

Americas

QUARTERLY

THE COVID GENERATION

Many kids in Latin America have missed a full year of school. Can the damage be repaired?

A SPECIAL REPORT



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A Lot of Homework Ahead

As many as half of students had no schooling during the pandemic. Without urgent action, Latin America may see a “lost generation.”



ACROSS LATIN AMERICA, a new generation of leftist leaders, including Gabriel Boric of Chile, Pedro Castillo of Peru and Xiomara Castro of Honduras, has been elected to address poverty and inequality, both of which have worsened during the pandemic. But it's fair to say that nothing else politicians do will matter unless they address the 10-alarm crisis that COVID-19 has caused in schools across the region. There will be no social justice in the 2020s, and likely beyond, without urgent attention to education.

Take a deep breath, because the data are grim. While the picture varied across countries, Latin American schools on average were fully or partly closed for more than 230 days, more than any other part of the world. During the pandemic, as many as half of students did not participate in learning or have any contact with teachers, according to a new IDB study. Some now estimate the dropout rate will return to levels last seen in the 1980s. And of course, these trends are even more pronounced among the poor, young girls, and other historically disadvantaged groups.

What to do? Our special report highlights several possibilities. Politicians and educators should work together to improve both technology and curriculums post-pandemic, writes Fernando Reimers of Harvard University (page 30). A program in Argentina (page 18) that targets and engages potential dropouts also seems worth emulating. These initiatives tend to require political will and coordination more than budget. All are better than the current strategy in many countries, which is to resume classes and almost pretend like nothing happened.

As Reimers notes, Latin America is a region where, even prior to the pandemic, 30% of employers cited poor schools as a major barrier to growth, above the 20% global average. Accepting educational setbacks is akin to accepting another decade, or two, or three, of slow growth, rising inequality and a lost generation of youth. That's a failing grade no one should want. **AQ**

The COVID Generation

Education threatens to become the most lasting aftershock from the pandemic. Kids — and our countries' futures — are at stake.

Our special report on the risks, and possible solutions, starts on page 18.

18 Preventing a Lost Generation

Luring kids back to school is the first challenge. Argentina is trying some innovative ideas.
By Natalie Alcoba

25 Post-COVID Education Crisis in Numbers

Students were already struggling when the pandemic arrived.
By Emilie Sweigart

29 A Time for Action

The cost of not closing the gap is too high.
By Susan Segal

30 Three Ways Forward

Education in Latin America can be remade, and better than before the pandemic.
By Fernando M. Reimers

ELECTIONS

35 Can Gustavo Petro Win Without Progressives?

The candidate has changed his alliances to try to become Colombia's first leftist president.
By Mariana Palau

43 2022 Elections—Meet the Candidates

Costa Rica
Colombia
Brazil

78 The Enigma of Claudia Sheinbaum

Who is Mexico City's mayor — and 2024 presidential hopeful?
By Benjamin Russell

PHOTO ESSAY

58 Foraging in a Land of Plenty

Nature is helping Venezuelans survive hunger.
Photographs by Andrea Hernández Briceño

NON FEATURE

74 The Huge Risk Facing Latin American Oil Companies

The sector is not ready to face the global race to net-zero.
By Luisa Palacios and Francisco Monaldi

DEPARTMENTS

3 From the Editor

5 Contributors

6 Our Readers

8 The Big Picture

16 Heard on the AQ Podcast

17 AQ Q&A

Edu Lyra is working to eradicate poverty in Brazilian favelas.
By Cecilia Tornaghi

38 The AQ Profile

Julia Tagüeña Parga is a decorated physicist being accused of organized crime. She says Mexican politics and revenge are to blame.
By Brendan O'Boyle

52 The Long View

The unlikely story of Maximilian, Emperor of Mexico.
By Edward Shawcross

92 Latin America at a Glance

CULTURA

82 Politics in Brazil, imagining guerrilla life and more.

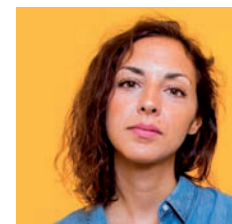
83 Books

86 Film

88 Music

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE:

Environmental destruction is pushing Central Americans out of their homes—and onto the road north. AQ takes an in-depth look at the impact of climate in the region, and what can be done about it.



Natalie Alcoba

Alcoba is an Argentine-Canadian journalist and Pulitzer Center grantee based in Buenos Aires. She has written for *Foreign Policy*, *VICE*, *Al Jazeera*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian*.



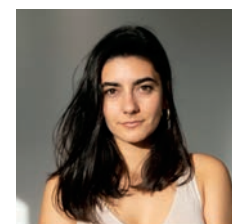
Fernando Reimers

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



AQ Editor-in-Chief Brian Winter, top left, leads a conversation launching our special report on fake news. Keynote speaker and Brazilian Supreme Court Justice Luís Roberto Barroso, center, joined speakers Carlos Affonso Souza, top right, Marcelo Lacerda, bottom right, and Cristina Tardáguila.

Cristina Tardáguila 
 @ctardaguila
 Diretora de Programas do @ICFJ. Fundadora da @agencialupa. Colunista no @UOL e @Uninoticias. Autora da @Intrinseca. Luto contra a desinformação.
[Translate bio](#)

I've found extremely difficult to share what happened with @agencialupa and with other Brazilian fact-checkers in 2018. And it is still difficult to see that things haven't changed much. Read @AmerQuarterly. 



americasquarterly.org
 Inside Brazil's Dangerous Battle Over Fake News



Former Mexican Ambassador to the U.S. Martha Bárcena, Colombian economist Luis Fernando Mejía, AQ's Winter, and former Chilean finance minister Felipe Larraín, clockwise from Bárcena, discuss the U.S.-China divide and its challenge for Latin America.

sylvia colombo 
 @sylviacolombo
 Latin american correspondent for Folha de S.Paulo, KWF'2014 (Michigan); openwater swimmer

Lindo ensaio fotográfico de Oaxaca 
americasquarterly.org/article/life-i-...
 via @amerquarterly

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americasquarterly.org
 Life in Oaxaca for the Ones Who Stayed Behind

Maurício Santoro
 @msantoro1978
 Professor da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Ciência Política e Relações Internacionais. Toques de literatura e cinema.
[Translate bio](#)

A Américas Quarterly publicou um especial muito útil sobre as relações da América Latina com a China, analisando Argentina, Brasil, Chile, Colômbia, México, Panamá, Peru e Venezuela.

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 Latin America's Evolving Relationships with China

Ryan Berg, PhD
 @RyanBergPhD
 Political Scientist. Senior Fellow @CSIS, @OxfordCCW Fellow, @CatholicUniv Prof. Former @AEI fdp. #LatAm, #security, #dictators. @UniofOxford alum. Rtw#endorse.

With no candidate other than @LulaOficial and @jairbolsonaro topping 8% in the polls, they will likely remain the frontrunners for #Brazil's 2022 election, despite a growing desire for a "third way" candidate. @AmerQuarterly



americasquarterly.org
 Why Lula vs. Bolsonaro in Brazil Leaves Little Room for Others

Jan-Albert Hootsen
 @jahootsen Here's another important article in the runup to Sunday's presidential election in #Honduras: Could Honduras Shift Left? A Look at Xiomara Castro - by @BrenOBoyle for @AmerQuarterly

Tiziano Breda
 @TizBreda Excellent piece on what to expect from Xiomara Castro's candidacy in #Honduras. Congrats @BrenOBoyle, very balanced picture.

Margaret Myers
 @myersmargaret Very helpful update this morning from @AmerQuarterly's @emiliesweigart and @GabrioCohen on the state of relations with China among major Latin American economies.

Anthony Faiola
 @Anthony_Faiola One stop shopping from @AmerQuarterly on China's burgeoning relationships with countries across LatAm

Hari Seshasayee
 @haricito Good summary by @OliverStuenkel in @AmerQuarterly predicting constitutional chaos in Brazil rather than impeachment, given the Centrão's support of Bolsonaro

Roberta Braga
 @RobertaBraga Great piece. @OliverStuenkel puts forth very eloquently what many Brazilians in the US, myself included, have been saying to those who ask us what to expect from the 2022 elections. This is it. @AmerQuarterly

Cristian González Cabrera
 @cristianfergo Excellent piece on #Brazil's disinformation problem by @mariana_palau in @AmerQuarterly. It's impossible to imagine @jairbolsonaro's rise w/o social media. His attacks on #women, #LGBT people, and others earned him an increasingly loyal following online.

A girl practices jumping during a ballet class on November 24, 2021, in Rio de Janeiro's Morro do Adeus favela. Despite practicing without traditional ballet equipment or proper flooring, 50 students – ages 4 to 15 – make up for it with determination to imagine horizons beyond their neighborhood.

PHOTO BY FABIO TEIXEIRA/ANADOLU AGENCY/GETTY IMAGES.



The Cholitas Escaladoras climb the 21,463-foot Nevado Sajama in Bolivia on November 19, 2021. The group of Aymara indigenous women used to help their climber husbands at base camp, until 2015, when they started going up the mountains themselves, always wearing traditional clothing.

MARCELO PÉREZ DEL CARPIO/ANADOLU AGENCY/GETTY IMAGES



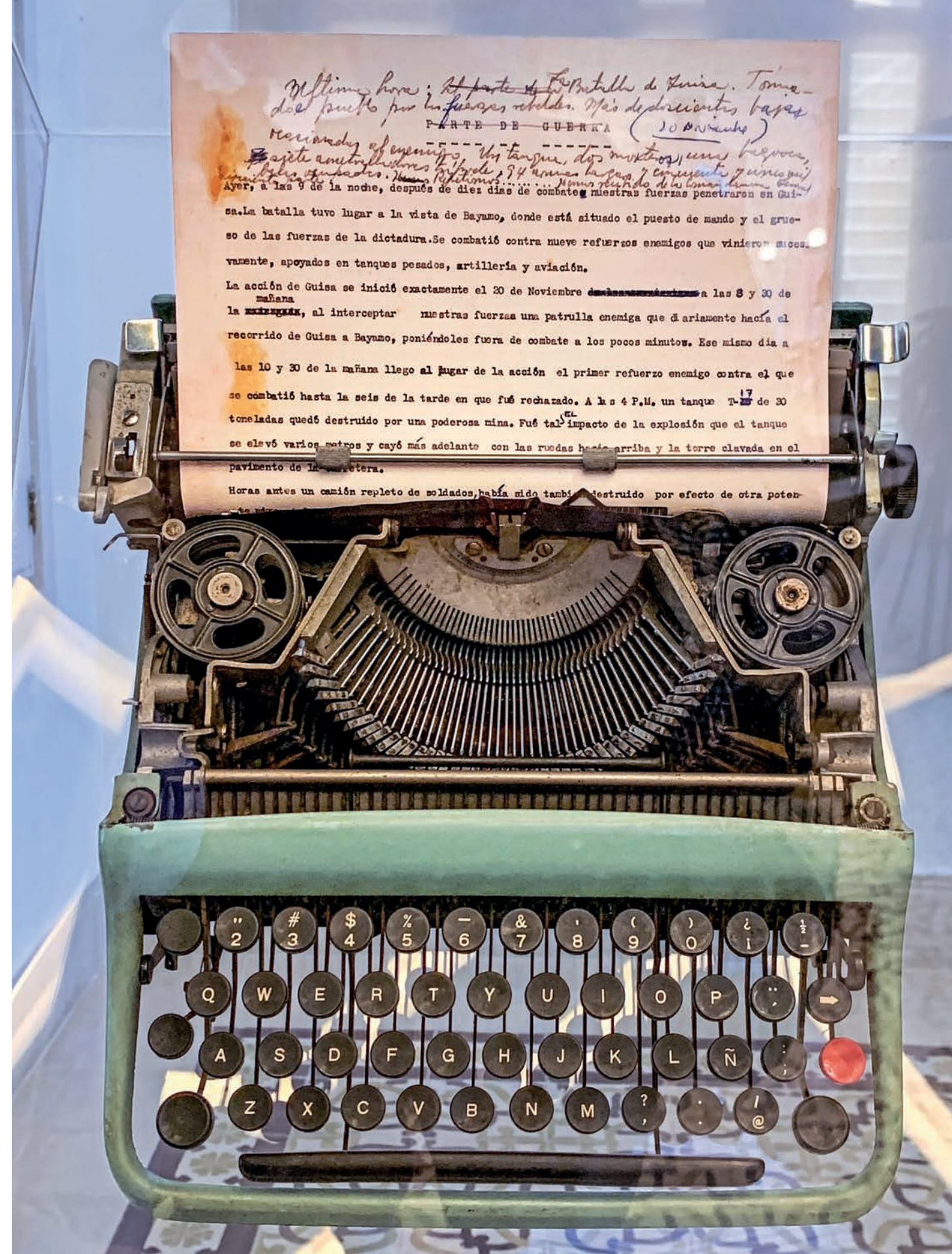


A Chilean couple share a kiss after the country's Congress approved a bill legalizing same-sex marriage on December 7, 2021, after years of discussion.

CLAUDIO SANTANA/GETTY IMAGES

Fidel Castro's typewriter on display at an institute in Havana's El Vedado neighborhood.

ADALBERTO ROQUE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES





After the death of Mexican music legend Vicente Fernández on December 12, 2021, fans gather outside the hospital in Guadalajara where he spent nearly five months after an accident at home. Fernández first achieved success in 1972 with "Volver volver," now a ranchera staple and perhaps his most iconic song.

ULISES RUIZ/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



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.

“People want change. But one thing is change, and the other is saying that we need to restart from zero, that we need to ignore everything that’s been done in the past.”

—Former Economy Minister Mauricio Cárdenas, looking ahead to Colombia’s 2022 election



“You can blame the pandemic, and certainly the pandemic has created a once-in-a-century economic crisis, but the structural weaknesses that the hemisphere had existed well before.”

—Juan Gonzalez, senior director for the Western Hemisphere at the National Security Council

“A lot of these issues that make it hard to do business in Argentina have also led to a lot of resiliency and creative solutions, whether it is on the fintech side of things, e-commerce, or crypto-related startups.”

—Carolina Millán, Buenos Aires bureau chief for Bloomberg



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Edu Lyra

Founder, Gerando Falcões

Lyra founded the nonprofit aiming to “turn poverty into a museum piece” by helping Brazilian favelas thrive.

by Cecilia Tornaghi

AQ: What is Gerando Falcões?

Edu Lyra: We started Gerando Falcões (Raising Falcons) 10 years ago as a small favela group organizing workshops for schoolkids to empower them to take charge of their lives. Today we are 200 people and reach 138 favela-based NGOs in 23 states, providing services ranging from education to support for local entrepreneurs and citizenship rights for favela dwellers. We try to focus on issues that keep people in poverty, such as low education, lack of job opportunities and domestic violence.


AQ: What prompted you to start the project?

EL: I was raised in Jardim Cumbica, a favela community in São Paulo. My mom worked as a house cleaner and my dad was in prison for robbing banks. As a kid it felt like society was always telling me I had only one future: to be a drug dealer and dead before turning 25.

The idea came to me in a dream about kids breaking the mold of poverty. I sold everything I could — a pair of jeans, my notebook — to travel to meet young people who had done that. Their stories became my book *Young Falcons*. I went door to door with the help of friends and sold 5,000 copies. I used the money to start Gerando Falcões.

AQ: Are there plans to expand your reach?

EL: During the pandemic we raised 70 million reais (\$12.7 million) that we sent to 85,000 families via cash

cards. We also created a program to sponsor Internet access to students stranded at home, and an education app, which we plan to expand to 40,000 kids by 2023. We have 2,000 recurring donors, and while I was in New York studying to improve my English, we were able to raise almost \$1 million. By 2023 we will reach more than 3,700 communities — and by 2100 we won’t need to exist anymore. We hope that we can be agents of change — proof that it can be done, so others follow in our footsteps. 

THIS INTERVIEW WAS EDITED FOR CLARITY AND BREVITY



Lyra visits a family assisted by the Gerando Falcões anti-poverty project in Poá, Brazil.

EDUCATION

Preventing a Lost Generation

Fresh ideas are getting Argentine students back in

the classroom. Are they enough to make up lost ground?

by Natalie Alcoba

photographs by Anita Pouchard Serra

Students attend a learning center run by the nonprofit organization Tejiendo el Barrio (Weaving the Neighborhood) in the outskirts of Buenos Aires.



BUENOS AIRES—Three days a week, Alejo Aracena drifts through the 19th-century doors of Casa Mercado, one of the oldest buildings in the municipality of San Martín, on the outskirts of Buenos Aires.

With a shock of bleached blonde hair and a slight stoop to his walk, the teenager has a destination: past the leafy pergola, toward the end of the building's interior courtyard, where a few plastic tables are tucked next to a big blue sign that reads Educación.

