

Americas

QUARTERLY

THE BATTLE OVER FAKE NEWS

Can democracies survive social media?



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A Very Real Threat


Fake news is eroding confidence in the very pillars of democracy. Are solutions within reach?



THE IMAGE ON OUR COVER, a photoshopped image depicting Pope Francis smoking marijuana with former Bolivian President Evo Morales, thus “proving” the Argentine pontiff is a decadent socialist at heart, was the most ridiculous recent example of fake news we could find. But it was hardly the most damaging.

This special report of *AQ* focuses on the profound, and possibly terminal, threat that fake news and misinformation pose to the democracies of the Americas. Whether it’s memes falsely alleging election fraud in Brazil, or touting bananas as a miracle COVID-19 cure in Mexico, the onslaught has accelerated a decade-long trend of declining confidence in democratic institutions, while costing countless lives during the pandemic. Disillusioned, many are putting their faith instead in authoritarian leaders, who are delighted by (and in some cases directly feeding) the confusion.

Upcoming elections over the next year in Chile, Colombia and, especially, Brazil will be a major test. Governments, social media companies and traditional media are brandishing an array of tools — some new, some old — in the hope of halting the decay. But there is no silver bullet, and some of the proposed cures, such as government-run fact-checking agencies or jail time for those who propagate fake news, may be worse than the disease itself. President Jair Bolsonaro and other leaders seem determined to protect their “freedom of speech” online, setting up a showdown with courts and tech companies — and possibly a constitutional crisis in Brazil.

The only surefire solution is education: media literacy and other programs to teach citizens to be more discerning about what they consume. Big tech companies could also increase funding for serious newsgathering outlets (whose business model they helped destroy). But these are long-term solutions, and they require public buy-in. So far, the 21st century has only seen people withdraw deeper inside bubbles of their own design. It’s unsettlingly unclear what, if anything, could change that. 

True or False? Democracy at Risk

Fake news is spreading faster than fact-checkers can handle.

While misinformation was always present in politics, social media has elevated the problem to a scale that threatens to unravel Latin America's democracies.

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Educate—or else. AQ will take an in-depth look at the challenge ahead for Latin America after the pandemic widened the education gap.



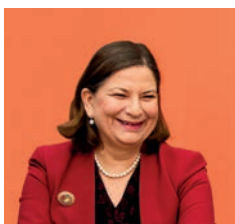
Mariana Palau

Palau is a journalist based in Bogotá, Colombia. She has written for the *The Economist* and has been published in *Al Jazeera*, *Foreign Policy* and *The Village Voice*.



Felipe Larraín

Larraín is a former minister of finance of Chile. He is a professor of economics at the Universidad Católica de Chile and a member of the Lancet COVID-19 Commission and the United Nations Leadership Council for Sustainable Development.



Martha Bárcena

Bárcena is a former ambassador of Mexico to the United States. She is also a columnist at *El Heraldo de México*.



Eva Lépez

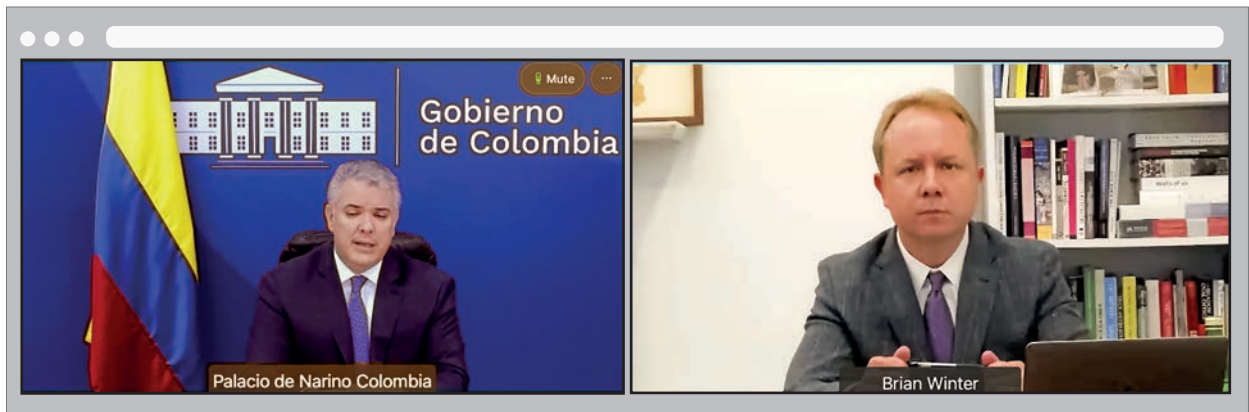
Lépez is a documentary photographer and visual educator based in Oaxaca, Mexico.



Brendan O'Boyle

O'Boyle is a senior editor at *Americas Quarterly*. His work has also appeared in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.

Tell us what you think. Please send letters to Brian@as-coa.org



President Iván Duque joins AQ Editor-in-chief Brian Winter to talk about Colombia's efforts to protect the Amazon.



Natalie Unterstell ✓

@unatalie

Climate activist since 2007. Sailed the Atlantic before it was cool. Lived in the Amazon before it was 🌳. Survived a 21-day voyage to Antarctica w 90 women.

No evento da @ASCOA liderado pela @ctornaghi agora sobre Amazônia, o Governador @FlavioDino anuncia um 'green deal' regional.

[Translate Tweet](#)



Caroline Kronley

@CKronley Great piece in AQ by Eugene Zapata Garesché, an admired former colleague and one of Latin America's most exciting thinkers on urban issues.



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@BeticaMunozPogo

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For those who want a summary of positions, challenges, opportunities of what is the 5th attempt at negotiating the Venezuelan transition to democracy since 2019, look no further.

Brilliant piece by @MaryhenJimenez for @AmerQuarterly

Americas Quarterly ✓ @AmerQuarterly · Aug 12

As Venezuela's opposition begins a new round of talks with the government tomorrow, "it is key that their leaders do not continue to demand the impossible," writes @MaryhenJimenez. americasquarterly.org/article/what-v...



Carlos F Chamorro ✓

@cefeche

Journalist/Periodista en Nicaragua. Director de Esta Semana y confidencial.com.ni

Nicaragua: Chronicle of a Death Foretold, by Kevin Casas-Zamora

americasquarterly.org/article/nicara... via @amerquarterly



Nicaragua: Chronicle of a Death Foretold

americasquarterly.org



Monique Clesca

@moniclesca

Writer. Memoir Celebrating Mysteries awaiting publication. Journalist. Haiti advocate. Women's rights advocate. Former UNFPA Representative in Niger.

Was honored @BrenOBoyle asked me to write an analytical piece on #Haiti for Americas Quarterly Magazine.

It's a tough read, but it's the reality we are living today in my beloved country.

Haiti's Critical Weeks Ahead



Haiti's Critical Weeks Ahead

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Otaviano Canuto

@ocanuto Great piece by Cecilia Tornaghi in @AmerQuarterly: Inequality Is Brazil's Achilles Heel

Ryan Berg

@RyanBergPhD Good piece from @jcorrales2011 in @AmerQuarterly on the reason for protests in #Cuba: "The protests occurred not because the regime was giving citizens greater spaces, but precisely because it was taking them away."

Thomas Traumann

@traumann Brilhante artigo (mais um) do @OliverStuenkel na @AmerQuarterly: a jovem esquerda brasileira se enxerga mais na constituinte paritária chilena do que na ortodoxia de Cuba e Venezuela.

Gerardo Berthin

@gerardoberthin Kudos to @AmerQuarterly for highlighting local leadership in #LatinAmerica. As the #democraticgovernance national space in the region continues to suffer setbacks, the local space offers some hope for the future.

Stephen Oakes

@stephen_oakes New essay by @MIT historian @MalickGhachem in @AmerQuarterly addresses the challenge of Haiti's constitutional void, calling for a U.S. role in rebuilding and a social compact for all Haitians.

Ralph Espach

@respach Startling assessment of China outmaneuvering U.S., from one who knows it well, former President @guillermosolisr: What's Behind China's Growing Push into Central America?

Hari Seshasayee

@haricito Excellent podcast with @camposmello & @BrazilBrian in @AmerQuarterly. Impeachment remains unlikely since the Centrão is not yet fully on board, but keep an eye on economic recovery & inflation.



AQ

THE BIG
PICTURE

Members of Colombia's Mothers of False Positives organization lie on a square in Bogotá on August 30, 2021, the International Day of Victims of Enforced Disappearance. The group honors 6,402 known victims of extrajudicial executions by the country's military between 2002 and 2008. The discovery of mass graves holding thousands of bodies of innocent civilians labeled as guerrilla fighters — "false positives" — touched off a scandal that toppled military brass and shook the country. *Photo by Raul Arboleda/AFP/Getty*





Mercedes D'Alessandro is Argentina's first national director of economy, equality and gender, a post within the Economy Ministry. Seen here in Buenos Aires on August 25, the author of *Feminist Economics* is tasked with embedding gender equality into economic policy. Photo by Erica Canepa/Bloomberg/Getty

Dancers on stilts perform a traditional celebration in honor of Saint Peter in Villa de Zaachila, in the Mexican state of Oaxaca on August 15. The Danza de Zancudos is a century-long tradition that can last for hours. Male villagers, some dressed as women to form pairs, learn to perform the dance as part of individual pledges made to the saint. The celebration is just one of several performed in Zaachila, the Zapotec capital before the arrival of the Spanish. Photo by Alfredo Martinez/Getty




IGLESIA PIEDRA EDIFICARE MI IGLESIA

XV
ANIVERSARIO
24 DE JULIO

AQ

THE BIG
PICTURE



A photograph of a muddy mangrove landscape. In the foreground, a large, crumpled piece of black plastic debris lies on the mud. The ground is a mix of dark brown mud and shallow, murky water. Several large, dark, horizontal logs or branches are scattered across the scene. In the background, some green mangrove vegetation is visible. The overall scene suggests a polluted or degraded natural environment.

This crab hunter could be taken for an oil worker during a spill. But he is just sticking his hand underground to search for crabs in a muddy mangrove in Rio de Janeiro's Guanabara Bay on August 24. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, informal workers such as Brazil's fishers and crab hunters face a number of other life-threatening dangers without protective gear or support. *Photo by Fabio Teixeira/Anadolu Agency via Getty*



AS HEARD ON THE AMERICAS QUARTERLY PODCAST

Leading voices from the region join AQ's Editor-in-Chief Brian Winter for a conversation on the people and events shaping Latin American politics.

"I think it raises the question of how serious López Obrador truly is about combating corruption and impunity, and it opens up the door for the selective application of justice."

—Political analyst Denise Dresser ahead of Mexico's corruption referendum



"Throwing money at problems will not solve them. You need the money, it's necessary, but it's not enough. You have to accompany it with other factors."

—Former Costa Rica President Luis Guillermo Solís on Washington's Central America aid package

"Jair Bolsonaro was managing to keep this image as a crusader against corruption. The corruption allegations are now changing the whole narrative."

—Journalist Patrícia Campos Mello on Brazil's beleaguered president



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Jorge Cueto

CEO and Founder, Prison Art

After seeing firsthand the hopeless future awaiting inmates, Jorge Cueto opened a fashion business to offer them a chance at a legal job.

by Gabriel Cohen

AQ: What is Prison Art?

Jorge Cueto: We make and sell luxury handbags and other items featuring tattoo-style art. I started it after I was incarcerated for almost a year before being cleared of my charges. I was one of 11,900 men in a facility for 3,000. It was hell. There I saw how hopeless the future was for inmates. They leave prison without any skills or education. Their only hope is to find work maybe as drug mules or as assassins, and the result is that last year we had over 36,000 murders in Mexico, double the number in the U.S. So, in prison, I had the idea to create Prison Art to give a more hopeful future to people leaving prison.

AQ: How does the business work?

JC: We developed a training program for inmates mixing tattoo art with leather and fashion design. Our program also helps them resocialize, as many are addicts or lack basic social skills. And we commit to hire program participants who follow the rules. Today we have 42 former convicts working for us, and 160 are taking part in the program while still in prison. The plan is to reach 1,400.

AQ: What is Prison Art's commercial reach?

JC: After eight years, we now have stores in Mexico and Spain, and distributors in France and Germany. We plan to have global reach within five years, even though we are a social business. Our difference from a regular enterprise is what we do with our profits. As we grow, the number of former inmates getting jobs increases. I know Prison Art won't solve the problem, but we hope that we can be agents of change — proof that it can be done, so others follow in our footsteps. 





**Brazil's President
Jair Bolsonaro speaks
to the press in Brasília.**

**“FAKE
NEWS
IS PART
OF OUR
LIVES.”**

**Inside Brazil's Dangerous
War Over Fake News**

by Mariana Palau



ON OCTOBER 28, 2018, just a few hours after Jair Bolsonaro was voted the next president of Brazil, Cristina Tardáguila received an urgent call from her lawyer. He had reserved a seat in her name on a flight to Spain, departing just a few days later. "It isn't safe for you in Brazil anymore," she recalled him saying.

Tardáguila is the founder of Agência Lupa, Brazil's first and most prominent fact-checking agency. Based in Rio de Janeiro since 2015, the agency at first received near-unanimous accolades for trying to help Brazilians sort through a growing mass of dubious content on platforms like WhatsApp, YouTube and Facebook. But by 2018, the year that saw a historically bitter presidential election between conservative Bolsonaro and leftist Fernando Haddad, the tone had changed.

The volume of fake news quadrupled that year. Tardáguila and her colleagues at Lupa were receiving as many as 56,000 threats per month. They came from across the ideological spectrum, but the majority were from Bolsonaro supporters. Around 20% of them appeared to be generated by bots.

"Filthy scum," one direct message on Twitter read. "When the time comes we will come looking for you, one by one." A viral cartoon caricatured her and two other prominent women fact-checkers half-naked and leashed like dogs. George Soros was depicted holding the leash and dangling a wad of dollars above them.

Other fact-checkers were also targeted. Truco, another agency, closed down amid a barrage of serious threats. Some warned of an attack with acid chemicals.

At first, Tardáguila ignored her lawyer's advice. She didn't want to uproot her family or abandon her colleagues, many of whom had also been threatened. She hoped that after the elections things would calm down. But the threats never stopped. She thought about making a formal complaint to the police in Rio de Janeiro. But a source inside Brazil's Superior Electoral Court (TSE, for its initials in Portuguese),

the highest authority overseeing elections, warned her not to. Rio's police were just as polarized as the people targeting her on Facebook and Twitter, her source said. In the best-case scenario they would ignore her complaint. But they could also harm her by leaking her personal information, such as her home address, to those who wanted to cause her harm. In May 2019, tired and scared, she finally left Brazil.

Tardáguila's story is just one face of the increasingly divisive and dangerous war over fake news and misinformation in Brazil. The battle over what is true or false, who gets to decide, and whether and how to punish offenders, is tearing at the very fabric of the country's young democracy. Fake news is badly eroding the public's faith in Brazil's voting system ahead of presidential elections in 2022. It is also at the heart of a constitutional crisis pitting Bolsonaro against Brazil's Supreme Court, which the president and his followers have threatened to disobey or even try to close down to protect their so-called freedom of speech. The question of how to deal with the tide of misinformation, while also not curtailing essential liberties, poses an extraordinarily difficult dilemma for policymakers, technology companies, the justice system and others, with no easy solutions in sight.

