

POLITICS, BUSINESS & CULTURE IN THE AMERICAS | VOLUME 20 | ISSUE 3 | 2026

Americas

QUARTERLY

THE SPACE RACE COMES TO LATIN AMERICA

WITH ARTICLES BY
JUAN PABLO TORO, LAURA DELGADO LÓPEZ, AND JEANETTE NUÑEZ

NO. 3, 2026 AMERICASQUARTERLY.ORG \$9.95



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This issue is supported in part
by the Jack D. Gordon Institute
for Public Policy at
Florida International University.

Americas Quarterly: Politics, Business and Culture in the Americas (ISSN 1936-797X) is an independent publication of Americas Society and Council of the Americas (AS/COA). AS/COA are nonpartisan, not-for-profit organizations founded to promote better understanding and dialogue in the Western Hemisphere. The positions and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors or guest commentators and do not represent those of AS/COA. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from AS/COA.

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Latin America Looks to the Stars

The region has a huge opportunity in the booming global space industry. What is necessary to take full advantage?



WHEN ELON MUSK'S SPACEX went public in June in a record-setting \$75 billion share offering, it confirmed what investors had been betting on for years: The space industry is on the verge of a major boom. The global space economy could reach \$1.8 trillion by 2035, nearly triple its value in 2023. And Musk, among others, has signaled that much of the upcoming expansion will occur outside of the U.S.

Increasingly, the search is leading south. As Juan Pablo Toro reports in this issue's cover story, several Latin American countries are emerging as protagonists in the new space economy. Ecuador's pitch, for example, is in its name: Sitting just two degrees south of the equator, where the planet spins fastest and rockets get a free boost toward orbit, Ecuador is courting investors with the promise of cheaper launches. Plans for spaceports are now on the table in Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Peru and Uruguay, while Argentina and Brazil already build satellites that help farmers assess crops and governments respond to disasters.

Space has also become a theater in the U.S.-China rivalry, with Washington pressing local governments not to host Chinese installations. The region, for its part, is determined to be more than a battleground. But fragile institutions, thin budgets and unforgiving technical demands stand between ambition and achievement.

Laura Delgado López, a leader on Latin American space issues and fellow at Florida International University, sharpens the picture. She notes in her article that no country or company can operate in space alone. The core objective is not independence but resilience: the capacity to manage risk and diversify partners. That reframing carries a pointed message for Washington. U.S. companies increasingly offer exactly what the region wants — not black-box dependence but “sovereign solutions” that build local capacity. This presents opportunities for collaboration, if all parties can get the mix right.

Indeed, whether Latin America's moment among the stars brings genuine growth or just frustrated potential — a pattern the region knows well — remains to be seen. For now, after centuries of gazing skyward to map gods and calendars, Latin Americans are once again looking up. **AQ**

Latin America's Space Race

The region is both a battleground and an increasingly significant player in the booming global space industry. AQ breaks down how countries are seeking to capitalize.

Our special report starts on page 16.

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Juan Pablo Toro

Toro is a senior research fellow at the Chilean think tank AthenaLab, which he co-founded in 2019, and a professor of journalism at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. He was previously an editor for the *El Mercurio* group and The Associated Press.



Laura Delgado López

Delgado López is a senior fellow at Florida International University's Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy. She is an expert in Latin American space ecosystems, and frequently teaches, speaks, and advises on the region's evolving role in the global space sector.



Carlos Alvarado Quesada

Alvarado Quesada was president of Costa Rica from 2018 to 2022. He is now a senior fellow at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.



Jeanette Nuñez

Nuñez is the seventh president of Florida International University and its first alumna president. A former lieutenant governor of Florida and current chair of Space Florida, she is focused on student success, expanding research and innovation, and advancing FIU among the nation's top public universities.



Renata Keller

Keller is an associate professor of history at the University of Nevada, Reno. She is the author of the award-winning book *The Fate of the Americas: The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Hemispheric Cold War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2025).

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



Celebrated journalist Richard Lapper (left) speaks with AQ's Editor-in-Chief Brian Winter in May at the Americas Society's headquarters in New York City. Lapper discussed his new book *Lula! The Man, The Myth and a Dream of Latin America* (Bloomsbury, 2026), a deeply reported biography of Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who is vying for a fourth term in October's general election.

THE GRAY TIDE

AQ articles are regularly republished by media partners across Latin America. Last issue's cover story, on the region's rapidly aging population and the political effects of this demographic transformation, was republished in Argentina's *La Nación* and Chile's *La Tercera*.

MUNDO

La Marea Plateada: La transformación demográfica de América Latina

Una tormenta perfecta de tasas de natalidad en caída libre y poblaciones que envejecen rápidamente se avecina sobre América Latina. ¿Tendrá un lado positivo?

Por Laurence Blair/Americas Quarterly 21 ABRIL 2026

Foto: Referencial/Atón Chile. Por JAVIER SALVO/PHOTOSPORT

LA NACION > El Mundo

La marea plateada: la transformación demográfica de América Latina

Una tormenta perfecta de tasas de natalidad en caída libre y poblaciones que envejecen rápidamente se avecina sobre América Latina, ¿tendrá un lado positivo?

22 de abril de 2026 · 11:31 25'

Laurence Blair

THE GRAY TIDE

The author of last issue's cover story, Laurence Blair, was interviewed by outlets such as Bloomberg and CNN about his reporting for AQ. The article was also shared widely on social media.



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This collective suicide of humanity needs to turn around!



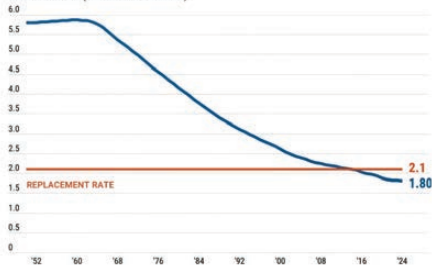
Brian Winter ✓ @BrazilBrian · Apr 21

Latin America is now aging faster than ANY region in the world. Chile has a lower birthrate than even Japan.

What is going on?