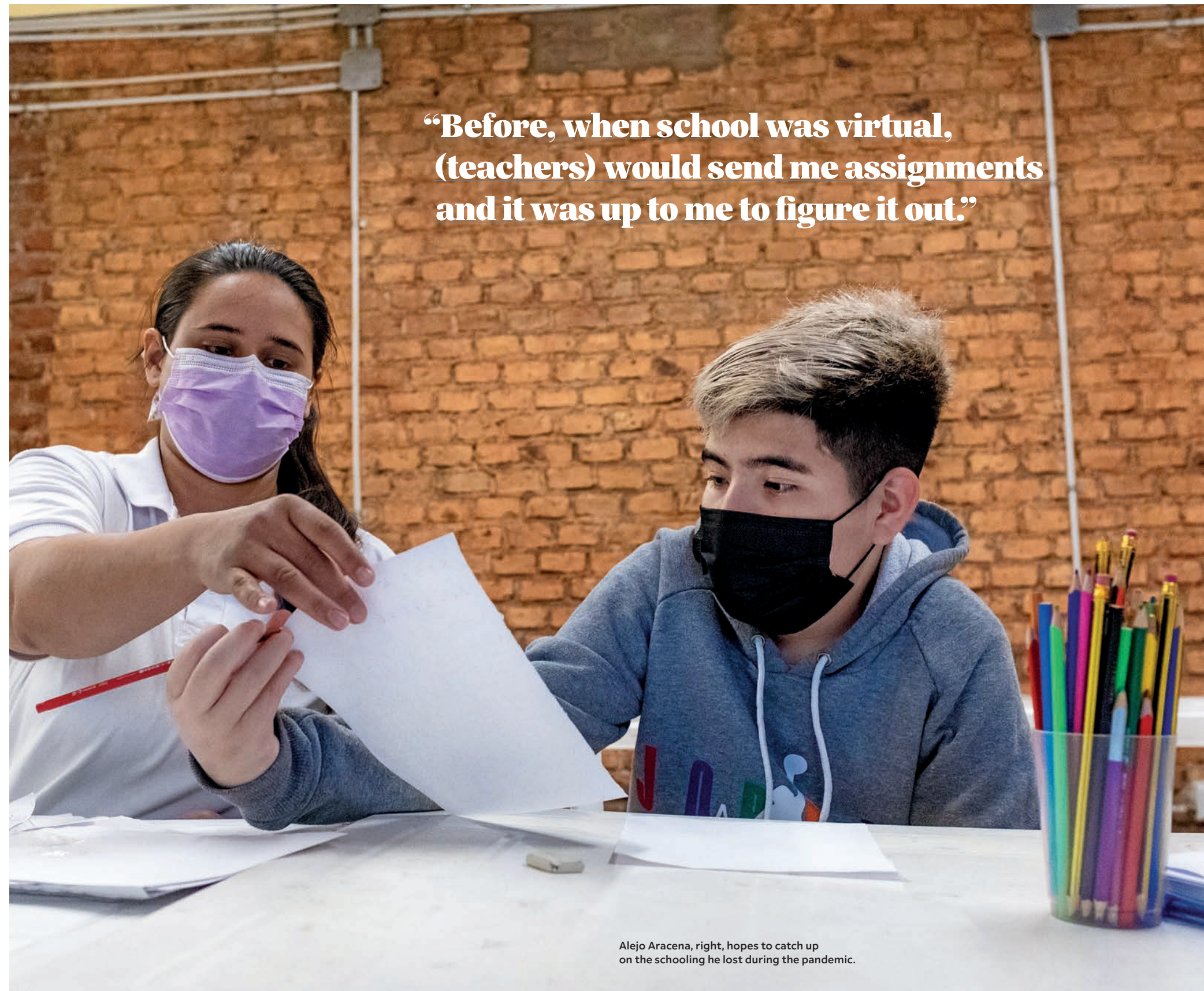
Aracena, 14, smiles at the young women preparing math exercises in ballpoint pen. He doesn't love school, he says, but this place is something different: a learning center funded by the city in an effort to help kids like him catch up and stay in school after the challenges of COVID-19.

"I come here almost all the time, whether I have homework or not, because they explain things to me so that I understand them," Aracena told *AQ*. "Before, when school was virtual, (teachers) would send me assignments and it was up to me to figure it out."

Like many young people in Latin America, the odds were stacked against Aracena when the pandemic shut down in-person schooling. With no Internet or computer at home, his mother had to use a neighbor's Wi-Fi to download assignments for him on an old cell phone. Her determination helped Aracena stay in school. But without individual tutors like those he's found at the study center — one of 40 set up in San Martín since February — he might still fall behind.

The center is one of several initiatives launched across Argentina this year to try to prevent long-term regression in student learning. A mix of new tools and old-fashioned persistence, the plans are wide-reaching, innovative and not especially expensive to implement. As such, they may eventu-

"Before, when school was virtual, (teachers) would send me assignments and it was up to me to figure it out."



Alejo Aracena, right, hopes to catch up on the schooling he lost during the pandemic.

ally serve as a model for other countries across the Americas. But first they'll have to prove they can make a real difference for students like Aracena — and there, it's still too soon to tell.

“Perhaps it's what they always needed”

IN JANUARY 2021, UNESCO estimated that 52% of the world's children — 800 million students — had either not yet returned to school or had returned under precarious circumstances. Across Latin America and the Caribbean — which outpaced the rest of the world with 22.5 weeks of full school closures and 11.4 weeks of partial closures in the first year of the pandemic — absenteeism and dropout rates skyrocketed.

In Argentina, teachers, administrators and government officials are still scrambling to adjust. Schooling here was put almost entirely online in 2020. In that process, more than 1 million students lost touch with their schools, according to government estimates, though a lack of national record-keeping may hide the full scope of the problem.

In response, simply getting students back to school has become a top priority. Outdoor learning centers during the summer months focused on play as a way to reengage the youngest cohort. New learning materials, tutors, games and digital tools have been rolled out. Volunteer-based local organizations have played a crucial role, as the ranks of students looking for extra help continue to swell.

“We had school help before, but now people are almost throwing themselves at me asking for a spot,” said Maria Fitte, one of the organizers of Tejiendo el Barrio, a nonprofit that operates in a low-income settlement in Buenos Aires' Chacarita neighborhood.

The need for tutors has become more urgent of late: Last year, students were automatically given passing grades; this year they have to meet expectations in order to advance.

Provincial governments, which manage education, have responded to the crisis in their own ways. Administrators in Mendoza added two hours to the school day for students with learning difficulties. In Córdoba, it was one hour. Most jurisdictions extended the school year in some form. In Santa Fe, of-

ficials plan to stagger the end of the academic year, depending on how students fared. The province of Buenos Aires, home to almost 40% of the population, has been holding “intensification” classes on Saturdays and after school for students who have fallen behind.

“I am convinced that the only way to recoup time is with time. And that's what we're doing here,” said Paulo Gutiérrez, the director of Escuela 50, a public high school in Lomas de Zamora in the province of Buenos Aires, during one of those recent Saturday sessions.

Rather than teach 20 students at a time, teachers in these sessions sit at a table with two, three or five students, working individually, Gutiérrez told *AQ*.

“Perhaps that's what these students always needed.”

Will it work?

AT A ROOT LEVEL, school administrators have taken to the task of finding students and helping them back to the classroom — with some success.

In the city of Buenos Aires, government workers have expanded a near decade-long program scouring neighborhoods for young people who have lost touch with their schools. They knock on doors, survey families and map the needs of students: Who dropped out because they didn't have a computer? Who had to go to work to help their family? Who languished in those months of lockdown, and needs an emotional boost?

After accounting for students who moved or passed school age, city officials found 4,481 students who had abandoned school in 2020. To date, they say 73% have since reestablished their connection.

“We went out to the street, we went out to look for them, always with a super friendly, loving approach,” Melisa Massinelli, the manager for inclusive education for the Buenos Aires city government, told *AQ*. “It was slow, but consistent work ... the idea is that you do not lose your schooling, the idea is that you are not left behind.”

The national government has since vowed to replicate this door-to-door approach under a program

“I didn't do anything all year. Not because I didn't want to, but because I couldn't.”

called *Volvé a La Escuela* (Return to School), which earmarked 5 billion pesos (\$50 million) to bolster programs that help improve learning environments, including funds for teaching supplies, building repairs and low-cost Argentine-made laptops for high school students.

Eduardo Levy Yeyati, dean of the School of Government at Torcuato Di Tella University in Buenos Aires, said he had seen “a lot of rhetoric and a lot of good intentions.”

“If you ask the provincial or district authorities what they're doing, everyone is doing something,” Levy Yeyati, who directs the school's evidence-based public policy center, told *AQ*.

But with just a few months since schools have been fully open, and no real assessment done yet, the impact of these programs is still unclear. Even promising pilot programs have limited reach, said Levy Yeyati, who noted that getting students back into the classroom is just the start.

“I think it's impossible to recover all that has been lost,” he said. “And unless we are able to achieve a greater level of targeting at the time of teaching, it's very difficult for those who are lagging behind to board the same train. They will board a few wagons behind and they will end up there permanently.”

An emotional toll

PART OF MAKING SURE that doesn't happen will mean taking a comprehensive approach to rebuilding education systems, experts say. That includes accounting for the pandemic's toll outside the classroom.

Alegre Sofia, 14, is trying her best to catch up after a difficult year. She's one of 120 students from Escuela 50 who has been attending extra classes after school and on Saturdays. She lost her father to

leukemia in 2019, and when the country shut down during the pandemic, so did her education.

“I didn't do anything all year. Not because I didn't want to, but because I couldn't,” Sofia told *AQ*. She's now making up classes from 2020 and those she's had trouble with in 2021; Zoom and virtual learning have been a challenge

“I was on my own all the time at home, because my mom and my sister work. And it being my first year of high school, I needed someone's help,” she said. “I don't want to repeat a year, so that's why I'm here. Plus, the teacher is very cool.”

Sofia's experience points to larger issues in post-COVID education. Agustina María Corica, a Buenos Aires sociologist who studies school abandonment, noted that confinement and isolation have driven an increase in child and adolescent labor, as more children pitch in to the family economy. For many girls, that means assuming more caregiving tasks at home.

The digital divide in Latin America has also been a major factor: Access to the Internet, to a computer or even a phone that isn't shared by multiple family members varies dramatically by income level. Education in this context has become a privilege, rather than a right.

Corica suggests that these social and emotional issues should be considered when devising stay-in-school strategies. While uncertainty and instability are often part of growing up, the pandemic has eroded young people's ability to project themselves into the future, she said.

“It has to do more with emotional support or mental health than with connectivity,” said Corica.

For Mariana Entenza Saavedra, director of education in San Martín, the pandemic has exacerbated a period in young people's lives that can already be difficult to navigate.

“There was a lot of loneliness,” Saavedra told *AQ*.



The city of Buenos Aires funded this learning center in a low-income settlement to reengage students.

“There were a lot of children whose parents both died. Learning becomes even harder because that energy is being placed somewhere else.”

Many of these difficulties, in San Martín and elsewhere, predated the pandemic. A report released in August by the Argentine Social Development Institute based on 2019 government data found that 31% of people between the ages of 18 and 24 had not received their high school diploma. Among the wealthiest sectors that number plunged to 12%, while it soared to 52% for the poorest sectors.

Iván Matovich, the education coordinator at the Center of Public Policy for Equality and Growth, a think tank, said there is “a temptation to refer to this moment as a crisis, but if you look back we’ve been talking about the education system being in crisis for decades.” He prefers to describe it as a “fragile turning point” that has the potential to address long-standing needs in the education system.

“We have to be able to improve the monitoring systems to be able to identify students earlier on and

adapt to their needs,” Matovich told *AQ*.

Until that happens, it continues to fall to parents to pick up the slack. Verónica Gómez stopped working as a caregiver for the elderly and bought a blackboard during the pandemic so she could help her five children with their virtual studies.

“As mothers we have the basics, and in the pandemic we put in a super-human effort to try to help them out, but it wasn’t enough,” she said after dropping off her 10- and 12-year-olds at Escuela 50. Committing to extra schooling wasn’t easy at first.

“Bringing them here is a sacrifice, I don’t live close,” she told *AQ*. “But their education is important. And I see the results in them. They put in the sweat, and they say to me, ‘Mom, I have to finish.’” *AQ*

Alcoba is an Argentine-Canadian journalist based in Buenos Aires. She writes extensively about the women’s movement in Argentina, and is interested more broadly in collective organization in Latin America.



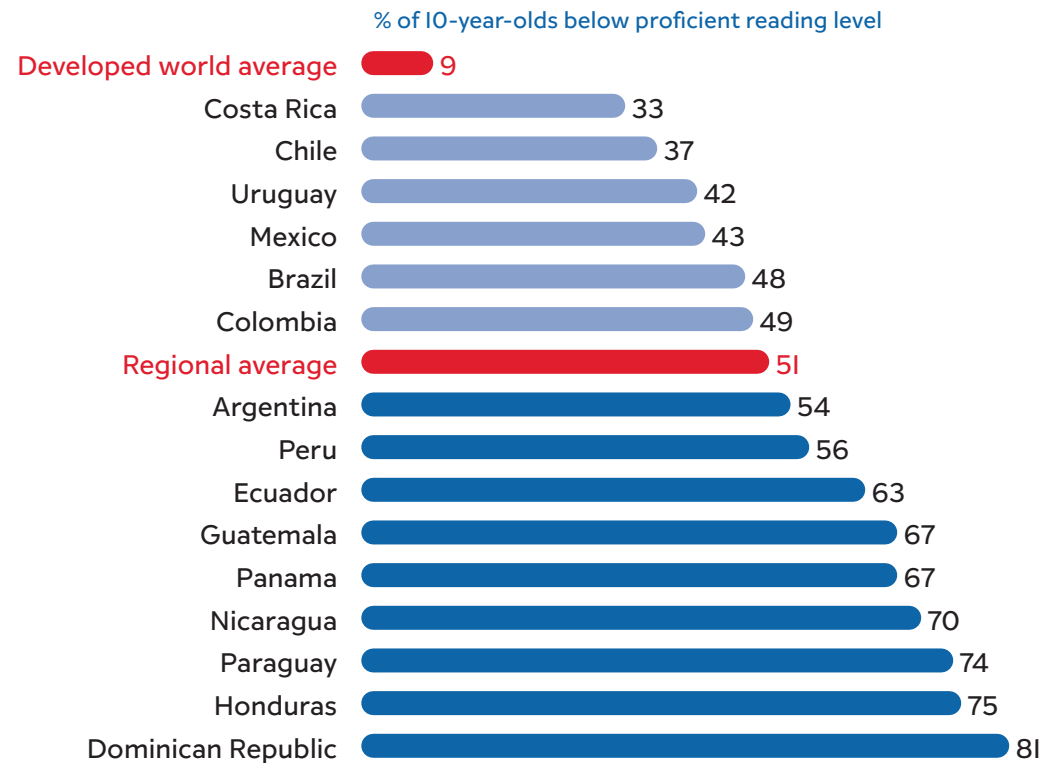
Latin America’s Post-COVID Education Crisis in Numbers

The region’s schools were already struggling. Now, more than 7 million Latin American children may grow up unable to read proficiently because of the pandemic, the World Bank says. Without urgent action, an entire generation may be left behind.

by Emilie Sweigart

Reading levels were already lagging ...

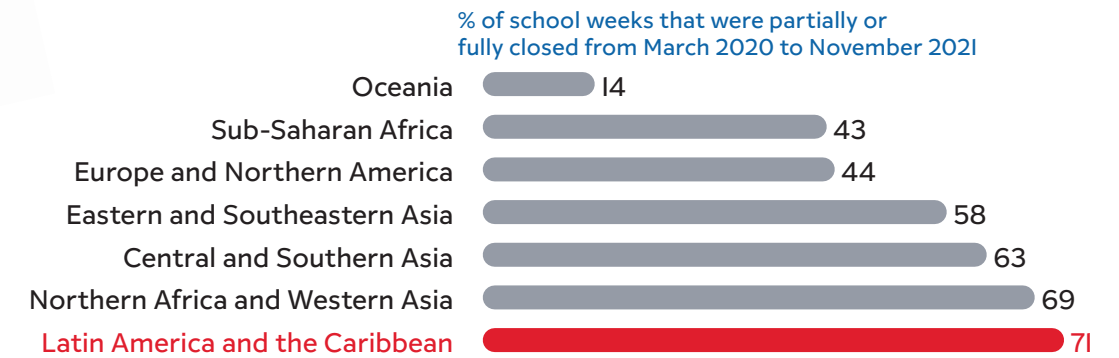
In 2019, half the region's 10-year-olds were unable to read and understand a simple text.



NOTE: FIGURES ROUNDED TO NEAREST PERCENTAGE. SOURCE: WORLD BANK, OCTOBER 2019



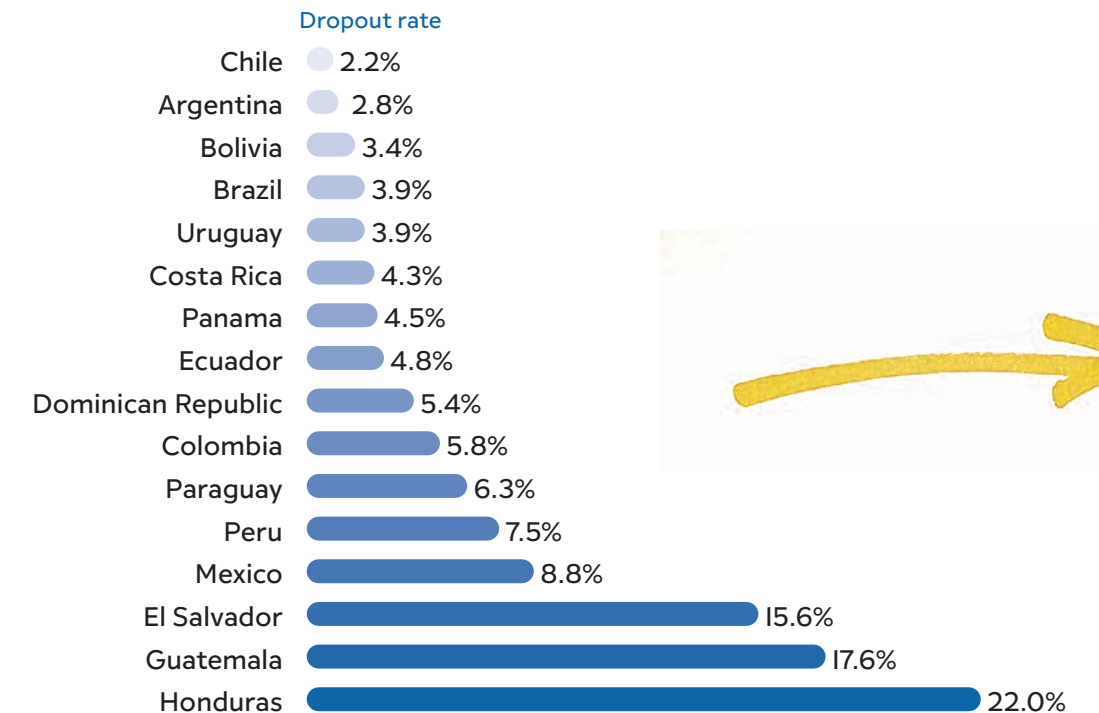
... and then Latin America had the world's longest COVID-related school shutdowns.