Brazil is certainly not the world's only country with a misinformation problem. Latin America has some of the world's highest usage rates of social me-



Fact-checking agency Lupa's founder Cristina Tardáguila left Brazil after receiving thousands of personal threats.



The battle over what is true or false, who gets to decide, and whether and how to punish offenders, is tearing at the very fabric of Brazil's young democracy.

dia, and among its lowest levels of trust in government and other institutions, making many countries especially fertile ground for fake news. In Colombia earlier this year, false reports about policemen raping girls were posted on Twitter, in an apparent attempt to motivate anti-police sentiment among the millions of anti-government protesters who took to the streets. In Peru, a dubious poll that showed Pedro Castillo 30 points ahead of Keiko Fujimori was widely shared on numerous platforms. The massive spread of fake news related to the pandemic, such as supposed miracle cures like hydroxychloroquine, may be one reason why Latin America has accounted for about a quarter of the world's confirmed COVID-19 deaths despite having just 8% of its population (along with other factors, such as inequality and underfunded public health systems).

But even by regional standards, Brazil appears to be a special case. As a Colombian reporter, I thought we had a bad problem with misinformation in my country; but I was consistently surprised while reporting this story by the amount of fake news spread even by government officials, and by Brazilians' heated debate around what is true or false. It's clear that, if the United States was a main battleground in the global debate over misinformation during its 2020 presidential election, Brazil could be the epicenter for a similar battle as Bolsonaro seeks reelection next year. Indeed, figures from around the world, from the U.S. conservative icon Steve Bannon to executives at Silicon Valley technology companies, are all taking an interest in the debate over misinformation in Brazil. What happens here over the next 12 months,

and whether Brazilians are somehow able to defuse what looks like a ticking time bomb, will have implications everywhere.

THE ONLINE WAR

FAKE NEWS TENDS to thrive most in polarized societies, said Michael Beng Petersen, a professor at Denmark's Aarhus University and a renowned expert on misinformation. It is no surprise then that Brazil has such a serious problem.

Many analysts trace the beginning of Brazil's current period of polarization to the 2003–2016 rule of the leftist Workers' Party (PT). The era was defined at first by generalized prosperity and a large expansion of the middle class, but it ended in scandal, rising crime and the worst recession in Brazil's history. The 2016 impeachment of the PT's Dilma Rousseff divided the country. Meanwhile, the Lava Jato anti-corruption investigation starting in the mid-2010s stained all political parties and generated a widespread backlash against Brazil's entire establishment, said Sergio Lutdtke, of Projeto Comprova, a Google-sponsored conglomerate of journalists focused on investigating disinformation.

Brazilians at first expressed their frustration in a series of popular protests that drew 1 million people to the streets in 2013. But the main battlefield quickly shifted online, said Lutdtke. Brazilians had already been among the earliest and most enthusiastic adopters of social media, embracing Orkut, a social media platform owned by Google, years before Facebook or Twitter conquered the world. Al-

though Orkut shut in 2014, Brazil today has around 160 million social media users, more than any other country outside of Asia except the United States. Brazilians also spend more time on social media than any other country except the Philippines, according to a digital report by We Are Social, a marketing agency, and Hootsuite, a social media management platform.

Into all this ferment came Bolsonaro. A peripheral figure in Brazilian politics prior to the 2018 election, it's impossible to imagine Bolsonaro's rise without the aid of social media. His aggressive attacks on the PT, women, LGBT people and others earned him widespread condemnation among Brazil's traditional media and politicians — and an increasingly loyal following online. "It's like (Bolsonaro) knows what words to say to play the algorithm" and bolster the size of his audience, said Thomas Traumann, a political analyst. Even today, Bolsonaro's followers tend to see social media as the core pillar of his power and popularity. They believe that without it, public debate would be monopolized by traditional newspapers and broadcasters such as *O Globo* that have consistently questioned or opposed Bolsonaro's rhetoric. This helps explain why any attempt to regulate social media prompts such immediate and ferocious opposition among many *bolsonaristas*.

The problem is that the *bolsonarista* online space

has been consistently plagued by fake news and misinformation — to an extent that it doesn't seem accidental, experts say. During the 2018 campaign, memes circulated falsely stating that Haddad, the PT candidate who faced Bolsonaro in the runoff, had, while mayor of São Paulo, distributed thousands of baby bottles with penis-shaped teats throughout the city's childcare facilities as part of a "gay kit" that sought to make homosexuality more acceptable among children. Other fake news during the campaign claimed Haddad wanted to legalize pedophilia, and allow the state to decide which gender children should be assigned once they turn five years old.

Some evidence suggests the pro-Bolsonaro fake news machine is a professional operation run by the president's allies and followers. A Federal Police investigation into the organization of anti-democratic protests held in 2020 pointed to the existence of a so-called cabinet of hate — a group of young aides, allegedly led by Bolsonaro's politically active sons, dedicated to spreading fake news and attacks on journalists and government opponents. (Bolsonaro's sons and others strongly deny the "cabinet" exists or that they spread fake news.) During the 2018 elections, an investigation by *Folha de São Paulo* revealed a supposed industry of PR agencies that sold WhatsApp packages that allowed for fast dissemin-



WhatsApp
73.7%



Facebook
15.8%



Instagram
10.2%

WhatsApp Is a Major Vehicle for Fake News in Brazil

At the pandemic's outset, nearly three out of four social media posts debunked by fact-checking app Eu Ficalizo circulated through WhatsApp.

Source: "Fato ou Fake?" study by Claudia Galhardi, Neyson Freire, Maria Minayo and Maria Fagundes



Many observers continue to see evidence of a professional misinformation operation in the service of the government.

nation of messages. Companies aligned with Bolsonaro allegedly paid up to \$2.3 million for the service. The investigation claims the PR agencies had illegal access to WhatsApp user databases sold by several digital companies.

Since becoming president, Bolsonaro has continued to rely on social media, to an even greater extent than most contemporary leaders. On his Facebook channel he broadcasts live speeches to 10.7 million followers every week. He often talks for more than an hour, complaining about business as usual in Brasilia and sometimes making fun of guests. (In one live show, he called a Black supporter a “roach breeder” in reference to his hair.) He and his followers have also used Twitter and other platforms to make false attacks on journalists, including those who work at fact-checking agencies. Eduardo Bolsonaro, the president’s son, falsely claimed Patrícia Campos Mello, the reporter who led the *Folha* investigation into the allegedly illegal use of WhatsApp groups, offered her sources sexual favours to get damning information about the president. (Campos Mello won a lawsuit against Bolsonaro for moral damages, and a judge ordered him to pay a \$5,500 fine.) “Undermining the press is part of (Bolsonaro’s) disinformation campaign,” said Pablo Ortellado, a philosopher and coordinator of the University of São Paulo’s investigation group on public policy and access to information. By calling journalists liars he “disarms something that could prove him wrong.”

Many observers continue to see evidence of a professional misinformation operation in the service of the government. A September report by Reporters Without Borders counted nearly half a million tweets attacking the press over a three-month pe-

riod in Brazil, with at least 20% of them likely coming from automated or “bot” accounts. Research by Raquel Recuero, director vice president at the Pelotas University Laboratory for Media, Discourse and Social Networks Analysis, suggests there is disproportionate, immediate and obviously coordinated response on social media almost every time the president is attacked or says something controversial. It happened, for example, when *Veja*, Brazil’s leading weekly publication, published a story in 2018 about Bolsonaro’s divorce of his second wife. Minutes later, social media was flooded with false claims that *Veja* received money from the PT to lie about Bolsonaro. “If it was organic there would be several stories, with different explanations,” coming out at different moments in time, said Recuero.

ENEMIES EVERYWHERE

THE RELENTLESS FLOW of misinformation has provoked a counter-reaction from the courts, Internet regulators, technology companies and Bolsonaro’s political opponents. Some efforts at getting the problem under control seem promising. But others seem tinged with politics, while some contemplate cures that may be as bad or worse than the disease itself.

On the judicial side, there are at least four major legal investigations or inquiries involving fake news, some with overlapping remits. The first, and perhaps most controversial, is a Supreme Court inquiry into the spread of disinformation by Bolsonaro’s followers, as well as threats they have made against members of the court. The investigation is being led by Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes, a for-



**PRISON
FOR
SUPREME
COURT**

**ON FOR
RUP
CIAN**

Bolsonaro supporters at a rally in São Paulo on September 7, Brazil's independence day, calling for the arrest of Supreme Court justices.

mer public prosecutor and minister of justice. The president himself became an investigated party in that inquiry in August, after claiming that the 2014 and 2018 elections, the latter of which he won, were plagued by fraud (Bolsonaro claims he should have won on the first round, but admitted he had no proof). A criminal conviction against a sitting president is highly unlikely.

The investigation has contributed to the escalating crisis between the Court and Bolsonaro, whose supporters contend the probe is unconstitutional, arguing the Supreme Court cannot be the victim, investigator and judge at the same time. Nevertheless, the case has deeply shaken Bolsonaro's inner circle, as Federal Police have searched the homes and offices of dozens of allied businesspeople, bloggers and politicians. De Moraes has also authorized arrests, including that of Roberto Jefferson, a staunch Bolsonaro ally and the head of the right-wing Brazilian Labour Party. According to the justice, Jefferson was part of a ring of criminals who sought to "destabilize republican institutions" by spreading fake news. Following Jefferson's arrest, Bolsonaro asked the Senate to impeach de Moraes. Traumann, the political analyst, said Jefferson's case especially bothers the president because he fears the court could one day also go after his sons for their alleged role in spreading misinformation.

The other probes include a Congressional investigation of criminal misinformation networks, which has asked the Federal Police to determine whether Senate computers were used to spread fake news on Instagram. That investigation has also asked social media companies to give them the names behind several social media profiles, including accounts that were accessed from the congressional office of Eduardo Bolsonaro. A separate probe by the TSE, the electoral body, has looked into allegations that Bolsonaro and supporters have spread misinformation regarding next year's election, including unproven claims that Brazil's electronic voting machines are susceptible to fraud. The fourth investigation, created by the Senate, is exploring misinformation and other aspects of the Bolsonaro government's ineffective response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Posts



Legislators have also tried to fight back, introducing at least 45 bills aimed at curbing the spread of fake news.

on social media have claimed the pandemic is exaggerated by left-wingers, that hospitals are actually empty, and that people are being buried alive to drive up death rates. The president himself has insisted, despite medical evidence to the contrary, that “early treatment” drugs such as hydroxychloroquine, ivermectin and azithromycin are effective against COVID-19. By September 2021, more than 590,000 people had died of COVID-19 in Brazil, a toll surpassed only by the United States.

Taken together, these investigations have heightened the possibility that Bolsonaro could be impeached by Congress or declared ineligible for the 2022 election. In response, the president has increasingly warned that a “rupture” in Brazil’s democracy may be imminent. He has also stepped up his attacks on Brazilian institutions, with a focus on the court and specifically de Moraes and Luis Roberto Barroso, a court justice who is also head of the TSE, the electoral body. The president gathered hundreds of thousands of his supporters to stage a protest against the Supreme Court on September 7, Brazil’s independence day, and declared that he would never again comply with an order from de Moraes, which would be illegal. The declaration prompted a forceful response from members of other branches of government, including Barroso, who refuted Bolsonaro’s claims of electoral fraud point by point, calling them “empty rhetoric.”

A few days later, Bolsonaro appeared to back down, saying in a letter that his threats toward the Court came “in the heat of the moment” and promising to respect other branches of government. But few observers expected the truce to last.

NO EASY SOLUTIONS

IN CONGRESS, legislators have also tried to fight back, introducing at least 45 bills aimed at curbing the spread of fake news. But many of the measures carry significant risks. Several would modify the Civil Rights Framework for the Internet, changing its rules on safe harbor, which currently give Internet providers and platforms immunity in case third party content violates any laws. This would expose the companies to major legal risk, and transform their business models. Other proposals seek to force social networks to remove objectionable content no more than 24 hours after a user files a complaint (currently they remove content that violates their terms of agreement, or when complying with a court order). Some bills would allow users who share fake news to be prosecuted as criminals, even if they are unaware that they are spreading lies. There is even a proposal to limit to 1,000 the number of users who can receive a WhatsApp message. Meanwhile, some members of Congress and the judiciary are pressuring tech platforms to ban Bolsonaro and his allies, in the same way many did with Donald Trump in early 2021.

Aware of the threat, Bolsonaro is taking countermeasures of his own. On September 6 he signed an executive order that attempted to ban platforms from de-platforming users (as happened to Trump) or taking down most content without a court order. *The New York Times* called the decree “the first time a national government has stopped Internet companies from taking down content that violates their rules.” The decree was ruled unconstitutional a few days later and thrown out by Congress, but most ex-

perts believe Bolsonaro will continue to try to use all tools at his disposal to protect his allies.


In the meantime, social media companies feel caught between Bolsonaro and his opponents, facing the dual threats of onerous regulation or a free-for-all environment that would further diminish public trust in their platforms. “Our mission is to organize information and make it useful to the world,” said Marcelo Lacerda, director of Google’s Government and Public Policy team in Brazil. “If we have bad content, we risk jeopardizing our relationship with the users, content creators and advertisers that support our business.” On some platforms, it’s not even clear regulation is possible. WhatsApp is the most popular social media platform in Brazil, and therefore where most fake news propagates, but messages there are encrypted. This plays in Bolsonaro’s favor, says Traumann. “In America they restrain Donald Trump by taking him out of Twitter and Facebook,” but if they do that with Bolsonaro, they won’t change anything because he can still reach Brazilians through WhatsApp. Many *bolsonaristas* have begun migrating to Telegram, which they view as even less likely to be regulated.

Proposals for regulation would complicate the way networks operate, not only in Brazil, but around the world, argued Marcel Leonardi, an Internet lawyer who represents many social media companies in Brazil. WhatsApp doesn’t currently have an operating system that can limit a message’s reach to 1,000 users, said Leonardi. It would have to create one, and apply it throughout the world, just because Brazil demands it. Instead, Leonardi said, companies should be allowed to continue to develop tools to fight disinformation. Facebook and YouTube use a combination of machines and humans to flag content with fake news. In Brazil, YouTube has taken down videos where Bolsonaro claims ivermectin cures COVID-19. Facebook removed dozens of accounts that spread fake news, some of them linked to associates of Bolsonaro and his sons. Even WhatsApp has conducted investigations that have led to the suspension of hundreds of accounts. Social media companies are also working with the TSE to understand how to best fight fake news about next year’s election. On August 16, YouTube complied with a TSE order to suspend payments to 14 channels that warned of voter machine fraud.

Google believes it can help fight disinformation through other means. In Brazil, for example, it has invested \$2 million in Educamidia, a program that helps teachers teach media literacy, and created Comprova, an initiative that employs journalists to disprove fake news. Yet social media companies know they can only do so much. “We understand the fight against misinformation as something we cannot do on our own,” said Lacerda, the Google director. He believes policymakers should involve educators, tech companies, lawyers and civil society to come up with joint solutions for fake news.