Latin America's fertility rate has been plunging

TOTAL FERTILITY (CHILDREN PER WOMAN)



Note: Includes Caribbean countries.
Source: World Population Prospects 2024 (United Nations)



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Periodista ¿Qué pasó con lo que pasó? en YT
CEO de [Lifememories.video](https://lifememories.video) Acuerdos comerciales: patricijaniot@laneta.com

Nos estamos envejeciendo como continente. La natalidad por los suelos y hay países en donde cada año hay menos nacimientos. Vean la gráfica del reportaje de @AmerQuarterly.



Brazilian Senator and presidential candidate Flávio Bolsonaro attends the "March for Jesus" in São Paulo in June, as evangelical support remains key to his campaign. His bid recently lost ground amid several setbacks, including reports that he sought funds from jailed banker and alleged fraudster Daniel Vercaro for a film about his father, former President Jair Bolsonaro. Vercaro and Flávio Bolsonaro have denied any wrongdoing.

PHOTO BY MIGUEL SCHINCARIOL/AFP/GETTY



THE BIG
PICTURE





AQ

THE BIG
PICTURE

After decades of delays, Bogotá's first metro line holds an initial test with passengers in May. A Chinese consortium is building the line, which is designed to ease congestion for the 8 million residents of Colombia's capital, considered one of the world's most traffic-clogged cities.

PHOTO BY SERGIO ACERO/AFP/GETTY



AQ**THE BIG
PICTURE**

Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel attends a rally in Havana in May to protest the United States' indictment of former President Raúl Castro. The U.S. charged Castro with murder and other crimes for his alleged role in the 1996 shooting down of two civilian aircraft operated by a group of Cuban exiles.

PHOTO BY JOAQUIN HERNANDEZ/XINHUA/GETTY







AS HEARD ON THE AMERICAS QUARTERLY PODCAST

Experts and policymakers join AQ's Editor-in-Chief Brian Winter to discuss the issues currently shaping Latin American politics, economics and culture.



"There's an idea that the U.S. administration won't take any military action [against Mexico] because we have these huge trade interests. But what we've seen, not only with Trump, but also across the world is that, increasingly, trade is not a guardrail."

—Brenda Estefan, professor at IPADE Business School in Mexico City and a columnist at Reforma



"It goes beyond who we get elected. There are deep issues [in Peru] that need to be tackled: more social cohesion, less corruption, more transparency, institutions really, really matter, the judicial system has been very much politicized, etc. And those are things that are weighing down Peru."

—Luis Miguel Castilla, senior visiting fellow at the London School of Economics and former Minister of Economy and Finance of Peru



"In Colombia, instead of having a left-right pendulum, we have always been in more of a peace negotiation versus outright confrontation pendulum. Now, the pendulum is swinging away from peace and much more towards confrontation."

—Sergio Guzmán, director of Colombia Risk Analysis

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Thomas Traumann

A veteran political analyst discusses voting trends ahead of Brazil's October elections.



Interviewed by Emilie Sweigart

AQ: What are the top issues in this year's general election?

TT: The most important thing is polarization. The polarization we saw in 2018 grew in 2022, and it is still extremely powerful. You have President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on one side, and Flávio Bolsonaro on the other, and both are extremely loved and hated figures. Public security, corruption, inflation, the relationship with the United States, and even Lula's health will also be very important issues.

AQ: How are long-term voting trends playing out in the 2026 race?

TT: Over the last 20 years, more women have been voting, and the electorate has become older and more educated. In Brazil, evangelicals mostly vote for the right, and Catholics mostly vote for the left. Data on religion became available recently since the census was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. People expected evangelicals would be more than 30% of the population, but they reached only 27%, with Catholics at 57%. Many people think that because many evangelical leaders grew so close to politics and *bolsonarismo*, this drew some people away.

AQ: Polls show that many Brazilians would prefer another option in the presidential race other than Lula or Flávio. Which factors could swing their vote?

TT: That's the million-dollar question. If inflation is high, Lula will be punished. If there's any threat that U.S. tariffs will cause unemployment in Brazil, that will be bad for Flávio. Independents will decide in the last few weeks, based on how they are feeling. They are not really looking at the big agendas, but rather at which candidate they hate the least.

AQ: What are you expecting from the legislative elections?

TT: There have been fewer parties in the lower house over the last 10 years, and the parties are getting bigger and stronger. After this election, six or seven parties could have over 80% of the representatives. Two-thirds of the Senate will be elected this year, and if the right wins the majority, they could have enough votes to impeach Supreme Court judges. No matter who the president is next year, there will be an institutional clash between the Senate and the Supreme Court over the impeachment of judges. AQ

Traumann is a political and economic analyst at GloboNews and *O Globo*. He is a member of *Americas Quarterly's* editorial board.

LATIN AMERICA'S SPACE RACE



THE SPACE RACE COMES

The region wants to be not just a battleground,



TO LATIN AMERICA

but a protagonist in the burgeoning space economy.

BY JUAN PABLO TORO





GUAYAQUIL, ECUADOR — Why would Ecuador, of all places, be a focus in Latin America's new space race?

Well, the answer is in the country's name.

On a recent afternoon, Robert Aillón and his colleagues were seated at a table in a chain hotel restaurant in Guayaquil, Ecuador's business capital, radiating enthusiasm for their proposed project: a new private spaceport for vertical launches and horizontal vehicle recovery at one of three potential sites nearby.

Some foreign investors regard Ecuador with caution at a moment when organized crime groups are battling for control of the country's seaports, key transit hubs for cocaine bound for Europe and Asia. But for Aillón and his partners, the Guayaquil area is strategic for a different reason: It sits just two degrees south of the imaginary line dividing the world into two hemispheres.

The planet rotates at its maximum speed at the equator — 1,040 miles (1,670 kilometers) per hour — making it more efficient to launch rockets from these latitudes. Thanks to the rotational boost, less fuel is needed to reach orbital velocity, which in turn means rockets can carry more payload at a lower cost.

Compared to many other countries that sit directly on the equator — a list that includes Congo, Somalia, Uganda and Indonesia, as well as Colombia and Brazil — Ecuador, with its dollarized economy and business-friendly government, looks attractive despite its security challenges.

"What's coming is big," enthused Aillón, a 50-year-old Ecuadorian who worked as a banking executive in his home country and in the United States before founding his firm Leviathan Space Industries LLC. "Spaceports are a cornerstone of future competitiveness."

