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## Past and future of Colombian armed conflict overlap

"We will create the conditions for a new Colombia," 'Timochenko' (Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri), formerly the maximum leader of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc), announced during the official launch of his presidential candidacy on 27 January. Earlier that same day the old Colombia was in evidence – in Ecuador. Farc dissidents detonated a massive car bomb outside a police station in northern Ecuador. Later on three car bombs exploded outside police stations on Colombia's Caribbean coast. Planted by the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), these claimed seven lives, prompting Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos to suspend peace talks with the country's largest extant guerrilla group taking place in Ecuador.

Timochenko launched his candidacy for the new Farc political party, Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común, for May's presidential elections in Ciudad Bolívar, a poor neighbourhood in Bogotá, in front of a sparse gathering of 200-300 people. He promised to put "the common man at the centre of the state". Iván Márquez (Luciano Marín Arango), who sits atop the Farc's list of candidates ahead of congressional elections in March, said the party was not interested in "a sterile war of words with other parties". Instead, the Farc's former chief peace negotiator said the new party's sole interest was "hauling Colombia out of the poverty and misery in which it finds itself".

The official launch of the Farc electoral campaign was overshadowed by the pre-dawn explosion of a car bomb in San Lorenzo, a canton in Ecuador's coastal border province of Esmeraldas. Remarkably, given that the device virtually razed the police station and dozens of nearby houses to the ground, there were no fatalities, although 24 civilians and four police officers were injured. Over the next 24 hours a further three car bombs were detonated in the Colombian departments of Atlántico and Bolívar. The Farc released a statement condemning the attacks and calling for "an enormous collective effort to leave this quagmire of violence, death, and fear".

The governments of Ecuador and Colombia attributed the attack in San Lorenzo to Farc dissidents. For several months the Colombian police have been following the movements in Esmeraldas of 'Guacho' (Walter Artízala), an Ecuadorean explosives expert commanding a drug-trafficking group operating on the border between the two countries. Artízala commands a group known as 'Oliver Sinisterra', comprising some 250 men (60 thought to be operating in Ecuador). These are mainly former guerrillas drawn from the Farc's 'Daniel Aldana' mobile column based in Colombia's southern department of Nariño. Artízala is suspected of having coordinated the attack in retaliation for the recent arrest of seven members of the group by Ecuadorean security forces, as well as the seizure of seven tonnes of precursor chemicals, and nearly one tonne of cocaine.

## Clara López

The decision by the presidential candidate for the Partido Liberal (PL), Humberto de la Calle, to announce Clara López as his running mate pushes the party decisively to the left. López, a former president of the left-wing Polo Democrático Alternativo (PDA) who was expelled from the party after accepting a cabinet position under President Santos in May 2016 as labour minister, is a firm adherent of peace.

Ecuador's President Lenín Moreno, who declared a state of emergency in San Lorenzo and the contiguous canton of Eloy Alfaro, blamed "drug-trafficking gangs that have been hit hard by Ecuador's security forces". He announced the deployment of 600 members of the security forces to the area and increased patrols in Esmeraldas and the far eastern border province of Sucumbíos.

The interior minister, César Navas, who visited the scene of the attack, said that Ecuador was "a peaceful country" and would seek to preserve this by cracking down on drug-trafficking. He acknowledged, however, that it was difficult to monitor all of the porous stretches of the 700km shared border, such as the Mataje and Mira rivers, down which drugs are believed to be smuggled to the Ecuadorean coast for onward transit to Central America (*see our latest edition of [Latin American Regional Report: Andean Group](#) for an in-depth evaluation of the repercussions of Colombia's evolving armed conflict on Ecuador*).

### ELN violence

Ecuador's role as host of peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the ELN could come to an end after the guerrilla group carried out the other three car bomb attacks on police stations at the weekend. Five police officers were killed in Barranquilla, the capital of Atlántico, and two in Santa Rosa del Sur in Bolívar; there were no fatalities from the car bomb in Soledad, Atlántico.

Santos suspended the peace negotiations in the wake of the three attacks "until the ELN shows coherence between its words and actions". The ELN released a statement on 30 January arguing that "reducing the intensity of the conflict is a bilateral effort". It highlighted two military operations against the guerrilla group in the days beforehand. The first took place in the municipality of Pisba, in the east-central department of Boyacá, on 20 January, during which two ELN guerrillas were killed, including 'Arturo' (Harvey Alberto Franco Holguín), leader of the 'Héroes y Mártires' battalion in the Frente de Guerra Oriental front. The second took place six days later in the municipality of Chitagá in the department of Norte de Santander. Four guerrillas were killed and one captured.

The military operation in Chitagá took place the day after four days of frustrated discussions in Ecuador between Gustavo Bell, the head of the government's negotiating team, and 'Pablo Beltrán' (Israel Ramírez Pineda), the ELN's chief negotiator, to agree upon a renewal of the bilateral ceasefire which expired on 10 January, and the start of the fifth round of talks.

The ELN is overplaying its hand. There is very little public enthusiasm for the peace talks. While it is true that Santos briefly suspended the talks with the Farc in November 2014, once a bilateral ceasefire was agreed the conflict with the Farc did not flare up to this extent again. Santos does not enjoy anything like the political capital he had at the outset of talks with the Farc. He barely has six months left in office, and presidential aspirants all clamoured for the talks with the ELN to be scrapped after the car bomb attacks. "They kill our police officers and at the same time express their commitment to peace," the right-wing presidential pre-candidate, Alejandro Ordóñez, said. "In my government they will be where they deserve to be: jail."

Even the presidential candidate for the Partido Liberal (PL), Humberto de la Calle, said that while he would like to continue talks with the ELN he could not see a successful end to the peace process if the guerrilla group persisted in its view that "terrorism is the best form of negotiation". De la Calle, who led the government's negotiating team in the talks with the Farc in Cuba, completed his 'peace ticket' this week by announcing the former left-wing presidential candidate Clara López as his running mate (*see sidebar*).

**Opposition clutches at straws****Electoral hurdles**

The MUD's Voluntad Popular (VP) explained that it had withdrawn from the national dialogue process because "there cannot be elections without guarantees". The national electoral council (CNE) had announced shortly beforehand that VP, the party of the imprisoned opposition figurehead Leopoldo López, had been barred from competing in the presidential elections because it had refused to re-register. The other two parties that boycotted the municipal elections – Acción Democrática (AD) and Primero Justicia (PJ) – have said they will seek to register again.