NOTES: FIGURES ROUNDED TO NEAREST PERCENTAGE. FULL SCHOOL CLOSURES REFER TO SITUATIONS WHERE ALL SCHOOLS WERE CLOSED AT THE NATIONWIDE LEVEL DUE TO COVID-19. PARTIAL SCHOOL CLOSURES REFER TO SCHOOL CLOSURES IN SOME REGIONS OR FOR SOME GRADES, OR WITH REDUCED IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION. SOURCE: UNESCO GLOBAL DATASET ON THE DURATION OF SCHOOL CLOSURES, OCTOBER 31, 2021

Many kids simply dropped out of school by late 2020 ...

Experts warn actual dropout rates are likely much higher than the numbers below for 6- to 17-year-olds.

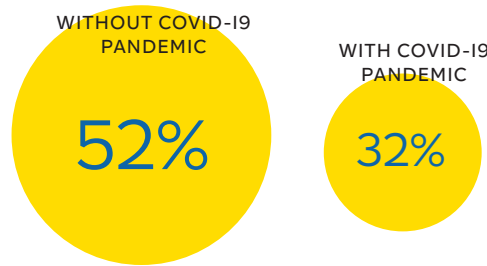


SOURCE: INTER-AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK, NOVEMBER 2020



... which may push dropout rates back to levels last seen in the 1960s.

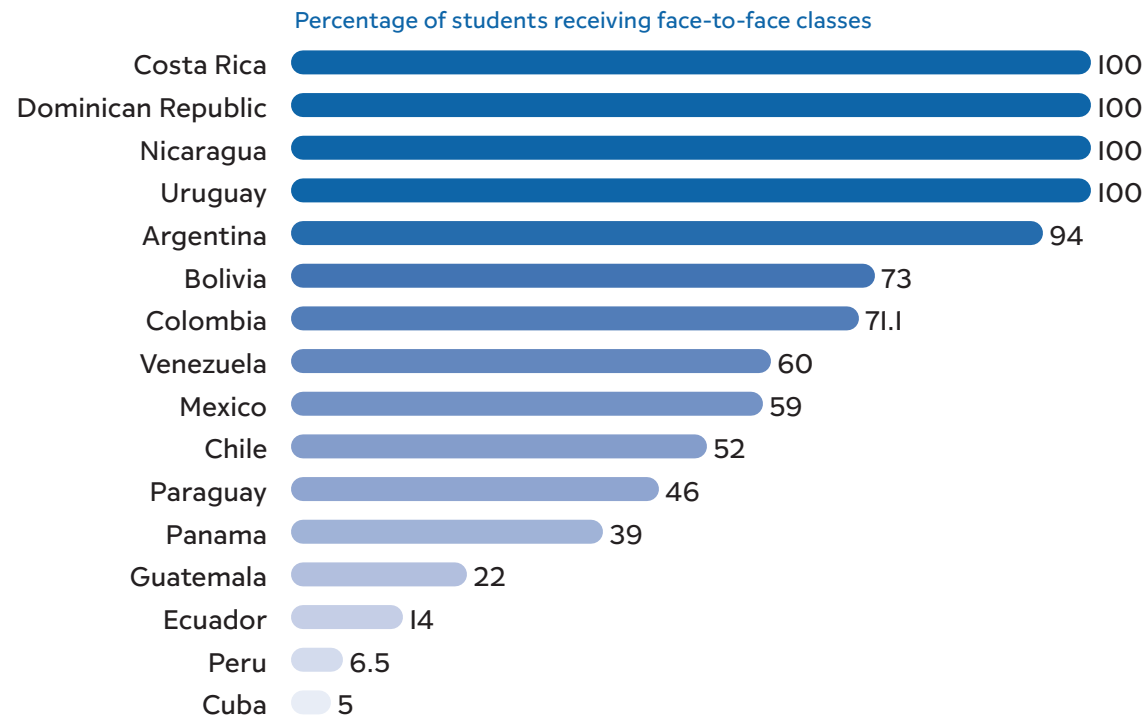
Estimated likelihood of Latin American students completing secondary school



SOURCE: GUIDO NEIDHÖFER, NORA LUSTIG & MARIANO TOMMASI. "INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF LOCKDOWN CONSEQUENCES: PROGNOSIS OF THE LONGER-RUN PERSISTENCE OF COVID-19 IN LATIN AMERICA", THE JOURNAL OF ECONOMIC INEQUALITY, JULY 2021.



While in-person learning returned in many countries by November 2021, school closures were still affecting over 70 million children.



NOTES: DATA NOT AVAILABLE FOR BRAZIL. PERCENTAGES CALCULATED BASED ON THE TOTAL ENROLLMENT OF STUDENTS FROM PRE-PRIMARY TO SECONDARY SCHOOL AND THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS BENEFITING FROM FACE-TO-FACE CLASSES. SOURCE: COVID-19 EDUCATION RESPONSE: UPDATE 30, STATUS OF SCHOOLS' REOPENING, UNICEF, NOVEMBER 2021

A Time for Action

Without addressing education, the pandemic's effects will be felt for years to come.

COVID-19 SEVERELY TESTED the social infrastructure of countries across the globe, laying bare countless shortcomings that have contributed to the tragedy we have experienced over the last 20 months. In Latin America, the impact of the pandemic has been disproportionate: The region accounts for 18% of global cases and 30% of the deaths, despite representing less than 9% of the world's population. And when it comes to education, the pandemic's long-term effects will be felt for decades to come.

As of February 2021, about 120 million school-age children lost at least a full academic year of education. A generation of young people, particularly the most vulnerable, will suffer lasting consequences because of this lost time in the classroom. According to the World Bank, after a year of academic closure, 71% of students in lower secondary education were not able to understand a text of moderate length, compared to 55% pre-pandemic. And the data indicates that these statistics will continue to worsen if schools do not fully reopen.

But educational quality in Latin America was a problem long before COVID. PISA results have persistently lagged even in the region's best education systems. Latin America must invest in education as its highest priority if it is to compete in the future and provide quality jobs to its population. This requires thoughtful and smart investment, not just more of the same. It also means that teachers need to be willing to accept guidance on how to teach for the future. Educational systems must emphasize reading, writing, science, math and technology skills from the very beginning of a student's education. And as students approach high school with a strong skills base in reading and math, technical apprenticeships and entrepreneurship should be prioritized to prepare students for the work force.

As we emerge from COVID, Latin America must embrace this opportunity to improve educational infrastructure — or it will risk losing its greatest asset: its youth. **AQ**



Susan Segal is the CEO of Americas Society/Council of the Americas

Three Ways Forward for Latin American Education

**A post-COVID renaissance is possible—
if governments choose the right path.**

by Fernando M. Reimers

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education systems worldwide, but the challenges in Latin America have been particularly acute.

Policy choices across the region led to the longest average school closures of anywhere in the world. But when classrooms finally reopened, parents' mistrust of government stopped many from sending their children back. Meanwhile, limited Internet connectivity and lagging digital skills made alternative forms of learning perhaps even less effective in Latin America than they were elsewhere.

All told, access to education and enrollment rates in the region could be set back 10 years or more as a result of the pandemic — with grave consequences for economic growth, political stability, democratic gov-

ernance and efforts to reduce poverty and inequality. Not since the “lost decade” of the 1980s has Latin American education faced such a profound threat.

There are three paths that governments, civil society, parents and teachers can take in response. If they learn from the past, and choose wisely, the pandemic could be a springboard to remake Latin American education better than it was before. Choose the wrong path, however, and the stagnation and learning losses of the 1980s are sure to return — and worsen.

The good news is that many in the region have already shown a way forward. From Brazil to Mexico, local governments, universities and the private sector have faced COVID-19 with collaboration and fresh ideas. But a truly better future will take an even larger dose of ambition.



A mother in Mexico City picks up free school supplies as classrooms across the country reopened in 2021.

Catching up

To understand where Latin American education needs to go, it helps to first understand how far it's come since the 1980s, when budget cuts in response to the region's debt crises led to stagnation in enrollment rates and student achievement. Not surprisingly, these effects were most keenly felt by lower-income families, as inequities in education spending deepened and students without access to private education fell further behind.

In response, governments in the region supported reforms that produced visible gains, including increases in compulsory education requirements, which led to a significant increase in schooling levels across the region.

By 2020, Latin America enjoyed almost universal enrollment for primary and lower secondary school. Overall the number of children out of school fell from 15 million in 2000 to 12 million in 2018, according to UNESCO. In that time, the share of students who com-

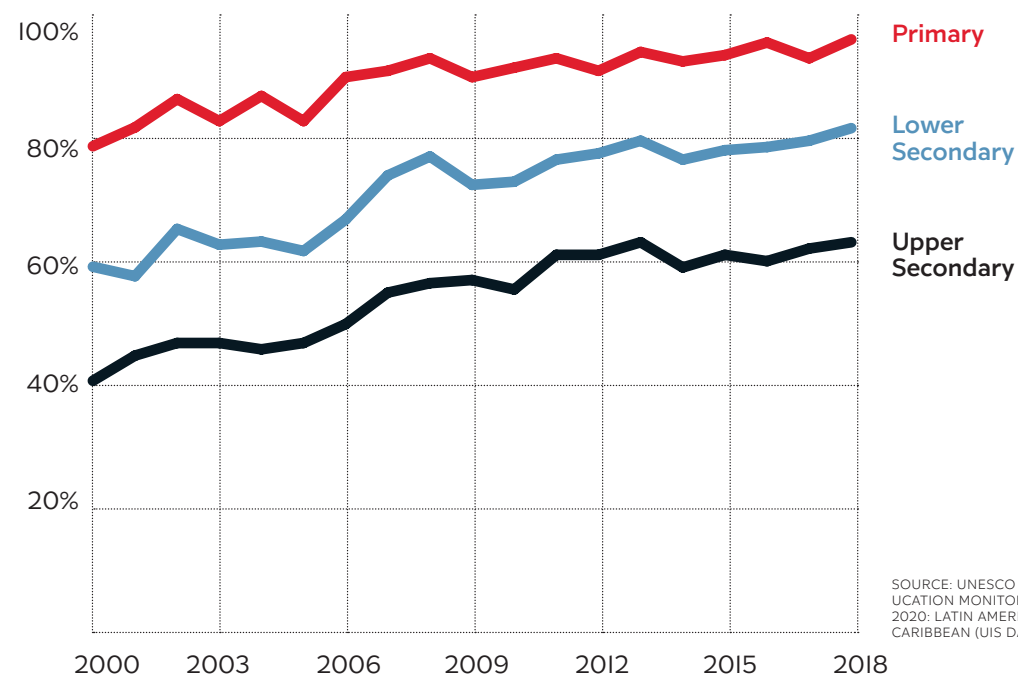
pleted primary education rose from 79% to 95%, while lower secondary education completion rose from 59% to 81% and upper secondary education completion increased from 42% to 63%, all above global averages.

Despite these advances, significant gaps remain. One in three children between the ages of four and five in the region does not attend preschool. Only four out of five stay enrolled between the ages of 13 and 17, and 14% of students that age are still in primary school as a result of chronic repetition. Educational opportunities remain stratified by socioeconomic status: More than half of children from low-income families in rural areas fail to complete nine years of basic education. Overall, half of Latin American students fall below minimum reading literacy rates by the time they're 15, according to OECD assessments.

COVID-19 has exacerbated these issues — and now threatens to reverse recent gains.

School completion rates in Latin America and the Caribbean

The region made steady progress in education prior to the pandemic



It may sound utopian, but there are already signs that ambitious change is taking place.

Three ways forward, one big opportunity

Paradoxically, the current crisis could encourage a cycle of reforms to tackle these challenges, and make education more inclusive and more relevant to the needs of a changing, complicated world. This will only happen, however, if stakeholders on all sides of the equation take the right approach. Their options are denial, retrenchment or ambition.

The first of these would be the worst. Policymakers in the denial camp might think their job is done once schools are fully reopened. But this would ignore the profound effects that two years of a pandemic have already had on education systems: learning loss, disengagement, student dropout, teacher burnout, and a growing lack of trust among the public, education authorities and governments.

This is especially true for students from lower-income families, where limitations on home-learning have been compounded by the health, economic and social effects of the pandemic. Internet connectivity and the digital skills divide between high-income students and teachers and their lower-income peers offer prime examples. While overall 77% of 15-year-olds in Latin America have Internet at home, the figure is just 45% for students from the lowest-income quintile, according to the World Bank.

Retrenchment, meanwhile, would perceive of the status quo as a worthy goal. It would aim to recover pandemic-related learning losses and enrollment rates, perhaps through a combination of added school hours and hybrid learning, though driven by awareness of new fiscal constraints. But prior to the pandemic, 30% of employers in Latin America blamed a poorly educated labor force as a serious constraint to productivity, compared to 20% worldwide. Why simply try to return to the way things were?

By contrast, an ambitious mindset would aim to build back better. The goal would be nothing less than a renaissance in education, to prepare students with the skills they need to improve their circumstances and those of their communities well into the future.

Such a rebirth of Latin American education would rest on the pursuit of three simultaneous goals: improving the effectiveness of education while the current pandemic persists, recovering and rebuilding educational opportunities post-pandemic, and making education systems more resilient to future disruptions and better equipped to prepare students.

Achieving these goals will first require a full diagnosis of how the educational context has changed with the pandemic. Educators and governments will need to develop new teaching strategies that can both respond to those changes and be adapted to future outbreaks. Finally, Latin American countries need to improve the capacities of teachers, administrators, students, families and education systems writ large.

Coherence and alignment among these goals and the policy response will be critical, bringing together all sides of the education equation to pursue common strategies. A fragmented or siloed approach — one in which teachers are taught how to use digital platforms but household connectivity remains unchanged, for example — won't be enough. Nor will simply trying to make up lost ground by adding to already overburdened curricula. Instead, learning plans need to be accelerated and reprioritized.

This may sound utopian, but there are already signs that such ambitious change is taking place.

Opportunity in crisis

In a recent study, my colleagues and I identified a range of education innovations developed during the pandemic. Many of these were aligned with

An education renaissance may look different from country to country. But a framework exists.

an ambitious vision for the future of education recently proposed by an international UNESCO commission.

In Brazil, for example, a lack of national education leadership led state governments and civil society organizations to generate their own approaches to teaching during the pandemic. These included the creation, in record time, of a learning program in the state of São Paulo to sustain education through a variety of delivery systems. An online platform to support learning and student assessment was supplemented with television, radio, WhatsApp and printed learning packages. Crucially, this came alongside programs to help teachers and school principals improve their own skills as well. The project was the result of unprecedented collaboration among the state government, the Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora, and the support of several state business leaders and companies.


Meanwhile, state governments in Mexico developed improvements to a national TV education program. Officials in Guanajuato, for instance, developed an online program of interactive home study guides and provided regular, real-time feedback to students.

In Colombia, the International Rescue Committee developed audio-based education materials to address Venezuelan refugee students' social and emotional learning needs, a facet of education that was highly disrupted by the pandemic. Also in Colombia, Alianza Educativa, a non-profit organization that runs 11 charter schools in Bogotá, turned its traditional social and emotional learning curricula into a schoolwide strategy for children and their families in vulnerable communities.

The list goes on: an assessment of teachers' digital skills in Costa Rica, an open-source platform to improve teacher training in Guatemala, an online development program for teachers in rural Peru. The common denominator in all these programs was partnership: institutional innovations as the result of

new collaborations or the expansion of existing ones. This trend was true throughout the region. Universities in Latin America, especially, showed commitment to the common good, supporting public schools during the pandemic in ways that could well have lasting effects on how these institutions define their missions in the future.

In Chile, for instance, President Sebastián Piñera called on the rectors of the Universidad de Chile and the Pontificia Universidad Católica to join together to help the government develop a range of policy responses to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. The Catholic University helped public school systems reprioritize their curricula, with a focus on helping teachers understand and expand their role in supporting social and emotional development for students.

The variety of examples suggests that an education renaissance may look different from country to country. But a framework exists. COVID-19 led to one of the most serious crises in the history of education in Latin America. But it has also created new partnerships between public and private actors and produced unprecedented innovations. Maintaining the priority on improving education, sustaining collective leadership and deepening innovation would help restore faith not just in education institutions, but also in government, democratic rule and, most of all, a better future. 

Reimers, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is coeditor of *Learning to Build Better Futures for Education*, a book documenting case studies on education innovation during the pandemic. He is also author of several other works looking at the impact of COVID on education.



Is Gustavo Petro Leaving Behind Progressives?

The left-wing candidate for Colombia's presidency is building new alliances, and straining old ones.

by Mariana Palau

WHEN GUSTAVO PETRO edged himself into the second round of the 2018 presidential race, socially progressive movements that had worked on his Humane Colombia campaign saw the resonance and power of their platforms. Feminists were an integral part of that campaign, with Ángela María Robledo, a widely respected advocate for gender equality policies, as his vice presidential candidate. Petro's platform was the only one to promote progressive priorities such as eliminating sales tax on feminine hygiene products, supporting the LGBTQ community, and phasing out Colombia's reliance on oil and gas. He ultimately lost, but his 8 million votes positioned Petro as the most prominent left-wing politician in the country.

Fast forward to 2022. Petro, an economist by training, is running for president for the third time. His party, Humane Colombia, is part of a new political movement, the Historic Pact. Petro will undoubtedly win the Pact's March primary and will face center and right-wing candidates in Colombia's presidential election in May. Except this time around, many believe Petro can no longer claim to represent socially progressive voters. He has left them behind as he tries to expand his 2018 voter base by building alliances with more traditional politicians.

His new allies include figures like Roy Barreras and Armando Benedetti, who have previously sided with Álvaro Uribe, a former president and Petro's nemesis on the right; and Juan Manuel Santos, another former president who is seen

as part of the elite progressives often dislike. Petro is also flirting with Luis Pérez, a former governor of Antioquia province and author of a book that glorifies Uribe. In November, Petro embraced Alfredo Saade, a Christian leader who is pro-life, rails against homosexuality, and is against legalizing marijuana.