DEMOCRACY AT RISK

IT’S UNCLEAR WHETHER any of this can prevent what looks like a looming crisis in 2022. With Bolsonaro’s approval rating at all-time lows, polls suggest he would lose next October to several major candidates, including his most bitter rival, leftist former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of the PT. With his back against the wall, Bolsonaro seems likely to use all tools at his disposal, including fake news, and could try to incite violence or otherwise undermine democracy, said Claudio Couto, a political analyst. “For him, it’s all about staying in power.” Bolsonaro has repeated on several occasions that he sees only three potential outcomes for himself: “prison, being killed, or victory.”

No one knows whether the Brazilian military, or other government institutions, would support Bolsonaro on an authoritarian adventure. Indeed, the only thing that seems certain is that misinformation will continue to corrode Brazilians’ faith in their institutions and in democracy itself. In a speech in mid-September, following his latest confrontation with the Supreme Court, Bolsonaro downplayed the threat, and seemed to nod to his tactical plans for the year ahead. “Who never told a little lie to their girlfriend? If you didn’t, the night wouldn’t end well,” he said to laughs from an audience of supporters. “Fake news is part of our lives.” 

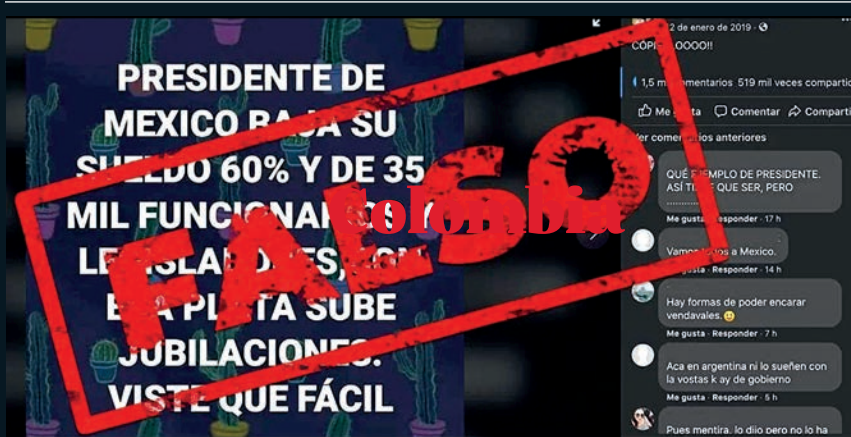
Palau is a journalist based in Bogotá, Colombia. She has written for The Economist and has been published in Al Jazeera and other publications.

Seven Examples of Fake News

Here, AQ looks at several recent cases of misinformation around Latin America, explains what's false, and analyzes what the creators may have been hoping to accomplish.

by Mariana Reina

Mexico

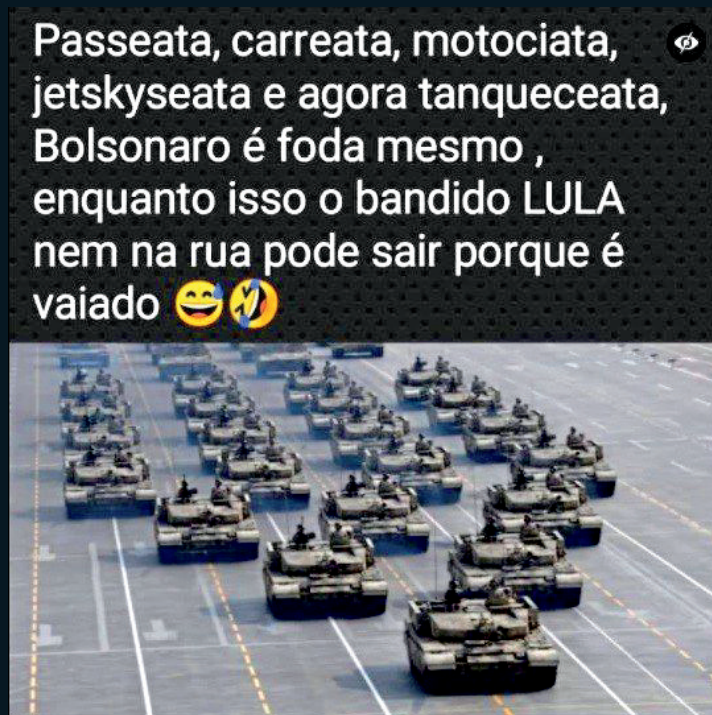


A January 2019 Facebook post falsely stated that Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador lowered his own salary and those of 35,000 government employees by 60%, to increase pensions for ordinary Mexicans. But the reductions were voluntary and amounted only to 25%. Savings were never meant to be directed to pensions. The post seemed intended to bolster the president's popularity.

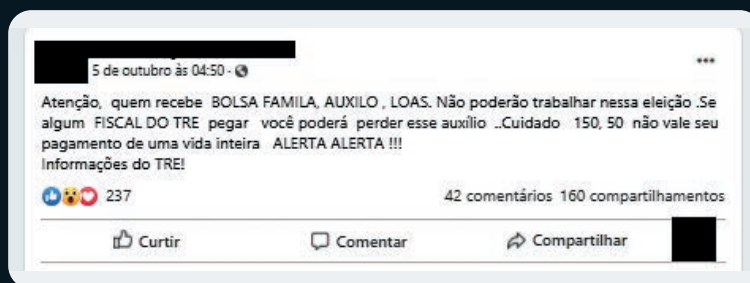


A WhatsApp video shared before Mexico's June 2021 midterm elections falsely suggested that the ink in pens used by voters could be easily erased. The video seemed intended to sow distrust in electoral institutions. The National Electoral Institute published a statement debunking the use of those pens in elections and pointed out that the misleading video had been shared across other countries in the region.

Brazil



After President Jair Bolsonaro commissioned a military parade in August 2021, a post on Facebook celebrated his supposed show of strength before Congress in Brasília. But the image used of tanks going down a multi-lane road was not taken in Brazil — it was from a 2019 military parade in China. The post seemed aimed at overstating the military's support for Bolsonaro.



During the run-up to the 2020 Brazilian municipal elections, a Facebook post falsely claimed that any beneficiary of the country's largest cash transfer program, Bolsa Família, would lose their benefits if they worked as election officials. This false statement seemed directed at decreasing civic participation in the elections.

Colombia

In February 2021, an image falsely quoted Colombia's vice president stating that the Pfizer vaccine produces a fever for eight to 12 days and that, after recovering, vaccine recipients could stop wearing masks. The layout was similar to that of a well-known Colombian news outlet, in an attempt to make the fake news seem more real. The apparent intent was to spread misinformation about national health protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Chile



A captioned image of Chilean moderate left presidential candidate Gabriel Boric was shared across social media, falsely quoting him as saying there was no reason for the country to continue being named the Republic of Chile or to continue using the "Pinochet-imposed" Chilean flag. This image circulated in the aftermath of the August 2021 constitutional convention debate and seemed designed to damage Boric's popularity ahead of the November 2021 presidential election.

Argentina

In July 2021, a widely shared tweet falsely stated that evidence of Argentine-produced military-grade ammunition was found in the autopsies of 22 Bolivians killed under former Interim President Jeanine Áñez. Bolivia's minister of justice publicly denied the claim. The tweet seemed designed to bolster accusations that former Argentine President Mauricio Macri improperly supported Áñez with arms shipments, which Macri has denied.


 FISCALÍA GENERAL DEL ESTADO

TOTAL, FALLECIDOS POR PAF (Proyectil de Arma de Fuego) POR DEPARTAMENTO Y PROYECTILES COLECTADOS

DEPARTAMENTO	CANTIDAD DE FALLECIDOS POR PAF	PROYECTILES COLECTADOS			Fallecidos sin colecta de proyectiles	Fallecidos por otras causas	Total
		22 mm	9 mm	6.35 mm			
La Paz	13	4	2	1	1	1	13
Cochabamba	19				1	2	12
El Alto	1	3					4
Siglo Veintiuno	4	7	2	2	2	3	20
Total	27	7	2	2	2	3	30



How Fake News Is Built

To make a falsified image go viral, Internet users deploy digital smoke and mirrors.



Pope Francis sends a kiss as he arrives for his general audience at St. Peter's Square on December 11, 2013.



Then-President Evo Morales holds up a few coca leaves during an event celebrating the tradition of coca leaf chewing in La Paz, Bolivia, on January 14, 2013.

IF THE PHOTO ON OUR COVER of Pope Francis and former Bolivian President Evo Morales sharing a joint looks almost real, it's because its creators used real photos, changing just one detail.

Fact-checking agency *Aos Fatos* helped Brazilians figure out how this meme was put together. The original 2013 photo of Francis, taken in the Vatican, shows him blowing a kiss.

The image of Morales smiling in the background also comes from a 2013 event, but in Bolivia.

The montage originated as a joke post on European social media, but in 2020 it went viral in Brazil. The post was shared thousands of times on social media as supposed evidence that the “excessively modern,” Argentine-born leader of the Catholic Church was connected to “communists” in Latin America. 

What Governments Are Doing

There is no silver bullet, and some efforts may cause more harm than good.

by Leonie Rauls

GOVERNMENTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY have tried a number of different approaches to fight misinformation. But the barriers are formidable. Latin America has among the world's highest rates of social media use, making countries fertile territory for fake news. But several of the proposed solutions infringe on free speech or can be easily abused by authoritarian governments with their own agendas, among other flaws.

Below, *AQ* compiled five categories of initiatives being tested, discussed or implemented in parts of Latin America.

I. Government-run fact-checking and monitoring services

In June 2019, Mexico's President Andrés Manuel López Obrador launched Verificado, a fact-checking operation, as part of the government's newswire Notimex. As of August 2021 it had no activity. Civil society and journalism groups expressed concerns the tool could be politicized and undermine the credibility of independent fact-checkers. (Verificado also faced a legal battle over the name itself, as several Mexican fact-checkers were already using it.) In Argentina, the Public Defender's Office launched the Observatory of Disinformation and Symbolic Violence on Digital Media and Platforms (NODIO) in October

2020, to “detect, verify, identify and disarticulate malicious news.” Critics across the region said the initiative could be akin to censorship and a few politicians in the opposition tried unsuccessfully to sue the public defender who created the unit.

2. Legislation

The most common response to misinformation in the region is to try to create legislation to stop it, said Columbia University researcher Laura Duarte. In Brazil the Internet Freedom, Responsibility and Transparency Bill, popularly known as the “fake news” bill, was approved by the Senate in 2020 and is now in the lower chamber. The bill aims to combat the spread of false information by making social platforms responsible for combating disinformation and creates an “Internet transparency council” with members from government and civil society. After Venezuela’s controversial 2004 Law of Social Responsibility in Radio, which was followed by a change in the country’s penal code in 2005, several Latin American countries are looking to criminalize the dissemination of fake news — with sentences of up to 10 years as in Nicaragua’s Special Cyber Crimes Law from 2020. Critics say Venezuela’s and Nicaragua’s legislation are effectively tools for political persecution. Other proposals making fake news a crime are being discussed in Chile, Colombia, Panama and El Salvador. According to the International Press Institute, 17 nations globally have passed some form of regulation targeting disinformation during the pandemic, with many other bills still pending in legislative bodies.

3. Working with social media companies


Several governments are trying to work with social media companies to tackle the main tools used to spread fake news. Mexico’s National Institute of Elections (INE) signed collaboration agreements with social media companies prior to the 2018 elections. As part of those accords, INE staff received training on using and monitoring the Facebook platform, while Google pledged to disseminate on YouTube information generated by INE about the electoral process, as well as other initiatives such as marking voting loca-

tions on Google Maps. Argentina’s electoral authority signed a memorandum of cooperation with Facebook, which pledged to amplify official electoral information while curbing the visibility of false posts. Brazil’s Superior Electoral Court (TSE) also partnered with social media platforms, with the creation of an official court chatbox on WhatsApp where people can send inquiries about dubious posts directly to TSE officials. Another tool allows electoral officials and WhatsApp to receive and collect information on social media accounts suspected of spreading messages in bulk, which also violates Facebook’s terms of use.

4. Ethics pacts among political parties

In Uruguay the six political parties with representatives in Congress signed an Ethical Pact Against Disinformation in April 2019, pledging “not to generate or promote false news or disinformation campaigns to the detriment of political adversaries.” The pact was proposed by the Uruguayan Press Association as part of a three-pronged campaign against disinformation that also includes training media professionals and a fact-checking tool.

5. Media literacy training

Researchers and specialists are almost unanimous that media literacy programs are the most effective long-term tool against the dissemination of fake news. The state of São Paulo in Brazil included media literacy as an elective class for middle schoolers to help them recognize what is news and how to check sources. Argentina’s fact-checking group Chequeado put together a handbook with UNESCO to help train others to spot disinformation. Outside the region, Finland has introduced a media literacy program at public schools in 2014 that teaches children from the age of six to read sources critically. Children are taught to evaluate and fact-check websites, and hunt for dubious sources. In 2019, the government of Finland topped the European Media Literacy Index that measures countries’ resistance to misinformation and disinformation. 

Rauls is a former editorial assistant at AQ

How to Navigate the Trade Wars

**On trade, Latin American countries must
strike a delicate balance in the confrontation
between Beijing and Washington**

By Felipe Larraín B. and Pepe Zhang

IN THE EVOLVING DEBATE over the U.S.-China relationship, and how it will impact Latin American countries, many observers perceive a recent shift. After Washington and Beijing reached their “Phase One” trade deal in January 2020, many assumed that the trade wars that peaked during the Trump administration had effectively ended. The focus thus turned instead to non-trade issues — questions of strategy, technology and ideology which seem to dominate attention today.

But the truth is that trade tensions never quite disappeared, and they are worth revisiting now for at least two reasons. First, for much of Latin America, growing ties with China have been propelled above all else by trade and broader economic considerations — not geopolitics. Second, since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, COVID-induced supply chain disruptions (including a massive increase in international transport costs) and trade policy restrictions have once again stress-tested global commerce,

with profound implications for Latin America in the short and long-term.

To explain, it is useful to review where the relationship stands today. Trade between China and Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) held steady at approximately \$315 billion in 2020, practically unchanged from 2019. This is remarkable because the pandemic wreaked havoc on LAC exports overall in 2020, causing an estimated 11.3% year-on-year contraction (including a 14.6% decline in shipments to the U.S.). In the meantime, a fast-recovering China stood out as the only exception among LAC’s major destination markets by registering a 2.1% year-on-year increase in exports from LAC. The resilience of China-LAC trade follows an impressive 20-year trajectory between 2000 and 2020. During this period, bilateral trade grew more than 25 times (from a low base of \$12 billion) and China’s share of total LAC trade multiplied eight-fold (from 1.7% to 14.4%).

The demand-supply dynamics behind these trade



A Salvadoran worker unloads vaccines donated by China. The shipment of 1.5 million doses arrived a day after a U.S. donation of 1.5 million Moderna jabs.

flows are well-known. On one hand, Chile, Peru, and Brazil are among the world's top exporters of products such as copper, iron ore, soybean, and beef. On the other, China is by far the world's largest consumer and importer, and its demand remained robust during the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, China has become, for some time now, the number one trading partner for these and some other countries in the region. Based on current trajectories, China could overtake the U.S. as LAC's overall largest goods trading partner during the next two decades.