Venezuela's opposition coalition Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD) held a fourth round of a national dialogue process with the government this week. The dialogue process appeared to be dead in the water after the government-controlled constituent assembly (ANC) announced last week that the presidential elections would be brought forward from December and held before the end of April. But, after the supreme court (TSJ) ordered the national electoral council (CNE) to bar the MUD from competing in the elections, the divided coalition decided that it had no choice but to return to the dialogue table to lodge a formal protest and to try and salvage some kind of electoral accord.

On 27 January, President Nicolás Maduro confirmed that Delcy Rodríguez, the president of the ANC representing the government in the national dialogue process, would become head of a new movement to drive his re-election bid: Somos Venezuela. Rodríguez said this movement, which was launched last June but was not on the electoral ballot, would not supersede the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) and Gran Polo Patriótico but complement them.

Somos Venezuela, Rodríguez said, was "a movement of movements to broaden the social foundation of the state model of inclusion and equality". It is composed of some 115,000 young 'brigadists' who "attend to the needs" of Venezuelans with a 'Carnet de la Patria'. This identity card has a more sinister application as a means of coercion. Without it Venezuelans cannot receive food parcels, pensions, or bonuses, and it has to be registered at PSUV stands outside polling stations.

**Reaction**

Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos is leading regional criticism of the Maduro administration's decision to bring the elections forward. "The decision to call elections without providing the necessary guarantees for them to be considered transparent, and so that the opposition can participate in acceptable rules of the game, is a decision that must be rejected by the international community, as it is rejected by Colombia," Santos said. "Unfortunately, Venezuela has become a dictatorship. Venezuela is suffering from a crisis that nobody could have imagined that such a rich country could suffer," he added.

"We will keep the people in Miraflores [the presidential palace]," Rodríguez said in riposte. "It's tragicomic that governments that last year called for early elections are now saying that we cannot bring elections forward." It is safe to say that the governments in question had not envisaged a unilateral decision by the government to bring forward elections to within three months, denying the opposition any time to select a candidate or prepare a campaign, and without any reform of the discredited CNE to allow for free and fair elections. And this was before the TSJ ruled on 25 January that the MUD could not compete in the elections on the grounds that the coalition contains some parties that are legally registered and others that are not.

The TSJ ruling referred to Acción Democrática (AD), Primero Justicia (PJ), and Voluntad Popular (VP), which were required to re-register in accordance with a recent law approved by the ANC because they boycotted December's municipal elections. The TSJ's decision puts the MUD in a quandary by complicating the opposition's ability to unite behind one candidate in the elections.

## Intervention

The Venezuelan government announced the expulsion from the country of the Spanish ambassador, Jesús Silva Fernández, on 25 January. The Venezuelan foreign ministry issued a statement declaring Fernández persona non grata for “continued aggression and intervention in domestic affairs”. It then proceeded to list a litany of Spain’s perceived domestic difficulties, and weighed in to the Catalan independence debate for good measure.

A member of the MUD team of negotiators in the Dominican Republic, Deputy Luis Florido (VP), had previously announced that the national dialogue process was dead after the government took the decision to bring elections forward without consulting the opposition coalition [WR-18-03]. The VP maintained this stance in the wake of the TSJ ruling (*see sidebar*), but the more moderate AD, PJ, and Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT) decided that it was now essential to use the dialogue process to try and secure some kind of deal on electoral reform. They also wanted a forum for expressing their grievances that the government unilaterally called elections in the midst of a dialogue in which discussing a timetable for these elections formed a key component of the agenda.

The MUD released a statement arguing that it would participate in the dialogue process after all “to protest against decisions by the government and the advance of its totalitarian vision...only looking to destroy the negotiation process...” Dominican President Danilo Medina duly confirmed that the dialogue process would proceed as scheduled on 28 January. After three days of debate, Medina said that the talks would be adjourned, to enable both sides to hold consultations in Caracas, and would resume “tentatively” on 5 February.

Medina said both sides had signed a document at the conclusion of the meeting. The government claimed that this was “a pre-accord” to which Maduro said he had “made some corrections”. The opposition fiercely denied that this was the case. It claimed that the document was merely some points on which advances had been made. A statement released by Chile’s foreign ministry suggested that the document was some way short of a pre-accord. It said that Chile would follow Mexico’s lead and cease to accompany the dialogue process unless conditions were agreed promptly for “democratic and transparent presidential elections”. The statement added that Chile’s foreign minister, Hernando Muñoz, had not taken part in the talks this week due to the “obstacles” that had emerged to “a credible agreement to allow free and democratic elections to be held”.

## PERU | POLITICS

### Family rift splits Fujimorismo

Peru’s political crisis took a twist on 31 January when Kenji Fujimori confirmed that he and nine other deputies would form a splinter group. Kenji’s high stakes power struggle with his sister Keiko means that the main opposition Fuerza Popular (FP, Fujimoristas) will no longer have a majority in congress. This could afford some respite for President Pablo Kuczynski as the FP had used its congressional majority to censure his cabinet ministers at will. But Kuczynski has alienated the left-wing opposition in congress by granting a pardon to former president Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000) and will enjoy even less support in congress than before despite Kenji’s promise of a governability accord.

Kenji was expelled from the FP by the party’s disciplinary committee on 30 January along with two fellow deputies for having abstained from voting in favour of President Kuczynski’s impeachment in late December in defiance of the party line. The day after the committee’s decision, Kenji announced that, rather than appeal, he would leave the FP along with the nine deputies whose votes had helped save Kuczynski. Barred by the constitution from establishing their own congressional bench, Kenji said his ‘Vengadores’ (Avengers) would support the government in the interests of political and economic stability.

This leaves the FP with 61 seats in the 130-seat congress, still the dominant force but five shy of a majority. This does not mean Kuczynski’s travails are over. The antagonised left-wing opposition and former government allies now favour tabling another motion to impeach him.

## Guardians of the State expanding

“God protects us so that we can protect the favela,” reads a slogan spray painted on the walls of the Cidade Jardim slum, located in Fortaleza, the capital of the north-eastern state of Ceará. At every street turn are the letters GDE – in reference to local criminal organisation Guardiões do Estado (GDE), or Guardians of the State. Having already seized control of the Cidade Jardim, the GDE has set its sights on acquiring more territory. It is vying for control of the drugs trade in the whole of Ceará, with murderous consequences.

