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FEATURED Q&A

What's at Stake in El Salvador's Legislative Vote?



Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele's Nuevas Ideas party is hoping for big gains in the country's Feb. 28 legislative elections. // File Photo: Salvadoran Government.

Q The fatal shooting of two supporters of El Salvador's FMLN opposition party has sparked concerns of violence just weeks ahead of the Central American nation's legislative and local elections, scheduled for Feb. 28. Why are tensions so high ahead of the election, and will violence intensify in the days ahead? Which parties are poised to win, and what could this mean for President Nayib Bukele and his agenda? What's at stake in the upcoming vote?

A Christine Wade, professor of political science and international studies at Washington College in Chestertown, Md.: "The recent shooting that left two FMLN activists dead and five others wounded is symptomatic of the disturbing escalation of political tensions over the past year. This type of partisan violence has been extremely rare in postwar El Salvador, but some now worry about a return to political violence—especially as the accused shooters provide security for a state agency. President Bukele's confrontations with the country's legislature, attorney general, media and Supreme Court have grown increasingly worse since the occupation of the legislature last February. Bukele's reliance on inflammatory rhetoric and the politicization of security forces to excoriate his enemies has delighted his base and alarmed others. Despite criticisms of his autocratic style and showman-like tendencies, Bukele's popularity with voters is undeniable. While polls suggest that his party, Nuevas Ideas (NI), will likely win a majority of the seats in the legislature, it's still uncertain whether NI (together with ally GANA) will win the 56 seats needed for a qualified majority. If successful, Bukele—who has faced a divided government since June

Continued on page 3

TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Colombia's Army Carried Out 6,400 Killings: Court

Members of Colombia's military carried out at least 6,400 extra-judicial killings between 2002 and 2008, according to a special court established as part of the government's peace accords with the FARC rebels in 2016.

Page 2

ECONOMIC

Brazil Drops Trade Complaint Against Canada

Brazil dropped a trade complaint that it had filed against Canada at the World Trade Organization over aircraft subsidies. Brazil also called for broad talks on aircraft production.

Page 3

ECONOMIC

López Obrador Urges Reduced Power Usage

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador urged Mexicans to lower their electricity consumption as severe winter storms in Texas have led to power shortages in northern Mexico.

Page 2



López Obrador // File Photo: Mexican Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Colombia's Military Carried Out 6,400 Killings: Court

Members of Colombia's military carried out at least 6,400 extrajudicial killings between 2002 and 2008, a number far higher than previous estimates, a special court said Thursday, Agence France-Presse reported. The Special Jurisdiction for Peace court, which Colombia established as part of its peace deal with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, rebels in 2016, said the killings were "illegitimate deaths presented as combat fatalities," which are known as "false positives," the wire service reported. In a report to the court last year, Colombia's public prosecutor's office acknowledged 2,249 such killings between 1988 and 2014, BBC News reported. However, the court's investigation indicates that the actual number of extrajudicial killings may be three times that number, and it suggests that the majority of the killings were carried out between 2002 and 2010, during the administration of former President Álvaro Uribe. So far, more than 1,700 people have been sentenced in connection with extrajudicial killings in Colombia, BBC News reported. In court cases over the past decade, members of the military have told courts that their superiors pressured them to increase their "kill rate," adding that they would be rewarded with days off and promotions. In some cases, young men were lured from Bogotá, dressed in military fatigues, killed and passed off as rebels. In one case, eight soldiers were imprisoned for forcibly taking four farmers from their homes, killing them and dressing them up as rebels. The Special Jurisdiction for Peace said the number of actual extrajudicial killings may be even higher than 6,400, adding that it is still investigating. Witnesses have blamed former Army Commander Mario Montoya, the highest-ranking military officer to have testified before the court, for extrajudicial killings, AFP reported. However, he has denied ordering the executions of civilians, AFP reported. As of last year, there were

2,140 military personnel under investigation in connection with the execution of civilians, Montoya's attorney, Andrés Garzón, told AFP. He said that number was less than one percent of the total number of troops in the army at the time. "That shows there was never a directive to the army to commit such atrocious acts," he told the wire service.

ECONOMIC NEWS

López Obrador Urges Mexicans to Reduce Power Consumption

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador on Thursday urged Mexicans to reduce their consumption of electricity as winter storms in Texas have severely restricted generation of power in Mexico, the Associated Press reported. The storms and bitterly cold temperatures north of the border have frozen natural gas pipelines, interrupting the flow of the commodity to Mexico, which derives most of its electricity from natural gas. The lack of power in northern Mexico has led to rolling blackouts. "From 6 p.m. to 11 [p.m.] help us by consuming less, all Mexicans, the problem is already practically resolved, but we're going to all help have reserves... and we're not going to endure blackouts," said López Obrador. The president added that he was seeking to head off an order from Texas Governor Greg Abbott that the state's natural gas suppliers not send any out of the state until Feb. 21. It was unclear whether Abbott could legally make the order. Mexico's deputy commerce secretary, Luz María de la Mora, said in a tweet Wednesday that Mexico's government understands the emergency situation in Texas, but added, "We don't consider the resolution announced by Texas Governor Greg Abbott the only option, [because] it would irremediably affect the economies of Mexico and the U.S." The winter storms have caused at least 40 deaths, The Washington Post reported Thursday. Hundreds of thousands of people in Texas were without electricity amid frigid temperatures across the state. López Obrador