These new alliances are a slap in the face for thousands of progressives to whom Petro owes his success, but he seems to see some mathematical sense in this change. Saade says he can deliver 1 million faithful Christian votes. Pérez could help improve Petro's performance in Antioquia, a province he has always lost to *uribistas*, as Uribe's supporters are called. Indeed, it is difficult to see how Petro could expand his 2018 voter base without new alliances. His support of Hugo Chávez and a tumultuous term as Bogotá mayor from 2012 to 2015 created a "voter ceiling" that somehow he needs to shatter.

Yet his new style of doing politics is alienating those who were once faithful to him, most notably feminists. Many have become some of his fiercest critics. Sara Tufano, a former ally and herself a rising star among Colombia's progressive feminists, told *Mañanas Blu with Camila Zuluaga*, a popular radio program, that Petro is an authoritarian who stimulates fanaticism among followers. Juana Afnador, who worked with Petro when he was mayor of Bogotá, publicly reminded him that a progressive movement has "red lines," such as women's rights, abortion rights and LGBTQ rights.

It is not the first time Petro has irked his feminist allies. In late 2018, he single-handedly decided his party would support Holman Morris, a loyal friend who had been accused by three women of abuse, to run for mayor of Bogotá. Petro sidelined the feminists who condemned this decision, including his former running mate Robledo, who was then trolled by his devotees on social media. Petro has tried to divide feminists into "us" versus "them," claiming the movement is ruled by urban elites and promising to make it more about poor rural women. And he recently declared he is no longer pro-choice but instead pro "abortion-zero," his idea of a utopian society where education and opportunities are enough to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

Many in Colombia wonder if Petro's opportunism will alienate a significant number of progressives who voted for him in the past. For now, that seems unlikely, as it is not yet clear who else they could vote for. For progressives, the only alternative to Petro could lie in the center-left alliance, the Coalition of Hope. Its presidential candidates, however, are all upper-class white men who polls say middle- and lower-class Colombians are having trouble sympathizing with. The Coalition of Hope's candidates include Sergio Fajardo, a mathematician and former governor who has also previously run for president, and Alejandro Gaviria, a former health minister and director of Los Andes University in Bogotá. The Coalition will hold a primary in early 2022 to decide their candidate.

The odds currently favor Petro. Polls show more than 42% of Colombians would vote for him, though it would be premature to cry victory. The Coalition of Hope is desperately trying to attract progressives and aggrieved Colombians. Ingrid Betancourt, a former presidential hopeful who was held hostage by the FARC for six years, has become a trusted mediator tasked with bringing the center's politicians together. She has asked Francia Márquez, an internationally renowned environmental activist and the only influential feminist who remains part of the Historic Pact, to ditch Petro and join the center. If she does, Petro might lose the only link he still has to progressive voters, especially feminists.

But if the center continues to fail to attract progressives and the millions of Colombians who feel left behind by years of uneven economic growth, the country will have its first radical left-wing president; the right stands little chance of winning, thanks to President Iván Duque's extreme unpopularity. Petro is a protectionist who has flirted with price controls, expropriating property and forcing the central bank to lend money to the government, a combination that could prove catastrophic for Colombia's frail economy. But he has already shown he can easily switch his political values if that is what it takes to win the presidency.

Indeed, it wouldn't be surprising if he morphs into a reborn progressive as the race gets tighter. ^{AP}

Palau is a Colombian-American journalist



Gustavo Petro speaks at a campaign rally in Medellín in November 2021. A senator and former mayor, Petro has emerged as a frontrunner in Colombia's presidential election this year.



THE AQ PROFILE

Julia Tagüeña Parga

**A decorated
physicist is accused
of organized crime.
She says politics
and revenge
are to blame.**

by Brendan O'Boyle

JULIA TAGÜEÑA PARGA woke up in good spirits on October 21, 2020. It was her 72nd birthday, and her grandkids were coming to visit her in Cuernavaca, a few hours' drive outside Mexico City. She'd just won a prestigious award honoring her five decades of work as a champion of scientific research in Mexico. Celebrations were in order.

Then Tagüeña flipped on President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's daily morning press conference, and her life turned upside down.

On screen, Tagüeña saw the director of Mexico's science and technology council (CONACYT) standing next to the president and accusing her of misusing government funds. That was the moment Tagüeña realized she was at the center of a brewing political storm, she told *AQ* in November.

The months that followed would pit some of the country's brightest minds against its most powerful government figures, and stoke fears that the president and his allies sought to silence critical voices in academia and beyond. Journalists, NGOs and prominent business leaders had already accused the government of stifling dissent in the name of fighting corruption. Tensions would soon boil over between administration officials, including the head of CONACYT, and faculty and students at the Center for Research and Teaching in Economics, CIDE.

When the charges against her first came to light, Tagüeña couldn't foresee how her case would become wrapped up in a broader debate over the purpose and limits of scientific inquiry in López Obrador's Mexico. In August 2021 and again in September, Mexico's attorney general had asked a federal judge to arrest Tagüeña and 30 other scientists, academics and administrators on charges of organized crime and money laundering. It seemed absurd. But if the judge in the case agreed, Tagüeña's male colleagues would be sent to the same prison that once held Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán; she would be sent to the equivalent facility for women.

"Suddenly the judge who deals with the worst criminals in the country has astronomers, econo-

mists and physicists in front of him," Tagüeña recalled.

The charges against Tagüeña and her colleagues started with a complaint from CONACYT to the attorney general's office, alleging that former employees and advisory board members had colluded to transfer millions of dollars from the council to the board over a six-year period. The attorney general alleged that the money had been used inappropriately for trips, meals and other expenses. Tagüeña, who at that time served in CONACYT's leadership before moving on to lead the advisory board, was also accused of having a conflict of interest in authorizing public funds for a project run by her physicist husband. The new CONACYT leadership attempted to bar her from holding a public job for 10 years.

"All the receipts were provided and everything was approved," said Tagüeña, who maintains she is "completely innocent."

In December, a federal court shut down the effort to bar Tagüeña from future jobs. But while a judge has twice refused to issue arrest warrants in the broader case against her and her colleagues, the attorney general's office has insisted on keeping its investigation open. In the meantime, the public scrutiny and accusations have upended Tagüeña's professional and personal life.

"The situation has kept me from organizing my future. I'm living in the present, day by day," Tagüeña said.

"We are not the enemy"

TAGÜEÑA'S CONFLICT with the López Obrador administration was far from inevitable, not least because she supports much of what the president is trying to accomplish.

"I am convinced my country needs improvement and I was completely in agreement with many of the problems that this government is trying to solve," Tagüeña said.

She's also one of the country's foremost scientists, beloved in academic circles and a true Mexican success story.

A professor and researcher at UNAM, Mexico's leading public university, Tagüeña is an expert in solid-state physics and studies topics that include electromagnetism, superconductivity and renewable energy. In 1985, she and her husband, Manuel Martínez, an expert in solar energy, helped establish a solar energy lab in Temixco, near Cuernavaca. The lab has since grown into UNAM's Institute of Renewable Energies.

Tagüeña and Martínez met in high school, and studied together as undergraduates at UNAM before earning their Ph.Ds. at the University of Oxford. Her exposure to science came at an early age. Born in 1948 in what is today the Czech Republic, Tagüeña grew up in a "family of survivors." Her parents were Spanish communists who had fled after the country's civil war. Her father, Manuel Tagüeña, was a celebrated colonel in the Spanish Republican Army and a physicist who "would read from the encyclopedia at the dinner table." Her mother, Carmen Parga, was a teacher who studied philosophy "but was keen on scientific issues." After the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, having grown disillusioned by Soviet communism and feeling "politically very unsafe," the family fled again. They finally found a home in Mexico.

Tagüeña said that calls for her arrest "make me wonder how it was for (my parents). ... This is really the first time in my life that I've been persecuted."

For his part, López Obrador has made light of Tagüeña and her colleagues' concerns, saying that "those who owe nothing, fear nothing." He has also criticized their "extravagance" and "waste" and described their requests for funding as "blackmail."

Those criticisms fit a broader pattern in which López Obrador often accuses traditional institutions of being part of a "mafia of power." The president was elected less than a year after an investigation by news site Animal Político and civil society group Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad found that public universities had misused or diverted millions of dollars in 2013 and 2014. The scandal led to ongoing criminal investigations and helped fuel demands for the kind of reckoning with corruption that

López Obrador promised as a candidate.

But even some of the president's key allies have expressed concern over the recent showdown.

"If you ask me what side I'm on, I'm on the side of the scientists," said Ricardo Monreal, the Senate majority leader from López Obrador's party. Mexico City Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum, herself a physicist who is close to the president and is considered a frontrunner to replace him in 2024, called the charges of organized crime "excessive."

"We are not the enemy," said Tagüeña.

A reckoning—or revenge?

TAGÜEÑA DISAGREES WITH the president on significant issues. Her enthusiasm for renewable energy, for example, comes in stark contrast to López Obrador's focus on fossil fuels. But she doesn't blame him for her current trials. Instead, Tagüeña believes that the president's advisers have misinformed him, and that personal conflict and disagreements within the scientific community may be driving the move against her.

Indeed, there has been a palpable shift in academic priorities since López Obrador took office at the end of 2018. At CONACYT that starts with María Elena Álvarez-Buylla, a geneticist known for her vocal opposition to transgenics, whom López Obrador tapped to lead the council after his election.

Points of tension between Álvarez-Buylla and Tagüeña arose from the start. In early 2019, Tagüeña left her leadership role at CONACYT to become coordinator of the council's independent advisory board, officially known as the Foro Consultivo Científico y Tecnológico (Scientific Technological Advisory Forum). Created in 2002 by a national science law, the board was intended to give the scientific community an outlet to advise officials on public policy.

"The idea was to try and create links between the public and private sectors and prevent good science from being decoupled from the economy and environment," Alejandro Frank, a physicist at UNAM, told *AQ*.

But this mission soon put the advisory board, in-



Fabricio Alvarado 47

NEW
REPUBLIC
PARTY (PNR)

CHRISTIAN SINGER AND FORMER CONGRESSMAN



"I wasn't the one who divided the country. It was those who put these issues on the table."

HOW HE GOT HERE

Alvarado, an Evangelical Christian singer, surprised the country by taking first place in the first round of the 2018 presidential election, capitalizing on conservative popular opposition to a judicial move to legalize same-sex marriage. He was defeated in the runoff by the current president, Carlos Alvarado Quesada.

WHY HE MIGHT WIN

With legislative investigations ongoing into the ruling Citizens' Action Party (PAC), and rival José María Figueres weighed down by old corruption allegations, Alvarado may be able to take advantage of anti-establishment sentiment. After receiving criticism in 2018 for vague stances on economic issues, his positions are now clearer.

WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

While polls suggest Costa Ricans remain divided on the issue of same-sex marriage, it has lost much of its urgency as a rallying political force. Alvarado's defeat by 20 points in the second round of the 2018 election suggests his support may have a ceiling. Other candidates will compete for the anti-status quo vote.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM

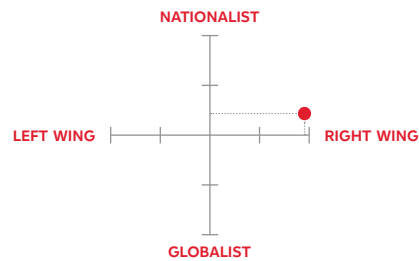
Evangelical Costa Ricans, who make up 20% of the country's population, voters with conservative stances on cultural issues, and those frustrated with the economic situation and the political establishment.

WHAT HE WOULD DO

Alvarado has pledged not to raise taxes, and vows to combat corruption and "old-style politics." With same-sex marriage having entered into force through a court ruling (over Alvarado's demands for a vote in the legislature), his focus has now turned to questions of religious liberty and opposing "gender ideology" in education.

IDEOLOGY

EXPLAINED ON PAGE 43



José María Figueres 66

NATIONAL
LIBERATION
PARTY (PLN)

FORMER PRESIDENT OF COSTA RICA (1994-1998)



"This will be a contest between experience and inexperience, between hope and disaster."

HOW HE GOT HERE

Figueres is the son of former President José Figueres Ferrer — "Don Pepe," as he is often known — a charismatic figure whose social reforms, introduced after the Costa Rican Civil War in 1948, laid the foundations for the country's modern society. After the younger Figueres became president himself in 1994, he undid many of the welfare programs his father put in place. Now, he is seeking a second term as his National Liberation Party (PLN) suffers a prolonged dry spell, last winning a presidential election in 2010.

WHY HE MIGHT WIN

Figueres led early polls, commanding high name recognition on account of his famous father and his own years in office. If he can keep the PLN united behind him, Figueres may benefit from the country's most sophisticated party machine.

WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

Keeping the PLN together is a tall order: Rolando Araya, a more left-leaning figure within the big-tent party, mounted his own presidential campaign after losing the nomination to Figueres. The PLN, along with the governing PAC, has high rejection in polls. Meanwhile, for a new generation of young Costa Ricans, the name Figueres and the PLN as a party may carry less significance.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM

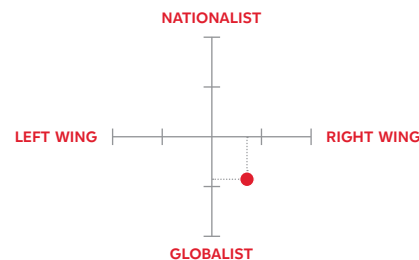
Older Costa Ricans who still look fondly on Figueres' family and party, and those looking for the return of a familiar political force to the helm.

WHAT HE WOULD DO

Figueres's program promises to put the country on track to push unemployment below 5%, keep the fiscal deficit below 3%, and achieve greater than 5% sustained economic growth by 2030 through pension reform and innovation in green energy, digital services and public-private export ventures. As of December 2021, he has proposed renegotiating a deal with the IMF agreed to by the current government.

IDEOLOGY

EXPLAINED ON PAGE 43



Lineth Saborío 60

SOCIAL CHRISTIAN
UNITY PARTY (PUSC)

LAWYER AND FORMER VICE PRESIDENT
OF COSTA RICA (2002-2006)



"They say that when a woman enters politics, she changes. But when many women enter politics, it is politics that changes."

HOW SHE GOT HERE

Saborío was head of the public prosecutor's office and served as the country's first female vice president from 2002 to 2006 during Abel Pacheco's presidency. She won the primary of the Christian democratic party PUSC with twice the vote of her nearest competitor, campaigning on her experience and perspective as a woman.

WHY SHE MIGHT WIN

Saborío has a record free of corruption allegations and a more built-out economic team than other candidates on the Christian right. She is also the only woman in the field. The PUSC has lower rejection than other mainstream parties.

WHY SHE MIGHT LOSE

Saborío spent several years out of the political spotlight, lowering her name recognition. She put in a disappointing performance during the first presidential debate and has avoided several others. (The debates played an important role in the last election.) Fabricio Alvarado's decision to run in this election threatens to split the vote on the Christian right.

WHO SUPPORTS HER

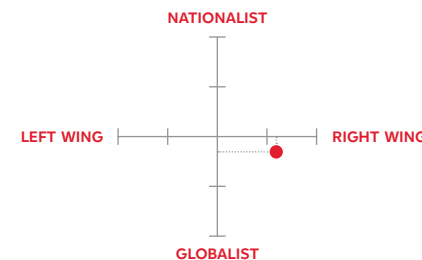
Traditional supporters of the PUSC, who have dwindled in recent years. In 2018, the party did best in the north and center regions of the country, but their candidate at the time, Rodolfo Piza, finished fourth.

WHAT SHE WOULD DO

Saborío is emphasizing economic growth and cost of living issues, pushing initiatives to lower the gas tax, boost the economy in rural areas and lower the cost of green energy. In contrast to Figueres, she has pledged to defend the agreement with the IMF initiated by the current government.

IDEOLOGY

EXPLAINED ON PAGE 43



José María Villalta 44

BROAD
FRONT (FA)

CONGRESSMAN, ATTORNEY,
AND ENVIRONMENTALIST



"We did not come to work for small, powerful groups that accumulate profits through injustice and corruption."

HOW HE GOT HERE

Villalta has served several terms as a legislator with the Broad Front, a left-wing party, and was its candidate for the presidency in 2014. His 2022 campaign repeats the themes of his previous run, with a strong focus on climate mitigation, workers' rights and social programs. He was chosen as the Broad Front's nominee for a second time in October 2021, announcing his decision in San José's Park of Social Guarantees.

WHY HE MIGHT WIN

Social media savvy with a strong track record on ecological issues, social welfare and opposition to free trade, Villalta represents a progressive, young left in a race dominated by high-profile figures on the right. Despite his political experience, Villalta's bold social spending plans could harness anti-establishment sentiment. His anti-corruption stance and clean record is also attractive as an alleged government bribe ring has elevated corruption to the forefront of the national dialogue.

WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

The Broad Front has received harsh criticism for its past support of the Ortega regime in Nicaragua, with Villalta's vice presidential candidate Patricia Mora heading a friendly delegation to Nicaragua in 2014. While Villalta has publicly denounced Ortega, he has received strong opposition from the private sector for perceived chavista tendencies.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM

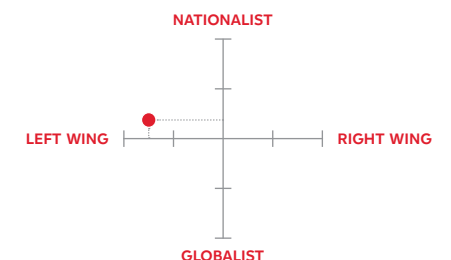
Young people and progressives in urban areas make up the bulk of Villalta's support, though he has the potential to capitalize on anti-corruption sentiment among centrist voters.

WHAT HE WOULD DO

Villalta has proposed cracking down on corruption by limiting bail in corruption cases, establishing oversight of off-shore transfers, and closing fiscal loopholes in the tax code. He also is supportive of a broad set of progressive causes, including advancing LGBTQ rights, supporting a green transition, labor rights and cutting down on resource extraction.

IDEOLOGY

EXPLAINED ON PAGE 43





Sergio Fajardo 65

CITIZENS' COMMITMENT

FORMER GOVERNOR



"We have to run two campaigns, one for the presidency and the other to show that we are conducting ourselves well."