The GDE is a young drug-trafficking organisation (DTO), but it has quickly become notorious in the area for its use of extreme violence. On 27 January, the GDE carried out an attack against rival DTO Comando Vermelho (CV). Members of the GDE broke into a night club at the Forró do Gado hosted by the CV in the Cajazeiras neighbourhood, located on the outskirts of Fortaleza. Once there, they gunned down 14 people, including eight women and two minors.

At the time, the state secretary for public security, André Costa, dismissed the attack as an “isolated incident”. But two days later, more violence ensued. Another 10 people were killed during riots at the Itapajé prison, located 130km away from Fortaleza during clashes between the CV and another DTO, the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC). These events have put pressure on the state government to reassert its authority in the face of criticism that organised crime groups are laying down the law.

### Introducing the GDE

The GDE’s reputation for brutality precedes it. The group not only seeks to eliminate competition by murdering rival traffickers but sometimes goes a step further by targeting their loved ones. Most GDE members are adolescents or young men united by their “cruelty”, according to sociologist César Barreira.

The GDE was founded by dissidents from the CV and the PCC who rebelled against the strict hierarchy of older criminal organisations. For example, unlike the CV, the GDE does not ask for a so-called ‘mensalidade’ – the monthly fee criminal leaders collect from gang members to provide protection. This means it is easier for the GDE to co-opt new members, particularly if they are young, penniless and unemployed.

The CV and PPC have strict criminal codes of conduct. This can partly be explained by the groups’ history. The CV is Brazil’s oldest DTO and the fruit of an alliance between leftist militants jailed during the dictatorship and common criminals in the 1970s. Later, the PCC was born out of a resistance movement in the wake of the October 1992 massacre in Carandiru prison, São Paulo state, when security forces killed over 100 people.

The same is not true for the GDE, which does not share this political history and defines itself in more geographical terms. While the CV and PCC have expanded their drug-trafficking business to multiple states, the GDE operates exclusively in Ceará. Hence its name – Guardians of the State.

The GDE’s loose structure and lack of clear rules makes it extremely volatile. “The reason the GDE is so violent is because it does not have a doctrine... the GDE was born from a lack of control, from overdoing it. Local criminals banded together to set up a gang to de-stabilise a situation that was already

### Criminal code

Another symbol for Ceará criminal organisation GDE is ‘745’. This refers to a criminal code which corresponds to the number of each letter of the name ‘GDE’ in the alphabet (G=7, D=4 and E=5). Many GDE members have the number 745 tattooed on their body, displaying their loyalty to the gang.

## Most violent states

Ceará has the third highest homicide rate of all Brazilian states after nearby Sergipe and Alagoas.

According to the 2017 Atlas of Violence, drawn up by research institute Ipea and NGO Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública, Ceará has a homicide rate of 46.75 per 100,000 inhabitants. This far exceeds the World Health Organization's threshold for 'endemic' violence, which is 10 per 100,000 inhabitants.

tense, it was everything that public security did not need," said a local military police officer in an interview with local newspaper *Diário do Nordeste*.

## The growth of organised crime in Ceará

Currently, there are around six different organised crime groups operating in Ceará. Some, such as the CV, have been present in the area for over 30 years. But, until recently, most co-existed peacefully. All that changed towards the end of 2016 when the CV broke off its alliance with the PCC, triggering a spike in homicide rates across the country. This national trend was felt acutely at a more local level.

In 2017, 5,023 homicides were reported in Ceará state, up 47.4% on the 3,407 registered in 2016. "Around here, criminals decide if lives should be lost or saved: if they form alliances, the death rate falls; if they fight, the homicides go up," said Márcia Feitosa, columnist for *Diário do Nordeste*. The rift between the CV and the PCC destabilised the fragile balance of power between DTOs in Ceará. The two rival groups began to compete for alliances, resulting in further conflict.

But where does the GDE fit in to all of this? When it was founded in 2012, the GDE sided more with the CV, according to an investigative report by *TV Coiote*. The CV helped train up some key GDE members and widely overlooked the group's anarchistic and destructive tendencies. But, in late 2016, the CV joined forces with Amazonian criminal organisation Família do Norte (FDN), which the GDE sees as a threat. In retaliation, the GDE abruptly broke off its ties with the CV, resulting in more bloodshed.

## Government response

Deteriorating public security will be a key campaign issue in this year's presidential elections. The same goes for the gubernatorial elections, particularly in Brazil's most violent states (*see sidebar*).

One man who will be conscious of this is Ceará state governor Camilo Santana from the leftist Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT). Santana was elected in 2014 and pledged to improve public security by launching a programme called "in defence of life". As he approaches the end of his term and is eyeing up re-election, he has come under pressure to defend his legacy and explain why crime rates have risen under his watch.

After the state government exchanged barbs with the federal government about who should take responsibility for tackling organised crime, on 30 January the two authorities agreed to meet. Santana discussed security measures with President Michel Temer and the head of the senate, Eunício Oliveira, who is also from Ceará and awkwardly lost the 2014 gubernatorial elections to Santana, among others.

During the meeting, Temer agreed to send a specialised police force to the state to investigate the recent killings. This will be comprised of members of the national public security ministry, police, and representatives of the national prison department (Depen). Santana also asked Temer to transfer an additional R\$15m (US\$4.7m) of funds to invest in state security initiatives for Ceará but he has not yet received a response.

In a statement, Justice Minister Torquato Jardim said that the federal government would continue "fulfilling its role of providing financial and technical help to the state governments...so long as the local authorities do not ask for money for eminently political reasons". His comments came after Santana attacked the federal government for failing to come up with a comprehensive security plan for individual states.

## Piñera's cabinet raises eyebrows

“Not only a step backwards but a form of provocation”. This was the response by Beatriz Sánchez, the defeated presidential candidate of the radical left-wing Frente Amplio (FA), to the new cabinet unveiled by president-elect Sebastián Piñera. Sánchez's surprisingly strong performance in the first round of the elections had forced Piñera and his Chile Vamos coalition to adopt a more centrist platform ahead of the December run-off against the ruling Nueva Mayoría candidate Alejandro Guillier. Some of Piñera's picks for ministerial positions – particularly hardliners from the ultra-conservative Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI) – have cast doubt over whether these promises will materialise once he takes office in March.