Many agree. A report by the World Economic Forum and McKinsey & Company projected the global space economy could reach \$1.8 trillion by 2035, up from \$630 billion in 2023. The June initial public of-

fering Elon Musk's SpaceX, which raised a record \$75 billion, ignited even greater interest in the sector worldwide. Musk has said he will look beyond the United States for future spaceports, with Latin America an obvious potential beneficiary.

Space is also increasingly an important theater in the strategic rivalry between China and the United States, with both superpowers vying in Latin America for allies and key geography such as the Southern Cone region, whose clear skies are ideal for tracking satellites. Meanwhile, Latin American governments are determined to be not just a battleground in a new Cold War, but key protagonists in the space industry's growth and governance.

The ambitions are literally out of this world. Musk's stated goal is to establish a permanent human presence beyond Earth, thereby ensuring the long-term survival of the species. Aillón uses similar language on his LinkedIn page, calling a private spaceport in Ecuador a "first step" to interplanetary travel. Plans for launch facilities have also been floated in Uruguay, the Dominican Republic and Peru. For those still residing on Earth, Argentina and Brazil are producing satellites that have practical implications for everyday people, such as assessing crop quality and helping governments better manage natural disasters.

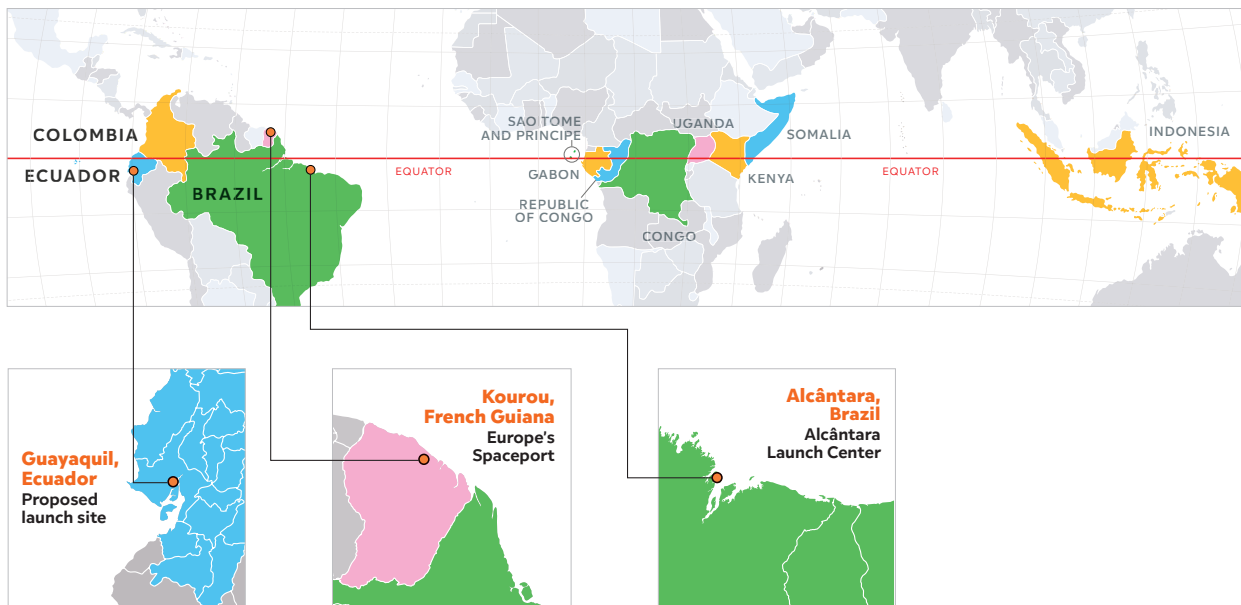
Yet observers warn of a gold rush mentality in which some investors may be overestimating the private sector's ability to build a space industry in Latin America on its own. Governments and companies must first address numerous challenges including weak institutions and limited infrastructure, they say.

"Opportunities exist, yes, but they will not materialize automatically," said Laura Delgado López, a senior fellow at Florida International University's Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy. "We need to better understand the mechanisms that shape the space sector."

Indeed, the question facing Latin America's space sector today is: What is mere hype, and what is truly within reach?

THE EQUATORIAL ADVANTAGE

South America's current and proposed spaceports are located in some of the most stable countries along the Equator.



PROVEN POTENTIAL

IT'S CERTAINLY NOT ALL speculative: The region already has a proven record when it comes to launch sites.

The Alcântara Launch Center (CLA by its initials in Portuguese) sits on Brazil's northeastern coast, in the state of Maranhão. Created in 1983, the CLA lies just 2.3 degrees south of the equator in an area with low air traffic and population density. The site is attractive enough that U.S. officials were elated in 2019 when, after decades of conversations, then-President Jair Bolsonaro signed a so-called technology safeguards agreement allowing U.S. technology to be used at the site.

However, even Alcântara has been a story of frustrated potential. Following a rocket explosion on a CLA launch pad in 2003 that killed 21 engineers and technicians, observers say the center was under-utilized for many years. Most launches are suborbital, meaning they reach space just briefly, at about 60

miles above sea level, allowing for microgravity experiments, atmospheric studies and the growing industry of space tourism.

Alcântara saw its first commercial launch in December 2025, with a rocket from the South Korean firm Innospace that crashed under a minute after liftoff. Innospace plans to launch from the CLA again this year.

The other major launch site on the continent lies about 1,250 miles east — in French Guiana, an overseas region of France. Often called Europe's Spaceport, the facility began operations in 1968 and is jointly operated by the European Space Agency (ESA) and France's National Centre for Space Studies, launching both government and commercial rockets.

In recent years, many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have used the European facility to transport their satellites, illustrating the lack of fully viable alternatives inside the region itself.



The rocket launch tower at Brazil's Alcântara Launch Center in 2018

Still, no one doubts the growth possibilities. The ESA projects the number of satellites orbiting the Earth will soar from about 10,000 today to 100,000 by 2030. Many will be small devices deployed in constellations, like those SpaceX operates in low Earth orbit over various parts of the world to provide internet services, a market Amazon is poised to enter as well.

