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## Stormy start to Uruguay's election season

The terms 'institutional crisis' and 'political uncertainty' get thrown around a lot in reference to Latin American governments, not always accurately. They are rarely applied to Uruguay, but right now they would be apposite. President Tabaré Vázquez dismissed General José González as the commander of the army, along with five other generals and the defence minister, on 1 April. González had only just assumed the mantle from Guido Manini Ríos, who was fired for misconduct. No government has decommissioned more generals in Uruguay's history. Vázquez accomplished the feat in under three weeks, triggering the most serious military crisis since Uruguay's return to democracy in 1985. It comes seven months before general elections in which the ruling left-wing Frente Amplio (FA) coalition faces the biggest threat to its political dominance since 2005.

Since coming to power in 2005, the FA, which includes former Tupamaros guerrillas, has approached the delicate issue of human rights abuses during the dictatorship (1973-1985) with care to avoid being accused of seeking revenge. It agonised for years, for instance, over the repeal of the Ley de Caducidad, the amnesty law shielding the military from prosecution for human rights violations during the dictatorship. But latent tensions have come to the fore just as historical revisionism is taking hold in Brazil over the region's dictatorships, and as the Vázquez administration's efforts to reform the military pension system, Caja Militar, prompted forthright criticism from Manini Ríos who was eventually fired for going too far once too often [[WR-19-11](#)] when he accused Uruguay's justice system of being biased against the military.

Vázquez had hoped that the dismissal of Manini Ríos might end frictions with the military. But, on 30 March, the national daily *El Observador* published the results of an investigation showing that González, the man appointed to succeed Manini Ríos, had formed part of a military 'honour tribunal' in 2017 that judged the moral and ethical conduct of lieutenant colonel José Gavazzo during the dictatorship. Gavazzo, who has been convicted for other dictatorship-era crimes, confessed, among other things, to having thrown the body of a Tupamaro guerrilla, Roberto Gomensoro into the Río Negro, in 1973, six days after he had been arrested, tortured, and murdered. The tribunal decided the incident did not affect the honour of the army and his only sanction was for having allowed Colonel Juan Carlos Gómez to be imprisoned for three years for Gomensoro's murder knowing he was innocent.

Vázquez reacted by firing González (replaced by General Claudio Feola), and the head of the national defence council (Esmade), General Alfredo Erramún, and pushing four further generals into early retirement. Vázquez, who condemned the military's "pact of silence", said he assumed "all the political responsibility" for appointing González but the defence minister,

## Militarisation of public security?

The tensions with the military come just as the public is preparing to vote on a constitutional reform proposal to create a national guard, composed of 2,000 members of the armed forces and police officers. Luis Lacalle Pou's rival in the opposition PN's primary election, Jorge Larrañaga, has backed the campaign 'Vivir Sin Miedo' which has collected 407,000 signatures in a petition to call for a referendum on the issue, which will be held at the same time as general elections in October. Larrañaga denied that the formation of a national guard would lead to the militarisation of public security.

Jorge Menéndez, carried the can. Vázquez fired Menéndez (replaced by José Bayardi), and his deputy, Daniel Montiel, for failing to read documents containing the trial transcript properly and pick out the confession, even though Vázquez had signed them off. The attorney general's office has opened an investigation into military honour tribunals which should relate full details of crimes to higher judicial authorities.

Daniel Martínez, a presidential pre-candidate for the FA, said that the revelation of Gavazzo's confession underscored the importance of a thorough investigation to reach the bottom of human rights violations during the dictatorship. But Manini Ríos slammed Vázquez as "weak and irresponsible" and used the episode to hurl himself into the electoral fray on 3 April as a presidential candidate for the Partido Cabildo Abierto-Movimiento Social Artiguista (PCA-MSA), a new party launched by retired military figures [WR-19-11]. Manini Ríos, who accused the government of being focused on the past rather than the future, said that he would restore "true democracy" in Uruguay.

Luis Lacalle Pou, the biggest threat to the FA winning a fourth straight term in power in October, also lay the responsibility for the military crisis squarely with Vázquez. Lacalle Pou launched his electoral campaign on 30 March with a fierce attack on the government. He told supporters at a rally in Montevideo that the FA had outstayed its welcome in power and had no answers to several issues like improving education standards and teacher professionalism but above all public security, after homicides and violent theft increased dramatically in 2018 [WR-19-12]. Lacalle Pou said he would provide security forces with "the necessary support" to enhance crime prevention.

Lacalle Pou also promised a change of foreign policy direction. He took aim at the Vázquez administration's equivocal stance on the Venezuelan regime led by Nicolás Maduro, saying he wanted to be able to hold his head high when travelling abroad "without the shame of defending dictatorships". Lacalle Pou even had the temerity to challenge the FA on its management of the economy after the release of a series of adverse figures (*see page 11*).

Lacalle Pou is limbering up for seven months of electoral battles, starting with his attempt to secure the presidential candidacy of Uruguay's oldest party, the main opposition centre-right Partido Nacional (PN, Blancos), in June's primary elections. Meanwhile, the country's youngest political movement, the La Alternativa electoral alliance, which had looked like playing a potentially decisive role in the next congress, disintegrated amid mutual recriminations.

This throws some doubt on the future composition of congress. The FA has enjoyed the narrowest of majorities in both chambers of congress over the last 10 years. The vote is likely to be close again in October but it had looked like the La Alternativa alliance, forged last November, might have won sufficient seats to play a potentially crucial role in providing the eventual victor in the presidential contest with a working majority in congress.

No longer. The alliance between the centrist Partido Independiente (PI); Navegantes, a dissident FA faction; and two factions from the right-of-centre Partido Colorado (PC, Colorados), Avanza País (AP) and Batllistas Orejanos (Unir), collapsed on 31 March. Just two weeks earlier La Alternativa had proclaimed a joint presidential ticket of the PI's Senator Pablo Mieres and Selva Andreoli of Navegantes. Mieres pulled the plug on the alliance after Andreoli gave a televised interview last week saying there would be no other option but to support the FA's presidential candidate in the event of a second round. Mieres said Andreoli's comment had undermined his confidence in Navegantes as an ally, not so much for the position it had taken but the fact that it had taken a position at all unilaterally. La Alternativa was a hybrid alliance but it would probably have taken more votes from the PN and PC than the FA.

**Maduro puts squeeze on Guaidó****Colectivos**

Nicolás Maduro called on pro-government armed groups (colectivos) this week to “defend the peace of every barrio, every block” in the face of the “most criminal” opposition of the last 20 years. Juan Guaidó had a different take on the situation. He accused the government of “state terrorism” in the weekend’s water and electricity protests, for sending colectivos into the barrios. The national assembly unanimously condemned repression by colectivos, declaring them to be terrorists and appealing to the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations (UN) to recognise them as such.