The 23-member cabinet unveiled by Piñera, who previously held office between 2010 and 2014, contained a mixture of new and old faces. It reflected a clear effort to reward the different members of Chile Vamos with posts commensurate with their size. As well as the UDI, Chile Vamos also includes Piñera's own party, the centrist Renovación Nacional (RN) and the smaller centre-right Evolución Política (Evópoli).

Of the new ministers, six were from RN, which in the concurrent congressional elections won 36 seats in the 155-member lower chamber and six of the 23 seats up for grabs in the newly enlarged 50-member senate. Four cabinet posts went to the UDI, which won 30 seats in the lower chamber and four senate seats, and two ministries to Evópoli (which won eight seats in total). Ten went to independents.

Piñera's new cabinet included five of his former ministers: Andrés Chadwick, a UDI hardliner; Cecilia Pérez (RN); and Felipe Larraín (independent) who reprise their old positions in interior & public security; secretary general of the government; and finance respectively.

Roberto Ampuero (independent), who served as culture minister during Piñera's first administration, picked up the foreign affairs portfolio, while former foreign minister (2010-2014) Alfredo Moreno (independent), who is currently president of the private sector lobby Confederación de la Producción y el Comercio (CPC) was named social development minister (*see sidebar*).

Of the new faces, Gerardo Varela, as education minister, attracted the most criticism. This appointment was always likely to face scrutiny given that students' demands for universal free education had been a major thorn in the side of Piñera's first administration, forcing Bachelet to make it a campaign promise ahead of the 2013 elections.

The choice of Varela, the current director of the free-market think-tank Fundación para el Progreso and president of dairy company Soprole, consequently raised eyebrows, particularly given Piñera's apparent U-turn over the issue ahead of the second round [WR-17-47]. It has already prompted complaints from former prominent student leaders-turned-congressional deputies, such as Camila Vallejo and Karol Cariola of the Partido Comunista de Chile (PCCh).

Also attracting criticism from the Left was the appointment of Isabel Plá as the new women & gender equality minister. A UDI member, Plá was a prominent critic of a law approved last year allowing abortion in certain circumstances (before that there was a blanket ban on abortion in Chile), fanning concerns that the law could be repealed.

### Social development

Critics pointed to Chile's incoming social development minister Alfredo Moreno's lack of experience in what is likely to prove a key ministry given the abuse scandal at the national children's service (Sename). This emerged ahead of the presidential elections, providing a headache for the administration led by President Michelle Bachelet.

## Nepotism

President Macri said he had taken the decision to force close relatives of cabinet ministers to abandon their advisory roles in government in the interest of greater transparency. He expressed his hope that provincial governments, where the practice of recruiting family members in public administration is even more rife, would follow his lead.

Yet it is worth pointing out that while appointments such as that of Varela and Plá may have stoked concerns on the Left, the incoming administration will be limited by the fact that Chile Vamos failed to secure control of the bicameral legislature in the congressional elections and will need to horse trade with the opposition to advance its agenda.

Cabinet	
Hernán Larraín (UDI)	Justice & human rights
Felipe Ward (UDI)	National assets
Andrés Chadwick (UDI)	Interior and public security
Isabel Plá (UDI)	Women and gender equality
Alberto Espina (RN)	Defence
Nicolás Monckeberg (RN)	Labour
Cristián Monckeberg (RN)	Housing
Baldo Prokurica (RN)	Mining
Cecilia Pérez (RN)	Secretary general of the government
Gloria Hutt (Evópoli)	Transport
Gonzalo Blumel (Evópoli)	General secretariat for the presidency
José Ramón Valente (Independent)	Economy
Felipe Larraín (Independent)	Finance
Gerardo Varela (Independent)	Education
Susana Jiménez (Independent)	Energy
Roberto Ampuero (Independent)	Foreign affairs
Juan Andrés Fontaine (Independent)	Public works
Alfredo Moreno (Independent)	Social development
Antonio Walker (Independent)	Agriculture
Marcela Cubillos (Independent)	Environment
Pauline Kantor (Independent)	Sport
Alejandra Pérez (Independent)	Culture
Emilio Santelices (Independent)	Health

## ARGENTINA | POLITICS, ECONOMY & DIPLOMACY

### Macri leads by example in state cost-cutting

President Mauricio Macri has made a symbolic gesture, ostensibly to cut the fiscal deficit but with the underlying motive of boosting his approval ratings. With the US dollar appreciating (always a source of deep concern among Argentines), inflation stubbornly high, and fuel and energy costs increasing, Macri announced an annual pay freeze for himself and some 350 senior government officials as part of a major restructuring of the state, which will see nearly 1,000 jobs go in public administration. And, in response to charges of nepotism, cabinet ministers will no longer be allowed to employ relatives in government.

“The change is serious,” President Macri said upon announcing the sweeping state reform. “What we have proposed is much more than an economic change, it is a cultural change,” he added. Macri’s salary is Ar\$200,000 (US\$10,180) a month; cabinet ministers earn Ar\$150,000. With inflation running at 25%, the freeze means that they will essentially take a sharp salary cut. An estimated 40 close relatives of cabinet ministers appointed to advisory roles will also have to leave government (*see sidebar*).

### Trimming the fat

The government will also eliminate 994 of the 3,500 senior positions in the national public administration, 10% of them from the office of the cabinet



## Chile recovery

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) raised its economic growth projection for Chile from 2.5% (last October) to 3% in its regional economic outlook for Latin American and the Caribbean published last week. The IMF said that political uncertainty in Chile had disappeared following December's presidential elections. The IMF's economic growth figures were encouraging for most of the region, although it produced a separate column for regional growth excluding Venezuela because it was dragging the average down so much.

chief, Marcos Peña. The 20 cabinet ministries will be preserved but some of the 87 secretaries of state will be downgraded to under secretaries of state; by turn, some of the 207 under secretaries of state will be downgraded to directorates; and some of the 687 directorates to coordinators.

Macri said the total annual saving, estimated to be in the region of Ar\$1.5bn (US\$76m), underscored his commitment to reducing the fiscal deficit. He added that if provincial and municipal governments followed suit, in keeping with a fiscal pact he signed with governors last November, it would have a significant impact on the overall fiscal deficit.