All that growth will require new launch sites, as well as new players. SpaceX's IPO was considered a milestone in what some call "new space" — an era in which state monopolies are being replaced by private companies that take large risks, have financial backing, and are oriented toward profits.

But the barriers to entry are high. Aillón, the Leviathan Space CEO, cited the example of SaxaVord Spaceport on the Scottish coast, which with an initial investment of \$57 million is expected to see the launch of a suborbital rocket this boreal summer. For

Leviathan's initiative, Aillón said he was attempting to raise \$800 million beginning this year. The firm has already secured its first partner: Florida-based Blackstar Orbital, which is betting on breaking into the market for cargo or surveillance space drones.

Not everybody can follow the SpaceX model, warned Victoria Valdivia, global fellow at the European Space Policy Institute and fellow at the co-SPAR-EUROMOONMARS-LUNEX initiative.

"In Latin America there is a tendency to talk about 'new space' and the space economy, particularly among many startups that seem to fill the void in an area where states have been inefficient," said Valdivia, who is also a PhD student at the Instituto de Estudios Avanzados at Universidad de Santiago de Chile.

"Because their projects are attractive, they receive a great deal of visibility, but since they are more focused on business than on regulations, they forget



that they need an entire organizational framework to operate,” Valdivia said. She cited environmental permits, as well as flight and tax considerations, where Latin American bureaucracies “are not exactly agile.”

THE U.S.-CHINA RIVALRY

STILL, THE REGION HAS other natural advantages. Satellites must be monitored and tracked from the ground, but only about one-third of the Earth’s land area lies south of the equator. That places South American territory at a premium, especially areas where skies are generally clearest.

Indeed, certain locations are coveted by major powers looking to maximize their reach — what the nascent field of “astropolitics” understands as the set of activities and technologies a state can deploy in space for purposes of war, development, and prestige.

A recent U.S. congressional committee report noted that China has built 11 facilities for satellite communications and radio telescopes in Latin America, including in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, and Venezuela, sparking concern among U.S. officials over their dual-use potential, given Beijing’s explicit doctrine fusing civil and military operations.

To block new initiatives, the Trump administration — in an updated application of the Monroe Doctrine — is openly pressuring countries not to host new Chinese space-related installations. In the mountains of Argentina’s San Juan Province, the CESCO radio telescope that China was building sits inactive, having been sidelined by U.S. pressure.

In Chile’s Atacama Desert, atop the flattened peak of Cerro Ventarrones, some of the components that were to form part of an astronomical observatory remain in place — a project canceled by Chilean authorities citing legal issues, following Washington’s

warnings about the threat it posed to the security of U.S. space assets.

China’s ambitions remain large. Following in the footsteps of Musk’s Starlink, Chinese companies are seeking to build their own satellite constellations to provide wireless communications services — among them Guo Wang, managed by the state-owned China Satellite Network Group, and Qianfan, developed by Shanghai Spacesail Technologies Co. Ltd.

According to the International Telecommunication Union’s website, several Chinese satellite operators filed requests during the final week of 2025 to deploy more than 200,000 devices in the coming years — an astronomical figure that runs up against bottlenecks in the launch sector and has already prompted the Asian giant to explore the possibility of establishing an equatorial spaceport in Malaysia. Some analysts wonder if their next push will be in South America.

CONFRONTING THE OBSTACLES

IN THE MEANTIME, companies and government officials are working to solve some of the bottlenecks facing the space industry — and hopefully seize the moment.

In 2024, Brazil enacted a space activities law that “would enable more legal security for launch operators from Brazil” and thus represented “an important step toward future CLA business with other foreign, private and government launchers,” according to Bruno Martini, an aerospace scientist at the Brazilian Air Force University (UNIFA). A new state-owned company, Empresa de Projetos Aeroespaciais do Brasil S.A. (ALADA), also began operations in 2025 with the goal of strengthening the Brazilian space program, including the commercial use of the CLA. Brazil is now working to develop its own rockets.

**NO ONE DOUBTS THE GROWTH POSSIBILITIES.
THE NUMBER OF SATELLITES ORBITING EARTH IS PROJECTED
TO SOAR FROM ABOUT 10,000 TODAY TO 100,000 BY 2030.**

THE U.S. GOVERNMENT IS EAGER TO EXPAND LAUNCH SITES WITHIN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE AS PART OF ITS GEOPOLITICAL CHESS MATCH WITH CHINA.

Despite this renewed momentum, lack of funding remains a challenge. The National Confederation of Industry noted in a 2025 report that the national budget of \$47 million allocated to the space sector equated to just 0.002% of Brazil's GDP in 2023 — the second-lowest level of investment among G20 countries.

Much farther north, in the Dominican Republic, President Luis Abinader himself announced during his annual address to Congress in February that his country would begin construction of a spaceport — thanks to an agreement with U.S. company Launch on Demand (LOD Holding) involving an investment

of \$600 million. “We are going to launch a satellite or a rocket into space from Pedernales — just wait and see,” the president declared. The milestone is expected to occur in May 2028.

LOD Holding is led by Burton Catledge, a retired U.S. Air Force colonel who previously commanded the Air Force's 45th Operations Group, 45th Space Wing, supporting numerous rocket launches for industry giants like SpaceX, Blue Origin, and Moon Express, and also served at the Pentagon.

In an interview with *AQ*, Catledge explained that the site in the Dominican Republic was chosen because of its relative proximity to the equator (18 de-



Northern Chile's ALMA radio telescope is composed of 66 high-precision antennae.



grees north), access to open waters, low population density, favorable high-altitude winds, and availability of multiple orbital trajectories. He also pointed to the construction of a nearby seaport — enabling the delivery of large space hardware — and the expansion of a neighboring airport for satellite transport, both being promoted by the government.

“President Abinader said in a meeting: ‘Burton, here is my phone number. If you have to wait more than 48 hours for anything, call me’ ... From that moment on, every door opened,” Catledge said. As recently as May, 528 acres of state-owned land were acquired for this purpose, and a Memorandum of Understanding was signed with the Instituto Tecnológico de Santo Domingo (INTEC) to train engineering and related students in highly specialized aerospace disciplines, laying the groundwork for the development of a space economy in the country.