HOW HE GOT HERE

This is Fajardo's third presidential bid. A former mathematics professor and newspaper columnist, Fajardo gained popularity and international recognition for reducing violence and improving infrastructure as the mayor of Medellín from 2003 to 2007. He was the governor of Antioquia from 2012 to 2015 and barely missed the runoff in the 2018 presidential election, as Gustavo Petro beat him for second place by a margin of 1.3% of total votes cast.

WHY HE MIGHT WIN

Known for his ability to work across Colombia's deep ideological divides, Fajardo is a moderate politician who has a good record on security and economic development. With strong name recognition, especially in the country's major urban areas, Fajardo could secure the nomination of the Coalition of Hope, a centrist group that plans to hold a primary in March.

WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

There is a crowded field of moderate candidates, and some see Fajardo as too vague in his proposals and too much of a name from the past. He has faced calls to drop out of the race amid investigations from the offices of the attorney general and the comptroller into alleged mismanagement while he was governor of Antioquia. Fajardo has stated that he acted correctly.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM

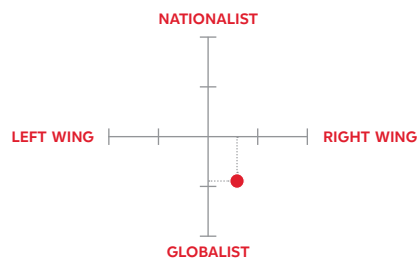
Fajardo's support base is concentrated in the department of Antioquia and its capital Medellín, as well as other urban areas. He stands to attract voters seeking change but not willing to support more radical figures.

WHAT HE WOULD DO

Fajardo has vowed to fight youth unemployment, improve public security, and combat corruption. He has continued his focus on education with proposed reforms such as introducing free public university for all and returning to in-person teaching to address the pandemic's effects on students.

IDEOLOGY

EXPLAINED ON PAGE 43



Rodolfo Hernández 76

INDEPENDENT

FORMER MAYOR



"Don't lie, don't steal and don't betray."

HOW HE GOT HERE

A civil engineer and businessman who specialized in housing construction, Hernández is running for the presidency for the first time. During his 2016–2019 term as the mayor of Bucaramanga, he faced two temporary suspensions, one for hitting a city councilor and another for allegedly attempting to influence voters during an election. Hernández resigned after receiving his second suspension near the end of his term. He has said that he is self-financing his campaign, and is running with the support of the League of Anti-Corruption Leaders, a movement that he created.

WHY HE MIGHT WIN

Hernández's anti-corruption message could have broad appeal. Though the attorney general's office is investigating scandals allegedly involving Hernández, his populist, outsider image has gained traction in opinion polls.

WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

Some see Hernández as a fringe personality rather than as a serious contender. In a 2016 radio interview he said he was a follower of Adolf Hitler, but he later apologized, saying he had confused the dictator with Albert Einstein. One leaked audio message recorded Hernández threatening to shoot a client, while another recording captured Hernández allegedly trading the League's support for House candidates for payments and 10% salary cuts if they were elected.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM

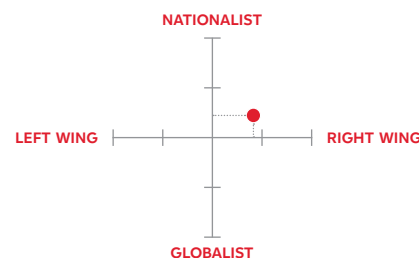
Hernández, who has rejected the labels of center, left and right, is targeting the anti-corruption vote. His support base is likely strongest in Santander department.

WHAT HE WOULD DO

Hernández has focused his campaign on fighting graft, which he has described as one of Colombia's main problems, along with wasteful government spending. He is in favor of reducing VAT to 10% and has proposed eliminating that tax on food. Hernández has made xenophobic comments about Venezuelan migrants, and has promised that he would reestablish relations with Venezuela on day one of his administration.

IDEOLOGY

EXPLAINED ON PAGE 43



Gustavo Petro 61

HUMANE COLOMBIA

SENATOR



"The necessities of Colombian society are not based on building socialism, but on building democracy and peace — period."

HOW HE GOT HERE

Petro is an economist by training and a former M-19 guerrilla who later promoted the group's disarmament. He has served two terms in the lower house of Congress and one in the Senate. Petro was the mayor of Bogotá from 2012 to 2015. He received 41% of the votes in the runoff of the 2018 presidential election.

WHY HE MIGHT WIN

Petro's leftist and anti-establishment stances could resonate with voters seeking major change following the pandemic, an economic slump and an unpopular right-wing administration. His second-place finish in 2018 secured him a seat in the Senate, where he has positioned himself as a vocal leader of the opposition. Petro has consistently led in most opinion polls.

WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

Petro's more radical policy suggestions might alienate voters if he faces off against a centrist in the second round. Despite distancing himself from the Cuban and Venezuelan governments, Petro continues to face suspicions from conservatives that he would emulate Fidel Castro or Hugo Chávez.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM

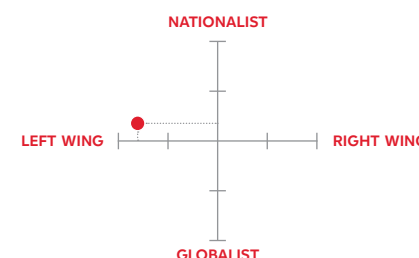
The young, politically active electorate in universities and big cities make up much of Petro's base. His proposed redistributive social policies could appeal to Colombia's lower-income communities.

WHAT HE WOULD DO

Petro has said that a continuation of Colombia's neoliberalism will eventually "destroy the country" and has proposed a tax increase on the 4,000 wealthiest Colombians. He plans to halt new oil exploration in an effort to eventually wean the country off of extractive industries and transition away from fossil fuels. Petro has also stated he would support putting President Iván Duque on trial for the violence committed by security forces during the 2021 protests.

IDEOLOGY

EXPLAINED ON PAGE 43



Óscar Iván Zuluaga 62

DEMOCRATIC CENTER

FORMER FINANCE MINISTER



"I don't believe in extremes or in personal attacks. To defeat this recalcitrant left, we need to unite our resolve around a shared dream."

HOW HE GOT HERE

A one-time steel executive, Zuluaga's political star began to rise as President Álvaro Uribe's finance minister during his second term, from 2007 to 2010. Zuluaga ran for president in 2014 and earned the most votes in the first round, but lost to Juan Manuel Santos in a runoff. He secured his party's 2022 presidential nomination in a November primary.

WHY HE MIGHT WIN

Zuluaga is seen as a relatively moderate figure within *uribismo*, and is already a nationally known figure with 81% name recognition in a December survey (compared to Hernández's 44%, Fajardo's 85% and Petro's 96%). Zuluaga's candidacy could appeal to voters that are opposed to Petro, a bloc that he has courted by referring to the "populist left" as Colombia's "great enemy."

WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

Uribismo is expected to struggle given President Iván Duque's low approval ratings and fatigue with high unemployment and poverty in the wake of the pandemic. Zuluaga is also an establishment politician at a time when anti-system candidates like Petro and Hernández have grown in popularity.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM

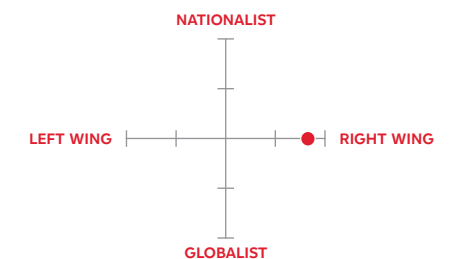
Conservatives with fond memories of the Uribe years, and those worried about the left taking power who don't think a centrist is the right choice. Zuluaga also has fans in the private sector who remember the boom years of the late 2000s.

WHAT HE WOULD DO

Zuluaga has made gestures toward the center by stating that he would increase the minimum wage by 10% and has spoken about the need to teach English in public schools and train youth in digital skills. He has emphasized public safety and said he would pursue what he has dubbed "Democratic Security 2.0", borrowing the term for Uribe's security policy during Colombia's armed conflict.

IDEOLOGY

EXPLAINED ON PAGE 43





Jair Bolsonaro 66

LIBERAL PARTY

PRESIDENT



“We took back Brazil from the left, we all did. We made the feeling of patriotism bloom.”

HOW HE GOT HERE

Bolsonaro’s 2018 election victory heralded a new alliance between social conservatives and pro-business forces, and a rejection of the status quo politics that led Brazil into its worst economic crisis on record. However, his government struggled to boost investment and economic growth even before the pandemic, which devastated Brazil amid Bolsonaro’s frequent denialism of the virus’s severity and the efficacy of vaccines.

WHY HE MIGHT WIN

Bolsonaro retains solid support among his conservative base, about 25% of the Brazilian electorate. His supporters bet that will be enough to get him into a runoff against Lula, where a recent increase in welfare programs could help him win enough working-class votes to eke out a victory.

WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

Bolsonaro’s poor handling of the pandemic, and his constant fights with institutions including Congress and the Supreme Court, have left many Brazilians fatigued and eager for change. Clear majorities say in polls they no longer trust their president or see him as competent to lead.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM

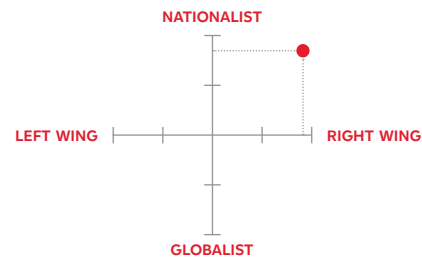
Social conservatives including Brazil’s growing evangelical Christian community and the rank-and-file of the military and state police. Small business owners and the agricultural sector, which has thrived in recent years.

WHAT HE WOULD DO

Bolsonaro says he remains committed to the pro-market agenda of his finance minister Paulo Guedes, who has given no indication he plans to leave. But the duo have mostly failed to implement reforms, partly because of the pandemic. Bolsonaro’s alliance with the “*Centrão*” bloc of legislators, which is mostly interested in pork for its constituents, may serve as a brake on efforts to shrink the state in a second term.

IDEOLOGY

EXPLAINED ON PAGE 43



Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva 76

WORKERS’ PARTY

FORMER PRESIDENT



“What’s happening in Brazil is not a dispute between left and right. It’s between fascists and democracy.”

HOW HE GOT HERE

Lula’s biography reads like an epic novel. A longtime metal-workers’ union leader, he was elected president on his fourth try and oversaw a long economic boom from 2003–10. He was then jailed for nearly two years on corruption charges, which were thrown out by the Supreme Court in 2021, allowing him to run again.

WHY HE MIGHT WIN

Positive memories of Lula’s presidency, which saw millions of Brazilians rise out of poverty and also a 500% increase in the stock market, seem more enticing to many voters after the disorder of the Bolsonaro years. He has focused on consensus-building so far in his campaign, and his rejection ratings are lower than other major candidates in the 2022 race.

WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

The Lula years also had their dark side, including numerous corruption scandals and economic distortions that blew up under his chosen successor Dilma Rousseff, resulting in the worst recession in Brazil’s history from 2014–16. Lula’s opponents will try to appeal to *antipetismo* (sentiment against his Workers’ Party) as the election heats up.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM

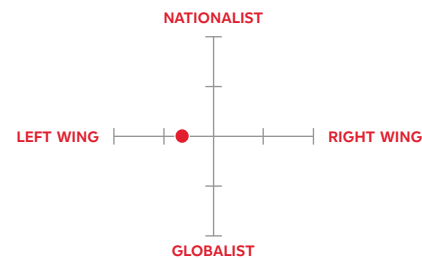
Lula’s support is strongest among Brazil’s poor and lower-middle classes, especially in the northeast.

WHAT HE WOULD DO

Lula has been somewhat vague about his economic plans and has avoided indicating a possible finance minister. But he has suggested he will further expand the Brazilian state, already one of Latin America’s most sprawling in relative terms, and try to increase taxes on the wealthy to help pay for it. His flirtation with Geraldo Alckmin, a center-right former governor of São Paulo, as a possible vice-presidential candidate suggests he will try to build a “big tent” of political allies, making a major shift left unlikely.

IDEOLOGY

EXPLAINED ON PAGE 43



Ciro Gomes 64

DEMOCRATIC LABOR PARTY

FORMER FINANCE MINISTER AND GOVERNOR



“The country is sinking, people are dying of hunger. Meanwhile (all the other candidates) are clowning around and mimicking each other.”

HOW HE GOT HERE

A well-traveled politician who served as a governor and a minister in multiple governments including Lula’s, this is Gomes’ fourth presidential campaign, following a third-place finish with 12% of the vote in 2018. These days, he casts himself as a leftist alternative to Lula while also flirting with parts of the center-right.

WHY HE MIGHT WIN

Gomes seems like a longshot, but could prevail if something unexpected happens to derail Lula’s candidacy.

WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

Lula is simply not leaving enough oxygen for other left-of-center candidates. Gomes is also mistrusted by many across the ideological spectrum in Brazil’s political class because of his long career of bitter public clashes. Many leaders in his own party could pressure him not to run, to allow their lower house and state assembly candidates to campaign with Lula instead.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM

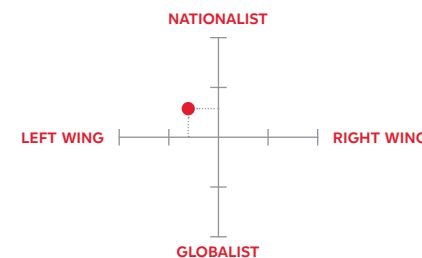
Well-educated voters and others from the urban middle class, who lean left but reject the corruption and other decay under the Workers’ Party’s 14-year rule. His power base is in his longtime home of Ceará state, and other parts of the northeast.

WHAT HE WOULD DO

Gomes’ detailed plans include a strong industrial policy that would boost exports, as well as an emphasis on green growth. But his difficult relationships with Brazil’s political class could make implementation difficult.

IDEOLOGY

EXPLAINED ON PAGE 43



Sérgio Moro 49

PODEMOS (WE CAN) PARTY

FORMER JUDGE AND JUSTICE MINISTER



“The confrontation of the far right with the far left gives victory to chaos.”

HOW HE GOT HERE

A previously obscure federal judge, Moro won international renown in the mid-2010s for overseeing the sprawling Lava Jato (“Car Wash”) corruption case, which sent many powerful figures to jail, including Lula. Moro then served as Bolsonaro’s justice minister but resigned, alleging the president’s attempts to interfere in the Federal Police. In 2021, Brazil’s Supreme Court ruled Moro was not impartial as a judge in the Lula case, further tarnishing his image.

WHY HE MIGHT WIN

Many Brazilians still see Moro as an anti-corruption hero capable of purging the current political class. His path is to steal away enough of Bolsonaro’s supporters to pass him and enter a second round against Lula, where he could then rally broad support from conservatives, centrists and business leaders.

WHY HE MIGHT LOSE

Despised in roughly equal measure by the left (for jailing Lula) and right (for “betraying” Bolsonaro), Moro has the highest negative ratings of any major candidate except Bolsonaro. Polls suggest there is not much demand for a so-called “third way” candidate.

WHO SUPPORTS HIM

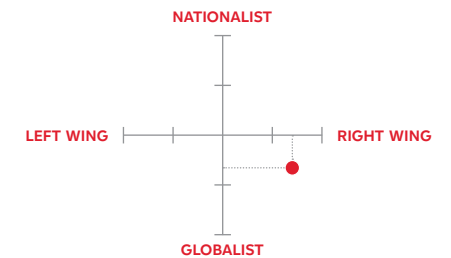
Business elites, some influential media commentators, law enforcement figures, and centrist types turned off by Bolsonaro’s response to COVID.

WHAT HE WOULD DO

Moro is essentially promising to deliver on Bolsonaro’s original promises to crack down on corruption and encourage private-sector investment, though he has struck a somewhat more centrist tone. However, Moro’s lack of support in Congress — where many legislators despise him because of Lava Jato — raises serious questions about governability if he is elected.

IDEOLOGY

EXPLAINED ON PAGE 43



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 **allá vamos**

“A Madness Without Parallel Since Don Quixote”

The unlikely story of Maximilian, Emperor of Mexico — and how U.S. aid helped a ragtag band of patriots win back Mexico’s freedom from the French.

by Edward Shawcross

The Emperor Maximilian's portrait is on display in Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City, the former site of his official residence.

WHEN PRINCESS CARLOTA HEARD that Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated, she was delighted. “Here, the mood is excellent,” she wrote from Mexico City to her husband, Maximilian I, the emperor of Mexico. Their hope: Lincoln’s demise would mark an end of U.S. resistance to their monarchy. But it was not to be.

The improbable story of how an Austrian archduke and a Belgian princess ended up on the throne of Mexico in the 1860s begins in France. There, the emperor Napoleon III dreamed of a “Latin” sphere of influence in the New World, with France as the leading voice. In fact, the term “Latin America” was first coined in Paris in the 1850s, and for some it was an intellectual justification for these imperialist designs. Many French thinkers believed the region was naturally suited to monarchy, like the southern European Catholic nations.

A later French president, Adolphe Thiers, called the scheme “madness without parallel since Don Quixote.” In 1862, the French fleet arrived in Mexico, under the pretense of collecting debts — but it soon became clear they had other motives. On April 19, some 30,000 French troops invaded Mexico to over-

throw the republic and its president. Napoleon III found an ideal candidate to occupy the throne: Ferdinand Maximilian. He was the ambitious younger brother of the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph, from the illustrious Habsburg royal family. But Maximilian had few prospects of power in Europe. Spurred on by his equally ambitious wife, Carlota, he had the additional motivation of trying to restore his family’s glory in the Americas: In 1519, Mexico was conquered for the Spanish Empire in the name of the Habsburg Emperor Charles V.

What was easy to plan in Europe proved harder to execute in the New World. Mexican political exiles in Paris portrayed the Mexican president, Benito Juárez, as a despot and claimed that Maximilian would be welcomed as a liberator. But much of Mexico rallied around Juárez and on May 5, 1862, the French army was defeated outside the walls of Puebla — a day that went down in history as Cinco de Mayo. Instead of deterring Napoleon III, the defeat convinced him to send reinforcements. French troops occupied Mexico City in June 1863, setting up a puppet government that proclaimed Mexico an empire and called for Maximilian to rule.