The measures are not just about cutting the fiscal deficit, however. Macri is also keen to stop the erosion of political capital he gained after the strong performance of his ruling centre-right Cambiemos coalition in last October's mid term congressional elections. The state reform sends a powerful message to Argentines teetering on the brink of the poverty line, for instance, that they will not be bearing the burden of high inflation alone.

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## TRACKING TRENDS

**ARGENTINA | Courting foreign investors.** President Macri stopped off in Switzerland last week for the annual World Economic Forum gathering at Davos, sandwiched between visits to Russia and France. "Argentina in its time was a very rich country and it has the potential to be so again," Macri told assembled businessmen and bankers. Macri argued that the country had "left behind its populist experiment". Questioned about apparent pressure being brought to bear on the president of the Argentine central bank, Federico Sturzenegger, to help spur economic growth, Macri was emphatically clear that the central bank's independence (crucial for foreign investors) was inviolable.

While Macri receives the plaudits of foreign investors this is yet to translate into much in the way of hard cash. Some could be waiting on the outcome of the labour reform bill he will shortly seek to push through congress, and his government's efforts to bring down inflation.

After leaving Davos, Macri met his French peer Emmanuel Macron in Paris on 26 January. Macron offered support for Macri's announcement that Argentina would seek membership of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The two men also broached the never-ending saga of a trade deal between the European Union (EU) and the Southern Common Market (Mercosur).

Macron alluded to certain "red lines" for France. "In the context of Brexit, France is determined to look after its beef industry, and has to ensure it is not destabilised by this accord," Macron said. Macri ducked the contentious issue of beef, insisting that a trade deal was "a gigantic opportunity for both regions that cannot be squandered".

**URUGUAY | No end in sight to agricultural protests.** President Tabaré Vázquez sought to defuse tension with Uruguay's powerful agricultural sector this week by tabling a series of proposals to mitigate adverse economic impacts on producers.

Vázquez's principal proposal was to exempt agricultural producers from value added tax (VAT) on diesel purchases for one year from this March, at a cost of an estimated US\$4.5m to state coffers. But Vázquez also promised sub-sectoral support: a dairy fund to assist with the debts of some 2,800 milk producers; and a 15% reduction in electricity costs for rice producers for the next three months.

The proposals were roundly rejected by both the large agricultural lobby groups in Uruguay and the self-proclaimed 'autoconvocados' of independent producers, who have been staging public demonstrations and tractorcades this month. They both accused Vázquez of failing to appreciate the magnitude of the challenge facing the agricultural sector and urged his government to present "concrete measures" forthwith. They did heed his appeal for them to engage in a dialogue process but they did not rule out further protests.

**Meade looks to take the initiative****Imco questions  
Meade's proposal**

In a radio interview on 25 January, Juan Pardinas, the director of the local think-tank Instituto Mexicano para la Competitividad (Imco), criticised the proposals made by José Antonio Meade to help combat corruption in Mexico. Pardinas said that Meade's proposals are not what is needed to improve the fight against corruption at this time. He also questioned Meade's commitment to transparency by pointing out that he is the only one of the leading presidential candidates yet to make public his declaration of assets.

José Antonio Meade, the presidential candidate of the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), is trying to regain the initiative in the campaign ahead of elections on 1 July. Meade, who is currently languishing at third place in opinion polls, has tried to do this by presenting his proposals for tackling one of Mexico's most pervasive problems: corruption. But Meade's efforts have fallen flat with a public all too aware that the former cabinet minister seldom spoke out against the various corruption cases that have affected the incumbent PRI federal administration. The PRI candidate is going to have to up his game in the coming months if he is to challenge the current frontrunner: Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the presidential candidate of the radical left-wing Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena).

Meade, who like some of the other main presidential candidates is currently undertaking a tour of the country to rally support, presented his new anti-corruption initiative during an event in the western state of Michoacán on 24 January. Meade said that tackling corruption remains one of Mexico's principal challenges as this often breeds impunity and promotes criminality. Meade went on to say that one way to stamp out corruption is to ensure that individuals are not able to take advantage of its proceeds. In particular, the PRI candidate said that corrupt individuals are too often able to use their ill-gotten gains to evade conviction and to make the work of prosecutors and the courts harder, such as by paying for top lawyers to defend them.

Meade said that preventing the corrupt from being able to use money to evade prosecution or obtain lenient treatment in the courts could help to reduce corruption. Meade said that he and PRI federal legislators have already presented a bill to the federal congress giving prosecutors greater powers to seize the assets of anyone being investigated for corruption and facilitating the forfeiture of the assets of anyone convicted of corruption to the state, so that these could be deposited in a federal fund that would be used to pay for things like scholarships for disadvantaged children and to finance productive projects. "We will recover assets obtained through crime and with that money we will support the studies of boys, girls, and women," Meade said.

Part of Meade's proposal also includes introducing tougher penalties for government officials guilty of corruption; making it mandatory for all public officials and national legislators to present a certified sworn declaration of assets (to be independently certified); and bringing anti-corruption legislation in the various states in line with federal legislation to create a more homogenous and better integrated judicial system. Meade said that tackling corruption was an urgent matter and that his proposal was "a clear sign" that he is determined to tackle the issue head on even before he wins election.

**Recriminations and counterproposals**

Meade's attempt to bring the fight against corruption to the forefront of his campaign elicited a quick response from his rivals in the presidential election. Ricardo Anaya, the presidential candidate of the Por México al Frente coalition comprised of the right-wing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) and the leftist Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) and Movimiento Ciudadano (MC), responded by saying that, rather than presenting proposals to combat corruption, Meade should apologise to the Mexican people for all the corruption that has taken place under the current PRI administration.

## Proposed prosecutors

Andrés Manuel López Obrador said that, if elected, he would nominate Eva Verónica de Gyvés Zárate, Juan Luis González Alcántara, and Bernardo Bátiz Vázquez to fill the attorney general's post. He also said he would nominate María de la Luz Mijangos Borja, Diana Alvarez Maury, and Ricardo Peralta Saucedo for the special anti-corruption prosecutor post. De Gyvés and González Alcántara are former magistrates in the Mexico City federal court and Bátiz is a former Mexico City justice minister. As for the special anti-prosecutor candidates, Mijangos is a former federal finance minister official, Alvarez is an independent judicial adviser, and Peralta is a university professor whose name is already being considered for the special anti-corruption prosecutor post by the federal congress.