The project envisions four launch pads — two for heavy and superheavy rockets, one for medium rockets, and one for small ones — that will operate independently. Financing comes from private institutional investors rather than public funds, Catledge said.

The Launch on Demand CEO said the project also has political backing from the U.S. government, eager to expand launch sites within the Western Hemisphere as part of its geopolitical chess match with Beijing. Catledge said he saw a “tangible commitment from the U.S. that they’re not just saying they’re pivoting to the Western Hemisphere — they in fact are.”

MATTERS OF NATIONAL INTEREST

FAR FROM THE ENTHUSIASTIC entrepreneurs of the private sector, Peru has chosen to travel the “old space” route to attempt to develop a spaceport — drawing on its experience managing large infrastructure projects in partnership with foreign actors, despite its persistent political instability of recent years.

In November 2024, Peru’s space agency, an entity under the Ministry of Defense, signed a Memorandum of Understanding with NASA, under which cooperation began on joint feasibility studies of launch sites, technical assistance, and planning for future launches.

The Ministry of Defense’s 2023–2026 Multi-Year Investment Report on Public-Private Partnerships estimated the project’s cost at \$270 million and said it would aim to facilitate rocket launches for orbital as well as suborbital flights: “Those that will transport people to other continents in less time without completing a full orbit of the Earth.”

The spaceport would be located at a Peruvian Air Force base — either in Chiclayo, Arequipa, or Talara, with the last of these generating the most discussion given its location four degrees south of the equator. Delegations of U.S. space specialists have visited Peru to discuss the vast array of political, social, financial, economic and regulatory considerations the country must take into account if the project is to go forward.

“It is part of a national initiative through which the country aims to become a connectivity hub, given its strategic location and policy of openness and global integration. It is also a way of compensating for weaknesses in infrastructure,” explained Clemente Rodríguez, a researcher at the Center for Strategic Studies of the Peruvian Army. He noted that Peru recently opened a major Pacific port, expanded its main airport in Lima, and is considering the construction of a rail corridor to Brazil.

Even the Peruvian Congress overcame its chronic divisions to pass by a wide margin, in March, the bill submitted by former President Dina Boluarte declaring the creation of a spaceport to be a matter of national interest. Law 32571 authorizes the Ministry of Defense to lead the technical and legal studies that will determine the project’s viability.

In past centuries, the peoples who inhabited the American continent gazed upon the Infinite to find their gods, devise complex calendars and orient their pyramids. Today, even though work is still needed to bring these dreams to fruition, Latin Americans are once again looking to the stars. 

Toro is a senior research fellow at the Chilean think tank AthenaLab, which he co-founded in 2019, and a professor of journalism at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile



TAKING FLIGHT

Initiatives from Brazil, Argentina and Mexico show how the space industry is getting off the ground, although numerous challenges remain.



Brazil's Landmark Satellite Program

Amazônia-I, the first satellite entirely designed and operated by Brazil, is part of a mission that includes two future units.

by Emilie Sweigart

WITH THE LAUNCH OF the Amazônia-1 satellite five years ago, Brazil displayed its growing space capabilities. Now, the country plans to put two new units into orbit as part of a mission to observe and monitor deforestation in the Amazon, natural resources and agricultural areas.

Launched from India in February 2021, Amazônia-1 was the first Earth observation satellite fully designed and operated by Brazil, built on lessons learned from the ongoing China-Brazil Earth Resources Satellites (CBERS) program, which began in the 1980s. Since then, Brazil has engaged in

technology transfer and exchange with China as well as developed its own satellite capabilities.



Amazônia-1 at a launch base in India in 2021

Amazônia-1 is the first to use Brazil's Multi-Mission Platform, a generic satellite bus designed to be cost-effective and reduce development time. The platform will also be used on Amazônia-1B, a satellite expected to launch from Europe's Spaceport in French Guiana in 2027. It will be part of Brazil's AQUAE mission to monitor domestic water resources, and a dual satellite program with Argentina, SABIA-Mar, to monitor oceans and coastal areas. A launch date for Amazônia-2, the Amazônia mission's final satellite,

is yet to be announced.

Despite Amazônia-1's success, "celebrating one or two satellites launching is not enough" for the size of Brazil's space ambitions, Bruno Martini, an aerospace scientist at the Brazilian Air Force University (UNIFA), told *AQ*.

Funding remains a major obstacle. According to the National Confederation of Industry (CNI), Brazil's space sector received \$47 million in public fund-

ing in 2023, equivalent to 0.002% of its GDP and the second-lowest level of investment in the G20, ahead only of Mexico.

Brazil has had "great ambitions since the '60s," said science journalist Salvador Nogueira. "But if you don't have a space policy that invests adequately, we can't really go that much forward." AQ

||||| Sweigart is an editor at *Americas Quarterly*

How Satellogic Is Trying to Reshape the Space Race

The company founded in Buenos Aires is pushing competitors to rethink who owns the sky.

by Horacio Aizpeolea

BUENOS AIRES — For more than 15 years, Satellogic has been working to fulfill its foundational promise: democratizing access to high-resolution satellite imagery by offering data at significantly lower costs than traditional competitors.

While legacy rivals limit satellite Earth observation imagery to wealthy governments and large corporations, Satellogic is betting that lower costs can become not only a commercial but also a geopolitical differentiator, via its growing network of satellites that monitor hundreds of sites worldwide each day.

The company, founded in 2010 in Buenos Aires and Nasdaq-listed (SATL), announced in May an \$18 million contract to provide strategic defense monitoring to a new undisclosed client. The deal was more than a commercial milestone. For some, it signaled that Latin America's

space ambitions have moved beyond symbolism.

"Satellogic is the incarnation of the new space logic," Lucas Arias Coco, a researcher at the AI & Robotics Group (GIAR) of the National Technological University in Buenos Aires, told *AQ*.

The company's services span precision agriculture, environmental management, and defense. It also offers turnkey satellite systems to sovereign clients, giving smaller nations a faster path to technological independence in Earth observation. Satellogic, now headquartered in Davison, North Carolina, has been expanding its customer base and,

in the first quarter of the year, signed deals in Australia, Malaysia, Albania, and Portugal, as revenue grew 80% year over year to \$6.1 million.