Venezuela’s government led by Nicolás Maduro tested the waters this week with two moves which in theory end the political future of Juan Guaidó. In practice both will be irrelevant if Maduro is dislodged. The comptroller general’s office struck first, barring the widely recognised interim president from holding any public post for the next 15 years; the supreme court (TSJ) followed suit, urging the government-controlled constituent assembly (ANC) to strip Guaidó of his legislative immunity from prosecution, a request that was duly rubberstamped by ANC delegates.

The comptroller general, Elvis Amoroso, accused Guaidó on 28 March of concealing details of his personal wealth in his declaration of assets; of spending incommensurate with his income; of carrying out 90 foreign trips since 2015, staying in “luxurious hotels”, without clarifying how he paid for them; and of accepting undeclared gifts from foreign governments. Amoroso called on the attorney general’s office to take appropriate legal action against Guaidó.

This is a tried and tested formula for the Maduro administration over the years. Indeed, any opposition figure that has not been barred from seeking election either does not possess or has not shown the qualities required to provide a real threat to the government. It is almost a badge of honour.

“The Venezuelan people will not be duped by a false debarment,” was Guaidó’s dismissive response. He said Amoroso lacked any authority as he had been appointed, in 2017, by the ANC when “only the legitimate [opposition-controlled] national assembly can designate a comptroller”. Guaidó reacted with similar insouciance to the next stage of the Bolivarian legal barrage. On 1 April the president of the pliant TSJ, Maikel Moreno, called on the ANC to strip Guaidó of his legislative immunity from prosecution for defying an order barring him from leaving the country on 23 February when he crossed into Colombia to endeavour to push humanitarian aid into Venezuela, and went on to carry out a regional tour.

The ANC wasted no time, authorising the “continuation of the prosecution” of Guaidó, a decision which in accordance with the constitution can only be taken by the national assembly (AN). The ANC, which has abandoned all pretence of drafting a new constitution, traducing the rule of law by usurping the functions of the AN, unanimously approved a resolution calling for the prosecution of Guaidó for contravening the law, and fomenting violence and terrorism, as well as his responsibility for crimes against humanity.

Diosdado Cabello said that it had fallen on the ANC, the body over which he presides, to take the decision because the AN had been declared in contempt by the TSJ in 2016. Cabello said the TSJ could proceed at its own pace. This pace will be dictated by the Maduro administration in accordance with domestic and international developments. If support for Guaidó appears to wane and he looks more vulnerable, it is likely to pounce.

“Violence and intimidation will not stop us,” Guaidó said, denouncing “the political response of an assortment of cowards”, at a rally an hour after the ANC issued its decree. Guaidó reiterated his refusal to recognise the legitimacy of the institutions in question, but he acknowledged that they are laying the legal groundwork for his arrest and that he was not minimising



## **Electricity rationing**

Electricity rationing has been implemented regionally, especially in the western state of Zulia, for years without the government undertaking any infrastructure improvements to address the problem. Nicolás Maduro said the country faced a “very serious situation” because of sabotage. The communications minister, Jorge Rodríguez, maintained that two new synchronised terrorist attacks on the national electricity system were responsible for the latest outages, pointing the finger at “agents of the northern supremacist empire and their sad and genuflecting local lackeys”. Juan Guaidó said the government was “clueless” and that if he were in power, he would isolate the problem and repair thermoelectric plants that are not working to full capacity because of a lack of maintenance, thereby supplying electricity in the short-term to central and western Venezuela.

the risk he was running. Maduro is intent on placing a legal noose on Guaidó just as he has sought to place a diplomatic noose on Maduro. Guaidó called for “organised strategic protest” in a bid to keep up the momentum, which is essential for his survival not just to try and bring down Maduro.

Guaidó’s bold challenge caught the Maduro administration unawares in January but the longer he goes without tangible progress the more it will grow in confidence that the populace will begin to lose faith in his ability to deliver change and the hope he instilled will fade. The loyalty of the armed forces (FANB) has been sorely tested but, by hook or by crook, retained, and the threat of foreign military intervention is receding, in spite of the tightening of sanctions by the US government led by President Donald Trump.

### **Could water be Maduro’s undoing?**

On 6 April Guaidó is organising a rehearsal for ‘Operation Freedom’, designed to stir up support in cities across the country for an eventual march on the presidential palace Miraflores (Cabello subsequently called a march of government supporters on the same day). Guaidó argued that the legal action against him was a sign of the success of the anti-government protests staged on 31 March. The protests were certainly large as Guaidó capitalised on public discontent over fresh power outages, especially in poor barrios that have abandoned Maduro. Hyperinflation, outbreaks of diphtheria, malaria, and measles, and chronic shortages of medicine and food are one thing, but no water is taking things to a new level of desperation.

The frequent power cuts over the last month have not just resulted in widespread blackouts, and businesses and schools closing, they have also affected water supplies. Electricity is needed to pump water through pipes uphill to Caracas and other cities, and water, in addition to being essential for survival, is needed to move human waste through the sewerage system and avert a public health crisis. Sending water tankers to areas of Caracas, as Maduro promised in a televised broadcast this week, will not suffice.

Maduro acknowledged the scale of the problem, however, by announcing on 31 March that electricity rationing would be put in place for the whole of April, placing an emphasis on water supply reliant on electricity generation, in “a new phase to win the electricity war”. The following day he replaced General Luis Motta Domínguez with Igor Gavidia as (the first non-military) electricity minister and head of the state power firm Corpoelec. Maduro praised Domínguez for having “waged a ceaseless war for four years”, adding that it was time for him “to rest a while”. Gavidia, unlike Domínguez and many of the cabinet appointments made by Maduro, has some qualifications for the post. He is an electrical engineer and previously served as head of the state power generator Electrificación del Caroní.

Maduro also created another layer of Bolivarian bureaucracy to deal with the problem: six working commissions within a new ‘Estado Mayor Eléctrico’ under the interior and justice minister, Néstor Reverol. This, Maduro said, would function 24 hours a day (power cuts and energy rationing might require many of those hours to be by candlelight) with “permanent coordination, revision, and action”.

Vice President Delcy Rodríguez said that the government would revamp the national electricity system (SEN) through “intervention, restructuring, and modernisation” of Corpoelec. The government’s diagnosis, however, is not that the SEN needs overhauling because of deficient infrastructure due to years of underinvestment but rather in order to shield it from cyber sabotage. Rationing will be necessary in the meantime, Maduro argued, so that the necessary modifications can be “progressively incorporated” to the SEN.