"The PRI should hold its tongue when it comes to initiatives to combat corruption; this is one of the most corrupt governments in the recent history of our country," Anaya said, alluding to the numerous corruption scandals that have affected the federal government as well as several PRI state governments since President Enrique Peña Nieto took office in 2012.

Anaya went on to say that, if elected, his government would adopt significant measures to fight corruption. The Por México al Frente candidate said that these measures would include introducing 'civil death' for all public officials and businessmen found guilty of corruption; eliminating all government cash transfers; and doing away with immunity from prosecution for legislators. Anaya said that these measures would help "break the impunity pact" that currently exists among government and business elites.

Meanwhile, Morena federal deputies reacted to Meade's proposal by accusing him of "plagiarising" proposals mooted by López Obrador and presented by the party to federal congress. Morena legislators said that a year ago the party presented a series of anti-corruption measures in the federal congress – including one that aimed to facilitate the forfeiture of the proceeds of corruption – only for it to be rejected by the PRI legislative bench. "Meade has presented an anti-corruption initiative that the Morena parliamentary group presented a year ago. It is exactly the same," Rocío Nahle, Morena's congressional leader, said.

These accusations have been rejected by Meade's campaign team. Mariana Benítez, Meade's spokesperson, said that the two sets of proposal were very different and that they "solve a problem in a very different manner". Benítez also accused Morena of seeking to "slander" Meade rather than engage in a debate about how best to combat corruption.

López Obrador sought to take the issue further on 29 January. Speaking from the campaign trail, López Obrador said that if elected he would seek to amend constitutional article 108 which enshrines the president's immunity from prosecution for common crimes. López Obrador, who also presented his proposed candidates to fill the positions of attorney general and special anti-corruption prosecutor (*see sidebar*), said that this constitutional reform would provide "the necessary judicial framework to eradicate corruption and impunity in the country".

### López Obrador stays ahead

López Obrador's latest proposal goes one step further than that of Anaya. It also ensures that López Obrador appears to be setting the pre-electoral debate agenda rather than his presidential rivals. This in turn appears to be helping to cement his substantial lead in the opinion polls. López Obrador obtained 32% of voting intentions in the latest Buendía & Laredo poll published by national daily *El Universal* on 29 January, ahead of Anaya on 26% and Meade on 16%. The results of the latest poll are virtually identical to the previous poll a month earlier suggesting that neither Meade nor Anaya are making any inroads into López Obrador's lead.

The poll also shows that support for López Obrador is broad-based. He currently leads voting intentions in all age brackets, as well as at all levels of attained education (primary, secondary, and higher education). In addition to this, 41% of respondents said that they believe that López Obrador will win the election. This compares with 23% who believe that Anaya will win, and 17% that Meade will. However, there are still five months to go until the elections and while 43% of respondents said that they had decided who they planned to vote for, 54% said that they were still unsure.

### Primary fiscal surplus

Mexico's federal finance ministry (SHCP) reported on 30 January that the country closed 2017 with a primary fiscal surplus of 1.4% of GDP. The SHCP noted that this is the first primary fiscal surplus posted by Mexico since 2008 and provides evidence of the government's successful efforts to cut spending and tackle the fiscal deficit. According to the SHCP's public debt report, which it has now submitted to the federal congress for review, total government revenue in 2017 reached M\$4trn (US\$264.27bn), while total spending reached M\$5trn. The SHCP also said that its preliminary data shows that Mexico's GDP grew by 2.1% in 2017, well above the lower end of the SHCP's growth forecast projection of 1.5%-2.5%.

**MEXICO | Progress in Nafta negotiations.** Mexico's economy minister, Ildefonso Guajardo, said this week that the negotiating teams from Mexico, Canada, and the US had succeeded in making some progress in the renegotiation of the terms of the North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta) during the sixth round of talks in Montreal, Canada, from 23-28 January.

This was the penultimate round scheduled by the three countries to try to reach a new deal and considered to be critical given the slow progress in the previous rounds. Speaking at the closing event of the sixth round, Guajardo noted that the three sides have now reached an agreement on the deal's anti-corruption chapter and made further progress in the chapters on telecommunications and digital trade. Guajardo said that he hoped that agreement on these chapters could be reached in the next round, scheduled to take place in Mexico in February. However, Guajardo recognised that the negotiations have "not been easy".

Similarly, US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer recognised that some progress had been made in the sixth round but complained that talks are still moving too slowly for the US's liking. "This round was a step forward, but we are moving very slowly," Lighthizer said. According to media reports, Lighthizer's frustration stems from the US negotiating team's dissatisfaction with the counterproposal presented by the Mexican and Canadian negotiating teams on Nafta local content requirements for the automotive sector.

During the fifth round, the US called for auto sector local content requirements to be increased from the current 65.5% to 80%-85%, with a provision that 50% of this must be sourced from the US. This was rejected by the Mexican and Canadian teams, which agreed to present a counterproposal. This counterproposal consisted of including the computer software programmes that are now built into automobiles into the local content requirements. However, this was rejected by the US, which has noted that under the counterproposal the percentage of locally produced components used to build automobiles could actually fall rather than increase.

**MEXICO | Successful hydrocarbon tender.** Mexico's energy ministry (Sener) revealed on 31 January that 19 of the 29 blocs included in the country's latest hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation concession tender ('round 2.4') have been successfully awarded (with the remaining 10 being declared deserted after no acceptable bid was submitted).

In a press conference, the deputy hydrocarbons minister, Aldo Flores Quiroga, declared the tender a "success", noting that it is expected to result in some US\$93bn being invested in the country's oil sector. This level of projected investment is the highest yet for any of the concession tender rounds launched since the 2013-2014 energy reform that opened up Mexico's oil sector to increased private sector participation (the total amount of pledged investment secured in prior tender rounds amounted to some US\$60bn).

Quiroga also noted that the exploration and exploitation of the awarded concessions is expected to produce some 230,000 jobs in the next 15 years. Quiroga added that if all of the awarded concessions located in deep waters in the Gulf of Mexico become productive, these could produce an additional "1.5m barrels of oil per day and 4bn cubic feet of natural gas per day by 2032", practically doubling Mexico's current production levels.

Meanwhile, the national hydrocarbon commission (CNH) said that the Mexican state stands to receive US\$525m in exchange for the signing of the concession contracts and to receive on average 64.7% of the profits generated by hydrocarbons extracted from the newly awarded concessions.

