IPS

LATIN AMERICA 20.03.2018 | Claudia Detsch

Latin America's bonanza election year

Everything you need to know about the upcoming elections in South and Central America

Read this article in German.

Costa Rica

With decades of solid democratic government, Costa Rica is generally considered an oasis of stability in Latin America. Whether its corruption indices, surveys of press freedom, or quality of life statistics, the central American nation usually comes far ahead of its neighbours in international rankings.

So if an evangelical hardliner new to politics plays the 'outsider' card and goes on to win the first round of the presidential elections, alarm bells should be ringing.

Held in early February, Costa Rica's elections came at the start of what is a bonanza election year in Latin America. After Costa Rica, Mexicans, Colombians, Brazilians, Venezuelans, Paraguayans and El Salvadorians will all go to the polls to elect presidents, parliaments, or local assemblies. President Raúl Castro of Cuba is also set to stand down.

The results of the first round of the Costa Rican elections are a foretaste of what is likely to follow across South and Central America. Though democratic institutions in this part of the world are strong, there is also evidence of political decay. Fewer people are turning out to vote. Even in El Salvador, where voting is mandatory, 58 percent of the electorate stayed at home during local and national parliamentary elections.

Another trend across Latin America is a growing rejection of established parties, not least due to a series of serious corruption scandals which have shaken voters' confidence in democratic institutions. That's led candidates to pitch themselves as 'outsiders' who reject the political mainstream, polarising debate and leading to an increasingly coarse tone in public discourse.

Meanwhile, mainstream parties are having trouble formulating a credible agenda for reform. They're struggling to attract younger voters and have suffered a series of painful defeats, often losing their parliamentary majorities to right-wing opponents, as in Brazil.

Mainstream parties on the right are not also mired in scandal and riven by internal divisions. What is more, public finances in South and Central America are now in worse shape than in the previous decade when the Left held sway, making it difficult to implement policies.

However, progressives seem incapable of turning this to their electoral advantage. That's partly because the Left is sharply divided, with its various streams unwilling to cooperate.

Venezuela and Cuba

In Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro will almost certainly win another presidential term – in a vote that will be neither free nor fair nor secret. Moreover, the opposition coalition (MUD, *Mesa de Unidad Democrática*) can't even agree on whether to participate in or boycott the election. So far, no date has been fixed for the ballot.

Meanwhile, Cuba's 31-member Council of State will choose a successor for President Raúl Castro, who will continue to exert significant influence on the Communist Party and military even after stepping down. Donald Trump's hawkish approach towards Cuba is unlikely to change the status quo, meaning Cuba and Venezuela look set to be fairly stable in coming months, despite their economic travails.

20/05 Presidential elections in Venezuela, 19/04 nomination of Castro's successor in Cuba

Colombia

The peace process in Colombia was one of two pieces of unquestionably good news to come out of Latin America in recent years (the other being rapprochement between Cuba and the USA – now frozen under the Trump administration). How it is worked out in practice will be a central focus of campaigns for the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections. The stream of migrants fleeing neighbouring Venezuela is also an area of tension.

Despite these issues, Last week's House of Representatives election passed off peacefully for the first time in decades. The party behind

Colombia's conservative ex-president Álvaro Uribe – a died-in-the-wool opponent of peace with the FARC – won the most seats. However, the overall majority went to three parties who supported President Juan Manuel Santos as part of an alliance for national unity. Several smaller parties on the left of the political spectrum were able to increase their share of the vote, too. The party-political arm of the remnants of FARC, listed for the elections under a different name, suffered a disastrous defeat at the ballot box.

In the presidential elections in late May and early June, various candidates have passable chances of making it into the second-round run-off. Gustavo Petro, a left-wing former mayor of Bogotá, is leading the polls. But unlike parties on the centre-right, the Left hasn't managed to forge a strong electoral pact, making it less likely that Petro will enter the decisive run-off.

11/03 elections to the House of Representatives, 27/05 and 17/06 presidential elections – first and second round.

Mexico

Mexico is a country in crisis. Murder rates are at near-apocalyptic levels; corruption is endemic.

The most likely winner of this year's presidential election is Andrés Manuel López Obrado, better known as 'AMLO', a left-wing populist whose proposal to grant an amnesty for drug cartel kingpins has provoked widespread condemnation.

An indigenous candidate attracted brief international attention, but failed to gain sufficient support to register for the election.

The left-wing PRD (*Partido de la Revolución Democrática*) has joined forces with the conservative PAN (*Partido Acción Nacional*) and the centre-left MC (*Movimiento Cuidadano*), with the aim both of stopping AMLO and preventing the governing PRI (*Partido Revolucionaire Institucional*) from forming another administration.

For the first time in the country's history independent candidates may run for election. The PRI is itself proposing former finance minister José Antonio Meade, who's running on a non-party ticket.

Washington has warned of Russian interference, with AMLO – a harsh critics of the US – the Kremlin's preferred candidate. Even if he wins,

he's unlikely command majorities in the two parliamentary chambers, which will limit his ability to implement his reform agenda.

03/06 presidential and parliamentary elections

Brazil

Brazil has been rocked by corruptions scandals of astonishing scale. The current right-wing government blames these on the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT*). But the accusers are equally part of a political culture marked by systems of patronage and pork-barrelling.

Currently, former PT president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is leading the polls with 35 per cent support. The 72-year-old's a symbolic figure, but hardly a fresh face. But with a potential corruption conviction hanging over him, he may not be able to stand.

The PT claims to have no Plan B should Lula be convicted. Indeed, no-one else from within their ranks would poll so highly.

If Lula doesn't make it, the next most likely contender for president is Jair Bolsonaro, a retired army captain and apologist for torture, who once told a left-wing lawmaker she was too ugly to be raped'. He enjoys close relations with big agricultural firms and the gun lobby.

A favourite with evangelical Christians, Bolsonaro is homophobic, misogynist and racist. His use of expletives makes Donald Trump sound like a choirboy.

The remaining competitors are all far behind the two front-runners, although the two major parties responsible for impeaching Dilma Rousseff (PSDB, PMDB) have yet to nominate candidates.

07/10, 28/10 presidential and gubernatorial elections (first and second rounds), 07/10 congressional elections

Paraguay

Paraguay remains one of the region's poorest countries, and is marred by political unrest.

The current president is tobacco magnate Horacio Cartes of the conservative Colorado Party.

They ruled the country for six decades, until left-wing former Roman Catholic bishop Fernando Lugo won the presidential election in 2008, backed by the left-wing *Frente Guasu* and the liberal PLRA (*Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico*).

In 2012, Lugo was impeached in what neighbouring countries have called a 'legislative coup'. Although the PRLA played a role in his impeachment, it could once again form a coalition with *Frente Guasu* to block the Colorado Party's chances of winning another term.

But *Frente Guasu* has lost credibility since backing changes to the constitution that would allow presidents to stand for a second term. Only a widespread (and bloody) wave of protests put a stop to the initiative.

22/04 presidential and congressional elections



Claudia Detsch
Brussels

Claudia Detsch is the Director of FES Just Climate. Her previous positions include Editor-in-Chief of the IPG Journal and Director of *Nueva Sociedad*.