## Seeking to avoid a Bambazo

### Las Bambas

The Las Bambas mine is located at 4,000 metres above sea level in the Apurímac province of Cotabambas. It is believed to contain 7.2m tonnes of copper and 12.6m tonnes of other minerals. The mine accounted for over 15% of Peru's total copper production of 2.3m tonnes in 2018. Meanwhile, figures released by MMG say that it has earned over S/75m (US\$22.5m) since 2016, from which 84 municipalities in the Apurímac region have benefitted directly.

Peru has a long history of social conflicts over major mining operations. Some of these conflicts have turned violent, leading to major crises that jeopardise governments, most recently the 2009 'Baguazo' that rocked the Alan García administration (2006-2011). The resurfacing of a long-running conflict over the Las Bambas copper mine in Apurímac region (*see sidebar*) produced concerns that the government led by President Martín Vizcarra could be facing its first such crisis. Yet despite a string of inauspicious incidents, including an attack on a helicopter carrying government officials to the area, the Vizcarra government is currently striving to advance a dialogue with those protesting against Las Bambas in the hopes of finding a solution.

The Las Bambas open-pit mine has been the focus of tensions within the local community of Fuerabamba for a number of years. When plans to open Las Bambas were approved by the Peruvian government in 2011, part of the deal was the resettlement of the nearby Fuerabamba community. Back then, the mine was under the control of Swiss-British company Glencore, which came to an agreement with the local community about the conditions of their resettlement in order to free up the land for mining. When the mine was sold to Chinese company Minerals and Metals Group Ltd (MMG) in 2014, the people of Fuerabamba began to complain that the conditions of their agreement with Glencore were not being met.

### What are the complaints?

The conflict centres around an untarmacked road that runs from Las Bambas through the Yavi Yavi rural community in the nearby Cusco region, where the Fuerabamba community was relocated as part of the resettlement deal of 2011. This road is now the mine's principal transportation route for all workers and goods. The local community argues that, at the time of the resettlement, the road was not the main means of transportation for the mine and that they did not agree to having such a major influx of passing vehicles, which pose an environmental risk to the community. In a 2010 report carried out by energy & mines ministry (Minem) to investigate the potential impact of the Las Bambas mine, air pollution caused by passing traffic is cited as a risk to the local communities, with the report recommending several precautionary measures to be undertaken in order to reduce the impact of passing heavy traffic (an estimated 250 heavy goods vehicles from the mine pass along the road every day).

However, the municipal president of Fuerabamba, Gregorio Rojas, complains that MMG is not upholding the agreement reached with the mine's previous owners. Indeed, when the resettlement was agreed, plans were underway to build a pipeline that would transport the majority of the mine's produce to the port of Matarani, Arequipa region, from where it would be shipped. But this is no longer considered a viable option by MMG and instead the minerals from the mine are transported via the road to Matarani. Consequently, the Fuerabamba community is demanding additional financial compensation for the use of the road that was built on their lands. This despite the fact that the road was declared a national highway in 2017 as part of government plans to establish a 'mining corridor' linking mines in the high Andes to the port of Matarani.

MMG maintains that the road was declared a national highway in 2008, long before the resettlement agreement, and that therefore it is entitled to use it freely without having to pay any compensation. Meanwhile, the transport & communications ministry (MTC) has said that it is committed to paying for

**Ongoing conflict**  
The Las Bambas conflict has been ongoing since 2015 when production at the mine started. The first violent protests against the mine by the surrounding community were first recorded that year. Between 2015 and 2016 seven local protesters were killed near Las Bambas in clashes with the local security forces. There have been sporadic protests in the area since then but none as big as the demonstrations and road blockade led by Fuerabamba community since 4 February.

the road. MTC head Edmer Trujillo has said that since the road has been declared a national highway it is the government's duty to pay compensation for the road that was originally built on private land. Nevertheless, the Fuerabamba community has been staging protests and blocking the road since early February to press their demands. The protests have not only disrupted operations at Las Bambas, which procures around 2% of the world's copper, but have also produced some deadly clashes between the protesters and the security forces deployed to clear the blockades.

### **Legal altercations**

The conflict also made headlines in recent weeks when Fuerabamba community leader Rojas was arrested alongside his legal advisers, brothers Frank and Jorge Chávez Sotelo. The three were detained on 21 March on suspicion of extorting money from passing drivers trying to access Las Bambas mine. Rojas was freed and acquitted on 29 March, but the Chávez Sotelo brothers are currently on trial and facing a sentence of 36 months. Investigation into the lawyers was opened in February 2017, and they are accused of running a criminal ring and of inciting the violent protests against Las Bambas. A witness involved in the trial, whose identity remains undisclosed, told the local press that the Fuerabamba community offered to pay them a monthly rate for their legal advice, but instead the Chávez Sotelo brothers asked for a 30% cut of any compensation paid to the community by MMG.

Audio recordings leaked by the national press reveal the lawyers' extortion tactics. However, the municipal vice president of Fuerabamba, Edison Vargas, has claimed that the recordings have been edited to condemn the brothers. While the Fuerabamba community has not been tainted by their lawyers' culpability, their case has affected the dialogue process, with the interior ministry (Mininter) tweeting that, "The government wants to talk, the community wants to talk. However, the Chávez Sotelo brothers continue pulling strings to stymie negotiations." But Rojas insists that there cannot be any agreement until his legal advisers are freed. In a further run-in with the authorities, Vargas was arrested on 29 March for hitting a police officer with his car while driving under the influence outside the Las Bambas mine. Two police officers were also injured by protesters throwing stones as Vargas was arrested.

### **The government's position**

The central government is striving to engage in peaceful negotiations with the Fuerabamba community. On 27 March, the newly appointed prime minister, Salvador del Solar, sent a commission led by Trujillo, Health Minister Zulema Tomás, and Social Development and Inclusion Minister Paola Bustamante, to Apurímac to speak with the Fuerabamba community. But the army helicopter transporting them was attacked with stones by unidentified individuals forcing them into an emergency landing. No one was injured in the incident and talks resumed the following day in Cusco, where ministers reaffirmed their commitment to finding a solution that will benefit all parties involved. On 31 March, a couple of days after being released, Rojas met with Del Solar and other cabinet ministers in a discussion that was mediated by Monsignor Miguel Cabrejos of Peru's Episcopal Conference.

In spite of efforts by the government, Rojas regrets MMG's failure to take part in the dialogue. He also upholds that the blockades will continue and that an agreement will not be reached until the Chávez Sotelo brothers are released. Rojas has also called for the government to lift the 15-day state of emergency that it declared in Apurímac region and along the Apurímac-Cusco-Arequipa road on 29 March.