The CNH also reported that the concessions had been awarded to some leading oil firms such as British Dutch firm Royal Dutch Shell (which secured nine concessions), PC Caligari, a subsidiary of Malaysia's Petronas (six), and Spain's Repsol (three). Meanwhile, Mexico's state-owned oil firm, Pemex, was awarded four concessions – two individually and two as part of a consortium (one in alliance with Royal Dutch Shell, and one in alliance with US firm Chevron and Japan's Inpex E&P).

## Hernández takes office against troubling backdrop

President Juan Orlando Hernández was sworn-in for a second term on 27 January. He becomes the first Honduran president to serve a second term since the restoration of democracy in 1982 after a creative interpretation of the constitution by the supreme court (CSJ) allowed him to seek re-election despite it being expressly outlawed. His legitimacy has been harmed further by uncertainty surrounding the validity of the 27 November elections which have spawned a series of protests, repressed by the police with dozens of fatalities. Less reported but with more serious long-term political repercussions was a budget law approved by congressional deputies denuding the public prosecutor's office and the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (Maccih) of any power to root out official corruption.

President Hernández was inaugurated in a heavily guarded national stadium in Tegucigalpa while police fired tear gas to disperse in excess of 1,000 protesters gathered outside. Among the protesters was Salvador Nasralla, the presidential candidate of the opposition Alianza de Oposición contra la Dictadura, who Hernández defeated in controversial circumstances eliciting cries of electoral fraud. Four days earlier, the Hernández administration had sent a letter to the United Nations Secretary General António Guterres seeking "technical support" for a dialogue process to find a way out of the political crisis. Nasralla condemned this gesture as too little too late.

During his inaugural address, Hernández promised to improve public security (*see sidebar*), and combat corruption. Hernández pointed to the arrival in 2016 of Maccih, established by the Organization of American States (OAS), as evidence of the efforts of his government which, he added, would work to strengthen national institutions to tackle corruption.

The actions of congressional deputies just a week earlier cast doubt on the sincerity of Hernández's stated intentions. Led by the ruling Partido Nacional (PN), deputies approved a law which, despite their protestations to the contrary, constitutes a major blow to the fight against corruption. It emasculates Maccih and the public prosecutor's office just as they underlined the urgent need to overhaul the country's institutions.

Congress approved the contentious budget law on 18 January. It stipulates that all public spending must be evaluated by the court of auditors, Tribunal Superior de Cuenta (TSC), for the period of three years, precluding any legal investigations in the interim. Six days later, CSJ Judge Alma Guzmán archived an investigation into five former deputies accused of embezzling public funds, the first case brought by Maccih, until the TSC could carry out an investigation into the alleged irregularities. The TSC has until 2021 to conduct the probe, one year after Maccih is due to leave the country.

The head of Maccih, Juan Jiménez Mayor, expressed "profound regret" that congress had approved what he described as "an impunity pact". He denounced the budget law as "unconstitutional" for barring public prosecutors from investigating official corruption. Jiménez also criticised the judiciary for not calling congress out about contravening the constitution. Indeed, he accused CSJ Judge Guzmán of not having analysed the case presented by the new anti-corruption unit of the public prosecutor's office (Ufecic), which was set up last September.

### Police corruption?

On 26 January the Associated Press published accusations that the newly appointed head of the Honduran police force, General José David Aguilar Morán, had colluded with a convicted drug kingpin, Wílder Blanco, to smuggle cocaine through the country. The incendiary piece cited a confidential report by the Honduran security ministry's inspector general, alleging that Aguilar had intervened in 2013 after local police officers had seized 700kg of cocaine and ordered them to let the drugs go. President Hernández has made a big deal of purging the police force of corruption.

## Retaliation?

There is speculation in the national and international press that the decision by congress to approve a budget law sidelining the Maccih, which was sent to Honduras by the OAS, was ordered by President Hernández. The OAS was the most vocal critic of irregularities in the electoral process that saw Hernández re-elected and had proposed that elections should be held again.

On 11 December last year Ufecic and Maccih claimed to have uncovered a corruption network in congress. They said there was sufficient evidence to prosecute five deputies for receiving L8.3m (US\$340,000) from the finance ministry channelled through an NGO meant to be carrying out social projects. But Jiménez maintained that the investigation had exposed the involvement of “more than 60 past and present deputies, including the president of congress [Mauricio Oliva, a close ally of Hernández],” in the corruption network. Jiménez said congressional deputies could have embezzled L1.3bn (nearly US\$60m) in this way.

In August 2016 the five deputies in question voted with the ruling PN to reject the staging of a plebiscite on whether to permit presidential re-election. Four of these deputies belonged to the left-wing Partido Libertad y Refundación (Libre) led by former president Manuel Zelaya (2006-2009). The initiative was defeated by congress and it is speculated that they received indirect payments for their vote.

While some Libre deputies marched out of congress before the vote on the budget law took place (Deputy Rasel Tomé argued that it was “illegal” to be voting on a law that had not been discussed), Zelaya met Oliva before the vote. It is noteworthy that the law giving the TSC exclusive control over the evaluation of public spending was made retroactive to 2006: the year Zelaya took office. This lends some credence to the idea that Zelaya might have cut a deal with Hernández, conscious that Maccih would also uncover corruption scandals during his three years in office.

## Reaction

The US chargé d'affaires in Tegucigalpa, Heide Fulton, sided with Maccih, criticising the budget law on Twitter as “a monumental step backward in the fight against corruption”. Because the law is retroactive it also means that there are likely to be future legal challenges from imprisoned public officials, sapping the precious time of the judiciary.

Congress gave a combative response. It released a statement calling on Maccih to “respect state institutions, their independence, autonomy, and free exercise of their attributions”. It also argued that “far from leading to impunity, it [the budget law] promotes transparency and accountability”. The CSJ rallied to the side of congress, insisting that “Honduras is a sovereign state”, and condemning “any pressure or insinuation from people, groups or institutions, national or international”.

It is difficult to sustain the argument that the budget law was designed with the express purpose of improving transparency in public spending. Firstly, there is the issue of timing. The budget law was approved by congress just one month after Ufecic and Maccih announced the discovery of a congressional corruption network.