NEWS BRIEFS

Brazil Surpasses 10 Mn Confirmed Covid Cases

Brazil surpassed 10 million confirmed cases of Covid-19 on Thursday, as a new variant of the novel coronavirus continues to ravage through the country's Amazonian region, Reuters reported. Brazil has also seen stalled inoculation efforts in many cities due to a lack of vaccines. Epidemiologists have warned that recent carnival holiday celebrations, although officially canceled in major cities such as Rio de Janeiro, could drive a further surge in infections. Brazil has registered more than 243,400 deaths from Covid-19, the highest death toll outside the United States.

Costa Rica's Legislative Assembly Passes Measure to Create Space Agency

Costa Rica's Legislative Assembly on Thursday approved the creation of a space agency, the Tico Times reported. The Costa Rican Space Agency will establish a space center in Liberia, in Guanacaste province. Scientists will conduct research and explore technological innovations there. The space agency will also promote collaboration between Costa Rica and other governments in the field.

Shares of Argentina's Grupo Supervielle Soar on Takeover Rumors

Argentine banking and financial services firm Grupo Supervielle saw a spike of more than 50 percent in its shares on Thursday as rumors of a potential takeover circulate, Reuters reported. Supervielle hit its highest level since 2018 before easing back to up by about 14 percent. "There is a rumor that it is being sold to a powerful group in Brazil, but nothing is known," an unnamed trader told Reuters. An external press official at Supervielle told Reuters it "did not have this information" and that the share price spike was being analyzed internally.

used the crisis to call for a strengthening of state-owned electricity and oil companies, the Associated Press reported. “The country’s public companies must be strengthened and given priority,” he said. [Editor’s note: See [Q&A](#) on Mexico’s power sector in today’s issue of the weekly Energy Advisor.]

Brazil Drops Trade Complaint Against Canada at WTO

Brazil on Thursday dropped a trade complaint it had filed at the World Trade Organization against Canada over aircraft subsidies, calling instead for broader talks between all aircraft-producing countries to avoid a potential aircraft trade war, Reuters reported. Brazil’s sudden move comes as rival airplane makers Airbus and Boeing remain in a 16-year-old spat at the WTO that has led to back-and-forth tariffs. While Europe’s Airbus and Chicago-based Boeing dominate the market for large passenger jets, Brazil’s Embraer, the world’s third-largest plane maker, has for years fought over the regional jet market against Canada’s Bombardier. Both companies have filed several trade complaints against the other. In 2017, Brazil complained to the WTO about Canadian support for the Bombardier CSeries jet, which it said had received \$3 billion in unfair subsidies, a claim Canada denied. “Brazil remains convinced of the strength of its case. However, it has become clear that the dispute could not effectively remedy the impacts of such large-scale subsidies on the commercial aircraft market,” Brazil’s foreign ministry said, Reuters reported. Shortly after the announcement, Embraer said it “welcomed” the Brazilian government’s decision to withdraw the dispute. “The WTO dispute became ineffective to address the Canadian subsidies and to remedy the distortions generated in the market,” Embraer said. The company “also supports Brazil’s initiative to launch negotiations for more effective disciplines on government support in the commercial aviation segment,” the aircraft manufacturer added.

FEATURED Q&A / Continued from page 1

2019—will control the legislature and be able to make key appointments, including the attorney general and Supreme Court magistrates. The concentration of power in Bukele’s hands would be especially concerning, given issues with transparency and rule of law during the past year. It will also leave Bukele little place to hide. Thus far, he has blamed the opposition and critics for his problems. The real test for Bukele will be how he will govern when nothing stands in his way.”

A **Orlando Pérez, dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of North Texas at Dallas:** “The legislative elections on Feb. 28 are the first since President Bukele came to power in 2019. Recent polling shows that Bukele’s party, Nuevas Ideas, will most likely gain a significant majority in the Legislative Assembly with more than 60 percent of the vote. The two parties that dominated Salvadoran politics for the past 30 years, Arena and FMLN, are likely to receive less than 10 percent of the vote. President Bukele came to power touting his outsider image and not being beholden to the traditional parties—a fresh face with ‘new ideas.’ Nevertheless, the president has governed as an autocratic populist. He has bullied the legislature with military intervention, arbitrarily dismissed ministers via Twitter and attacked political and civil society opponents. Bukele has used propaganda and publicity to magnify his influence by building a powerful personality cult. Before entering politics, Bukele was a public relations executive. He knows well how to sell his image, set the agenda and neutralize opponents. Human rights and civil society groups attribute recent political violence to Bukele’s increasingly confrontational and hateful rhetoric. The president blamed the killing of two FMLN activists on that party’s efforts to generate sympathy in the run-up to the legislative elections. Bukele has called the peace accords that ended decades of

civil war a ‘farce.’ Recent political violence has shaken Salvadorans’ confidence in democracy and raised questions about the country’s governance. Emboldened by a large legislative majority, President Bukele is likely to become even more personalistic and autocratic.”