Following his meeting with Rojas, Del Solar insisted that the government is willing to advance the dialogue with the Fuerabamba community and to consider lifting the state of emergency but only once all road blockades are cleared.



**US coca accusations ruffle feathers**

The issue of narcotrafficking has been central to US-Colombia relations for decades. Since 2000, the two countries have been united by a US foreign aid initiative 'Plan Colombia' ('Peace Colombia' since 2016) to combat drug trafficking organisations and insurgent groups in Colombia. When President Iván Duque of the right-wing Centro Democrático (CD) assumed office in August last year, he was clear that he shares a common focus with US President Donald Trump: reducing illegal drug production in Colombia. However, Trump's condemnation of Duque's efforts in fighting narcotrafficking this week ("he has done nothing for us [the US]") flies in the face of their prior understanding.

In a statement given to US press on 29 March, President Trump lambasted President Duque's efforts to quell the drug trade. Despite calling Duque "a really good guy", Trump said he had not delivered on his promise "to stop drugs", saying that "more drugs are coming out of Colombia right now than before he was president, so he has done nothing for us". Given the positive meeting held between the two presidents on 13 February in the White House, the comments have come as a surprise for the Duque administration. After his meeting with Duque, Trump had responded to a question on Colombia's efforts to eradicate illegal coca plantations and reduce its cocaine-producing capability by saying that they were "working together" on it, but that Colombia was not yet ahead of schedule. Meanwhile, Duque made his position very clear: "Mr. President. In the first four months of our administration, we have eradicated 60,000 hectares [of coca] – more than was eradicated in the previous eight months. We have a goal – and we will commit to that goal – because it is our moral duty to have Colombia free of illegal crops and free of narco-trafficking".

Duque appeared to respond to Trump's latest comments when he defended his government's approach to Colombia's drug problem during a speech before the US-Colombia Chamber of Commerce in Bogotá, that was attended by the US ambassador to Colombia, Kevin Whitaker. Duque said that in his first nine months in office his administration has destroyed over 4,000 cocaine labs, and that it has increased the number of manual coca eradication units from 23 to 100, which have destroyed 16,000 hectares (ha) of coca crops. However, Duque recognised that his government faces "adversity" in eradicating coca given that its ability to rely on aerial coca eradication has been limited. Aerial eradication, which involves the spraying of a herbicide from an aircraft onto the plants, was banned by Colombia's constitutional court (CC) in 2015, after studies conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) found the chemical used, glyphosate, to be carcinogenic. Since then Duque has appealed to overturn this ruling – an appeal that is currently being considered by the CC.

Duque's defence of his government's actions was backed up by the CD's main leader and Duque's political mentor, former president Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010). In a series of tweets, Uribe rejected Trump's accusations and placed the blame for the increase in coca plantations on the lenient eradication policies pursued by the previous government led by Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018), which "allowed coca plantations to increase 200,000 hectares". Uribe went on to criticise Trump for not moving to decertify Colombia as a country that had upheld its international obligations to combat drug trafficking under Santos. The reaction against Trump's comments in Colombia prompted the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, to phone Duque on 1 April in an apparent attempt to mend fences. According to a press release by the US embassy in Colombia, Duque and Pompeo "discussed the importance of continued joint actions to reduce coca cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia, including increased eradication and operations against trafficking networks".

**Coca**

According to statistics from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the number of coca plantations in Colombia has skyrocketed since 2013, reaching an all-time high of 171,000 hectares in 2017.

## The new Tipnis?

### Polls

According to a poll by Latin American-wide independent research organisation Centro Estratégico Latinoamericano de Geopolítica (Celag), which was cited by state news agency *Abi* on 27 March, 45% of respondents said that they would vote for President Morales while 35% said they would vote for former president Carlos Mesa (2003–2005) who is running for Comunidad Ciudadana (CC), with Oscar Órtiz of Bolivia Dice No, third with 9%. Another poll, published by La Paz-based national daily *Página Siete* on 1 April, however, showed Mesa creeping ahead on 32% while Morales was on 31%.

Plans by the government led by President Evo Morales to exploit a local nature reserve, Tariquía, Tarija department for hydrocarbon deposits has led the local media to draw parallels with the ‘Tipnis’ dispute. This is a reference to the mass protests that took place in 2011 over government plans to construct a new road through the Isiboro-Sécure Indigenous Territory and National Park (Tipnis) ecological reserve, which dealt a major blow to Morales’ popularity. A repeat of such unrest would be damaging for Morales ahead of October’s general election in which he is seeking a further term for the ruling Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS).

In April 2018 the MAS government promulgated laws approving exploration and exploitation contracts for the San Telmo Norte and Astillero blocks which, combined, would generate US\$8.9bn when up and running. Located in the provinces of Gran Chaco, O’Connor and Arce, the San Telmo Norte block has a potential of 1.08 trillion cubic feet (TCF), according to the hydrocarbons ministry. The operator is Petrobras Bolivia, the local subsidiary of Brazil’s state oil company Petrobras which is investing over US\$193m. The contract for the Astillero block, which is located in the Gran Chaco and Arce provinces, went to YPF Chaco SA, a subsidiary of state oil company YPF, which is investing US\$489m.

The hydrocarbons minister, Luis Alberto Sánchez, maintains that just 0.014% of the protected territory (which spans 246,870 hectares [ha]) will be affected by the plans. However, according to a report by local think-tank Centro de Documentación y Información (Cedib), published in October 2017 (which cites hydrocarbons ministry figures), there are five exploration blocks in Tariquía: Huacareta, San Telmo (norte), San Telmo (Sur), Churumas, and Astillero with 136,277ha of the protected territory earmarked for hydrocarbons exploration – considerably more than the 0.014% figure cited by Sánchez. A more recent (22 November 2018) Cedib press release claims that authorisation for the projects was given without the consent of the affected communities or any preliminary investigation, and it poses a risk to the ecological stability of the region.

Protests against the plans to exploit the territory have been taking place since 2017 with the most recent show of unrest, a 24-hour strike staged on 27 March by Tarija residents. Organised by the local civic committee, strikes and street blockades were concentrated in the departmental capital, Tarija city, but also occurred in the Méndez, Arce, O’Connor, Caraparí, and Padcaya provinces. Yet the Morales government maintains that the affected communities support the project.