In the context of COVID-19, over 100 million Sinovac, Cansino, and Sinopharm vaccines are expected to flow to the region, which — together with massive amounts of personal protective equipment and medical supplies — makes China a key ally in LAC's fight against the virus. Chinese firms have also invested in local production of vaccines, including a recently announced new Sinovac plant in Chile. The U.S. has also made recent, if belated, inroads in "vaccine diplomacy," having distributed about 38 million doses in the region as of mid-August.

Each country is different

DESPITE THE AFOREMENTIONED competitive dynamics, however, discussions about direct U.S.-China rivalry in LAC appear exaggerated when examined strictly through the lens of trade. Indeed, LAC is a massively heterogenous region, not least due to its North-South divide. A deeper dive into sub-regional and country-specific statistics suggests that China has and will struggle to meaningfully out-compete U.S. trade dominance in Mexico and Central America, given the deeply integrated North American supply chains. Similarly, the U.S. cannot realistically replace Chinese demand for South American commodities.

Nonetheless, Latin America is not free from the indirect impact of U.S.-China trade tensions. The region has been affected unevenly by them and, on balance, does not benefit from these trade tensions, contrary to some assessments. Trade diversion gains experienced by some (e.g. Brazilian soybean and Mexican manufacturing) were offset by losses in other sectors and countries.

Notably, global demand, trade, and investment un-

certainties during the height of the U.S.-China trade war (2018-2019) reinforced a downward trajectory in commodity prices (except iron ore), as well as a stagnation in volumes. In 2018, the U.S. and China levied tariffs on \$403 billion worth of goods against each other, including a significant \$260 billion escalation in September of that year. LAC felt the effects shortly after, despite a truce reached by Presidents Trump and Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Buenos Aires G20 meeting. In 2019, the region saw the value of its exports contract by 2.4% year-on-year, and a weakening of performance in nearly every country. Copper hit a two-year low in the same year and did not significantly reverse course until 2020 (under extraordinary supply-side pressure).

In the foreseeable future, tensions will likely persist in the world's largest bilateral trade relationship. The Trump administration held 13 rounds of formal trade talks with China before reaching the Phase One trade deal. While the Biden administration has expressed doubts about the arrangement, it has kept most of the Trump-era China tariffs in place, not least because "no negotiator walks away from leverage." To

date, average tariff rates between the U.S. and China remain elevated at approximately 20%, covering over 58% of bilaterally traded goods. In parallel, as evidenced by the contentious high-level meeting in Anchorage earlier this year, U.S.-China political frictions also show no sign of letting up. This could continue to stifle meaningful bilateral exchange and coordination in other areas including trade.

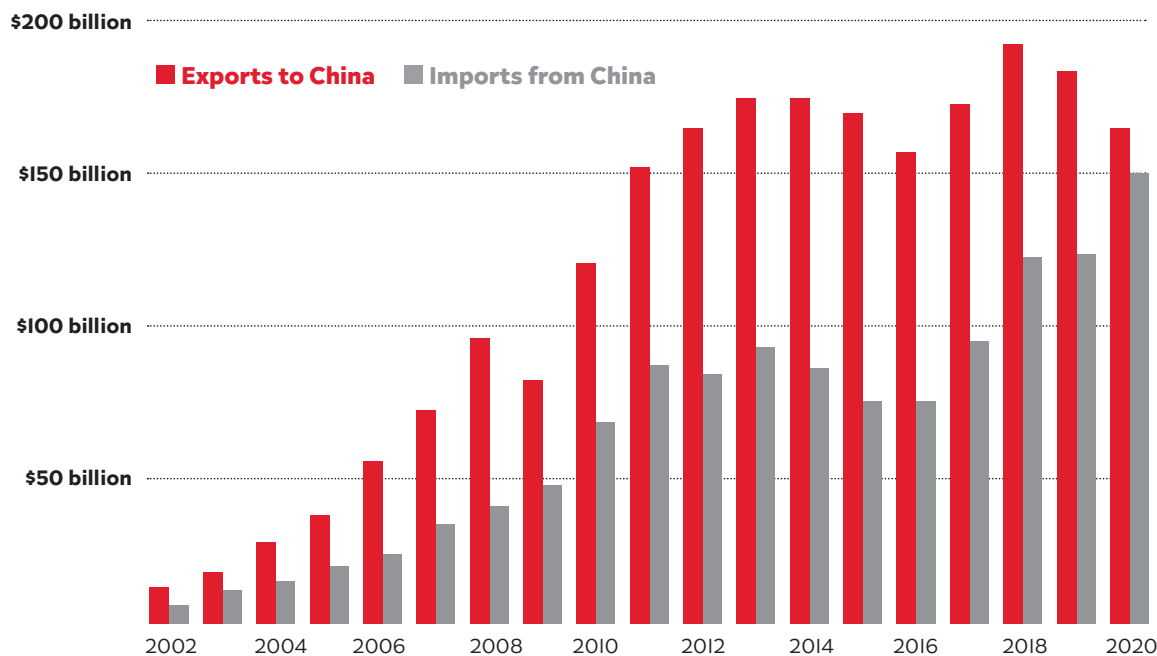
What does all this mean for Latin America and the Caribbean? A forward-looking approach would serve LAC well, as regional governments and businesses aim to better navigate the current and next stages of U.S.-China trade tensions. Here are a few key policy milestones and issues to watch on the horizon:

With regard to the U.S.

LAC SHOULD CLOSELY monitor U.S. policy actions and guidance, both explicitly and implicitly related to China. For example, the bipartisan Manufacturing Abilities Determine Economies (MADE) in the Americas Act introduced in May by Congressmen Adam Kinzinger (R-IL) and Jason Crow (D-CO) aimed to

China's Economic Footprint

Chinese trade with Latin America has further expanded in recent years.



SOURCE: WITS. CRS: CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

strengthen hemispheric supply chain integration and thus reduce dependency on China. This and other U.S.-led initiatives could draw greater attention to potential reshoring, nearshoring, “ally-shoring” or regional integration opportunities in LAC, a sentiment recently echoed by Mexico’s President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Next year’s Summit of the Americas — the first to be hosted by the U.S. since 1994 — would be a natural platform to explore and elevate these opportunities.

In addition, LAC must take steps to mitigate the possible “collateral damage” resulting from U.S.-China tensions. Firms and subsidiaries would be wise to carefully review possible licensing, review, and other requirements in the U.S., especially for those doing business with Chinese firms and individuals added to the U.S. government’s growing Entity List and sanctions list.

The potential evolution of upcoming U.S.-China discussions on the Phase One trade deal is worth tracking. As China grapples with the ambitious purchase target and the U.S. with a resurging bilateral trade deficit, the Biden administration may face domestic pressure to re-engage and renegotiate the deal with Chinese counterparts. For reference, China had committed to acquire an additional \$200 billion of U.S. goods by December 31, 2021 (on top of the 2017 baseline) and was 31% off target as of June 2021. Chinese efforts to ramp up purchases of U.S. goods could have implications for LAC exporters.

With regard to China

ON THE CHINESE SIDE, the clearest and most comprehensive policy signaling will come from the next ministerial forum between China and CELAC, which is scheduled to take place later this year. This high-level meeting is held every 3 years and usually accompanies the release of Beijing’s latest policy blueprint for LAC: e.g. the China-CELAC Cooperation Plan (2015–2019) during the first Forum (Beijing, 2015) and the CELAC-China Joint Action Plan (2019–2021) during the second Forum (Santiago, 2018).

Taking a longer-term view, LAC exporters should also follow developments in China outside of the policy space. Shifts in Chinese consumption patterns could bring about new opportunities, ranging from rising and vastly untapped demand in China’s mas-

sive “second-tier” cities (a dozen “mid-size” cities with more than 10 million residents) to a growing appetite for more sophisticated, gourmet consumer goods. Chilean wine and cherries, for example, have become best sellers in the Chinese market.

For some LAC countries, product/sector-level diversification may not be immediately feasible or necessary, but diversifying markets should always be a priority to mitigate concentration risks. During the pandemic, Chinese concerns and scrutiny over coronavirus transmission through frozen food or packaging have spooked LAC exporters of Ecuadorian shrimp, Brazilian and Argentinian meat, and Chilean cherries. Chilean cherry exporters, in particular, could benefit from greater market diversification and reduced exposure to demand shocks in China, which currently accounts for over 90% of sales. Paradoxically, one smart way to diversify from China may be through China. As the Belt and Road Initiative improves connectivity infrastructure in Central and Southeast Asia, shipping costs for specific routes from LAC may lower, thus creating conditions for exports to enter new markets beyond East Asia.

OVERALL, MOST LAC COUNTRIES do not desire or need to choose between the U.S. and China when it comes to trade. In that sense, trade wars are also a useful device for understanding LAC’s nuanced behavior and balanced position in the midst of broader China-U.S. tensions. Economically and politically, it behooves the region to work with both superpowers in respective areas of shared interests through a practical, proactive, and country-specific strategy. In the context of COVID-19 and post-COVID recovery, the region needs all the external sources of growth and support available. 

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Larraín B., *former minister of finance of Chile (2010–14 and 2018–19), is professor of economics at Universidad Católica de Chile and a member of the Lancet COVID-19 Commission and the United Nations Leadership Council for Sustainable Development.*

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Zhang is *associate director of the Atlantic Council’s Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center and co-author of LAC 2025: Three Post-COVID Scenarios and China-LAC Trade 2035: Four Scenarios.*

Fake News & Elections: How to Reduce the Threat?

Join AQ for a special virtual event examining how to prevent misinformation and fake news from damaging the electoral process in Brazil and across the Americas. What strategies have worked? What can the private sector, government and media do to help?

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Why Mexico's Relationship with China Is So Complicated

Integration with both China and the U.S. benefits Mexico, but also presents challenges.

by Ambassador Martha Bárcena Coqui

EVERY COUNTRY IN LATIN AMERICA faces a set of choices on how it responds to China's growing presence in the region. For Mexico, however, the path forward is particularly complex, considering the country's dynamic and close economic ties to both China and its frequent rival, the United States. If Mexico can effectively navigate the showdown between the two superpowers, it will go a long way in shaping not only its own economic future, but also the future of the U.S.-China rivalry.

Mexico's relationships with both countries are complex and long-standing. Its links to the U.S. are more obvious: The two countries share a 1,954-mile border, the U.S. is Mexico's top trading partner and more than 36 million people of Mexican origin live in the U.S. Mexico's relationship with China is also well-established. In 1972, Mexico became the second Latin American country to establish diplomatic relationships with the People's Republic of China. In that sense, Mexico can be considered a *lao pengyou*, an old friend of China.

China has not invested in Mexico at the levels it has in other Latin American countries.

It's true that China's economic relationship with Mexico was negligible for many years, but this started to change at the beginning of this century, and the two maintain a dynamic, if challenging, partnership. China became Mexico's second trading partner in 2003, behind the U.S. Since the turn of the century, trade with China has made up a growing share of Mexico's trade portfolio, rising from 1% of Mexico's total trade in 2000 to 9.8% in 2019. Over roughly the same period, trade with the U.S. fell from 81% in 1999 to 63% of Mexico's total trade in 2019. And while Mexico's trade with the U.S. (\$619 billion in 2019) remains far greater than its trade with China (\$90 billion in 2019), its trade with China has grown at a faster rate this century.

Still, Mexico's trade with China is unbalanced: We import much more from China (\$83.05 billion in 2019) than what we export (\$7.14 billion) even as Mexico's exports have been growing, driven by oil, mining products, automotive parts and electronics. This will remain a pressing challenge for Mexico in the near future, as experts at think tanks like the Atlantic Council predict that while Mexican-Chinese trade will continue to grow until 2035, it will remain overwhelmingly favorable to China.

Mexico is importing more products from China that it once might have sourced from within North America. In 2019, Mexican imports from China represented 17.7% of Mexican total imports in the sectors of electronics (particularly mobile telephones), auto parts and motor vehicles, areas in which the U.S. was the traditional supplier. China's participation in the automotive industry, which was the backbone of NAFTA and continues to be the backbone of its replacement, the USMCA, is also becoming more evident. This would explain why the rules of origin for the automotive sector increased from 62.5% to

75% of regional content in USMCA.

Still, the data also shows how complex the relationship between the three countries is, as trade between Mexico and China is directly related to North American supply chains. This is quite different from the trading relationships of other Latin American countries with China, which often rely fundamentally on commodities.

On the other hand, it is also important to note that China has not invested in Mexico at the levels it has done in other Latin American countries like Brazil, Peru and Ecuador. From 1999 to 2018, China invested only around \$1 billion in Mexico, according to the statements from Economy Undersecretary Luz María de la Mora in December 2020. In comparison, according to data from Mexico's economy ministry, the U.S.'s accumulated investment in Mexico from 1999 to June 2021 was \$292.6 billion — equivalent to 46.8% of all investment in Mexico in the same period.

The dynamic may be changing. Recently, the China Communications Construction Company, associated with the Portuguese company Mota Engil, won a tender to build a section of the Maya Train, one of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's flagship projects. Chinese companies also won tenders for oil exploration and production in the first rounds of the Mexican energy reform. Hong Kong-headquartered Hutchison Ports Holding, meanwhile, manages Mexico's most important ports.

Beyond trade

LIMITING MEXICO-CHINA ties to trade and investment, however, is a misguided approach, as the relationship goes beyond the two and is increasingly geopolitical in nature. In 2003, for example, both countries established a “strategic re-



Vice President Kamala Harris hosts formal U.S.-Mexico High Level Economic Dialogue talks in September 2021, the first since 2016.

lationship,” and in 2004, they agreed to create a binational commission. When President Xi Jinping visited Mexico in 2013, the relationship was upgraded to be an “integral strategic relationship,” followed by the creation of various high-level working groups on investments and entrepreneurship.

Both countries are members of the G20 and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and participate in dialogue through the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), which Mexico currently chairs. Both countries are now members of the U.N. Security Council and participate together on several executive bodies of other multilateral organizations.

We also have common interests and positions in international financial organizations that support high and middle-income countries like Mexico and China, which still have huge pockets of poverty. Both countries have championed South-South development cooperation, trying to eradicate the traditional

donor-recipient dichotomy. At the same time, Mexico has not yet become part of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank founded by China nor of the Belt and Road Initiative.

A changing relationship

THE CHINA-MEXICO relationship has changed in several ways due to the pandemic. China has been one of the first and most important suppliers of vaccines and personal protective equipment to Mexico. Up until September 2021, Mexico had acquired 103 million doses of vaccines, around 19.4% of which came from China’s Sinovac laboratories and 7.1% from China’s CanSino. That is almost 27% of all the doses received in Mexico. In comparison, the U.S. had supplied Mexico with around 17% of vaccines, basically from Pfizer (even though the first doses arrived from Belgium), Johnson and Johnson, and more recently AstraZeneca and Moderna.

A confrontation between the U.S. and China will benefit neither Mexico nor its neighbors.

But covid also affected global supply chains, and in North America we suddenly realized that we were too dependent on Chinese products, namely in the auto industry, aerospace, electronics, pharmaceuticals and medical equipment — particularly relevant during a health emergency. In difficult times, Mexico showed itself to be a reliable partner to the U.S., coordinating with the private and public sectors to ensure essential sectors stayed open and operating.