Secondly, it is already within the remit of the TSC to investigate the use of public funds. So all the budget law is actually doing is reinforcing the status quo while preventing prosecutors from taking any legal action for three years and rendering Maccih, which was invited in by Hernández to combat official corruption, toothless.

Finally, the composition of the TSC does not inspire confidence that decisive action will be taken to confront official corruption. For all that they have legal and economic backgrounds, the three members of the TSC leadership, José Juan Pineda Varela, Ricardo Rodríguez, and Roy Pineda Castro, are political appointees. They were chosen by congress in November 2016 as part of a pact between the country’s three main parties.

## Major twist ahead of polling day

A “religious shock”. This is how local commentators are referring to the surprising surge of support in recent weeks for evangelical pastor Fabricio Alvarado, the presidential candidate for the small, conservative Restauración Nacional (RN). The new frontrunner ahead of the presidential election on 4 February, Alvarado has linked his jump in the polls to his stance on a recent ruling by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (Corte-IDH) which found that Costa Rica should legalise same-sex marriage. Alvarado’s performance in the polls is the latest twist in an unpredictable race. It follows the rise in support for the previous frontrunner, Juan Diego Castro of Partido Integración Nacional (PIN), another small conservative party [[WR-18-02](#)]. With none of the candidates mustering over 20% support, the one seeming certainty is that a run-off will be required.

In its most recent pre-electoral survey released on 23 January, the centre for research and policy studies (Ciep) of the Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR) gave Alvarado 17% of voting intentions, up from just 3% in the December 2017 poll, narrowly eclipsing Castro on 16% (down from 18%, albeit within the 3.5% error margin). Antonio Alvarez Desanti of the main opposition Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN), who initially led the race, fell from 14% to 11%, having enjoyed 25% support in August. Rodolfo Piza of the traditional Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC) fell from 14% to 9%, while Carlos Alvarado, of the centre-left ruling Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC) was on 6%, up from 5%. The number of undecided voters stood at 27%, down from 34% in December.

The only RN deputy in the fractious 57-member unicameral legislature, Castro himself explicitly attributed his new lead to his response to the Costa Rica-based Corte-IDH’s ruling. The court’s decision was in line with a petition submitted in 2016 by President Luis Guillermo Solís who had pledged to increase rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. A fervent opponent of gay marriage and abortion, Alvarado stated publicly that, if he were president, he would remove Costa Rica from among the Corte-IDH’s member states.

While suggesting that President Solís may have underestimated public opposition to gay marriage, and more general conservatism within the country, the show of support for Alvarado, a clear outsider, also reflects the continued public disenchantment with the political establishment. This stems in part from the so-called ‘Cementazo’ corruption scandal involving the local subsidiary of Chinese cement exporter Sinocem Costa Rica and top public officials [[WR-17-48](#)]. This public disillusionment has been also attributed to the popularity of Castro, a former security minister (1994-1996) who served under the PLN presidency of José María Figueres (1994-1998). A report by UCR publication *Semanario Universidad*, published at the end of last year, likened him to US President Donald Trump, citing as similarities his distance from the political system, his ambivalent relationship with the media, and his use of social media and populist rhetoric.

### Corte-IDH ruling

On 9 January, the Corte-IDH found that Costa Rica should treat same-sex couples “without discrimination” and legalise same-sex marriage. However, the same (January 2018) Ciep poll showed that 67% of respondents were against the ruling. The most recent religious freedoms report by the US State Department (released in 2017) cites a 2013 Ciep survey which estimates that 72.8% of Costa Rica’s population is Catholic, 14.8% Protestant (including evangelical Protestants), 3.6% other religious groups, and 8.4% without religious affiliation.

### Fiscal deficit

Costa Rica’s finance ministry last week revealed that the country’s fiscal deficit reached 6.2% of GDP in 2017, up from 5.3% in 2016. Addressing the widening fiscal deficit remains a major electoral concern ahead of the 4 February general election. President Solís sent down a tax reform proposal in August 2015, which has since been amended, although the opposition-led national legislature has persistently refused to approve it.

## POSTSCRIPT

### Quotes of the week

“My patience and the patience of the Colombian people has a limit.”

*Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos suspends peace negotiations with the ELN.*

“We're going to win and wipe the floor [with the opposition].”

*Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro, prompting detractors to argue that, in view of his government's recent actions, it would be more appropriate to say that he was “clearing the floor” of the opposition before the presidential elections to ensure there was nobody left to challenge him.*

“Kenji [Fujimori] has become the defender and shield of President Kuczynski, serving as a smokescreen...to cover up corruption allegations.”

*Deputy Cecilia Chacón on the rift within Peru's main opposition Fuerza Popular (FP).*

### Probe sheds light on death of Brazilian judge

A year after a plane carrying supreme court (STF) judge Teori Zavascki crashed outside the beach town of Paraty in the state of Rio de Janeiro, killing him instantly along with five others, an investigation has ruled out sabotage. At the time, Zavascki had been working on Brazil's biggest ever anti-corruption probe, 'Operation Car Wash'.

Before his death on 19 January 2017, Zavascki had been about to reveal explosive content from the plea bargaining testimonies of the Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht, implicating dozens of politicians from all major parties. Family members had aired concerns about his personal safety, sparking speculation that his untimely death was not an accident.

A year on, an investigation carried out by the centre for prevention of aeronautical accidents (Cenipa) on behalf of Brazil's air force (FAB) has discounted the theory that Zavascki's plane was sabotaged. The small Beechcraft King Air C90 aircraft he was travelling in had not been tampered with when the plane took off. Its pilot, Osmar Rodrigues, was experienced and did not suffer from any obvious medical or psychological conditions, nor was he under the influence of drugs.

But, as the aircraft approached its final destination in Paraty, visibility deteriorated due to the onset of rain, heavy clouds, and lightning. Rodrigues then made two attempts to land. On the second, he most likely suffered from “spatial disorientation” where pilots lose their ability to assess how far away they are from the ground and sometimes get confused about which way up the plane is. As the plane spun out of control, its wing hit the sea, killing the five passengers and the pilot on impact.

Still, some questions remain unanswered. The first mystery is why Rodrigues did not use the ground proximity warning system (GPWS) to help him land. The second is why he did not press the panic button once he started encountering difficulties. In a recent interview with *UOL* published on 2 January 2018, Zavascki's son Francisco criticised the year-long delay in publishing the results, to which the FAB responded that the time taken was “proportional to the complexity of the case”.

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