A **Luis Mario Rodríguez, director of the Department of Political Studies at the Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development (Fusades):** “With the same intensity and in a similar way to the months prior to the presidential election, Nayib Bukele is warning of possible ‘electoral fraud’ in the Feb. 28 legislative and municipal elections. Bukele attacks the electoral authority every day and encourages his supporters not to accept a result that is

“Opinion polls show Nuevas Ideas with a considerable advantage.”

— Luis Mario Rodríguez

adverse to him. Militants of his party have also attacked two departmental electoral boards and the Supreme Electoral Tribunal. The murders of two FMLN militants are added to the acts of violence that originate from the president’s social networks, as well as from government officials and the ruling party’s candidates. Opinion polls show Nuevas Ideas with a considerable advantage. Bukele has assured that his party will obtain 60 legislative seats (of a total of 84). This would allow the approval of more international loans and also the selection of second-level officials (the attorney general and Supreme Court magistrates, among others). The Salvadoran electoral system in principle does not allow any party to have a simple nor a qualified majority and benefits minority parties. If Bukele takes control of the Legis-

Continued on page 4

FEATURED Q&A / Continued from page 3

lative Assembly, considering his authoritarian behavior during and in the months prior to the pandemic, and with his sending soldiers into the Legislative Assembly on Feb. 9, 2020, El Salvador's next election could mean a transition from a democratic system to an undemocratic one."

A **Leonor Arteaga, program director at the Due Process of Law Foundation (DPLF):** "The recent murders of two FMLN supporters during a rally has escalated the political crisis in El Salvador. The case generated a confrontation between President Nayib Bukele, who supports the version of events of a mutual confrontation rather than an attack, and Attorney General Raúl Melara, after Melara revealed that the crime was perpetrated by three bodyguards from the Ministry of Health. While these crimes might not follow a pattern of political killings, Bukele's confrontational and even aggressive governing style has definitely contributed to an atmosphere of public tension that led to the shooting, which has been widely condemned inside and outside the country. Still, a majority of Salvadorans approve of his hardline approach, which is credited with reducing high levels of crime. The assassinations occurred in the middle of a contentious electoral campaign for local and legislative elections that will take place on Feb. 28. President Bukele's New Ideas party currently leads in the polls. If it captures a majority of the 84 seats in the Legislative Assembly, it could further enable Bukele's dictatorial impulses, endangering El Salvador's system of checks and balances. These elections are critical for Bukele, who so far lacks a base of congressional support. With his government likely to come under increasing scrutiny over allegations of corruption and abuse of power, the scene is set for a hostile election dispute. It remains to be seen whether these accusations, along with the shift in the White House in favor of the rule of law in El Salvador, will diminish his populist shield."

A **Douglas Farah, president of IBI Consultants:** "What is at stake in the upcoming elections is likely the survival of El Salvador's battered and fragile democracy, built after the civil war that ended in 1992. While the nation has remained deeply polarized, Bukele is the first to attack the legitimacy of the peace accords themselves, while criminalizing all opposition. If Bukele's Nuevas Ideas party wins a majority in the Legislative Assembly as expected, he will likely install loyalists in the Supreme Court, as attorney general and at other independent watchdog organizations, further politicize the military and weaken constitutional term limits. The recent political violence is a direct result of Bukele's ongoing inflammatory attacks on all dissent in the media and civil society while publicly defying the Supreme Court and openly feuding with the attorney general over the growing number of corruption investigations that touch the government's inner circle. Bukele's popularity due to the perception of falling homicide rates is at least partly the result of negotiations with MS-13 and other gangs. However, the country's homicide rate has fallen far less than he claims. This means violence can be started and stopped however it is most politically expedient. Bukele disrupted the traditional party structure, but he and his party are likely to be less democratic and as corrupt as the politicians they are displacing. A large electoral win may be enough to allow Bukele, like fellow authoritarian populists Hugo Chávez and Daniel Ortega, to create an autocratic state built on a Messianic individual rather than on institutions."

[Editor's note: The Advisor requested a commentary from El Salvador's Embassy in Washington for this issue but received no response.]

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gene.kuleta@thedialogue.org.

LATIN AMERICA ADVISOR

is published every business day by the Inter-American Dialogue ISSN 2163-7962

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Latin America Advisor is published every business day, except for major U.S. holidays, by the Inter-American Dialogue at 1155 15th Street NW, Suite 800 Washington, DC 20005
www.thedialogue.org

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