The French fleet arrived in Mexico, under the pretense of collecting debts — but it soon became clear they had other motives.

The United States, along with all other Latin American nations apart from Brazil, had refused to recognize Maximilian’s empire.

Whose hemisphere is it?

ALL THIS WAS A TREMENDOUS CHALLENGE to the United States and its Monroe Doctrine, which aimed to prevent European interference in Latin America. The United States, however, was divided in two during the U.S. Civil War, and in no position to send troops to prevent the French incursion. Furthermore, Lincoln feared France would react to any hostile move by recognizing the Confederacy or, worse, intervening on its behalf. At least for the moment, this gave the French a free hand.

Following the conquest of Mexico City, Napoleon III convinced Maximilian and Carlota that the country was “pacified.” But when they arrived in May of 1864, they realized their empire was torn by civil war. In Mexico City, extravagant dinners and balls showcased the glory of Maximilian and Carlota’s new empire, but in the countryside, forces loyal to Juárez waged guerrilla warfare.

French counterinsurgency tactics were brutal. Torture and summary execution were common, and whole villages were sometimes burned down if suspected of collaboration with the empire’s enemies. As one French officer admitted in a letter to his niece, he had waged an “atrocious war.” “If I were Mexican,” he wrote, “what hatred I would have for these French, and how much I would make them suffer.”

To escape the combined forces of the French army and Mexicans loyal to Maximilian, Juárez retreated northwards, but by 1865 he had gone almost as far as he could. He set up an alternate capital in Chihuahua City, close to the U.S. border and almost 800 miles from Mexico City. As one of his support-

ers noted, “Our enemy is the most powerful in the world and the head of our government is in the corner of the most distant state of the republic, without money, credit or army.”

When the American Civil War ended in April 1865, that seemed about to change. The United States, along with all other Latin American nations apart from Brazil, had refused to recognize Maximilian’s empire. Yet so long as the Confederacy endured, Lincoln felt unable to offer more meaningful support to Juárez. An arms embargo prevented weapons from reaching Mexico, though Lincoln was expected to lift it. That was why Carlota welcomed his assassination. She and Maximilian hoped that his successor, Andrew Johnson, would recognize their regime.

Maximilian sent a delegation to Washington, eager to strike a deal with Johnson, but the emperor’s men were ignored. Instead, Juárez’s representative, Matías Romero, remained the only diplomat from Mexico with whom the Americans dealt. And Romero had an impressive address book: Among his high-society friends was American Civil War hero Ulysses S. Grant. Romero organized balls and public banquets at New York’s famous Delmonico’s restaurant to pressure the U.S. government not to reach a compromise with France. Lincoln’s son attended one.

It worked: Under Johnson, the arms embargo was lifted. Men, money and supplies poured over the border. One U.S. businessman alone sold Juárez’s forces 5,020 Enfield rifles, 1,000 pistols, 6 artillery pieces and 20,400 rounds of ammunition — not to mention 1,308 pairs of underwear and 813 frying pans.

Rescue at the border

DESPITE THE INFLUX OF SUPPLIES, Juárez's future looked bleak. In the summer of 1865, French General Auguste Henri Brincourt marched almost 400 miles across northern Mexico with some 2,500 men. His mission: Seize Juárez, or drive him out of Mexico. It would be, Brincourt confidently boasted, "the last military act" of the French intervention.

"I am writing to you comfortably seated on the presidential armchair of citizen Juárez," Brincourt wrote on August 15, 1865, in a letter to his uncle. "Yesterday we made our triumphant entry in this capital" — Chihuahua City — marking "the end of the Mexican war."

The war, however, had not ended. Juárez had merely made one more retreat, to El Paso del Norte (today's Ciudad Juárez), only 55 miles north. But Brincourt could not pursue him. Bellicose comments from Grant had terrified Napoleon III. Fearful that border clashes with U.S. troops might spark war with the United States, the French emperor ordered his troops concentrated in the interior of Mexico, and commanded Brincourt to go no further.


Without French soldiers to defend the northern states, towns fell one by one to Juárez's partisans, while the U.S. increased pressure on Napoleon III, informing him in December 1865 that friendship between the two countries was impossible unless France ended its intervention in Mexico.

With Maximilian's empire nearing bankruptcy, unable to pay for the French army to stay in Mexico, Napoleon III's decision was an easy one. After receiving the U.S. threat, he wrote to his protégé announcing that the French would withdraw. Without French military and financial support, the Mexican Second Empire had little chance of success. Maximilian's government limped on, but as Juárez's supporters gained strength, he ruled an ever-smaller part of Mexico. Carlota returned to Europe to beg for more men and money, but Napoleon III was unmoved. She suffered a nervous breakdown on a trip

to beg the pope for Catholic support — and never returned to Mexico.

With French assistance cut off, Maximilian's regime collapsed in the face of a resurgent nationalist movement, a similar fate to the one that would later meet regimes backed by U.S. intervention in the 20th and 21st centuries. Two months after the last French troops left in March 1867, Maximilian surrendered after a brave but futile siege at Querétaro. He asked for his closest officers and friends to be spared: If blood must be spilled, then let it be only his. Along with two of his top generals, he was executed by firing squad on June 19, 1867. Moments before his death, he turned to his executioners and declared in Spanish, "I forgive everybody, I pray that everyone may also forgive me, and I wish that my blood, which is now to be shed, may be for the good of the country. Long live Mexico, long live independence."

Juárez's resistance had kept republican government alive in Mexico. But U.S. aid played an important part, too, and Juárez wasn't afraid to express his gratitude. He told one former Union officer who fought Maximilian's forces that for Americans, with no ties to Mexico, "to make every sacrifice and to suffer every privation for the republic, was a spirit so noble that it could not be put into language."

Sadly, this spirit has rarely been seen since. Given how few examples of good relations between the U.S. and Mexico there are to choose from over the years, it was not surprising when President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, speaking alongside U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in October 2021, thanked Washington for never recognizing Maximilian. Today, amid a global pandemic and an ever-worsening climate crisis, among numerous other problems, we should hope that the cooperation between the two nations seen during the 1860s can be revived not only in words, but in meaningful action. 

Shawcross is the author of *The Last Emperor of Mexico*, available now from *Basic Books*

THE HISTORY BEHIND MAXIMILIAN'S UNLIKELY ASCENT — AND VIOLENT DEATH



April 12, 1861

Fort Sumter in South Carolina is bombarded by secessionist forces. The U.S. Civil War begins.



July 1861

Benito Juárez emerges victorious after a three-year civil war in Mexico and suspends debt payments, infuriating Europe.



January 1862

Fleets from France, Spain and Britain arrive in Veracruz to force repayment of Mexican debts.



April 19, 1862

The French invade Mexico, reneging on a promise not to interfere with its internal affairs.



May 5, 1862

Battle of Puebla: Generals Ignacio Zaragoza and Porfirio Díaz beat back French troops.



June 10, 1863

After French reinforcements arrive, Mexico City falls to the invaders.



April 10, 1864

Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian accepts an offer by France's Emperor Napoleon III and Mexican monarchists to take the throne of Mexico.



April 1865

U.S. Civil War ends. An embargo on U.S. arms sales to Mexican forces is lifted, and Mexican republican partisan activity intensifies.



January 1866

Napoleon III tells Maximilian he will withdraw his troops from Mexico. Maximilian's days are numbered.



June 19, 1867

Maximilian is executed after Querétaro, his last stronghold, falls to Juárez's forces.

PHOTO ESSAY

Foraging in a Land of Plenty

*Venezuelans eke out a living among falling
fruits and blooming trees.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ANDREA HERNÁNDEZ BRICEÑO

RIPE COCONUTS AND MANGOES fall to the ground: a boon for a hungry population.

Once buoyed by a flourishing oil industry, an increasing number of Venezuelans now rely on the ecology of their backyards to keep food on the table. In a country with almost 8 million undernourished citizens, droughts influenced by a changing climate add to shortages and poverty in keeping food out of reach for many.

Andrea Hernández Briceño's work documents how food insecurity is contributing to a return to subsistence agriculture on the outskirts of Caracas, Venezuela's capital. As the government remains unable to provide for the basic needs of its people, Venezuelans turn to nature instead — a precarious solution.

Roasting homegrown bell peppers
on a makeshift grill in San Antonio,
Venezuela.



“Everything is not lost. We should take advantage of the things we have.”

— LUIS CALZADILLA

Luis Calzadilla, formerly a construction worker, now relies on subsistence farming to provide food for his family. He plants taro, yucca, corn, bananas and beans on his vegetable patch in the San Isidro area of Caracas.



A teenage mother holds her baby's milk bottle in front of a bougainvillea shrub in La Guaira, near Caracas.



Briyit Pérez watches over her niece, Mariángela, while drying clothes in the Catia neighborhood of Caracas. Finding work is hard: Mariángela's mother left Venezuela in search of better opportunities.

More than 5.4 million Venezuelans have left since 2014, but remittances declined sharply over the past year amid the pandemic and the global economic crisis.



A man scales a quenette tree in Patanemo, a town up the coast from Caracas, looking for ripe fruit.



Mango in hand, Joseph Chacón (12) looks out toward his mother's home in San Isidro.



People from the town of Chuspa dance along packed streets and pray for abundance during a festival honoring St. John the Baptist.



Freddy Flores pulls his horse toward Patanemo. His family doesn't earn enough to shop in the supermarket. Instead, they live off the land, trading what they hunt and growing their own food.



Before the pandemic, Puerto Cabello was home to a bustling commercial area. Now Ángel (18) sells fish among shuttered shops on a largely deserted street.

“I help myself with what I harvest from the vegetable patch. We eat from it and I give some vegetables to my neighbors.”

— FELIPE ARRIOJA

Felipe Arrioja poses in front of the dry riverbed that snakes around San Isidro. An unemployed construction worker, Arrioja has dealt with waves of drought and electricity rationing by tending a vegetable garden he started in 2015.



The Huge Risk Facing Latin American Oil Companies

The region's big energy firms are mostly lagging in the transition away from fossil fuels. More can be done.

by Luisa Palacios and Francisco Monaldi

AFTER A RASH of net-zero pledges from oil-producing and oil-consuming nations alike at the COP26 summit in Glasgow, Scotland, last November, the future of Latin America's oil industry is in jeopardy. The region's national oil companies, especially in a few laggard countries like Venezuela and Mexico, must act quickly or be left behind by the global energy transition, with grim consequences for national economies.

It's unclear how long the process of decarbonization in the world energy market will take, but what is clear is the threat it presents to the market for oil and the rents that come from its extraction. Latin America, especially, stands to lose from a decline in oil demand: It has the second largest oil reserves in the world after the Middle East. But Latin American oil production involves higher costs and higher car-

bon intensity than the Middle East, which makes it less resilient to drops in demand. The faster the decarbonization process ends up being, the more disruptive it will be for the region.

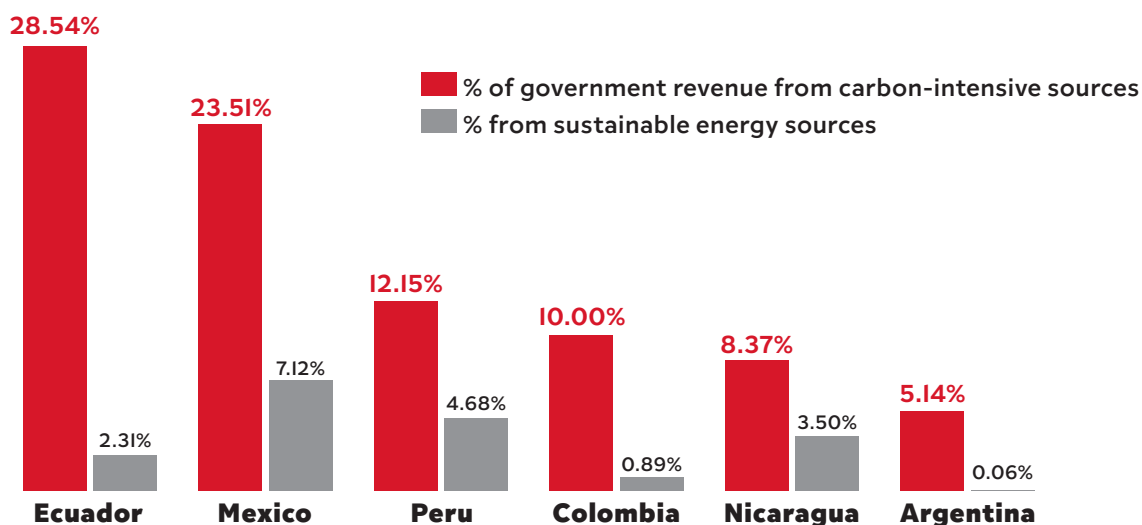
Venezuela, Ecuador and Colombia are particularly dependent on oil exports and revenues. Bolivia and Trinidad and Tobago depend on natural gas. The small nation of Guyana is poised to become the largest per capita oil producer in the world, just as the window for developing its reserves may be closing. Though Argentina, Brazil and Mexico are not as oil-dependent, oil and gas are among the largest industries in each country in terms of fiscal revenues, exports and investments. Latin American national oil companies also have significant macroeconomic importance as providers of oil rents, generators of foreign exchange receipts and issuers of foreign debt.



Petrobras' Presidente Bernardes refinery in Cubatão, Brazil.

Fossil fuels remain a big source of revenue for Latin American governments

Moving away from hydrocarbons poses significant financial uncertainty



SOURCE: GFLAC ÍNDICE DE FINANZAS SOSTENIBLES 2020
NOTE: GOVERNMENT REVENUE FROM SUSTAINABLE SOURCES IS MOSTLY FROM INTERNATIONAL AID

When the region’s national oil companies are listed on stock markets, they are among the largest companies in terms of market capitalization.

Investment by large international oil companies (IOCs) looks set to cool off. Recent announcements by some of the largest European IOCs (BP, Shell, Total) tout accelerated plans to diversify their business models into renewables. Judicial pressure on Shell in the Netherlands, as well as shareholder pressure on the boards of Exxon and Chevron, suggest the appetite of the traditional oil majors for investment in Latin America could drop or change focus into low-carbon projects. The pressing question is whether they will be replaced by national oil companies from China and India, or perhaps private equity investors or smaller companies.

It’s too soon to pick winners and losers, given the uncertain pace of the energy transition, but it’s clear who is currently better poised to adapt. Among the major national oil companies, Brazil’s Petrobras and Colombia’s Ecopetrol, the only national oil companies in the region to pledge net zero by 2050, are emerging as regional leaders. Petrobras is positioning itself as

a low-carbon producer able to survive in a low oil-price environment, even deep into the energy transition. Petrobras has stated that it can produce its prolific pre-salt offshore fields at \$35 per barrel. At 2.83 million barrels per day of oil and gas production, Petrobras is the largest producer in the region and the only national oil company with a clear path to significant production growth in the next five years. The company has been shedding assets as part of a divestment program responding to the need to deleverage and concentrate its expenditures to fulfill its production target of 3.3 million barrels a day by 2025. Becoming leaner and concentrating efforts on making its pre-salt fields less carbon-intensive might be Petrobras’ niche as a geopolitically attractive alternative to OPEC.

Colombia’s Ecopetrol, meanwhile, is leading the pack in terms of diversification of its business model. Ecopetrol is rethinking its business strategy, diversifying into non-fossil sources of revenue, with the acquisition of ISA, an electricity transmission company. While offshore gas might have potential, Colombia’s and Ecopetrol’s low reserves relative to production

and potential environmental concerns about shale leaves the field open to bold moves into other sources of energy, with the country even exploring hydrogen.

On the other side of the spectrum, Venezuela’s PDVSA and Mexico’s Pemex are clear stragglers with few immediate prospects for improvement. Without a significant policy U-turn, these two national companies and their oil assets will be at the forefront of the discussion about stranded assets in the region. Exploitation of Mexico’s deep-water and shale reserves are being put on hold by a state-centric oil and gas policy that is scaring off private investment. With its strategy directed by the government of statist president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), Pemex is sinking money into expanding refining capacity at a time of worldwide refining overcapacity, making the Mexican company less resilient to the energy transition. Ironically for AMLO’s defense of national energy sovereignty, these decisions are making Mexico more dependent on imports to satisfy its present and future energy needs, given the budget constraints of both Pemex and the government.

Venezuela, of course, looks worse. The severity of the institutional deterioration of both PDVSA and the government, macroeconomic policy dysfunction, the anti-private sector policy framework, and significant geopolitical constraints (sanctions) are all serious obstacles to Venezuela’s ability to navigate the energy transition. The national oil company — with its high carbon intensity and high methane emissions, not to mention its serious governance issues — creates significant liabilities for future reconstruction of the oil industry. Only a significant change in the current political and policy framework would allow Venezuela a chance to properly tap into its ample gas resources, develop its potential for carbon storage and maximize its renewable energy potential.

That leaves Argentina and Ecuador, whose national oil companies — YPF and Petroecuador, respectively — are still a question mark. The high share of natural gas in YPF’s portfolio means the company has a head start in the decarbonization strategy vis-à-vis some of its peers. Its ability to generate quicker returns on investment with short-cycle shale production plays in its favor. But poor financial perfor-

mance, the country’s macroeconomic imbalances, the government’s solvency issues, and the high cost of its shale are worries. Ecuador, meanwhile, is trying to enact more pro-private sector policy changes, while environmental concerns around oil production could disrupt its plan to aggressively increase oil output in the next few years.

As for Guyana, beneficiary of an ongoing bonanza after the discovery of a large reserve in 2015, the small country seems intent on maximizing revenues over the next 10 years, potentially reaching 750,000 barrels a day by 2025. As a newcomer lacking technical capacity, Guyana is relying on a consortium of IOCs led by Exxon. A realization that the window of opportunity is closing is serving as a check on nationalist tendencies that have inflicted damage on some of the country’s regional peers, particularly in times of high oil prices. The challenge for Guyana and its neighbor Suriname will be to succeed where others have failed and use proceeds from the oil boom wisely.