Worryingly for the government, there are suggestions that the issue could serve as a rallying point for the fractured political opposition ahead of October’s elections. The day after the 24-hour strike, members of the Unidad Demócrata (UD) announced plans to take legal action against the proposed explorations in a bid to protect the biodiversity of the Tariquía reserve. UD national deputy Norman Lazarte told the national daily *La Razón* of plans to take the case to the constitutional court (TCP) on behalf of the people with letters being drafted to the attorney general’s office and ombudsman to enlist their support. Morales’ bid to run again is already contentious given the February 2016 popular referendum rejecting the proposal to change the constitution to allow him to seek a further term and local commentators are likening the government’s controversial plans with regard to the Tariquís to the dispute over the Tipnis which the government was forced to cancel after a violent crackdown on protesters (although the initiative was again revised in 2017).



**Bolsonaro turns to Israel**

**Following official visits to Presidents Donald Trump in the US and Sebastián Piñera in Chile earlier in March, Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro continued a busy international agenda with a three-day trip to Israel this week, where he was received with ceremony by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.**

President Bolsonaro's assurances that he is pursuing a foreign policy free from ideological bias ring hollow when the list of his preferred partners is held up for examination. Despite having toned down attacks on China (and even planning a visit there), Bolsonaro has demonstrated a preference for deepening ties with countries governed by right-of-centre leaders, especially those that have received the Trump seal of approval.

The precedence given to Israel in Bolsonaro's foreign policy, to the likely detriment of Brazil's trade relations with the Arab League countries sympathetic to the Palestinian Authority, can be attributed to religious and ideological factors. Israel, and Jerusalem in particular, holds a religious significance for Brazilian evangelicals, who form an influential group amongst Bolsonaro's supporters, as well as in congress.

Bolsonaro, a Catholic, had previously visited Israel in 2016 when he was publicly baptised in the River Jordan by a prominent evangelical pastor. This time, his agenda combined discussions on bilateral cooperation with visits to Jerusalem's holy sites, including the 'Wailing Wall' in East Jerusalem (recognised as occupied Palestinian territory by much of the international community).

On 31 March, Bolsonaro and Netanyahu signed five cooperation agreements and one memorandum of understanding in a variety of areas, including energy, science & technology, health and cybersecurity. The two leaders hope to increase cooperation in natural gas production, the development of start-ups, and on matters of defence and security.

Under pressure from pragmatic generals in government, as well as the powerful agri-business lobby, Bolsonaro backtracked on plans to follow Trump's lead and move the Brazilian embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Instead, he announced that Brazil would be opening a trade office in Jerusalem, a move which is largely symbolic from Brazil's point of view but will be recorded as a foreign policy victory by Netanyahu, who is gearing up for elections on 9 April.

Bolsonaro's attempt at compromise appears to have fallen flat, however. Marco Feliciano, a federal deputy and member of the so-called 'Bible caucus' in congress, said that Bolsonaro's evangelical supporters hope he will keep his promise and move the Brazilian embassy in Israel to Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority has denounced Brazil's plans to open a Jerusalem-based trade office and recalled its ambassador in Brazil for consultations. Brazil's agriculture minister, Tereza Cristina da Costa Dias, said Arab countries have expressed discomfort with this decision. The Arab world is an important destination for Brazilian exports of halal meat, and a deterioration of relations with this market would be detrimental to Brazil's chicken and beef industry.

Bolsonaro not only caused anger and controversy with his apparent disregard for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After visiting the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum on 2 April, Bolsonaro claimed that Nazism had been a left-wing not extreme-right movement, echoing recent declarations made by his Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo. Historians worldwide condemned this re-interpretation of history.

**An explosive tweet**

Palestinian extremist group Hamas also condemned President Bolsonaro's plans to open a Brazilian trade office in Jerusalem, after which the president's son, federal senator Flávio Bolsonaro, posted a since-deleted tweet saying he wished that Hamas would "explode". The tweet caused exasperation in Brazil's congress, with the leader of the agricultural caucus, federal deputy Alceu Moreira, expressing his discontent aloud and saying he feared repercussions for the Brazilian market. President Bolsonaro's slights to the Palestinian Authority have also raised security concerns amongst some members of government.

## Bolsonaro revives a painful past

### Region condemns praise of dictatorships

Brazil is not the only South American country to have struggled to come to terms with the abuses of past dictatorships, however Bolsonaro is the only head of state in the region to openly admire these repressive regimes. On 29 March, a Parlasur deputy for Paraguay's left-wing Frente Guasu presented a motion for the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) to condemn Bolsonaro's commendation of Paraguay's dictator Alfredo Stroessner during a speech in February. Chile's President Piñera has also distanced himself from Bolsonaro's views on the region's right-wing dictators.

During his undistinguished seven terms as federal deputy in Brazil's congress, one of now-president Jair Bolsonaro's most distinctive features was his frequent praise of the country's military regime (1964-1985). In 2016, he dedicated his vote to impeach then-president Dilma Rousseff to Colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, who has been denounced as the dictatorship's chief torturer. Although Bolsonaro has toned down some of his more controversial views since taking over the presidency, he has remained vocal about his admiration for Latin America's right-wing dictators, including Paraguay's Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989) and Chile's Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). Last week, he revived debates over Brazil's dictatorship when he ordered the armed forces to commemorate the 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coup that marked its beginnings.

Brazil chose amnesia over reckoning where its collective approach to the dictatorship is concerned. A 1979 amnesty law protects perpetrators of human rights abuses from being brought to justice, which is why the country's truth commission (CNV), which was not set up until 2012, has no prosecutorial authority. The view held by President Bolsonaro and his foreign minister, Ernesto Araújo, that the 31 March 1964 military take-over that resulted in the deposition of then-president João Goulart was not a coup, but a revolution that saved Brazil from Communism, is still shared by many to this day.

Nevertheless, the 25 March announcement that Bolsonaro had instructed the defence ministry to order "due commemorations" of the date by the military rank-and-file generated immediate backlash. Bolsonaro later moderated his words, saying that the armed forces should "remember" the date. On 29 March, a federal judge prohibited the government from holding any sort of commemorative events relative to the 31 March 1964. The next day, this decision was overturned.

The Brazilian Bar Association (OAB) and the Instituto Vladimir Herzog (an NGO set up in memory of a journalist killed during the dictatorship) presented a request to the United Nations (UN) to condemn Bolsonaro's order. The UN special rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and the guarantees of non-recurrence, Argentina's Fabian Salvioli, then denounced it as "immoral and inadmissible."

Salvioli said that "any action that could justify...serious human rights violations during the dictatorship would further reinforce the impunity from which perpetrators benefit in Brazil." He also warned against attempts at historical revisionism, a habit Bolsonaro and Araújo seem to be adopting to suit their anti-left-wing political discourse (*see previous article*). The CNV established that at least 8,000 indigenous people and 434 supposed dissidents were killed during the dictatorship, with tens of thousands more illegally detained and tortured.