"Defense and intelligence organizations are the primary drivers of demand because they understand that persistent



A Satellogic satellite captured this image of Palau Bohayen in Malaysia.

intelligence is becoming a strategic capability,” Alan Kharsansky, Satellogic’s chief technology officer, told *AQ*. “Our view is that the market is evolving beyond Earth observation. Customers don’t wake up wanting satellite imagery. They want to understand what’s happening in the places that matter to

them,” he added.

The company plans to launch its AI-driven Merlin constellation in October and have it fully operational in the first quarter of 2027. **AQ**

Aizpeolea is a Buenos Aires-based journalist

Argentina's Global Satellite Aspirations

The national space agency, CONAE, has yet to announce details of two upcoming SAOCOM launches.

by Horacio Aizpeolea

BUENOS AIRES — At a time when fiscal constraints and political volatility often undermine long-term planning in Latin America, Argentina’s SAOCOM satellite program stands out as a rare example of sustained strategic investment.

Developed by the National Space Activities Commission (CONAE) in the 2000s during the presidency of Néstor Kirchner, the program relied on major contributions from the state-owned technology firm INVAP, the nation’s atomic commission (CNEA), private company VENG, and Italy’s space agency. Unlike conventional optical satellites, SAOCOM-1A (launched in 2018) and SAOCOM-1B (2020) are equipped with L-band synthetic aperture radar (SAR) that can collect data through clouds, smoke, and darkness, providing reliable information under virtually any weather conditions.

Argentina designed the satellites — as part of an ambitious \$600 million project — primarily to support its thriving agricultural sector, monitor natural disasters, and measure soil moisture. The satellites help improve crop management, assess drought



SAOCOM-1A with its radar antenna deployed

risk, and strengthen disaster preparedness.

“The true value of projects like SAOCOM lies not merely in the satellite itself, but in the knowledge, experience, and industrial capabilities they generate — which can subsequently be applied to new missions, products, and enterprises,” Gabriel Sanca, a professor and researcher at

the National University of San Martín (UNSAM), told *AQ*.

Through a partnership with Italy’s space agency, SAOCOM also supports the operation of COSMO-SkyMed, a dual-use (civilian and military) Earth observation satellite constellation considered one of the world’s most advanced systems for environmental monitoring and emergency management.

A next-generation SAOCOM-2 constellation is under development, although launch schedules remain undetermined. Early plans envisioned launches in 2025 and for this year, but more recent international mission databases suggest deployment could slip into the latter part of the decade. CONAE declined to comment on details for the upcoming launches.

In the meantime, Argentina has also made inroads with microsatellites. In April, a shoebox-sized satellite, known as *ATENEA*, transmitted its first telemetry data from space as part of *NASA*'s *Artemis*

II mission, highlighting the sector's potential and global aspirations. **AQ**

Aizpeolea is a Buenos Aires-based journalist

Latin America Has a Space Agency. Now Comes the Hard Part.

ALCE faces pressing questions about its political support and future funding.

by Cyntia Barrera Díaz

MEXICO CITY — The Latin American and Caribbean Space Agency (*ALCE*) held its first general assembly in Mexico in February, marking the transition of a five-year-old diplomatic ambition into an operational institution. Of the 18 countries that signed the agency's founding convention in 2021, only 11 ratified it. The challenge ahead is making it matter.

Since its inception, the agency has attracted expressions of cooperation from the European Space Agency (*ESA*) and China's National Space Administration (*CNSA*). Spain's and Italy's space agencies have followed suit, while South Korea's Aerospace Research Institute (*KARI*) was designated as its permanent technical advisor.

But alongside expressions of international support, the case for internal concern is equally real. *ALCE* has yet to publicly disclose how much its member states contribute or what its operational budget is, and the institution needs to align the aspirations of many national agencies with limited resources. Mexico, the agency's loudest advocate, slashed its 2026 budget by over a third, to around \$2.6 million, making it one of the world's most underfunded such agencies. A constitutional reform that would give the space sector a robust le-

gal framework and attract private investment remains stalled in the Senate.

Besides these concerns, geopolitics cast doubt on *ALCE*'s future. Brazil, the region's most advanced space power, never joined the agency, a decision compounded by its temporary withdrawal from *CELAC*, the regional body under which *ALCE* was established. Argentina, one of the agency's early promoters and cofounders, signed the founding convention but never ratified it after the Milei government pivoted away from regional multilateralism.

"It is disheartening that, despite sharing a common language, cultural traits, and a shared geographical area, we are unable to establish cooperation for the common good," Valeria Ramos Barba, a consultant on space law and policy based in Tokyo, told *AQ*.

Until now, the priorities *ALCE* has outlined — environmental monitoring, disaster risk management, food security, and digital connectivity — address real and urgent regional needs. The question

remains whether the agency will be able to deliver on its lofty ambitions. **AQ**

Barrera Díaz is a bilingual editor and journalist based in Mexico City



The convention establishing *ALCE* was signed in Mexico in 2021.



LATIN AMERICA'S QUEST FOR SPACE SOVEREIGNTY

**The region's pursuit of autonomy in
the growing space sector is more complex
than it seems. The U.S. can be an
important partner.**

by Laura Delgado López

EARLIER THIS YEAR, Brazil's telecommunications agency Anatel officially authorized SpaceSail, a broadband constellation often described as China's equivalent to Starlink, to operate in Brazilian territory. The announcement didn't generate many headlines, but it deserves more attention. Not because it was a statement about China, but because it was a statement about the region's desire for options.

Across Latin America, professionals in the space industry are consistently advocating for solutions with sovereignty in mind. Chile's 2025 National Space Policy calls for national space capabilities to "strengthen autonomy and independence." Argentina's defense doctrine reinforces a desire for independent launch access, viewed as a vital component of national defense and sovereignty. A technical working group in Brazil is studying options for a sovereign alternative to the systems that provide position, nav-

igation and timing (PNT) services. And so on.

The autonomy agenda in Latin America is not inherently anti-U.S., nor is it pro-Chinese. It is also not unique to the region. European leaders have the same concerns and are attempting to balance what is nationally developed with what is sourced via partners or the international market. This is not only a function of geopolitics but a response to a sharper awareness of vulnerability and the need for resilience.