The challenges of the pandemic also strengthened the trend towards nearshoring and the relocation of value chains. In practical terms, producing key ingredients and supplies for North American value chains in the region, and taking advantage of the USMCA, which is not only a free trade agreement but also an instrument to spur investment in the region.

Mexico could and should benefit from this relocation of value chains. But until now this obvious trend has not materialized, and other countries like Vietnam seem to have benefited more. Therefore, one of the main objectives of the relaunched High Level Economic Dialogue (HLED) between Mexico and the U.S. is to strengthen the resilience of supply chains in North America.

This will, of course, affect China. Some experts in Mexico-China relations, particularly from the CECHIMEX Center at National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), the most important think tank in Mexico specializing in this area, have warned that Mexico lacks a strategy and a concrete agenda in the short, medium and long term with China.

If true, we should consider defining a strategy to be of utmost importance. This will imply a clear and strong commitment from the U.S. to invest in Mexico and Latin America and the Caribbean more, as well as an attitude of partnership and not dominance.

As Mexican leaders define this strategy, they will

have to consider several questions.


1. China is the main competitor in the U.S. market for certain Mexican products. Is it feasible to substitute those U.S. imports from China with Mexican imports? If so, what is the best way to do this? And can Mexico substitute some of its imports from China with American or Latin American imports?

2. Mexico, China and the U.S. should work together to identify areas of trilateral and multilateral cooperation. The most obvious example is cooperation on climate change.

3. The three countries should increase their cooperation against transnational criminal organizations, which are active not only in drug trafficking, but in people trafficking, illegal fishing and the illicit trade of endangered species.

4. Mexico's economic competitiveness is directly linked to information technologies, one of the areas of fierce confrontation between the U.S. and China. Which 5G system Mexico adopts is one of the big issues to be defined.

These are just some of questions and ideas that will have to be considered soon. It is possible that the High-Level Economic Dialogue between Mexico and the U.S. and the Summit of the Americas, which will take place in the coming months, can be an effective forum to start tackling them.

In the end, while the economic and foreign policy decisions that Mexico will adopt regarding China will also impact the U.S., a constant presence and partner, they will be based on its own national interest — on what is good for Mexico and the Mexicans. Still, a confrontation between the U.S. and China will benefit neither Mexico nor its neighbors. 

Bárcena Coqui was the Mexican ambassador to the United States from 2018 to 2021

Latin America's Evolving Relationships with China

Some of the region's presidents have strengthened ties with China during the pandemic, while others have sought to distance themselves. *AQ* tracks how eight governments have managed their relationships with Beijing over the past two years.

by Emilie Sweigart and Gabriel Cohen



ALBERTO FERNÁNDEZ
Argentina

"Thank you for the donations and facilities for the acquisition of strategic supplies in times of scarcity. You definitely helped us with the vaccines."

—July 2021, addressing Chinese President Xi Jinping



JAIR BOLSONARO
Brazil

"It's a new virus, nobody knows if it was born in a laboratory or born because a human ingested an unsuitable animal. ... Are we not facing a new war? Which country has grown its GDP the most? I'm not going to tell you."

—May 2021, echoing unproven theories about China and COVID-19



SEBASTIÁN PIÑERA
Chile

"Chile has good relations with China and good relations with the U.S. It will hold auctions for 5G technology according to the interests of Chile, without us getting into this fight between the two big superpowers."

—April 2021, in an interview with the *Financial Times*



IVÁN DUQUE
Colombia

"We hope that relations between the two countries continue to strengthen. Today, China is our second-largest trading partner and we want to continue opening doors in that great nation."

—March 2021, via Twitter



ANDRÉS MANUEL LÓPEZ OBRADOR
Mexico

"We will never forget China's support in these bitter and distressing months of the pandemic."

—May 2021, during a morning press conference



LAURENTINO CORTIZO
Panama

"All these differences between two great countries affect the mood of the world. ... Use your head, use common sense, find a way to get closer and not keep the world the way you have it."

—May 2019, speaking about the governments of China and the U.S.



PEDRO CASTILLO
Peru

"We met with Liang Yu, Ambassador of the People's Republic of China in Peru, to prioritize the ties of brotherhood and cooperation between both countries."

—July 2021, via Twitter



NICOLÁS MADURO
Venezuela

"President Xi Jinping, today we are more united than ever, China and Venezuela are in good health, and China will meet this century by setting an example."

—June 2021, marking 47 years of Venezuela-China diplomatic relations

Argentina

Alberto Fernández



In office since 2019

"Argentina is a country with many opportunities for China to be a central actor."

—September 2020, during a phone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping

Fernández has deepened the relationship with China, which surpassed Brazil as Argentina's largest trading partner for part of 2020. Driven by Argentine soy and beef exports, bilateral trade expanded by 56% from 2007 to 2019, reaching \$15 billion, before the pandemic caused trade to fall. Argentina joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in March, and Foreign Minister Felipe Solá has declared the country's interest in joining China's Belt and Road Initiative. However, Argentina's macroeconomic instability, and slow progress on projects such as two China-funded hydroelectric dams in Patagonia, have been hiccups in the otherwise expansive investment relationship. Still, plans to revive a Chinese-funded nuclear power plant emerged in August. The relationship has also been developed through the Chinese-run space station in Patagonia that opened in 2018, as well as a proposed logistics base in Ushuaia that reportedly may be funded by Beijing. The pandemic has brought Fernández and Xi closer, and millions of doses of the Sinopharm vaccine have been delivered while Argentina also approved the single-shot CanSino vaccine.

ARGENTINA'S LARGEST TRADE PARTNER



MAJOR CHINESE ECONOMIC ACTIVITY SINCE 2019

\$2.6 billion	Reconstruction of San Martín cargo railway by China Railway Construction Corp. Ltd.
\$1.02 billion	Malal-Hue UTE consortium, headed by PowerChina subsidiary Sinohydro, won the bid to build the Portezuelo del Viento hydroelectric dam in Mendoza province
\$816 million	China Machinery Engineering Corp.'s improvement of the Belgrano freight railway
\$784 million	Northern Patagonian train line built by PowerChina, linking Vaca Muerta shale reserves and Bahía Blanca port
\$580 million	Investment by Ganfeng Lithium in solar-powered lithium plant in Salta province

Brazil

Jair Bolsonaro



In office since 2019

"Today we can say that a significant part of Brazil needs China, and China also needs Brazil."

—October 2019, on a state visit to China

Despite Bolsonaro's at times antagonistic rhetoric, Brazil has maintained strong ties with China. In 2020, China received over a third of Brazil's exports in a bilateral trade worth \$100 billion. Brazil's agribusiness sector, which lobbies the government to maintain access to its largest customer, remains influential. Brazil joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in November 2020, a year after Bolsonaro's state visit to Beijing and the BRICS summit in Brasília. November 2019 also saw Brazil's largest-ever oil auction, in which two Chinese firms were the only foreign companies to bid. Recent Chinese investments have targeted cleaner energy production and infrastructure. While as recently as 2020 Bolsonaro was opposed to Huawei participating in Brazil's 5G network auction, he has since backed down. According to Brazil's communications minister, the auction could be held in coming months. The São Paulo state government partnered with Sinovac in June 2020 to produce vaccines at the state's Butantan Institute. Although Bolsonaro has mocked the company's CoronaVac vaccine as ineffective, the federal government has relied on imports of vaccines from China, including the active ingredients to produce CoronaVac and the AstraZeneca vaccine.

BRAZIL'S LARGEST TRADE PARTNER



MAJOR CHINESE ECONOMIC ACTIVITY SINCE 2019

\$1.7 billion	China General Nuclear Power Group 2019 acquisitions of Atlantic Renewable Energies and Enel's Brazilian wind and solar assets
\$1.3 billion	China Communications Construction Co. (CCCC) to build a 130-mile railway between Marabá and the port city of Barcarena in Pará state
\$1.2 billion	Consortium of three Chinese firms signed a public-private partnership with Bahia state to build a 7.7-mile bridge connecting the capital city Salvador and Itaparica Island
\$719 million	China's BYD company to construct SkyRail monorail system in the city of Salvador
\$450 million	CCCC co-invested in a steel rolling mill in Pará state with Brazilian mining company Vale

Chile

Sebastián Piñera



In office since 2018

"This meeting with the Chinese government's main public authorities, Chinese businesspeople and innovators is something that is good for my country."

—April 2019, during a state visit to China

Piñera has continued to deepen Chile's relationship with top trading partner China, and the countries marked 50 years of diplomatic relations in 2020. In 2021, the Export-Import Bank of China became the third Chinese bank to operate in the country. Chile joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in July 2021 and has been a member of the Belt and Road Initiative since 2018. Chinese firms stayed active in Chile throughout the unrest of late 2019, as Chile is still widely seen as an entry market for China in Latin America. However, there is growing resistance in Chile to recent Chinese activity in the energy sector. In July 2020, for example, Chile opted for a Japanese firm's bid for a trans-Pacific fiber optic cable, rather than a bid from Huawei. Despite this, diplomatic ties have remained resilient, with two reported phone calls between Piñera and Xi Jinping in 2020 and the opening of a Chilean consulate in Chengdu this year. A June 2020 agreement between Chile's Pontificia Universidad Católica and Sinovac to test vaccines in Chile led to CoronaVac shipments in early 2021 that helped Chile become a regional vaccination leader.

CHILE'S LARGEST TRADE PARTNER



MAJOR CHINESE ECONOMIC ACTIVITY SINCE 2019

\$3 billion	State Grid bought CGE, the Chilean subsidiary of Spanish company Naturgy
\$2.2 billion	State Grid bought U.S. firm Semptra Energy's Chilean business Chilquinta Energía
\$922 million	China's Joyvio Agriculture Development Co. acquired Chilean salmon producer Australis Seafoods
\$804 million	Consortium of CRCC International Investment Co. Ltd. and China Railway Construction Corporation to construct 124-mile section of highway between Talca and Chillán
\$60 million	Sinovac Biotech to build a vaccine production plant in the Santiago region and a research and development center in northern Chile

Colombia

Iván Duque



In office since 2018

"This relationship goes back 40 years. I'd like to tell you that with this visit, we hope to engage even more."

—July 2019, addressing President Xi Jinping during a visit to China

Before Duque entered office, Colombia saw relatively little Chinese economic activity compared to its neighbors. Duque has steadily strengthened the bilateral relationship. During a state visit in July 2019, he signed deals to export avocados and bananas to China, among other agreements. Later that year, Chinese companies won a multi-billion-dollar contract to construct a metro line in Bogotá, an investment that to many observers signaled China's real arrival in Colombia. Although it is not a member of the Belt and Road Initiative, Colombia has received notable Chinese transportation investments, including a tram line to Bogotá's suburbs and electric buses in Cali and Medellín. Construction on what is set to be one of the region's largest Chinese embassies began in Bogotá in 2018, and diplomatic gestures have ramped up during the pandemic. In March, Colombian Ambassador to the U.N. Alicia Arango praised China's efforts to provide vaccines, as well as what she described as China's "progress" in human rights, provoking criticism. Vaccines from Sinovac were the first to arrive in Colombia. In a video message that followed one shipment, Duque thanked Xi for the vaccines, adding that he hoped to visit China in 2021.

COLOMBIA'S LARGEST TRADE PARTNER



MAJOR CHINESE ECONOMIC ACTIVITY SINCE 2019

\$4 billion	Consortium of two Chinese companies to build the elevated 15-mile metro line in Bogotá
\$1 billion	China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation to build a tram line connecting Bogotá to its suburbs
\$1 billion	Zijin Mining Group bought Canadian firm Continental Gold, gaining access to the Buriticá gold project in Antioquia department
\$418 million	China Development Bank's financing of the \$652 million Mar 2 highway project connecting Medellín to the country's ports

Mexico

Andrés Manuel López Obrador



In office since 2018

"The day we spoke on the phone, [the president of China] decided to give us special attention. ... After that call, more ventilators were secured from China."

—April 2020

AMLO has gradually deepened Mexico's relationship with China. On a visit to China in July 2019, Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard stated that Mexico was seeking more trade and investment, as well as "better economic relations." After speaking with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, in January 2021, Ebrard announced that the countries would expand their "strategic association." Mexico is not a member of the Belt and Road Initiative, but there has been recent Chinese investment in its transportation and energy sectors. In November 2020, the Chinese firm State Power Investment Corp. bought Zuma Energía, one of Mexico's largest renewable energy firms, for an undisclosed amount. A consortium that includes a Chinese company is set to construct the first part of AMLO's signature Maya Train project, and other Chinese firms are involved in Mexican cities' bus and train networks. The world's largest manufacturer of railway cars, China's CRRC, announced in May 2021 plans to build a factory in central Mexico. Ebrard and AMLO have also thanked China for its support in confronting the pandemic. Mexico relied on Chinese vaccine shipments in early 2021, and a government agreement led to the production of the Chinese vaccine CanSino in Querétaro for national distribution since March.

MEXICO'S LARGEST TRADE PARTNER



MAJOR CHINESE ECONOMIC ACTIVITY SINCE 2019

\$1.8 billion

CRRC Zhuzhou Locomotive to modernize Line I of Mexico City's subway system and add 30 new train cars

\$630 million

A consortium including China Communications Construction Company to construct a section of the Maya Train on the Yucatán Peninsula

\$300 million

Zhongtong Bus Holding Co. Ltd. and Mexican firm Golden Star 400 to build a plant in Nuevo León state to produce buses that run on natural gas

Panama

Laurentino Cortizo



In office since 2019

"Relations with the Chinese must be developed with everything above the table, nothing below the table, and with full transparency."

—December 2019

PANAMA'S LARGEST TRADE PARTNER



NO MAJOR NEW CHINESE INVESTMENTS OR FINANCING SINCE 2019

The Cortizo administration has cooled relations with Beijing, in a departure from the prior administration's rapid turn toward China. Former President Juan Carlos Varela switched Panama's diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China in 2017 and oversaw extensive investments from China, but progress on some infrastructure projects has stalled since Cortizo entered office. In September 2019, for example, the Cortizo government canceled a \$4.1 billion Chinese-funded high-speed rail line project. And while Varela led efforts to sign a free trade agreement with China, the Cortizo government has insisted on redefining the scope of the negotiations. His administration also ruled out purchasing Chinese

COVID-19 vaccines in 2021. Still, there are undeniable ties binding the two countries. Panama is part of the Belt and Road Initiative, and in June the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China became the second Chinese bank to operate in Panama, following the Bank of China. Bilateral trade grew by 19% from 2018 to 2019, in part due to Panama's booming copper industry, of which over 60% of exports headed to China. The government has stated it is in negotiations to finance a \$1.4 billion fourth bridge over the Panama Canal; it signed a contract for the project with a Chinese consortium in 2018.

Peru

Pedro Castillo



In office since 2021

"Bilateral relations with China are extremely important."