Outside of military barracks, this year's 31 March passed off with only small-scale protests on the streets, both in defence and in condemnation of the 1964 coup and the 21-year military regime that followed. A video celebrating these, reportedly shared by the Planalto presidential palace's WhatsApp account and then tweeted by one of the president's sons, federal deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro, caused the most stir.

## GDP growth slows

Uruguay's 1.6% GDP growth in 2018 marked the 16<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of positive growth in the country, although it slipped to just 0.6% year-on-year in the fourth quarter of 2018 (and contracted by 0.1% in the fourth quarter compared to the third quarter). The central bank's report highlighted the positive results of the transport, storage and communications sector (6.8% annual growth) and the primary sector (5.7%). This was counterbalanced by a 2.8% contraction of the construction sector and a 1.3% contraction in the trade, repairs, restaurants and hotels sectors.

The opposition Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) has filed a request for a legal investigation into the diffusion of the video, which shows a man speaking of a time of fear from which "the army saved us". After different offices and members of government denied knowledge and responsibility for the recording and subsequent sharing of the video, a pro-Bolsonaro businessman confessed authorship on 2 April. The episode has served to increase divisions and tensions in Bolsonaro's already fractious government.

## TRACKING TRENDS

**BRAZIL | Increased aerial links to Europe.** On 31 March, European budget airline Norwegian Air UK operated the inaugural flight of its new London-Rio de Janeiro route. Norwegian Air had announced the launch of this new flight route, which will have a frequency of four flights a week and aims to break the monopoly of direct flights between Brazil and the UK, last November.

Brazil's national tourism institute, Embratur, has celebrated the launch of Norwegian Air's operations in the country as a success for Brazil's tourism industry. Embratur expects the new low-cost flight route to contribute to an increase in the number of British and European tourists in Rio de Janeiro. In a statement, Embratur noted that the flight not only improves connections between Brazil and the European continent but will also stimulate competition, generate employment, and increase inflows of foreign currency. Overall, this new flight route is expected to inject some US\$29m into the Brazilian economy within a year.

Flight capacity between Europe and Brazil has already been growing. On 29 March, Embratur announced that the number of flights linking Europe to Brazil had increased by 4% in March this year compared to March 2018, with 44 extra flights, while the number of seats had increased by 8% (with a further 25,000 available seats).

Embratur has made the expansion of Brazil's aerial network a priority. Earlier in March, Virgin Atlantic announced that it will be launching daily flights between London and São Paulo in 2020. This will be the British airline's first South American destination. Meanwhile, Spanish company Iberia (which operates the most flights between Europe and Latin America) also plans to increase the frequency of its flights to Brazil, according to Embratur.

**URUGUAY | Adverse figures.** Uruguay's public account deficit deteriorated again, reaching 4.5% of GDP in the 12 months to February (down by a fifth of a percentage point on January), a figure not seen since June 2003, according to data released by the economy and finance ministry on 29 March. Poverty also increased for the first time in the 14 years since the ruling left-wing Frente Amplio (FA) came to power, according to the national statistics institute (INE), falling by two decimals on 2017 to reach 8.1% in 2018 (indigence remained steady at just 0.1% of the population). In absolute terms this means that 8,000 Uruguayans fell beneath the poverty line in 2018. The figure needs to be put in context. FA governments have brought down poverty from 39.9% of the population since coming to power in 2004. But it adds to the growing public perception that the FA's cycle could be over and a steady decline setting in.

GDP growth was 1.6% in 2018 down from 2.7% in 2017 (indeed only in 2015 has it been lower since the FA came to power), according to a report released by the central bank (BCU) on 28 March (*see sidebar*). Again, this figure needs to be seen in the context of Argentina's sharp contraction, and Brazil's continuing economic difficulties.

Deputy Roberto Chiazzaro of the FA's Partido Socialista (PS) actually pointed to the adverse economic developments in Argentina to highlight the competent economic stewardship of the FA in difficult times. "Orthodox and neoliberal economic policy [the preferred economic strategy of the Uruguayan opposition] has delivered poverty rates of 32% of the population and indigence has already reached 12% [in Argentina]," Chiazzaro said.

## Migrant crisis fuels tensions with US

The Central American migrant crisis shot to prominence again this week with US President Donald Trump threatening to close the shared border with Mexico unless the government led by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador make a concerted effort to address the issue. Trump also announced that he was cutting off aid to the three Northern Triangle countries (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) for failing to stem the northward flow of migrants.

The migration issue has made headlines in recent months due to the caravans formed last year by thousands of Central American migrants to make the journey overland to the US to escape the violence and lack of economic opportunity afflicting their countries. President Trump spelt out his readiness to close the border on 29 March after reports of the formation of a massive caravan of Central American migrants.

President López Obrador refused to respond to the torrent of tweets from Trump criticising Mexico for failing to halt the flow of migrants, saying he preferred “love and peace” (although, intriguingly, he did say that he planned to ask the US to tighten gun controls “once the situation with the migrants calms down”). Some 750 US border agents were reassigned from customs to immigration duties in order to deal with the influx of migrants, holding up trucks trying to enter the US.

Trump intimated that his threat to close the border had served a purpose, concentrating minds in Mexico, which he said had “made a big step” and was “apprehending large numbers of people at their Southern Border, mostly from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador”. Trump stressed, however, that he was “100%” ready to close the border if he adjudged that not enough was being done.

López Obrador has urged the Trump administration to combat the migrant crisis by increasing investment in Central America to drive development and reduce the imperative to migrate. Mexico’s foreign minister Marcelo Ebrard said this week that Mexico’s plan for developing Central America was “advancing very well” and would be presented by the United Nations (UN) Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (Eclac) by mid-April. It took a big hit, however, from Trump’s announcement that he was cutting off aid to the three Northern Triangle countries.

### Future of US-Northern Triangle cooperation in doubt

Trump’s order, which followed a similar threat made in October 2018 and has been widely slammed by US Democrats as well as some Republicans, came days after the US government had announced an “historic agreement” with the Northern Triangle countries to address the “root causes” of the migration crisis. The Honduran presidency released a statement decrying “contradictory policies by US government agencies and different State powers”.

Trump’s latest move followed remarks on 27 March by Mexico’s interior minister, Olga Sánchez Cordero, that the government was preparing for “the mother of all migrant caravans” (comprising some 20,000 Central American migrants) reaching the US border. Her comments prompted an official complaint from the Honduran foreign ministry, which said the number was “unsubstantiated”.