Indeed, these recurring ambitions reflect a genuine concern that, as reliance on space technology increases, dependence on foreign space systems is a strategic liability. Autonomy, sometimes alternatively couched as self-sufficiency or sovereignty, has thus become a key organizing concept for Latin American space ambitions. The question is what that means in a global sector, and whether the U.S. is adequately positioning itself to be part of the answer.



A rocket carrying satellites blasts off from a commercial spacecraft launch site in China's Hainan province in 2025. The satellites are part of China's broadband constellation SpaceSail, recently authorized to operate in Brazil.

THE LIMITS OF GOING IT ALONE

THERE IS A VERSION of autonomy that is as headline-grabbing as it is unworkable: fully independent, indigenously developed and controlled space systems that depend on no foreign provider or system. This narrative may stroke nationalistic egos, but it is not realistic. It ignores the gargantuan financial, infrastructure and human resources that would need to be mobilized in the near term and, importantly, maintained in the long term. But it is also misplaced because of something more fundamental: the nature of space itself.

Space activities are global and integrated by both design and physics. The international governance framework that has guided space activities for decades reflects this reality: orbits, spectrum, and the operating environment are all shared resources. Satellite services require ground infrastructure distributed across the planet. Even full-scale PNT systems

depend on a global geodetic supply chain for a common understanding of time and space. To be clear, competition, conflict, and structural asymmetries are real, but they coexist with an unavoidable need for coordination. No country operates in space truly alone. Interdependence is the nature of the domain.

This creates a genuine tension at the heart of the space autonomy narrative. Reducing vulnerability is important, but it should not be confused with pursuing total technological independence. That is not only infeasible; it can be counterproductive. In the region's fragmented space ecosystems, efforts to build independent capabilities, without the governance and institutional frameworks to use them effectively, may just relocate risk.

Owning a satellite does not mean you control everything needed to use it. A country can build its own system to take images of its territory from space

TODAY, U.S. SPACE ENGAGEMENT IN THE AMERICAS IS MEANINGFUL BUT DISJOINTED.

and still depend on foreign weather data, additional commercial imagery, partner analytics, and secure communications to turn those pictures into actionable information, such as during a natural disaster. A cyberattack on a communications link, an unclear chain of command, or a licensing restriction on how data can be shared can each render a sovereign asset far less useful than it appears. Autonomy that focuses on one piece of the puzzle can lead to a false sense of security.

The more useful frame is not independence, but resilience and the ability to make informed decisions. Autonomy in space should be perceived as maintaining the ability to manage risk, select appropriate approaches, and negotiate with partners from a position of competence, avoiding arrangements that constrain future options. That is a different goal, and it leads to different strategies.

WHO GETS TO DEFINE AUTONOMY?

THE SPACESAIL STORY REFLECTS the logic of autonomy more than any particular affinity for Chinese technology. In the last few years, leaders in the region watched with concern, perceiving Starlink access as unreliable, if not capricious, even as it shaped military outcomes in Ukraine. Closer to home, Brazilian media speculated openly in 2025 about whether Washington might weaponize access to GPS during a low point in bilateral ties. While that was never likely, it reinforced a desire to protect freedom of action and invest in the capacity to act independently. From a Brazilian policy perspective, having a viable alternative to Starlink, even a Chinese one, expands the menu of options.

The choices made while building capacity at speed can have long-term consequences. These choices in-

volve what partners to work with, standards to adopt, and technologies to integrate. The 2024 memorandum of understanding between Brazilian telecommunications company Telebras and SpaceSail included language that referred to a possible Brazilian subsidiary to enable investment, knowledge-sharing around the “governance and operational mechanisms of space infrastructures,” and potential joint projects. These additional aspects may increase the agreement’s value for Brazil, but could also complicate the stated goal of “guarantee[ing] the independence and autonomy of the State.”

On the practical side, building infrastructure around Chinese operational standards, procedures, suppliers, and technology could create constraints that limit interoperability with other systems, akin to attempting to plug a U.S. device into an Argentine socket. On the political side, certain choices will be incompatible with foreign export control rules or cybersecurity requirements, potentially limiting Brazil’s room for maneuver elsewhere in its space ecosystem. This may prevent deeper engagement on space situational awareness (SSA) with U.S. security partners and future commercial opportunities.

Another concern is that autonomy narratives often fail to specify which capabilities are truly critical and should be prioritized. Countries thus risk pursuing programs without sufficient depth or attention to vulnerability. This is especially problematic in a sector that is resource-intensive, technically unforgiving, and still perceived by the public as a luxury. The emphasis on launch capability is a useful example. An operational launch site does not automatically lead to a functioning space ecosystem, let alone an autonomous one. It is one part of an equation that includes satellite development, mission operations, data pro-

cessing, governance capacity, skilled personnel, and institutions capable of actually using space information. A country that puts too many of its resources into the launch basket may still depend on others for the systems it needs to manage agriculture, monitor illegal fishing or support national security.

The risk, then, is not that Latin American actors are pursuing autonomy in space. It is that they may pursue it in ways that curtail the flexibility that autonomy is supposed to deliver.

U.S. PARTNERS IN THE MIX

THIS IS WHERE U.S. entities, both governmental and commercial, have a genuine but underemphasized opportunity.

The U.S. commercial space industry now offers regional partners much more than discreet products or services. A growing number of companies provide “sovereign solutions” — dedicated satellite capacity, proprietary ground infrastructure, and advanced information products licensed in ways that preserve operational independence. Earth observations company Planet, for example, sells not just data but satellites and end-to-end architectures. Sling-shot Aerospace offers a comparable range on the SSA front, including dedicated sensors for direct access to tailored orbital data.

This speaks directly to what many Latin American governments want: not black-box offerings that deepen dependence, but solutions that expand national capacity and build relationships.

With space such a highly regulated and politically sensitive sector, however, this opportunity will not grow on its own. U.S. companies need more active government support to win against foreign vendors offering competitive options under less stringent technology transfer rules. The administration’s 2025 National Security Strategy hints at commercial diplomacy. That should translate into facilitating market access, aligning export frameworks with partnership goals, and providing backstopping through insurance to mitigate risks. It should also mean adopting a model of engagement akin to the Comprehensive Dialogues on Space held with Japan and France to bring U.S. industry into bilateral engagement.