—August 2021 press release from Peru's trade ministry

Castillo took steps early in his term to signal the importance of Peru's relationship with China. In July, then President-elect Castillo chose China's as his first embassy to visit. The Chinese ambassador to Peru and Peru's trade and tourism minister have discussed upgrading the bilateral free trade agreement and increasing trade and tourism. A member of the Belt and Road Initiative since April 2019, Peru has attracted multi-billion-dollar Chinese investments, especially in the energy and mining sectors. In August, Peru's energy and mining minister met with the heads of some of the largest Chinese mining companies operating in the country. Existing contracts may be up for discussion; during the campaign Castillo stated he would increase mining taxes and use revenues to improve public services. However, Peru's economic downturn means he cannot afford to alienate Chinese firms, which have invested an estimated \$10.4 billion in Peru's mining sector. On the healthcare front, Chinese Sinopharm vaccines were the first to arrive in Peru as part of a 38 million-dose deal, but the country's reliance on Chinese vaccines has reduced as Sinopharm shipments have been delayed and Peru has purchased or received vaccines from other countries.

PERU'S LARGEST TRADE PARTNER



MAJOR CHINESE ECONOMIC ACTIVITY SINCE 2019

\$3.59 billion	China Yangtze Power Co., Ltd. bought U.S. firm Semptra Energy's Peruvian assets, including a 83.6% stake in Peru's largest power utility company, Luz del Sur
\$3 billion	Chinese-Peruvian consortium constructing Chancay port north of Lima
\$1.39 billion	Consortium led by China Three Gorges Corp. bought Chaglla hydroelectric power plant

Venezuela

Nicolás Maduro



In office since 2013

"Thanks to China and other friends from around the world, we were able to obtain public health supplies to face the pandemic."

—August 2021

VENEZUELA'S LARGEST TRADE PARTNER N/A

NO MAJOR NEW CHINESE INVESTMENTS OR FINANCING SINCE 2019

Venezuela remains dependent on China for its oil demand, even with investments and finance projects dropping off as Beijing reevaluates its exposure to the Bolivarian Republic's ongoing economic meltdown. The oil-for-loans relationship between the two countries has grown more complex in recent years, as the Sinovensa joint venture between China National Petroleum Corp and Venezuelan state-owned oil firm PDVSA has persisted, even following the end of state-to-state lending in 2016. The Maduro regime owes roughly \$20 billion to China, and has struggled to repay due to significant drops in oil production. Venezuelan crude petroleum exports to China fell by 57% from 2013 to 2019. China has allegedly skirted U.S.

oil sanctions for some of these imports, employing techniques such as ship-to-ship transfers. In response to drops in output, Beijing extended a moratorium on debt payments to the end of 2020. (As of September 2021, no information was available regarding whether payments have resumed or not.) China's approach to Venezuela also involves medical diplomacy. Between the start of the pandemic and May 2021, China sent more than 420 tons of medical supplies. By early July, Venezuela had received 1.8 million doses of Chinese vaccines.

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THE AQ PROFILE

Luis von Ahn

**The Guatemalan
CEO of Duolingo
is putting his
massive platform
to good use.**

by Brendan O'Boyle

IN 1996, LUIS VON AHN'S life changed when a beloved aunt was kidnapped and held for a week, a trauma that convinced the high school senior to pursue college outside of Guatemala. But as the 17-year-old began applying to U.S. universities, he found a problem: Guatemala had run out of seats to take the required English proficiency test. He paid about \$1,000 to fly to El Salvador to take the exam instead.

The investment paid off: Von Ahn went on to earn his Ph.D. in computer science from Carnegie Mellon University, becoming a professor there and a pioneer in the field often known as crowdsourcing. Today, von Ahn, 43, is the CEO of Duolingo, the most downloaded education app in the world, which he cofounded in 2012, and one of Central America's most celebrated tech entrepreneurs.

But von Ahn knows his path was an unlikely one, considering where he comes from. As a child, the completion rate for primary school in Guatemala was below 40%. Von Ahn's physician mother worked hard to send him to a private school, where he rubbed elbows with the children of elites, ultimately coming to see education as a privilege for a select few.

"I always thought of education as something that brought inequality to different social classes," he has said. "People who have money can buy themselves the best education in the world. People who don't have very much money barely learn how to read and write."

Disrupting that cycle by making education "universally available" is Duolingo's mission. Today, the company is expanding beyond its signature language courses, with new offerings teaching literacy and math. Von Ahn, too, is taking on a new kind of role for himself. By investing in education and speaking out against corruption in his home country, he has become a vocal advocate for the private sector's active role in reducing inequality.

"Early on I wanted to do technology for technol-

ogy's sake," von Ahn told *AQ* from Duolingo's headquarters in Pittsburgh in August, shortly after the company debuted on the U.S. stock market with a nearly \$5 billion valuation. "These days, I just want to have an impact on the world."

In May, von Ahn was among a group of CEOs who met with U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris about efforts to foster economic development in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Von Ahn discussed the development of a Spanish version of Duolingo's award-winning literacy app targeting three- to 17-year-olds, and he committed to expanding fee waivers for people taking Duolingo's English proficiency test in these countries. The test can be done at home — no testing center or plane ticket, as in von Ahn's experience, required. Even without a waiver, the \$49 test costs just a fraction of what traditional alternatives charge.

Von Ahn has also announced the creation of the Luis von Ahn Foundation, which aims, among its core goals, to expand education for girls and women in Guatemala. The most recent census in 2018 found that while 85% of men and boys in Guatemala over the age of seven could read and write, only 78.3% of women and girls over seven could — a figure that drops below 70% in rural areas.

"In a country like Guatemala, if you have low resources and you have to make a decision, you choose to educate your boys rather than your girls," von Ahn said. And because a child's IQ has been shown to be more correlated with their mother's education level, von Ahn notes, investing in a girl's education has a direct impact on the next generation, too.

Von Ahn's emphasis on human capital comes as Latin America faces a critical juncture. The pandemic has taken a heavy toll on the region's students, who on average have lost more days in the classroom than any other part of the world. As public and private sector leaders try to minimize the losses, von Ahn can serve as a source of ideas and inspiration.

“People who have money can buy themselves the best education in the world. People who don’t have very much money barely learn how to read and write.”

“There are more Luis von Ahns out there, in Guatemala and elsewhere in the Northern Triangle, who we don’t know about,” said Luis Alberto Moreno, the former president of the Inter-American Development Bank. “If given the opportunity to get the kind of education he got, they could very well build businesses like his.”

Betting on human potential

VON AHN’S CAREER began in the computer science department at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Mellon University. His work there, much as at Duolingo, focused on using technology to maximize the potential of people. At Carnegie Mellon, von Ahn helped develop the field of human computation, known to many as crowdsourcing, which involves, as he described it, building systems “that combine humans and computers to solve large-scale problems that neither can solve alone.”

Those systems included a series of multiplayer computer games, including one where players helped label images on the internet — technology that Google bought to help label its vast catalogue of images and improve its searches.

“Everything he did was geared toward finding ways of engaging people in things that are useful,” said Josh Benaloh, a veteran cryptographer at Microsoft who hired von Ahn as a summer intern in 2004.

What really put von Ahn on the map was CAPTCHA, which he developed with his thesis advisor, the distinguished Venezuelan-American computer scientist Manuel Blum. Anyone who has ever had to type in a series of distorted words to buy a concert ticket or open an email account to prove they are human

has used CAPTCHA. The idea for CAPTCHA arose after von Ahn and Blum attended a talk in 2000 by the chief scientist at Yahoo, which was struggling to keep scammers from opening email accounts to send spam. By having the idea to ask Internet users to do something simple, but that computers could not yet do well, Von Ahn created a valuable tool for Yahoo and many businesses.

Before he even turned 30, CAPTCHA and von Ahn’s other innovations had made him a rising star in the tech world. Bill Gates spent 45 minutes on the phone with him trying to convince him to work at Microsoft. Von Ahn turned him down, preferring to “do his own thing.” In another unexpected phone call, von Ahn was informed that not only was he in the running for a MacArthur Fellowship, but that he had won the award and the \$500,000 no-strings-attached prize that came with it.

Shortly after that in 2006, von Ahn said that his goal was “to have a site where literally millions of people come and work on tasks that are useful for humanity.”

That dream would become the massive success that is Duolingo. But at the time, von Ahn was a bit frustrated.

“I think he felt some guilt in the hours that people wasted doing CAPTCHAS,” Benaloh told *AQ*. “People hated doing them.”

Von Ahn calculated that 200 million users a day were spending 10 seconds to fill in CAPTCHA, equal to over 500,000 hours every day. Wanting to get more from those hours, von Ahn created reCAPTCHA, a more useful offshoot of CAPTCHA that used the original idea to have users digitize books and newspapers for clients like *The New York Times* by translating

a word from a scanned document that computers couldn't decipher.

Google bought reCAPTCHA, and after two years working for Google, von Ahn began an early retirement. It lasted about two weeks.

Finding his voice

SHORTLY THEREAFTER, a self-described “restless” von Ahn started Duolingo with Severin Hacker, a former graduate student of his from Switzerland who, like von Ahn, knew firsthand how learning another language can change your life.

Von Ahn had not planned on leading a company, telling *AQ* that he “specifically stayed away from other people’s problems” growing up. In fact, von Ahn described himself as conflict averse. “The first person that I ever fired in my life I had to fire three times because they didn’t understand.”

When it comes to Guatemala, however, von Ahn, who lives in Pittsburgh, is increasingly vocal, primarily about government corruption, which he called “probably the single biggest problem in Guatemala.” Von Ahn has called himself a “dissident of Guatemala’s government” on Twitter and has criticized officials who are part of what he and many others call the country’s “pact of the corrupt.” These include the attorney general who fired an anti-corruption prosecutor who was gathering evidence into alleged corruption by the president.

Von Ahn “is someone who wants a change for our society and has had the courage to raise his points of view, even going against the conservative establishment,” Juan José Narciso Chúa, a columnist at Guatemalan newspaper *La Hora*, wrote in 2020.

To support government accountability, von Ahn has personally funded Guatemalan investigative journalism outlets, including *La Hora*, which was exclusively family-owned for a century before von Ahn became a major shareholder in 2020.

“Other than doing things that would probably risk my life, this is one thing that I think I can do to help,” von Ahn told *AQ*. “I spent quite a bit of money trying

to help journalism in Guatemala.”

Some business leaders in Guatemala have joined von Ahn in speaking out against efforts to stall anti-corruption work. Von Ahn is a member of the National Entrepreneurs Council, an organization of business leaders formed in 2021 to advocate for renewal within Guatemala’s private sector. But not enough leaders are taking a stand, von Ahn said.


“There are a few people that matter a lot in Guatemala. They are not changing,” von Ahn told *AQ*. “I’m not sure that they are massively corrupt, but they understand that it’s probably not in their interest to rock the boat.”

What’s next?


ONE GROUP GIVING von Ahn hope is the next generation of business leaders, particularly in Latin America. This year, he started a Spanish-language podcast — *Emprendedores con Luis von Ahn* — in which he offers inspiration and insight to aspiring entrepreneurs through interviews with other Latin Americans who have started successful companies with a social impact.

“Latin America is kind of a forgotten continent, certainly in terms of tech investment,” von Ahn said. “I think that is changing, and my hope is to accelerate that change.”

Von Ahn is also committed to expanding Duolingo’s impact both through a growing number of languages on offer — five new languages rolling out this year include Haitian Creole — and the development of an app to teach elementary school math. Duolingo is also expanding its programs to aid language teachers in the classroom or, more recently, remotely.

Back in 2007, in an interview with *Wired*, von Ahn referred to humanity as the “biggest supercomputer in the world.” In an age of self-driving cars and humanoid robots, Von Ahn’s mission to use technology to make the most of our natural talents is a reassuring alternative to technologies that threaten to replace them. 

O’Boyle is the senior editor at *AQ*

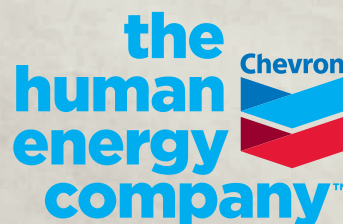
A smiling woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a white lab coat over a red top, stands in a lush green market setting. She is holding several pieces of fresh produce, including green bell peppers and purple eggplants. In front of her is a wooden table displaying a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, including a wooden bowl of tomatoes, a basket of colorful bell peppers, and several green mangoes. To her left is a large wooden sign with the text "STRONGER ECONOMIES BENEFIT EVERYONE." in white capital letters, with red horizontal lines under "ECONOMIES" and "BENEFIT".

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PHOTO ESSAY

THE ONES WHO STAYED BEHIND

PHOTOGRAPHS BY EVA LÉPIZ

STORIES OF MIGRATION often attract attention — and deservedly so — for their dramatic combination of hope, uncertainty and adversity. But there is always a parallel story about those who are left behind. For them, the separation is a quieter affair, but not a lighter burden.

Here, Eva Lépez portrays life in Teotitlán del Valle, a town of 6,000 people in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca that has seen large outward flows of migration to the U.S. in recent years. Artisan crafts, community life and religious rituals continue — but not without a melancholy that comes with the absence of loved ones, especially in this Zapotec-influenced culture that puts such great emphasis on the extended family.

Enedina Zarita Bazán Chávez (57) and Juana Victoria Chávez (86) spend much of their time weaving wool rugs, a Zapotec tradition for which Teotitlán is famous. Families in Teotitlán receive more than \$1 million annually in remittances from the U.S., money that helps sustain the making of these handcrafts, which lack access to large, commercialized markets. Several of Enedina's and Juana's nephews and cousins have emigrated to the United States.







Locals hold a trio of large beeswax candles studded with flowers. These are to be presented as a gift as part of a *contentada*, a traditional form of marriage proposal that brings together the respective families of the couple. For those who have family members who have left, fewer hands make such elaborate preparations a harder task.



Areli Chávez Bautista (25), Beatriz González Martínez (69), and Guadalupe Chávez Bautista (70) light candles as part of a Christmas festival reenacting Mary and Joseph's search for a place to stay in Bethlehem before the birth of Jesus. These women have several relatives now residing in the U.S.: Beatriz's daughter lives in Moorpark, California.







At a wedding, village women put their cooking skills to work in a show of *guelaguetza*, a traditional Zapotec form of community service. Villagers help others with tasks at marriages and other festivals, in the expectation that this help will be returned to them when the time comes.






Winter in Oaxaca. Enedina Chávez and her daughter Janet (32) look out from the top of Picacho Mountain over the Piedra Azul reservoir and the town of Teotitlán del Valle.





Mobile phones are poised to film the spectacle, as a wicker structure lined with fireworks is lit aflame during celebrations for the new year. During the period around Christmas, many families living in the U.S. return to their native villages to visit family and keep alive the connection to their roots.



A photograph of two young men standing in a desert landscape. The man on the left is wearing a black t-shirt with a small logo and black pants, standing next to a stack of rocks. The man on the right is wearing a plaid shirt, khaki shorts, a baseball cap, and has a camera hanging from his neck. They are both smiling. The background shows a dry, hilly landscape under a clear sky.

Men prepare for the new year at the Cerro de la Cueva, a local landmark where traditional offerings are made. Townspeople stack rocks representing things they hope to obtain in the year to come, such as a house, animals or a car. Various relatives of Javier Lazo Gutiérrez (31), right, now live in the U.S., including his brother, several cousins, and his uncle Porfirio, a renowned Zapotec weaver who lives in Ventura, California.



Faustino Alavez Chávez (48) stands next to his mother's grave. After crossing the border as a teenager in 1987, Faustino spent 26 years in the United States before returning to Teotitlán to spend time with his ailing parents. Now working in town as a taxi driver, he says he has no desire to return to the U.S.