### Border closure

Mexico’s foreign minister Marcelo Ebrard said on 3 April that his government had employed the “strategy” of not replying to President Trump’s hostile tweets, adding that “strategies are measured by results”. President López Obrador added that it would be “in nobody’s interests” if the border were closed.



### More doubts

Adam Isacson, director for defence oversight at the US-based human rights lobby group Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), questions whether President Trump will be able to make good his threat to cut off aid to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Isacson points out that the US Constitution gives Congress “the power of the purse” while the Impoundment Control Act of 1974 specifically prohibits the president from withholding appropriated funds. Isacson notes that the White House could, of course, propose not to withhold money but transfer it to other countries. However, he considers that the “president would pay a huge price if the reprogramming were to happen despite congressional opposition”.

After Trump tweeted on 28 March that “Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador have taken our money for years, and do Nothing”, on 30 March, in an interview with US news channel *CNN*, his chief-of-staff Mick Mulvaney confirmed that the US administration was cutting off aid to the three countries. *CNN* cited a source claiming that “at the Secretary’s instruction, we are carrying out the President’s direction and ending FY 2017 and FY 2018 foreign assistance programs for the Northern Triangle”, adding that the administration “will be engaging Congress as part of this process”.

With the amount in question not disclosed, and doubts persisting as to whether such a move is possible (*see sidebar*), Trump’s decision has been condemned by a string of US Democrats like Eliot Engel (D-NY), Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. It has also been criticised by Republicans such as Michael McCaul (R-TX), highest-ranking Republican on the House Foreign Relations Committee and Rep. Kay Granger, the top Republican on the House Appropriations Committee.

Trump’s announcement also raised eyebrows given the “historic agreement” unveiled the previous day by US Secretary of Homeland Security (DHS) Kirstjen Nielsen which would cover four distinct areas of collaboration. These are combating human trafficking and migrant smuggling; countering organised crime and gangs; expanding information and intelligence sharing; and strengthening border security.

Yet the latest “historic agreement” (which omitted mention of efforts to promote prosperity) itself drew criticism from figures like Guatemalan-born US Rep. Norma Torres (D-CA) who warned that it fails to provide a firm commitment to combating corruption and strengthening institutions. These concerns regarding the direction of anti-corruption efforts in the sub-region have intensified due to moves like the decision last year by Guatemala’s President Jimmy Morales not to extend the mandate of the UN-backed International commission against impunity in Guatemala (Cicig). Torres warned that without this commitment by the US government, “any attempt to increase security assistance to Central America...is doomed to fail”.

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## TRACKING TRENDS

**MEXICO | Growth forecast cut.** Mexico’s finance ministry released a report this week reducing estimated GDP growth in 2019 to a range between 1.1% and 2.1% from a 1.5%-2.5% range projected in December last year when President Andrés Manuel López Obrador took office. It also projected GDP growth of between 1.4% and 2.4% in 2020. López Obrador describe the finance ministry’s revised forecast as “prudent and conservative” especially as it is now in line with the estimate of the Banco de México (Banxico).

The finance ministry said it had not taken into account any positive impact of the government’s economic development plans. López Obrador seized upon this by boldly predicting that in his view his own finance ministry’s projection “falls short”, and that the economy will actually grow by 2% this year and 3% in 2020. Even if the economy grows at this more optimistic rate, it is a far cry from the 4% average annual growth López Obrador promised to deliver during his electoral campaign.

**MEXICO | Remittances soar.** Remittances from Mexican expatriates increased by 6.43% in the first two months of 2019 compared with the same period last year, the Banco de México (Banxico) reported on 1 April. Remittances totalled US\$4.51bn. At this rate they will exceed the annual total of US\$33.47bn in 2018, which set a new record.

Remittances are the second largest source of foreign exchange in Mexico after automotive exports. This goes some way to explaining President Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s decision to urge banks during last month’s annual banking convention to lower fees on remittances.

**Moïse names interim PM as protesters return to streets**

President Jovenel Moïse has named culture & communication (MCC) minister Jean Michel Lapin as Haiti's new interim prime minister following the departure of Jean Henry Céant after losing a vote of no confidence [[WR-19-11](#)]. Céant was the first real casualty of the current crisis afflicting the country which saw mass protests in February stemming from the worsening economic situation (the February inflation rate was 17%) and the alleged embezzlement of some US\$2bn of funds from Venezuela's discounted oil initiative Petrocaribe, which has implicated Moïse. Lapin's appointment has done little to assuage these tensions or address concerns raised by the international community about the ongoing political uncertainty.

President Moïse named Lapin on 21 March to replace Céant who had been his second prime minister since taking office in February 2017. Lapin has been in public administration for the past three decades and assumed the post of MCC in September 2018. That Lapin's appointment had failed to satisfy the opposition was suggested by the announcement six days later of a new movement, Forces de l'opposition progressiste (Fop), comprising some 20 political groupings, calling for Moïse to step down. The Fop includes Mouvement patriotique populaire dessalinien (Mopod), Konbit òganizasyon sendikal ak popilè yo, and Pitit Desalin of Jean Charles Moïse, who came third in the 2015 presidential election.

In a sign that Fop intends to keep the pressure on President Moïse, it called protests for 29 March – the anniversary of the latest (1987) constitution. With dozens reportedly taking to the streets, this was the first show of unrest since the three weeks of national demonstrations, which took place in February, leaving 26 people dead and 77 wounded according to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) (although a local human rights group Réseau National de Défense des Droits Humains put the death toll at 40 with 82 people injured.)

The instability and political uncertainty continues to attract foreign concern. With members of the international community such as the Core Group (comprising the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General, the ambassadors of Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Spain, the European Union, the US, and the Special Representative of the Organization of American States) having all signalled concern about February's protests, on 20 March US Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL), who chairs one of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's sub committees, paid a visit to Haiti. Rubio met President Moïse and the heads of the lower chamber and senate, Gary Bodeau and Carl Murat Cantav respectively. He also met Helen La Lime, the UN Special Representative for Haiti; the director general of the national police, Michel-Ange Gédéon; and representatives from local political parties, the private sector, and civil society.

A press release from Rubio's office "highlighted the importance of constructive and inclusive dialogue from all parties and...expressed the importance of holding elections in the country", with a legislative vote due in October. Also indicative of US concern, 104 bipartisan congress members signed a letter to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo expressing concern over the deadly unrest in Haiti, and asking him to investigate corruption and human rights violations by the Haitian government. The concerns raised by the US come as the problem of insecurity in Haiti again made headlines after gunmen attacked a motorcade which was carrying Chile's ambassador to Haiti, Patricio Utreras, on 27 March as it was driving in a convoy to a clean-water project in Croix-des-Bouquets commune, Ouest department. The ambassador was not harmed.