The energy transition also represents an opportunity for the region’s energy importers. Chile, the most conspicuous example, has made significant inroads into the renewable space and it is today the country with the most potential in hydrogen, which many see as the fuel of the future. The country also stands to benefit from the increased demand for critical minerals for electrification such as copper and lithium.

The energy transition represents real challenges, but also opportunities for countries and national oil companies in Latin America. With oil prices currently high, the time is right for the region’s oil industry to take note of decisions being made today to adapt to a net-zero world and use their windfall profits to plan decarbonization strategies. That will ensure they retain access to capital and even export markets in the carbon-neutral future. ^{AQ}

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Monaldi is a fellow at, and director of, the Latin American Energy Program at Rice University’s Baker Institute.

The Enigma of Claudia Sheinbaum

For Mexico City's mayor and possible 2024 presidential contender, technical expertise clashes with political positioning.

by Benjamin Russell

MEXICO CITY—Most experts agree that President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's proposed reform of Mexico's energy sector will delay its transition to cleaner fuels. Claudia Sheinbaum, Mexico City's environmental scientist-turned-mayor, is not among them.

For now, congressional opposition and horse trading have stalled López Obrador's attempt to return state producer CFE to the center of Mexico's energy industry. But in the administration's ongoing sales pitch, Sheinbaum remains a central — and credible — figure.

The 59-year-old was part of an IPCC climate change panel that won a Nobel Peace Prize in 2007, and has bolstered her green credentials since becoming mayor in 2018 — including through a massive expansion of rainwater collection programs, significant investment in modernizing waste management, and reforestation projects.

She couches her support for the reform, in press conferences, interviews and on social media, in terms of “energy sovereignty.” Though some private electricity generation has been permitted in Mexico since the late 1990s, López Obrador presents his plan foremost as a corrective to constitutional changes implemented by his predecessor in 2013. Those changes, he said, sidelined CFE and left consumers at the mercy of rent-seeking private producers.

Most analysts, however, say that by giving dispatch priority to CFE-generated electricity (rather than to renewable production, as the 2013 reform mandated), the proposal would make Mexican electricity not only more expensive, but also



President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's public shows of support have led many to believe he wants Sheinbaum to succeed him in 2024.

worse for the environment. CFE is a significant hydropower producer, but only 11% of its clean energy generation comes from wind and solar.

This isn't the first time Sheinbaum's ardent support for López Obrador's so-called fourth transformation of Mexico has come into apparent conflict with her reputation as an innovative problem solver.

"On one side (Sheinbaum) is loyal to an illogical ideology, and on the other she has a highly logical technical outlook," said Ana Lilia Moreno, a program coordinator at México Evalúa who has analyzed López Obrador's reform proposal. "Those two things clash."

How to square the circle?

MEXICO'S NEXT PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION isn't until 2024 but, in the words of one prominent local journalist, "(Sheinbaum) would say she's not campaigning to be a candidate, but her supporters would."

Among those supporters may be López Obrador himself. Most polls show Sheinbaum leading or tied with Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard in the race to represent MORENA, López Obrador's party, in the next election. Whoever wins the nomination, officially through an internal survey in 2023, would likely begin the national race as the favorite.

Hints of López Obrador's preference for Sheinbaum have been hard to ignore. A photo of the president holding her arm aloft after a public event in September 2021 reminded many of the so-called *dedazo*, an implicit coronation of presidential successors that was standard practice during decades of one-party PRI rule.

Sheinbaum has also appeared to align herself more closely with the president after local elections last June in which MORENA was trounced in Mexico City. Some party heavyweights reportedly blamed Sheinbaum's lack of political acumen for the loss. In July 2021, the mayor replaced her government secretary with Martí Batres, a political operator close to the president. Her administration also shed its bright green branding in favor of the maroon and gold associated with the national government, a telling stylistic change that extended to debit cards used to

distribute social program subsidies.

It would not be surprising if López Obrador indeed wants Sheinbaum to carry the mantle. She has been in and around his orbit for the last 30 years, starting as a student activist supporting what would become the PRD, the political party that launched López Obrador to national recognition.

Sheinbaum has been especially prominent in advocating López Obrador's view on the intersection between energy and development, a central pillar of the president's ideology. They often hit the same notes in the perennial debate in Mexico over natural resources, tapping into a deep well of nationalistic pride and myth-making that dates back to Lázaro Cárdenas' expropriation of foreign oil concerns in 1938.

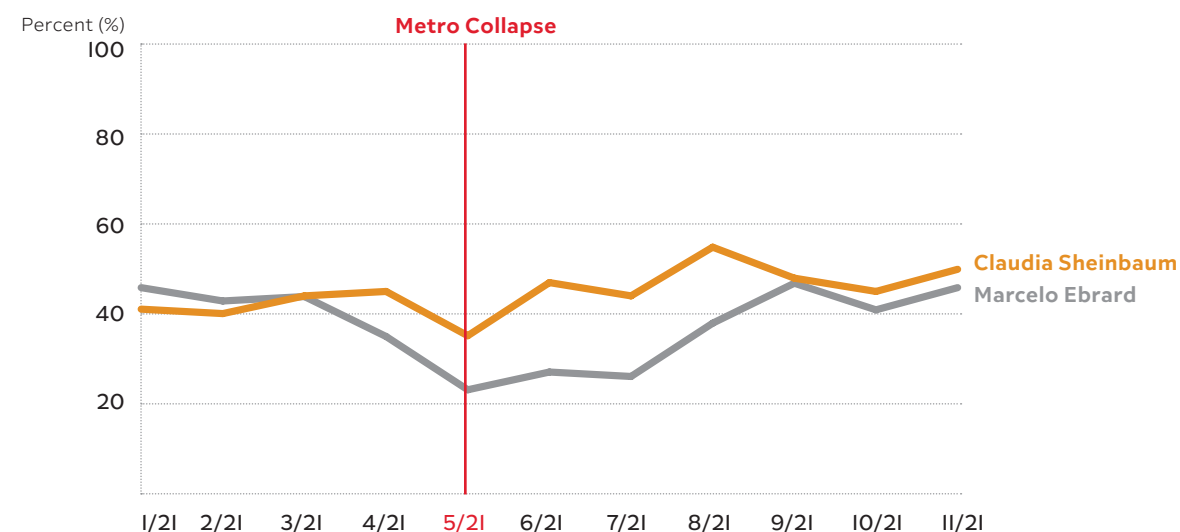
When López Obrador disputed the result of presidential elections in 2006, he made Sheinbaum a secretary in his "legitimate government" that occupied the center of Mexico City for two months; her responsibility was to "defend the national patrimony" from privatization. In 2008, when then-President Felipe Calderón attempted his own reform of Mexico's oil sector, Sheinbaum was put in charge of the Adelitas, groups of women enlisted into civil resistance by López Obrador who marched, occupied public spaces, and harangued administration politicians "to rescue (Mexican) oil, however they can, with what they can, and wherever they can."

When not in government, Sheinbaum's academic pursuits have married energy sustainability with the stated core of both her and López Obrador's political agenda: reducing inequality or, in administration parlance, "for the good of everyone, first the poor." Sheinbaum's doctoral thesis on residential energy use, part of which she researched under the renowned UC Berkeley efficiency expert Lee Schipper, begins, "Sustainability? Ask the indigenous people of Chiapas" — an apparent reproach of the top-down imposition of energy policies on marginalized communities.

"(Sheinbaum) without any doubt has a clear ideological compass: She's of the left and a *lopezobradorista*," said Genaro Lozano, a political analyst and professor at Universidad Iberoamericana. But, he said, "She's more pragmatic than she seems."

Sheinbaum vs. Ebrard

The MORENA frontrunners' national favorability ratings have recovered since the Mexico City metro collapse.



SOURCE: EL FINANCIERO (NOVEMBER 2021); PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS RATING CANDIDATES AS "GOOD" OR "VERY GOOD"

A technocrat at heart?

IT IS IN THIS CONTEXT that Sheinbaum's view of the 2013 reform, and the continued efforts to unravel it, can be understood. In a speech in March 2021 commemorating the Cárdenas expropriation, Sheinbaum said she was "convinced" that López Obrador's energy policy would strengthen Mexican sovereignty and "reduce environmental impact including, yes, mitigating climate change."

In support of her position, Sheinbaum noted that the president had banned fracking despite Mexico's continued dependence on natural gas. She also claimed that climate gains from wind projects in Oaxaca — one of Mexico's poorest states and home to some of the most significant wind energy potential in the world — had come "at a cost to local communities."

Despite her ideological alignment with López Obrador's political project, some observers believe a Sheinbaum presidency would look more like her technocratic, data-driven city administration than the president's "we have our own numbers" leadership. While she often echoes López Obrador's attacks on the "neoliberalism" of Mexican institutions (in-

cluding criticism of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, her alma mater), Sheinbaum has also worked with the private sector on local development projects. The city has even benefited from the 2013 reform while she's been in office, with the metro and other public services buying lower-cost energy through CFE-contracted private generators.

And while her priority has been on public spaces in often-overlooked parts of the city such as Iztapalapa (where painted rooftops under a new cable bus system read "Thank you, Claudia"), that has not stopped her from directing funds to redeveloping the city center, and improving roads and bike lanes in tourist-heavy, up-market neighborhoods.

"Sheinbaum is close to the president ... to the point where perhaps she has been pushing more his agenda than her own," said Eugene Zapata, the Latin America director at the Resilient Cities Network, which analyzes urban environment and development projects. "As we get closer (to the election) it would be great to hear more about her own vision of the country." ^{AQ}

Russell is a guest editor and correspondent in Mexico City for AQ



La Bruja de Texcoco performs to celebrate the first International Mambo Day in Mexico City.

Books 83

Brian Winter reviews *Beef, Bible and Bullets: Brazil in the Age of Bolsonaro* by Richard Lapper

Oscar del Valle reviews *Volver la vista atrás* by Juan Gabriel Vásquez

Film 86

Ena Alvarado reviews *Clara Sola* by director Nathalie Álvarez Mesén

Music 88

Sebastián Zubieta's winter playlist

Books

Nonfiction

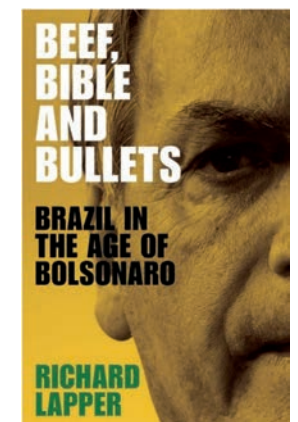
***Beef, Bible and Bullets* raises the question: Will *Bolsonarismo* survive Bolsonaro?**

Reviewed by Brian Winter

IN CERTAIN BRAZILIAN CIRCLES, the rewriting of history has already begun: Jair Bolsonaro's 2018 election victory was an aberration, an accident, the product of a now-discredited corruption investigation that unfairly put the rightful winner, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, in jail. Now free, Lula is leading Bolsonaro in polls for this October's election by 10–20 points or more. As the thinking goes, the fever of the last four years will soon break, and Brazil will return to its normal left-of-center point of equilibrium.

Richard Lapper's book *Beef, Bible and Bullets: Brazil in the Age of Bolsonaro* is a powerful counterargument, full of richly reported stories and data showing the country's conservative movement is here to stay, even if its now profoundly unpopular leader ends up being shoved aside. The book's title refers to the bloc of legislators in Congress representing, respectively, Brazil's agribusiness, evangelical Christians and gun lobbies — all of which have enormously expanded their numbers and influence in the past 30 years. Even for specialists, some of the details here are eye-popping.

Lapper starts with a fresh look back at what conservatives originally rebelled against — the Brazil left behind by 14 years of Workers' Party (PT) rule. The problems of that era are well-known: The worst recession in Brazil's history, endemic graft, and a years-long rise in crime that, by 2016, made 68% of Brazilians say in polls they almost constantly feared becoming a victim of violence, more than double the percentage of Mexicans who said the same. Meanwhile, the Brazilian state expanded to reach a bloated 38% of GDP, much larger than peers like Mexico (26%) and Chile (25%) and even bigger than China (34%) and Russia (33%), crowding out the private sector and acting as a clear brake on long-term economic growth.



Beef, Bible and Bullets: Brazil in the Age of Bolsonaro

by Richard Lapper
Manchester University
Press
Hardcover
272 pages

All this explains the “liberal-conservative” alliance of business leaders, gun-toting anti-crime types and social conservatives that began to take shape even before Bolsonaro’s election. The growth of the evangelical community, from 6% of Brazil’s population in 1980 to an estimated 31% today, has radically and perhaps permanently changed what Brazilians want from their politicians. One of the best passages of the book involves a group of preachers in a favela in Uberlândia, in Minas Gerais state, who had repeatedly voted PT prior to 2018. But the party’s emphasis on gender and LGBTQ rights alienated many. One plaintively told Lapper: “God showed me that I should vote for Bolsonaro.”

The truth of course is that Bolsonaro has delivered, at best, mixed results to these constituents. Homicides are down (for a variety of reasons), and evangelicals have gained a greater voice on issues like education, plus a seat on the Supreme Court. But COVID-19 exacted a brutal toll, numerous scandals have dogged the Bolsonaro family, the Brazilian state

remains as sprawling as ever, and investment is so low that the economy may experience yet another recession in 2022. Yet as Lapper repeatedly makes clear, the underlying currents that led to Bolsonaro’s rise seem set to only accelerate in coming years, with evangelicals expected to become an outright majority by mid-century.

What might happen to Bolsonaro himself? It seems plausible that a different, more competent brand of conservative might rise to take his place. But there are two examples that suggest otherwise. The first is his idol Donald Trump, who, against all odds, now looks well-positioned to return in 2024. The other is Lula, whose rise from the ashes reminds us that Brazilian politicians, from Getúlio Vargas to Fernando Collor and José Sarney, very often get a second (or third, or fifth) chance at glory. Even if he loses, both Bolsonaro and *bolsonarismo* may be here to stay. [AQ](#)

Winter is editor-in-chief of AQ

It’s this “look back” that provides the narrative structure of Vásquez’s phenomenal novel. *Volver la vista atrás* immerses the reader in the lives of three generations of Cabrerases, real people whose stories Vásquez remakes into fiction. As the crushing weight of the 20th century’s political violence falls on their private, intimate lives, the paths they will never set foot on again remain indelible in their memories.

Threatened by Nationalist rebels under General Francisco Franco during the Spanish Civil War, Sergio Cabrera’s grandfather flees with his family to the Dominican Republic. But there, another ferocious dictatorship looms: that of the merciless Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. They flee again, spending brief periods on the Haitian border and ending up in Colombia in 1945. There, Sergio’s father Fausto hears for the first time about the Communist Party, the guerrillas of the Eastern Plains and the revolution that was about to kick-start 50 years of bloodshed.

Struggles between right and left in Colombia mirror the unstable political landscape of Spain before the Civil War. “You’re not old enough to remember,” Sergio’s uncle Felipe tells him, “But that’s how it was. That’s exactly how it was.” As Fausto commits himself to the life of a revolutionary, young Sergio and his sister Marianella are caught up in a swirl of communist fervor that takes the family to Maoist China.

Abandoned by his parents, who return to Colombia to join the struggle there, Sergio grows up amid the ferment of the Cultural Revolution. Forced to follow his father’s commands to prepare for the revolution, he joins the Red Army. At 19, finally returning to a Colombia racked by violent repression and far-left insurgency, Sergio becomes a guerrilla fighter in the Popular Liberation Army (EPL). In the jungle, he must survive punishing marches, hunger and disease before he can earn the chance to get away — and become the distinguished filmmaker he is at the book’s outset.

Vásquez’s novel is an indelible portrait of the extremes of conviction, a deep probe into the mysterious origins of the fanaticism to which we are all susceptible. Why write a novel about a real-life person, and not a biography? The author’s own words best describe his reasons for navigating the murky waters between fact and fiction. Upon receiving the Mario Vargas Llosa 2021 Biennial Novel Prize, Vásquez thanked Sergio and Marianella Cabrera, not only his subjects but his personal friends, “for the trust with which they placed in my hands their memories, their documents, their lives, so that I could reimagine them through the novel, [the form] we human beings have invented to narrate the world.” [AQ](#)

Del Valle is a lawyer and writer based in Berlin

Fiction

Volver la vista atrás intertwines memory and political violence in this fictionalized portrait of a real-life guerrilla turned filmmaker.

Reviewed by Oscar del Valle

JUAN GABRIEL VÁSQUEZ’S LATEST NOVEL begins innocuously enough: Sergio Cabrera, a Colombian filmmaker, is being honored in Barcelona with a retrospective of his career. He’s also having a family reunion. Seeing his wife and his two children for the first time in a while, he’s hoping for a second chance. Maybe, he thinks, his life could resume its normal course. Then, an unexpected phone call brings the news that his father has died.

Cabrera finds himself undergoing a more personal kind of retrospective, reckoning with his relationship with family and the influence of a radical left-wing father. The book’s title, which translates literally as “look back,” is borrowed from a poem, “Caminante,” by Spanish modernist Antonio Machado, which describes life as walking down a path whose steps we can never retrace.



Volver la vista atrás

by Juan Gabriel Vásquez

Alfaguara

Paperback

416 pages

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

FICTION

Moldy Strawberries

By Caio Fernando Abreu

April 5, 2022

Archipelago

Paperback, 200 pages

Paradais

By Fernanda Melchor

March 2022

New Directions

Cloth, 128 pages

NONFICTION

The Revenge of Power

By Moisés Naím

February 22, 2022

Macmillan

Hardcover, 320 pages

Ripe for Revolution: Building Socialism in the Third World

Jeremy Friedman

January 4, 2022

Harvard University Press

Hardcover, 368 pages

Film

Drama

A Swedish-Costa Rican director traces the tension between religious dogma and female desire.

Reviewed by Ena Alvarado



Clara Sola

Directed by
Nathalie Álvarez Mesén

Screenplay by
Nathalie Álvarez Mesén
and María Camila Arias

Starring
Wendy Chinchilla Araya

Costa Rica

Distributed by
Oscilloscope Laboratories

AQ Rating: ★★★★★ (4/5)

WHEN ASKED IF SHE BELIEVES in the Virgin Mary, Clara, the protagonist in Nathalie Álvarez Mesén's debut feature, *Clara Sola*, responds flatly: "I can do whatever I feel like." Though she seems self-assured, her words reflect aspiration more than reality. After all, Clara is a 40-year-old woman tightly controlled by those around her, with little to no say over her own movements, health, or even clothes. Hers is a constricted life, and Álvarez Mesén's intimate film reveals what becomes of it when these decades-old community bonds come undone.