Hosts pass around glasses of mezcal to guests during New Year's Day celebrations. Many of those who migrate set aside money throughout the year to help pay the cost of traditional celebrations, like this one.



Elvia Quiñones Martínez (47), pictured at center bearing an effigy of the Infant Jesus, returned to Teotitlán with her family from Santa Ana, California, to play this special role in the traditional New Year's Day procession. Elvia and her husband crossed to the U.S. 25 years ago in search of better employment prospects.



Bolivia Fails to Turn the Page

**After years of crisis and acrimony,
Luis Arce's government disappoints
those hoping for a fresh start.**

by Richard Lapper

BOLIVIA'S NEWLY ELECTED vice president struck a conciliatory note when he took office last October. “We want agreements between the right and the left,” David Choquehuanca said, suggesting that after the violent upheavals of 2019 and the deeply divisive transitional government of 2020, Bolivia was bound for a period of greater stability. “The truth is very simple. The condor takes flight only when its right wing is in perfect balance with its left wing,” Choquehuanca added, drawing on the communitarian traditions of Bolivia’s indigenous communities.

A year later, the promised harmony has failed to materialize. Instead, under the leadership of President Luis Arce, Bolivia has become bogged down in bitter political wrangling and economic dysfunction. Rather than seek consensus, Arce has looked for confrontation. Jeanine Áñez, the former transitional president, and several of her former ministers languish in prison on terrorism charges described by Human Rights Watch as “grossly disproportionate.” The country’s traditional private sector has been isolated and ignored at best, and



Bolivia's President Luis Arce, left, and former President Evo Morales at the MAS 26th anniversary in 2021.

subject to harassment at worst. “This is a crusade against the infidels,” said one senior private mining executive, speaking anonymously for fear of retribution, like many others quoted in this article.

To casual observers of Bolivia’s fortunes, this might seem something of a surprise. After all, as finance minister from 2006 until 2017 and then again during 2019, Arce won a reputation as a level-headed technocrat and took some of the credit for Bolivia being seen as perhaps the most economically successful of the so-called Pink Tide governments. “People expected this government to be much more pragmatic,” said Roberto Laserna, the director of Cochabamba-based think tank CERES. “Instead, it is acting with a great deal of irresponsibility. It is very ideological and is doing exactly the opposite of what it should.”

The case for consensus is a fairly compelling one. The country has endured an awful two years. Morales’ controversial efforts to secure a fourth successive term in office (constitutional term limits were overturned on very dubious grounds) and subsequent irregularities in the 2019 presidential election polarized the country. A violent crackdown on pro-Morales demonstrations in November 2019, and other heavy-handed repression under Áñez and her interior minister Arturo Murillo, led to even greater discord.

Last year, Bolivia was badly hit by the COVID pandemic. Over the last seven years, falls in the prices of gas and other exports had put the economy under pressure, but in 2020 output plunged by more than 8%. Many companies collapsed, throwing thousands out of work and into poverty. According to one estimate, 86.3% of the workforce was outside formal employment by the end of 2020, compared with 78.3% in 2013. “Companies are borrowing or selling assets

to cover spending commitments,” Luis Barbery Paz, president of the employers’ confederation (CEPB), told a press conference earlier this year. “The crisis has been catastrophic for the private sector.”

At least four separate attempts by the confederation to strike up a dialogue with the president have been rejected. Many ministers and department heads have adopted a similar posture. “Not only has the president not received us but it seems that there are instructions to all the ministries that they don’t receive the businessmen,” a businessman close to the board told me recently. “We all feel that the relationship with the government is nonexistent.”

It has sometimes seemed as if Arce has gone out of his way to make things more difficult. A new wealth tax — charged on fortunes of more than about \$4 million — raises very little revenue but will encourage more businesses to take money out of the country. Some business leaders allege they are being pursued by tax authorities. Courts have become politicized, in one case arresting the local head of a Canadian subsidiary that had tried to restructure its work force. “Bolivia needs investments, but instead of trying to attract capital people are driving it away. This could lead us to abandon Bolivia,” Juan Gavidia, chief executive of Corporación Orvana, told reporters last month.

Policy sometimes seems influenced by the need to discredit the previous government, rather than any kind of broader economic logic. In April, Bolivia paid back a \$327.2 million loan from the IMF contracted by the previous government, even though it cost an additional \$24.1 million in interest, commissions and other expenses to make the repayment. An official for the economy minister deemed responsible for the supposed irregularities of the contract remains un-

It has sometimes seemed as if
Arce has gone out of his way to make
things more difficult.

Independent journalists also speak of feeling persecuted; some have left the profession altogether.

der house arrest. Yet last month, Bolivia happily accepted an IMF loan for almost an identical amount offered under the terms of a global facility designed to assist recovery from the pandemic.

Businessmen who know Arce say they are not surprised by the president's attitude. Even when Evo Morales actively sought out foreign investment and courted local businessmen in the latter part of his 13-year period in office, his faithful finance minister was not supportive. Instead, Arce's economic team has hoped to generate investment through the public sector, with Bolivia's underperforming state companies at the forefront. In addition, there has been an acceptance that the scale of the informal sector — reflected in the enormous number of mining cooperatives, as well as extensive contraband — will help cushion the downturn. Party leaders believe that the great mass of Bolivia's mainly indigenous population identifies with his government and can adapt to the decline of the formal private sector. "Arce thinks his support base can survive a bad situation for a long time. This is a line of resistance and patience," said one senior ruling party figure.

But the change is part of a broader shift. Like their counterparts in Brazil or Venezuela, many on Bolivia's left see recent events as part of a broader narrative in which progressive governments are now recovering from "imperialist intervention." From this perspective, the events in Bolivia of November 2019 — just like the failed 2002 coup against Hugo Chávez, the 2016 impeachment of Dilma Rousseff and the imprisonment two years later of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva — were the product of counter-revolutionary and *golpista* maneuvers. From this perspective, the importance of settling scores with anyone who supported the transitional government overrides all else. Business leaders who might have

stood on the sidelines are seen as having offered implicit support to the coup. In this fevered and polarized atmosphere, nuance matters little. Barbery Paz, for example, who was close to Evo Morales and other government ministers and in 2019 negotiated a deal between the government and his family-owned agribusiness company to produce ethanol, is seen by many in Arce's government as being as bad as any other *golpista* businessman. Independent journalists also speak of feeling persecuted; some have left the profession altogether.

Meanwhile, rising commodity prices, resulting from the rapid post-pandemic recovery of China and U.S. reflation policies, are bolstering the belief within Arce's Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) party that maybe the private sector doesn't really matter. Some MAS thinkers are arguing that a second wave of the pink tide that first swept through the region in the 2000s is gathering force. They frequently refer to a new left-wing axis between Argentina and Mexico (conveniently leaving aside the disaster in Venezuela). In July, Álvaro García Linera, who served as vice president, told *Le Monde Diplomatique* that the political shift favored a "new wave of nationalizations". The reelection next year of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva would cement this trend, and since Brazil is the most important customer for Bolivia's gas, it would help stabilize the country's prospects, the thinking goes. In the meantime, the MAS will fight the "good fight" against private capital and Bolivians will have to be happy with what they have, proponents say. If that's the case, "resistance and patience" will have to be enough. 

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Lapper is a freelance writer and consultant who specializes in Latin America. He is a member of the AQ editorial board.

For Young Leftists, Cuba Is Out. Chile Is In.

Issues like gender and minority rights seem to resonate more than old 20th century battles.

by Oliver Stuenkel

SÃO PAULO — I was in for a surprise when I asked politically engaged university students and young political activists in Brazil how they felt about the recent upheaval in Cuba. “The whole debate about Cuba is like a caricature, I don’t really think it’s interesting,” one replied.

Contrary to my experience of when I started teaching more than a decade ago, the majority had not even paid much attention to events there — despite self-identifying as being on the left of the ideological spectrum. While all opposed the U.S. embargo against the island, most did not consider Cuba to be particularly relevant to the issues they care most about, namely race and gender issues and the need to increase the number of minorities in positions of power across society.

Rather, several said Chile’s gender-balanced constituent assembly — the world’s first with a 50% gender quota — inspired them, as did the participation of indigenous Mapuche people. In the same way, several female students mentioned the feminist protest song “El Violador Eres Tú” (The Rapist Is You), which captured people’s imagination across

the globe during the height of Chile's protest wave in late 2019.

Their relative apathy towards Cuba — a topic that was once certain to arouse passions in any discussion — seems to reflect a shift in the debate among some of Brazil's younger leftists.

The same is true about Venezuela, which until a few years ago guaranteed bare-knuckle debates between students supportive of and those opposed to the Chávez regime. While limited to anecdotal evidence, my conversations with left-wingers in Brazil born in the 2000s reveal that neither Che Guevara, Fidel Castro nor Hugo Chávez comes close to the inspirational power of Marielle Franco, the Black lesbian councilwoman from Rio de Janeiro assassinated in 2018. Indeed, it is not uncommon for left-wing students of this generation to call Franco's murder the most relevant political event of their lives, leading them to engage politically in the first place — somewhat similar to what Lula's election in 2002 symbolizes to those born in the early 1980s. When asked about the topics they most ardently care about, issues like increasing the political representation of women — and Black women in particular — indigenous communities and the LGBTQ population are regularly mentioned first.

In addition to Chile, many of the young leftists who look beyond Brazil's borders seem to consider Argentina's social policies to be inspiring, especially vis-à-vis the recent decision to legalize abortion, as well as its new affirmative action law for trans people.

This does not mean, of course, that several of the left's more traditional concerns, such as reducing inequality and poverty, no longer matter to Brazil's Gen Z leftists. Quite to the contrary, many of those I speak to, particularly students who hail from poorer families, see themselves as products of the Workers' Party's social policies aimed at including groups that long had little access to Brazil's public university system. To them, the fight for greater political representation is the logical next step of successful anti-poverty measures (even though the economic crisis after 2014 and the pandemic reverted a signif-

icant part of the progress made during the 2000s).

Perhaps most fascinating to me, their fight for greater political representation of minorities involves questioning the intellectual foundations and references of older generations, even on the left. I often hear that Marielle's death and the government's reaction (it remains unclear who exactly was behind the killings) have led young activists to wonder why the vast majority of authors they read are white men and how the Portuguese language includes what they consider to be elements of white privilege. Gen Z leftists are inventing new linguistic expressions and "subverting language," using for example *escurecer* (to darken) instead of *esclarecer* (to lighten, or to clarify). Somewhat related are discussions about the need to "decolonize" knowledge, which often involves the search for alternative perspectives on politics and history, particularly so by minorities whose voices were traditionally silenced.

It may thus come as little surprise that those young leftists who consider LGBTQ and women's rights as a key political battle struggle to connect to many of the Latin American left's most iconic leaders, ranging from Fidel Castro, Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa to Evo Morales, who were socially conservative and oftentimes homophobic. (The same seems to be true for Peru's new left-wing president, Pedro Castillo, whose socially conservative views on issues such as abortion make him a complicated ally for those who prioritize things like women's rights.) While the new generation of Chile's leftist leaders — including 35-year-old presidential candidate Gabriel Boric — are not yet household names among Latin America's left, they seem to be far better positioned to capture the imagination of Gen Z leftists across the region than Cuba's aging political elite. 

Stuenkel is a contributing columnist for Americas Quarterly and teaches international relations at the Getulio Vargas Foundation in São Paulo. He is the author of *The BRICS and the Future of Global Order (2015)* and *Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers Are Remaking Global Order (2016)*.

Cultura



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Sebastián Zubieta's fall playlist

Books

Nonfiction

***Cuba: An American History* is a dive into the island's deep connection with its northern neighbor.**

Reviewed by Oliver Balch

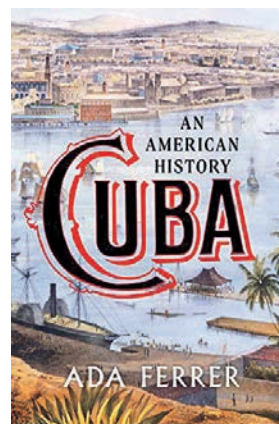
ON APRIL 17, 1961, CIA-BACKED Cuban exiles mounted an ambitious amphibious landing on a remote section of the Cuban coast. The now-infamous Bay of Pigs invasion was a military botch. Had the invasion succeeded, Washington fully expected Cuba's nascent revolution to fizzle out. Give it a week or two, and it would be back to rum-soaked mojitos at the veranda bar of Havana's Hotel Nacional.

As Ada Ferrer observes in this intriguing and nuanced account of Cuban history, such a view was "optimism bordering on lunacy." In truth, most Cubans were only too happy to see the back of Fulgencio Batista, the U.S.-backed military dictator who had dominated Cuban politics on and off since 1933. Only when Castro's regime took a marked turn toward state-led socialism around 1963 did domestic opinion firmly split. Thousands of Cubans fled the island of their birth (including Ferrer's own parents), most settling in Miami.

The antipathy of Cuban exiles toward Castro framed how a large proportion of U.S. citizens perceived the island state 90 miles off the Florida coast — and for many, little has changed. Cubans who stayed were pushed to the other extreme, coming to see their near neighbor as a rapacious capitalist overlord. Like a blue-helmeted peacekeeper, it is into this polarized historical debate that Ferrer bravely steps.

She describes *Cuba: An American History* as an attempt to refute the binary interpretations imposed by Washington, Havana, or, indeed, Miami. The red thread running through its 33 lively chapters is the presence of Cuba's larger neighbor to the north. Of Cuba's military interventions in Africa, say, or Castro's extraordinary political influence across Latin America, there's barely a word.

The story of U.S.-Cuban relations has not always been frosty, she in-



Cuba: An American History

by Ada Ferrer

Scribner

Hardcover

576 pages

sists — far from it. In the century or so before Cuba's break with Spain, the cultural, economic, and political links between these two American territories ran wide and deep. Through sugar, Ferrer argues, Cuba and the United States landed on a profound historical parallel: the shared experience of slavery. In the cane fields of Santiago de Cuba as in the cotton plantations of Mississippi, life was governed by precisely the same barbaric conditions and dehumanizing logic.

Another parallel is that of colonialism. Both countries know what it is to be subject to a foreign crown, just as both understand the compunction to be rid of one. Yet, at the first chance, the United States shifted from the colonized to the colonizer. The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 promised to keep European hands off the Americas, but it said nothing about an expansionist U.S. taking Europe's place. "In the struggle between Cuba and Spain," writes Ferrer of U.S. intervention in the Cuban War of Independence, "it was the U.S. that

emerged victorious."

Through the story of one small island, *Cuba: An American History* allows Americans to look at themselves through the eyes of others. More than a century ago, José Martí, Castro's revolutionary muse, did the same in reverse. In New York during the 1880s and 1890s, Martí saw the harsh reality of economic and racial inequality firsthand — and resolved that his homeland must take a different route.