**IMF aid suspended**

On 23 March the local media reported that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had suspended more than US\$229m in loans at 0% interest announced on 7 March. The loans were in return for the Haitian government attaining agreed goals such as reducing its budget deficit and carrying out social protection programmes, which have been threatened by the instability at the top.

**Bitter political struggle comes to a climax**

Guyana's warring political parties are heading for a showdown at the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) as they battle for power at a time when the country has come into game-changing oil wealth. The A Partnership for National Unity (Apnu) coalition government headed by President David Granger was battling for survival after being on the receiving end of a vote of no confidence in parliament on 21 December last year which was upheld by the acting chief justice, Roxanne George-Wiltshire, just over a month later. But in a reversal of fortunes, on 22 March, Guyana's Court of Appeal overturned the vote of no confidence the day after the expiry of the 90-day legal deadline for the government to call fresh elections. The opposition People's Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) appealed to the CCJ, whose ruling will be final.

In a highly controversial vote Guyana's Court of Appeal adjudged that an incorrect formula was employed for December's vote of no confidence in Granger's Apnu government, which had been passed by 33-32 after Charrandass Persaud switched allegiance to the PPP/C, and subsequently departed for Canada. The two Afro-Guyanese judges on the Court of Appeal ruled that 34 rather than 33 votes were necessary for an absolute majority in the 65-seat national assembly. They calculated that the requisite absolute majority must be one more than half (32.5), requiring it to be 34. The third, Indo-Guyanese, judge on the court strenuously objected, arguing that this "does not accord with logic or common sense". Apnu comprises the predominantly Afro-Guyanese People's National Congress/Reform (PNC/R) and Indo-Guyanese Alliance for Change (AFC). The PPP/C is the country's traditional Indo-Guyanese party led by long-serving former president Bharrat Jagdeo (1999-2011).

**Stay of execution?**

The upshot of the Court of Appeal ruling is that the national assembly can start functioning again, but this is not the end of the matter. Jagdeo reacted by saying he was "respectful of the ruling of the court" but promptly appealed to the CCJ on 27 March. Given the magnitude of what is at stake, the CCJ could take its time to issue a verdict. The appeal hearing is set for 10 May. If the CCJ upholds the Court of Appeal ruling, then Granger's Apnu government will serve out its five-year term and call elections before August 2020. If it sides with the PPP/C, then fresh elections will need to be held. It is not clear when.

In theory the date for elections should be set within three months but the Guyana Elections Commission (Gecom) announced on 19 March that it needs to update the electoral roll (which is only valid until 30 April) by means of a house-to-house registration process, and would not be ready to hold elections until late November. The PPP/C insisted this was unacceptable and Jagdeo insinuated that Gecom under its "unilaterally appointed Chairman", retired Justice James Patterson, was answering to Granger. The CCJ will hear a challenge to Patterson's appointment (upheld by Guyana's Court of Appeal) on 8 May.

The political deadlock has prevented the national assembly from passing legislation to regulate the oil industry. ExxonMobil discovered oil off Guyana's coast in 2015, with reserves of in excess of 5bn barrels of oil equivalent, and wants to start drilling next year, with projected production by 2025 of 750,000 barrels per day. The oil windfall could see Guyana's GDP nearly quadruple to US\$13bn by 2025. This goes some way to explaining the current bitter political struggle. The party in government at this juncture could stay in power for some time if it spends this money wisely in alleviating poverty, which affects some 40% of the 800,000 population, and improving education, healthcare, and infrastructure.

**Oil boost**

In a further boost for Guyana's economy, energy companies Tullow Oil, Total, and Eco Atlantic announced on 29 March that they will drill a second well in their Orinduik oil and gas field off Guyana's coast. Eco Atlantic revealed earlier in the month that the estimated size of the field is some 3.9bn barrels of oil (up by one-third on an estimate released last September).



## POSTSCRIPT

### “Quotes of the week

“Asking for the removal of the commander [of the army] every 15 days damages institutional credibility.”

*Uruguayan Senator Javier García, a member of the opposition Partido Nacional and president of the senate defence commission.*

“For me, stripping immunity is very little. How do we deal with traitors? (“Firing squad!” [response from fellow constituent assembly delegates]). They don’t deserve to be called Venezuelans...I don’t want to share my nationality with them...I’d ask that we hold popular tribunals in every state and let the people decide what to do with the traitors.”

*Venezuela’s María León, a constituent assembly delegate and former minister for women and gender equality (2009-2010), on stripping Juan Guaidó’s immunity from prosecution.*

“I have learned from my mistakes. My arrogance made me believe that votes were a blank cheque. Defeats chastened me...but they made me more sincere and humble. I apologise to those who were disappointed in me. Today I feel I have matured and that I’m more prepared to govern the country than ever before.”

*Argentine presidential aspirant Sergio Massa.*

### Argentine unions rise up against Macri

As we go to press on 4 April Argentine trade unions and activists are staging a demonstration on the streets of the city of Buenos Aires to protest against the economic policies of the government led by President Mauricio Macri. It is an eminently political protest with Héctor Daer, one of the ruling triumvirate of the country’s main trade union movement Confederación General del Trabajo (CGT), calling for the political opposition to unify to defeat Macri in October’s presidential elections.

Protesters, numbering in the thousands, took to the city centre to protest against crippling inflation, soaring utility tariffs and transport fares, and increasing poverty, while demanding better salaries and an end to austerity. On the eve of the protest, Daer called for a united opposition to defeat President Macri at the polls. But the main opposition Partido Justicialista (PJ, Peronists), much like the CGT, is far from presenting a united front, offering Macri his best hope of securing re-election.

There are various presidential aspirants within the PJ, competing for the right to face Macri. The electoral panorama is complicated by the fact that it is unclear not just whether former president Cristina Fernández (2007-2015) will stand for the presidency but whether she would seek to do so on the PJ ticket. Former economy minister Roberto Lavagna (2002-2005) has dropped heavy hints that he will seek to run for the PJ, and has obtained some heavyweight backing, but he is yet to confirm his pre-candidacy. During an event in Buenos Aires, Sergio Massa, the leader of the dissident PJ Frente Renovador (FR), confirmed his intention this week to run for president and to stand in PJ primaries in August.

The ruling centre-right Cambiemos is not as united as Macri might hope – there have been calls from some quarters within the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR), one of the three constituent parties, for the coalition to hold primary elections. But the interior, public works, and housing minister, Rogelio Frigerio, confirmed in a press conference this week that Macri would seek re-election for Cambiemos.

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