In the rural Costa Rican village where Clara lives, everybody knows she's a healer. Because she can perform miracles, her family and neighbors believe she can communicate with the Virgin Mary. At her mother's behest, Clara entertains visitors — sick people eager to heal — and presides over communal prayers at home. The work of a saint is a full-time job. When she gets time off, we almost always see her alone, wandering in the rain forest. Nature is where Clara feels most at ease. So it comes as no surprise that after years of quiet endurance, her small acts of rebellion materialize with the help of animals, trees, water and dirt.

Shortly before a mass, for example, Clara decides to lie on the muddy ground. When she goes on to greet fellow churchgoers in her sullied white dress, her mother is incensed. "The Virgin told me to do it," she offers as an excuse. A few days later, learning that her white mare, Yuca, might be sold, she releases her by a river. The family spends hours trying to find the horse, but their search is in vain. Yuca stays free. Clara's revolts lead her closer to nature, and perhaps most importantly, they enable release. This liberating process is best exemplified by the most persistent and powerful urge that Clara works to actualize: the full expression of her sexuality.



Wendy Chinchilla Araya (right) stars as Clara, a middle-aged religious healer who longs to escape her family's tight control.

The clash between sexual desire and freedom is at the heart of *Clara Sola*, and in this sense, Álvarez Mesén's film addresses an age-old Christian conflict. Clara is often turned on, especially by the telenovelas she watches with her family, yet whenever she begins to masturbate, she is chastised and forced to rub her fingers in red chili peppers. In line with the prevailing view in Clara's village, her mother calls her "vile" and "disgusting" whenever she gives way to these unauthorized sexual feelings. More than anybody else, Clara must aspire to emulate the Virgin, that "New Eve" who remedied primeval woman's original sin.

The traditional Catholic notion of sex as tainted derives from Saint Augustine's reading of the Book of Genesis. For Augustine, concupiscence, or libido, split from the human will when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Until that moment, as the liter-

ary historian Stephen Greenblatt has argued in *The New Yorker*, Augustine believed humans were perfectly free, for the only period in their entire history. Afterward, "because they had spontaneously, inexplicably, and proudly chosen to live not for God but for themselves, they had lost their freedom."

Clara turns this cause and effect inside out. For her, lust strengthens freedom, not the other way around. Through an exploration of her sexuality, she gains the ability to assert her individuality, and this newfound autonomy inaugurates a return to nature that is not inscribed in Christian terms. *Clara Sola's* invocation could not be clearer: Reentry to paradise does not require a purification of our desires. It demands an embrace of them. **AQ**

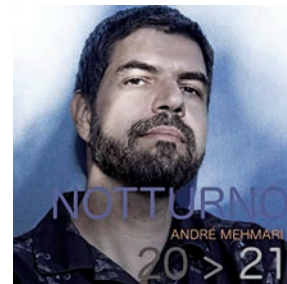
Alvarado is a writer and former assistant editor at The Atlantic

Music

AQ's Winter Playlist

A pyrotechnic Brazilian pianist and a Mexican “witch” turn tradition inside out.

by **Sebastián Zubieta**



Notturmo 20>21

André Mehmarí
Estúdio Monteverdi
Brazil

BRAZILIAN COMPOSER AND PIANIST André Mehmarí is in high demand. Recent projects include music for film and television, the opening of the 2016 Rio Olympics, and for the OSESP, Brazil’s leading orchestra. He has performed all over the world (including at the Americas Society in New York in 2013), and is also a prolific recording artist.

Mehmarí’s piano albums are often virtuosic, drawing equally from jazz, Brazilian styles, and classical music. His latest release, *Notturmo 20>21*, veers towards reflexive serenity, but with smatterings of his characteristic fireworks. Alongside eight of Mehmarí’s original compositions and one by Brazilian icon Hermeto Pascoal, the album features eight classical pieces written from the 17th to the 19th centuries that the pianist uses as starting points for improvisation, in the way that a jazz musician approaches a “standard.”

It’s a new spin on a longstanding tradition: Musicians in Europe and the Americas have been improvising on previously composed pieces for centuries. Church authorities during the Baroque period, for example, complained repeatedly about singers’ penchant for ornamenting their songs too much, rendering them unrecognizable.

In that sense, Mehmarí’s approach on this record resembles that of his predecessors. Tarquinio Merula’s 1638 love song “Folle è ben che si crede” declares, “Only a fool can believe that vain flattery will turn me away from my true love.” Mehmarí’s version keeps the original harmonies (with a few twists) and builds a delicate melodic filigree over the 17th-century original that manages to keep the song recognizable throughout. *Notturmo 20>21* was recorded during the pandemic in Mehmarí’s studio in the Serra da Cantareira, just north of São Paulo. According to the pianist, the album reflects his state of mind. “Music has the power to save us, it grounds us so that we can find our true bearings and forces us to reflect on our lives.”

MEXICAN ARTIST LA BRUJA de Texcoco released her debut album in 2019 and a handful of singles since the beginning of the pandemic, including “Chéni” (“fear” in the indigenous Purépecha language) and a cover of Cornelio Reyna’s mariachi classic “Carta invisible.”

La Bruja de Texcoco also has a fascinating origin story, as she revealed in a profile published on the Bandcamp music site. Violinist Octavio Mendoza Anario was playing at a party when a woman fell ill. A healer in attendance urged her to help. Mendoza, replying that her only magic was music, performed the Catholic anthem “El Pescador” — and the woman recovered.

When the healer prodded her to identify herself to the devil she had just expelled, she declared, “I am the Witch of Texcoco!” Thus did Octavio become La Bruja de Texcoco. As colorful as this story is, her music, on the cutting edge of the *son* tradition, is even more remarkable. Her harp playing and expressive voice anchor her songs firmly in the *son* tradition, but the arrangements expand the music in unexpected and evocative directions. In just under four minutes, “Chéni” delivers a message of freedom and empowerment traveling from a seemingly standard *son* introduction of dreamy harp chords, through verses in a Pan-American dance beat reaching through to an extended instrumental section that sounds like a mariachi party, with violins, and trumpets, but also incorporating *concheras* (a traditional guitar built on armadillo shells not found frequently in mariachi bands) — all capped off by an ending that any party band could play.

Her version of “Carta invisible,” released in a compilation in honor of songwriter Reyna’s 80th birthday, created in collaboration with Mexico City-based producer Demián Galvez, adds dance inflections to this classic road trip song, along with harp effects and an unsettling ostinato that resonates with the disconcerting message of the song: Why would anyone send a love letter written in invisible ink? La Bruja de Texcoco is a remarkable trans artist who has been fighting stereotypes in the world of traditional Mexican music for years. **AQ**

Zubieta is director of the music program at the Americas Society



Chéni, Carta invisible

La Bruja de Texcoco
Self-released
Mexico

26TH BRAVO BUSINESS AWARDS

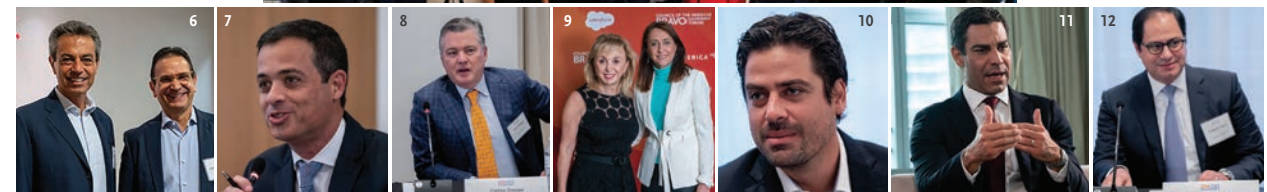
On Friday, November 12, the BRAVO Business Awards returned to honor three socially-driven business leaders at an exclusive dinner at the Perez Art Museum Miami: Chobani's Hamdi Ulukaya, Grupo Bancolombia's Juan Carlos Mora, and Medina Capital's Manuel D. Medina.



1. Left to right: Susan L. Segal - ASCOA with BRAVO Honorees, Hamdi Ulukaya - Chobani, Manuel D. Medina - Medina Capital, Juan Carlos Mora - Grupo Bancolombia & Maria Lourdes Teran - ASCOA; 2. Left to right: Marcelo Moussalli, Fernando Iraola, Moises Vidal - Bank of America; 3. Alejandro Anderlic - Salesforce, Eduardo Coello - Visa Latin America; 4. Left to right: Robert Ivanschitz, Giuliana Figueiredo, Pablo Zornotti, Mariana Castro, Fabricia Degiovanni, Leonardo Ganni - Microsoft Latin America.

2021 COUNCIL OF THE AMERICAS CEO ROUNDTABLE & SYMPOSIUM VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

On Friday, November 12, Council of the Americas hosted a private CEO Roundtable in Miami focused on Sustainability Imperatives for Business. Top speakers included Rodrigo Kede Lima from Microsoft, Juan Carlos Mora from Grupo Bancolombia, Felipe Bayón from Ecopetrol, Erika Herrero from Belcorp and Fernando Iraola from Bank of America. Following the CEO Roundtable, COA also hosted a virtual conference anchored by two BRAVO Leadership Conversations featuring Francis X. Suarez, Mayor of Miami & Manuel D. Medina from Medina Capital, and Cristina Palmaka from SAP & Blanca Treviño from Softtek.



5. Left to Right: David Kelly - University of Miami, Maria Lourdes Teran - ASCOA, Cristina Palmaka - SAP, Erika Herrero - Belcorp, Manuel D. Medina - Medina Capital, Juan Carlos Mora - Grupo Bancolombia, Susan L. Segal - ASCOA, Fernando Iraola - Bank of America, Felipe Bayón - Ecopetrol, Walter Cohen - Salesforce; 6. Carlo Enrico - Mastercard LAC, Juan Carlos Mora - Grupo Bancolombia; 7. Rodrigo Kede Lima - Microsoft LAC; 8. Carlos Dieppa - Mars, Inc.; 9. Blanca Treviño - Softtek, Cristina Palmaka - SAP; 10. Juan Pablo Mata - CBC Bottling; 11. Francis X. Suarez, Mayor of Miami; 12. Yosbel Ibarra - Greenberg Traurig, LLP.

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The Council of the Americas is the premier international business organization whose members share a common commitment to economic and social development, open markets, the rule of law, and democracy throughout the Western Hemisphere. Its membership consists of leading international companies representing a broad spectrum of sectors.



2021 COUNCIL OF THE AMERICAS SYMPOSIUM & BRAVO VIRTUAL SERIES

Starting July 2020, Council of the Americas' BRAVO Leadership Forums became virtual. During this time, COA hosted a select group of global business leaders in BRAVO Leadership Conversations and dynamic COA Symposium panel discussions to address the most relevant topics impacting business in the Americas, including ESG, sustainability, the future of work, tech for good, digital transformation, fintech, and leadership. The Symposium culminated with two BRAVO Leadership Conversations recorded in person in Miami on November 12, featuring Francis X. Suarez, Mayor of Miami & Manuel D. Medina from Medina Capital, and Cristina Palmaka from SAP & Blanca Treviño from Softtek.



1. José Antonio Fernández, Chairman of the Board, FEMSA; 2. Roberto Marques, Executive Chairman & Group CEO, Natura & Co.; 3. Carlos Slim Domit, Chairman, Telmex; 4. Mauricio Claver-Carone, President, Inter-American Development Bank; 5. Cristina Palmaka, President - Latin America & Caribbean, SAP; 6. Gaston Bottazzini, CEO, Falabella; 7. Erika Herrero, CEO, Belcorp; 8. Carlos Mario Giraldo, CEO, Grupo Éxito; 9. Marcelo Claude, Chief Executive Officer, SoftBank Group International and Chief Operating Officer, SoftBank Group Corp; 10. Suzanne DiBiana, Chief Impact Officer & EVP, Corporate Relations, Salesforce; 11. Savita Subramanian, Head of US Equity & Quantitative Strategy, Bank of America; 12. Osvaldo Gimenez, CEO, MercadoPago and EVP, MercadoLibre; 13. Michael Froman, Vice-Chairman and President - Strategic Growth, Mastercard.

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LATIN AMERICA AT A GLANCE

Slow to moderate GDP growth is projected for most of the region in 2022. However, high inflation and the impact of a 30% spike in hunger levels from 2019 to 2020 point to prolonged suffering for many.



GDP GROWTH

	ARGENTINA	BRAZIL	CHILE	COLOMBIA	DOMINICAN REPUBLIC	ECUADOR	GUATEMALA	MEXICO	PERU	VENEZUELA
2021 (projected)	8.3%	4.8%	11.5%	9.2%	10.9%	3.1%	N/A	5.6%	12.6%	1.9%
2022 (projected)	2.2%	0.7%	2.5%	3.9%	4.8%	2.8%	N/A	2.8%	3.2%	4.5%
2023 (projected)	2.0%	2.1%	2.0%	3.0%	5.0%	2.2%	N/A	2.1%	3.1%	5.0%

PROJECTIONS CURRENT AS OF JANUARY 2022

ECONOMIC INDICATORS

Inflation	50.9%	10.1%	7.2%	5.6%	8.2%	1.9%	3.1%	7.4%	6.4%	N/A
Unemployment rate	10.5%	13.9%	8.9%	13.7%	N/A	6.1%	N/A	4.2%	9.8%	N/A
Govt. deficit as % of GDP	-5.0%	-5.3%	-7.7%	-8.3%	N/A	-3.3%	N/A	-3.3%	-4.4%	-12.0%
Fiscal response to COVID as % of GDP	5.3%	9.2%	12.7%	4.6%	3.3%	0.7%	3.6%	0.7%	9.6%	N/A

FISCAL MEASURES ANNOUNCED OR TAKEN BY GOVERNMENTS AS OF SEPTEMBER 2021

HUNGER LEVELS

Undernourished people (millions)	1.7	N/A	0.6	4.4	0.9	2.2	2.9	9.2	2.8	7.8
% of population undernourished	3.9%	<2.5%	3.4%	8.8%	8.3%	12.4%	16.8%	7.2%	8.7%	27.4%

VALUES ARE AVERAGES OF 2018-2020 DATA

PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL RATING

President	Alberto Fernández	Jair Bolsonaro	Sebastián Piñera	Iván Duque	Luis Abinader	Guillermo Lasso	Alejandro Giammattei	Andrés Manuel López Obrador	Pedro Castillo	Nicolás Maduro
Approval	29%	31%	29%	25%	67%	28%	21%	67%	36%	N/A

Sources: GDP growth forecasts, inflation rate: Bloomberg (January), Unemployment rate, government deficit as percentage of GDP: Bloomberg (December). Fiscal response as percentage of 2020 GDP: International Monetary Fund (October); Hunger levels: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (November). Undernourishment is defined as the condition of an individual whose habitual food consumption is insufficient to provide, on average, the amount of dietary energy required to maintain a normal, active and healthy life. Note: Figures rounded to one decimal place.

Presidential Approval: Argentina, Management & Fit (December); Brazil, PoderData (December); Chile, Plaza Pública Cadem (December); Colombia, Invarner (December); Dominican Republic and Guatemala, Consulta Mitofsky (October); Ecuador, Perfiles de Opinión (November); Mexico, El Financiero (December); Peru, Ipsos (December). Note: Figures rounded to the nearest percentage.

ALEJANDRO CEGARRA/BLOOMBERG/GETTY; FÁBIO RODRIGUES POZZEBOM/AGÊNCIA BRASIL; SEAN GALLUP/GETTY; EL COMERCIO; FLICKR; HAMILTON LÓPEZ/AGENCIA PRESS SOUTH/GETTY; JOHAN ORDÓNEZ/AFP/GETTY; RADIO ZÓCALO NOTICIAS; JANINE COSTA/AFP/GETTY; GABY ORAA/BLOOMBERG/GETTY

INCLUDES DATA PROVIDED BY
Bloomberg


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BENEFIT
EVERYONE.**

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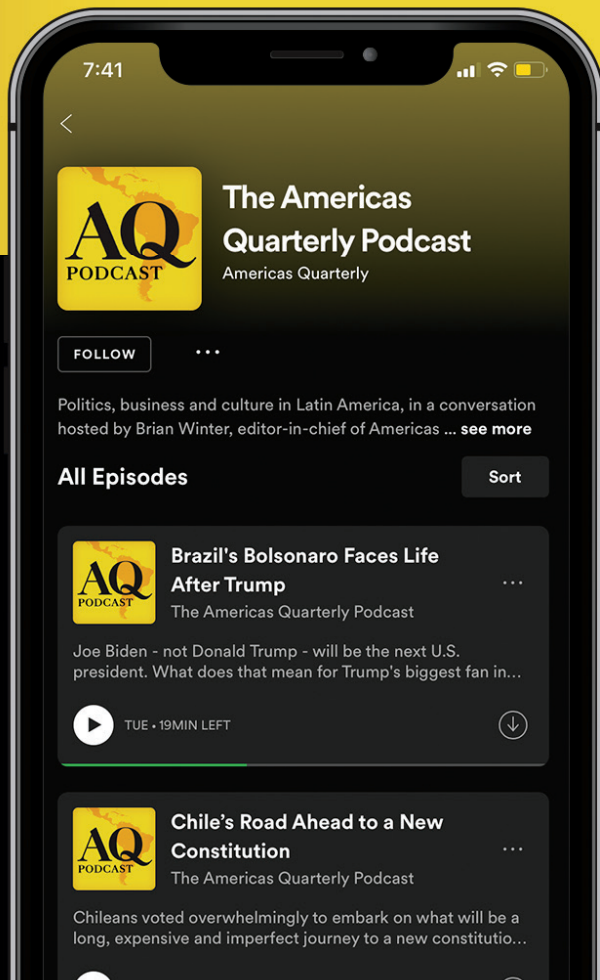
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