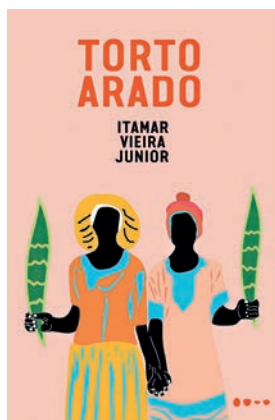
When President Joe Biden promised the international community that "America is back," he meant it as a reassurance. Across Latin America, many read it as a threat. Those U.S. citizens who take affront at such a reaction may dislike the premise of this important book. That's precisely why they should be the first to read it. **AQ**

Balch is the author of *Viva South America! A Journey Through a Surging Continent* (Faber & Faber)

Fiction

***Torto Arado* is a searing novel that has captivated Brazil's literary scene.**

Reviewed by Camila Fontana



Crooked Plow

by Itamar Vieira Júnior

Today

Paperback

264 pages

IN 1888, BRAZIL BECAME the last country to abolish slavery in the Americas. But for many of those who had been considered possessions, emancipation brought little change. More than 130 years later, some in the remote, semi-arid hinterland of Brazil's northeast live under arrangements that seem a holdover from the era of slavery, without access to education, a permanent home, or ownership of the land they have worked for generations.

This region, known as the *sertão*, is the setting for *Torto Arado*, the bestselling 2018 novel by geographer-turned-writer Itamar Vieira Júnior. The land is a conspicuous presence on every page of the book, whose title translates to *Crooked Plow*. Dust covers the characters' bodies and few belongings after a day of hard labor in the fields. Mud is used to build the walls of their temporary huts. The earth fills their mouths, takes their dead children, and is their only means of survival.

Set in the Diamantina Mountains in the state of Bahia, far from the state's paradisiacal beaches, *Torto Arado* follows two sisters growing up in a community of Afro-Brazilians whose lives resemble those of their ancestors. At the book's outset, the sisters' curiosity about their family's past results in an accident that leaves one of them permanently unable to speak. The first two parts of the novel are told by the two sisters: Bibiana moves away and soon begins to grasp the extent of the injustice imposed on her people, while Belonísia never leaves her small town. The book ends triumphantly in the voice of a female African divinity, channeling this community's anger, mysticism and strength.

A tour de force of injustice, tragedy, affection and human dignity reminiscent of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* or John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Vieira Júnior's book garnered top literary prizes in Portugal and Brazil. Its author has drawn comparisons to Jorge Amado, the giant of Brazilian letters who introduced the magic and plight of Afro-Brazilians to the world.

The world is already taking note of Vieira Júnior. *Torto Arado* also won a prize in Italy, and publishing rights have been sold in nine countries. The U.S. National Endowment for the Arts awarded a grant to Montclair State University Professor Johnny Lorenz to translate the novel into English, and a production company has acquired the rights to make a

series or film for a streaming service.

Humble origins make Vieira Júnior's international success appear still more impressive. While studying at the Federal University of Bahia, supported by a scholarship for low-income Black students, he worked as a clerk at a grocery store and pharmacy before taking a post as a researcher at the national land reform agency. Vieira Júnior then spent 15 years crisscrossing the vast states of Bahia and Maranhão, spending long periods among rural laborers. These travels provided the material for *Torto Arado*, written discreetly over several decades.

Perhaps most impressive in Vieira Júnior's work is the sensitivity it displays in treating the struggle of the most vulnerable members of the community he describes: the women. "In that hell named Caxangá, the hell of slavery to which she was accustomed as if it were her native land," Vieira Júnior writes of one of his characters, "she was not allowed to give birth to her son at home." The women in his novel must bear children every year, go hungry to feed them, and live under the same thatched roof with their violent husbands — yet sometimes they still manage to improve their fates by resorting to the only methods available to the truly desperate. **NO**

Fontana is a writer, economist and translator based in São Paulo

Upcoming Books

The latest in economics, history, policy and fiction from across the hemisphere

FICTION

Milongas

By Edgardo Cozarinsky
Translated by Valerie Miles
November 9, 2021
Archipelago, Paperback, 144 pages

Jawbone

By Mónica Ojeda
Translated by Sarah Booker
February 8, 2022
Coffee House Press,
Paperback, 272 pages

NONFICTION

Stories That Make History: Mexico through Elena Poniatowska's Crónicas

Lynn Stephen, October 2021
Duke University Press Books
Paperback, 328 pages

Borges: An Introduction

By Julio Premat
Translated by Amanda Murphy
October 15, 2021
Vanderbilt University Press
Paperback, 306 pages

Loss and Wonder at the World's End

By Laura A. Ogden
October 22, 2021
Duke University Press Books,
Paperback, 200 pages

Film

Documentary

Modern-day footage gets a sci-fi twist in this exploration of the vexed legacy of Mexico's Spanish conquest.

Reviewed by Mariana Reina



499

Directed by Rodrigo Reyes

Screenplay by Lorena Padilla and Rodrigo Reyes

Starring Eduardo San Juan

Mexico

AQ Rating: ★★★★★ (4/5)

A MAN WASHES UP ON A MEXICAN SHORE, dressed in 16th-century Spanish attire. Seconds later, an emblematic metal helmet with a flat brim washes up next to him: He is a conquistador. But as he begins to walk, he is confronted with contemporary scenery, signaled by a broken plastic cup. He is lost in time, finding himself unexpectedly in 21st-century Mexico, 499 years after the fall of the great Aztec capital Tenochtitlán.

A fictitious, anachronistic conquistador faces real, unscripted people in this one-of-a-kind documentary hybrid film. Director Rodrigo Reyes uses every tool in the cinematographic toolbox to confront the viewer with a harsh reality: Almost half a millennium later, the Spanish conquest of Mexico is not over. As the conquistador retraces his steps from the coast of Veracruz through the Sierra Madre to Tenochtitlán, he encounters people and listens to their stories, muted, because his job now is to listen.

In his journey through a country experiencing historically high homicide rates — 29 per 100,000 people — we see his defiant thoughts and actions slowly begin to unravel as he comprehends more of the contemporary aftermath of the conquest.

The lost conquistador is at ease interacting with elements of early modern Spanish culture in modern Mexico: bumping into a horse, watching a bullfight or a traditional dance, even glimpsing modern guns (invented after his time but familiar nonetheless). Yet he is confronted with many types of violence experienced by the people he meets: violence against journalists and civilians, indigenous groups, women and girls, as well as displaced Central American migrants. The parallels to violence in 16th-century Mexico are emphasized by his internal dialogue, which guides us through the conquest.



As a conquistador in Rodrigo Reyes' 499, Eduardo San Juan seizes the opportunity for self-reflection.

The conquistador serves as a cathartic sounding board to real people telling their stories, an age-old figure of violence who is forced to listen, understand and experience the collective failings of his time. As his journey nears its end, the conquistador literally begins to lose his armor, piece by piece, starting with his helmet. He finally understands why he is here and why

he'll never go back to his own time. Try as he might, his penance is not enough. He is alive and well now, and will continue to be as much a part of 21st-century Mexico as any of the people he meets, just in a new guise. [MA](#)

Reina is an editor and the business and production manager at AQ

Music

AQ's Fall Playlist

A Dominican musician's genre-defying performances make a virtue of pandemic-imposed constraints.

by Sebastián Zubieta



Mandinga Times

Rita Indiana

FAMA

Dominican Republic

"DOMINICANS WILL FIND A REASON to catcall, whether you are fat or thin, ugly or good-looking. I think it is because of the years of repression during the dictatorship that we have to yell. I was catcalled all the time, because I was queer, rode a skateboard, was thin, tall. There are people who become traumatized, while others, like myself, write jokes about it."

This was Rita Indiana speaking on Dominican TV, with an apparent declaration of aesthetic principle. She does indeed write jokes that reveal a tragicomic, occasionally dark sense of humor. *La Montra* (The Monster), as she is known in the Dominican Republic's independent music scene, has written five novels, worked in TV, created several imaginative music videos in collaboration with Noelia Quintero Herencia, and recorded two albums, the latest of which, *Mandinga Times*, was released in 2020 after a 10-year hiatus.

Her lyrics, always elegantly inventive, are full of swagger (*In the time you write a chorus I wrote five novels*, in "Como un dragón") and erudition (invoking Jorge Luis Borges over a frantic, gagá-inflected electronic beat in "El Zahir"), often dealing with injustice, violence, her own experiences and the magic of creation. Calle 13's Eduardo Cabra shares the production and guests include MIMA, Kiko El Crazy and Sakari Jäntti.

In September 2020, Indiana released *After School*, a video including three songs and two poetic interludes from *Mandinga Times*, also directed by Quintero Herencia. Filmed in San Juan, Puerto Rico, where she has lived since 2010, *After School* has a handmade, pared-down aesthetic compared to her previous videos. The original video for "Como un




Indiana and her collaborators in a scene from *After School*.

dragón”, for example, happens in a CGI world of flying eyes, caves, and faceless minions. Here, on the other hand, we see Indiana, in color, in an abandoned classroom accompanied by a few musicians and dancer Vicente Santos, also in charge of the choreography. On black-and-white projections at the end of the room, other band members make evocative appearances playing alongside their colleagues, in a “superlive” production integrating performers in multiple locations.

After Santos opens the show, the song “Pa’ Ayo-tzinapa” — a memorial for the victims of the infamous 2014 mass murder in Mexico — starts like a bolero with maracas, acoustic guitar, and bongos, but takes an intense turn with the inclusion of distorted guitars and an eerie bachata atmosphere. We often hear Indiana rapping, but here we can appreciate her soulful singing voice. *MIMA* joins the live stage to sing harmonies with Indiana in “The Heist,” about a bank robbery conducted by the Puerto Rican revolutionary group Los Macheteros in Connecticut in 1983. This version is lighter than the one recorded on the album but keeps the Western-inspired twangy guitars and the bachata bass. A photo of Pedro Albizu Campos, the Puerto Rican indepen-

dence leader who died in 1965 (and on whose birthday the heist took place), is the final image.

After another poetic interlude introducing Kiko El Crazy, sporting golden dentures, the relentless electronic beat of “Mandinga Times” follows, infused with traditional Dominican carnival rhythms. This is a song about catastrophes, warning us that humanity needs to learn to “change the course of our cruise ship.” A persistent invocation (“Tick tock!”) reminds us of how little time we have left to do so.

Indiana and Quintero Herencia’s videos are the perfect medium to express La Montra’s unified artistic world, where characters and circumstances appear often in both songs and novels — like the environmental disaster at the heart of the novel *La mucama de Omicunlé* (2015), present in “Mandinga Times.” Perhaps because of the times we have been living through for over a year now, the superlive concept of *After School* seems even more powerful — building on Indiana’s powerful and elegant stage presence to recover the idea of being together for justice and committed artistry. 

—————
Zubieta is director of the music
program at Americas Society

LATIN AMERICA AT A GLANCE

Even as the pace of COVID-19 vaccination picks up in some countries, Latin America is facing a long road ahead to recover economically from the pandemic. The International Monetary Fund estimates that regional GDP will grow by 4.6% in 2021, which is not enough to offset 2020's 7% decrease.



GDP GROWTH

	ARGENTINA	BRAZIL	CHILE	COLOMBIA	DOMINICAN REPUBLIC	ECUADOR	GUATEMALA	MEXICO	PERU	VENEZUELA
2021 (projected)	6.7%	5.2%	8.3%	6.5%	7.5%	3.5%	3.9%	5.9%	9.9%	-12.0%
2022 (projected)	2.5%	2.2%	3.0%	3.8%	5.0%	2.7%	3.6%	3.0%	4.1%	3.5%
2023 (projected)	2.3%	2.4%	2.7%	3.3%	N/A	1.8%	N/A	2.3%	3.2%	N/A

PROJECTIONS CURRENT AS OF AUGUST 2021

ECONOMIC INDICATORS

Inflation	47.5%	7.0%	3.7%	3.1%	6.2%	0.5%	N/A	3.5%	2.7%	2,527.6%
Unemployment Rate	11.0%	14.1%	9.5%	14.4%	N/A	N/A	N/A	4.2%	10.1%	N/A
Govt. Deficit as % of GDP	1.0%	-0.2%	-0.7%	-3.8%	-2.2%	0.2%	N/A	0.9%	-5.7%	1.0%
Fiscal Response to COVID as % of GDP	4.5%	9.2%	14.1%	4.7%	3.3%	0.7%	3.3%	0.7%	7.8%	N/A

FISCAL MEASURES ANNOUNCED OR TAKEN BY GOVERNMENTS FROM JANUARY 2020 TO JUNE 2021

FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT (FDI)

FDI in 2020 (billions USD)	\$4.019	\$44.661	\$8.528	\$8.100	\$2.554	\$1.190	\$0.915	\$31.365	\$0.982	N/A
% CHANGE FROM 2019	-39.7%	-35.4%	-32.2%	-43.4%	-15.4%	22.1%	-6.1%	6.6%	-87.8%	N/A

PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL RATING

President										
Approval	25%	27%	26%	20%	70%	74%	59%	56%	42%	N/A

SOURCES: GDP growth forecasts, inflation rate, unemployment rate, government deficit as percentage of GDP: Bloomberg; fiscal response as percentage of 2020 GDP: International Monetary Fund; foreign direct investment: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. NOTE: Percentages rounded to one decimal place.

PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL: Argentina, Synopsis (August); Brazil, PoderData (September); Chile, Plaza Pública Cadem (September); Colombia, Invaer (August); Dominican Republic and Guatemala, CID-Gallup (August); Ecuador, Cedatos (August); Mexico, El Financiero (August); Peru, Ipsos (September). NOTE: Figures rounded to nearest percentage.

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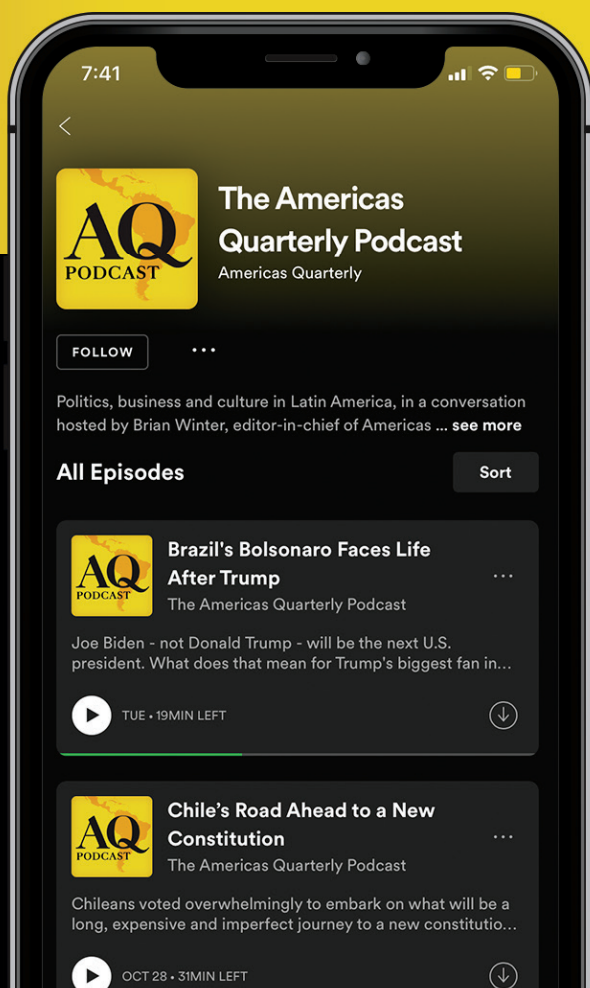
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