Today, U.S. space engagement in the Americas is meaningful but disjointed. A stronger U.S. offer would be not just military cooperation, not just scientific data sharing, and not just commercial sales, but one that aligns these to advance shared priorities.

AUTONOMY IS NOT ISOLATION

FOR THE U.S. TO embody the often-used phrase “partner of choice” in Latin America, it must do more than just show up. It requires a deliberate effort to better connect U.S. civil, commercial and defense activities. This means adopting an integrated approach to engagement, exchanging information across agencies, and leveraging official visits, relevant conferences and trade shows for U.S. government and non-government entities to build relationships with their counterparts. It means intentionally directing diplomatic resources to help U.S. business compete and succeed.

Being a strong partner means recognizing that the U.S. advantage is not hardware alone, but also the training, workflows, standards, best practices, and project-management excellence that turn space capabilities into operational value. Done well, this would move the conversation beyond “choose the U.S. or else” and position the U.S. space sector to help regional partners build real capacity: the capacity to choose.

Autonomy and alignment are not opposites. In space, where systems are global and threats are shared, genuine autonomy is built through diversified, interoperable partnerships, resiliency that enables actors to allocate risk smartly, to know when to tap into domestic or partner-provided tools, and when to opt for non-space solutions. The U.S. has more to offer on that agenda than it is currently delivering. ^{AQ}

Delgado López is a senior fellow at the Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy at Florida International University. She has more than 15 years of experience in the U.S. space sector, with a career spanning industry, the non-profit sector, and government, most recently serving as policy advisor in NASA’s Science Mission Directorate.



BEYOND HARDWARE: LATIN AMERICA'S SPACE WORKFORCE CHALLENGE

by Jeanette Nuñez

IN LATIN AMERICA AND AROUND the world, today's satellites do so much more than before. They help monitor illegal deforestation, expand broadband access to remote communities, improve disaster response, and strengthen maritime awareness. Governments across the hemisphere increasingly view space capabilities as essential infrastructure for economic development, resilience, and national security.

But as space technologies become more integrated into critical sectors, countries are also pursuing something larger than access to orbit: They are seeking the institutional and technical capacity to participate meaningfully in the emerging space economy.

That ambition is reshaping international cooperation. Rather than simply seeking satellites or launch services from external powers, Latin American countries are pursuing partnerships that strengthen sovereign capabilities through workforce development, research collaboration, technology transfer, and commercial integration. In short, the region increasingly seeks partnership, not dependency.

Broader changes in the global space economy are accelerating this shift. Falling launch costs, increased availability of technology, expanding low

Earth orbit satellite networks, and the growing strategic value of geospatial data have lowered barriers to entry. The challenge is no longer simply acquiring space technology. It is developing the expertise needed to govern, integrate, and benefit from these systems over the long term.

Across much of the region, shortages of engineers, geospatial analysts, cybersecurity specialists, and space policy professionals remain major barriers to building homegrown capabilities.

This is where universities and research institutions become essential. They train the workforce needed to manage increasingly complex systems while supporting innovation, entrepreneurship, and policy development. Just as importantly, universities create durable relationships that extend beyond traditional government-to-government engagement. In a sector increasingly shaped by the relationships, services and capabilities of private companies, strengthening these knowledge flows is critical.

The demand for a space-ready workforce also presents an opportunity for the United States to distinguish itself. China has expanded its regional footprint not only by offering infrastructure, but by pairing satellite cooperation with financing, technical training, and research partnerships. Russia has pursued its own initiatives, including establishing a GLONASS ground station, its equivalent to GPS, in Venezuela.

The U.S. can remain the preferred partner in the hemisphere's emerging space sector, but doing so will require a strategy that extends beyond traditional security cooperation. Washington should continue to prioritize education, workforce development, research collaboration, technology transfer, and public-private partnerships that strengthen local capacity.

U.S. universities are uniquely positioned to support that effort. We train the engineers, policymakers, entrepreneurs, scientists, and legal experts who sustain national space ecosystems, while serving as hubs for international collaboration.

Universities play a critical role in advancing U.S. interests across the Western Hemisphere. Institutions such as Florida International University demonstrate how academia can connect governments, industry, and civil society across borders. In an era of intensifying geopolitical competition, these institutions strengthen the networks, knowledge flows, and trusted relationships that support both U.S. national security and long-term prosperity.

The future of space cooperation in the Americas will depend not on who launches the most satellites, but on who helps build the people and institutions capable of using them effectively. In a region seeking greater autonomy, the partner that invests in those foundations will be the partner that endures. **AQ**



Núñez is president of Florida International University and chair of the board of directors for Space Florida, the state's aerospace finance and development authority

Latin America's Final Frontier

The booming space sector offers opportunities, if the region can seize them.

by Susan Segal



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

LATIN AMERICA HAS LONG been known for its natural resources: abundant energy supply, minerals, agriculture and more. Until recently though, few people recognized it had the resources to become relevant in the space sector, too.

Indeed, strategic locations near the equator, and clear skies especially in the Southern Cone, make much of the region ideal for satellite launches and ground observatories and data centers. Ecuador, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Peru, and the Dominican Republic are among the countries with big opportunities in front of them.

It's not just about geography, of course. Latin America has entrepreneurs such as Marcos Galperin and Martín Migoya who have created world class companies, provided hope and seeded an ecosystem that supports and encourages the creation of other new businesses. That innovative spirit has supported the creation of companies including Satellogic in Argentina and Visiona Tecnologia Espacial in Brazil.

There is a certain amount of "space fever" throughout the globe at the moment, especially in the wake of Elon Musk's successful stock offering for SpaceX. The question is whether Latin America can take full advantage.

Over the almost 50 years that I have worked with the region I have witnessed boom to bust multiple times. The region has seized some opportunities and missed others. In the case of space, it seems that the private sector cannot go it alone — governments will need to provide the regulatory framework, infrastructure and sometimes the capital necessary for success. Policy continuity across successive governments, even those of differing ideology, will also be key as always.

If Latin America can succeed this time, it will clearly place them at the center of a booming and future global industry. So space is the last and possibly the best frontier for Latin America! **AQ**

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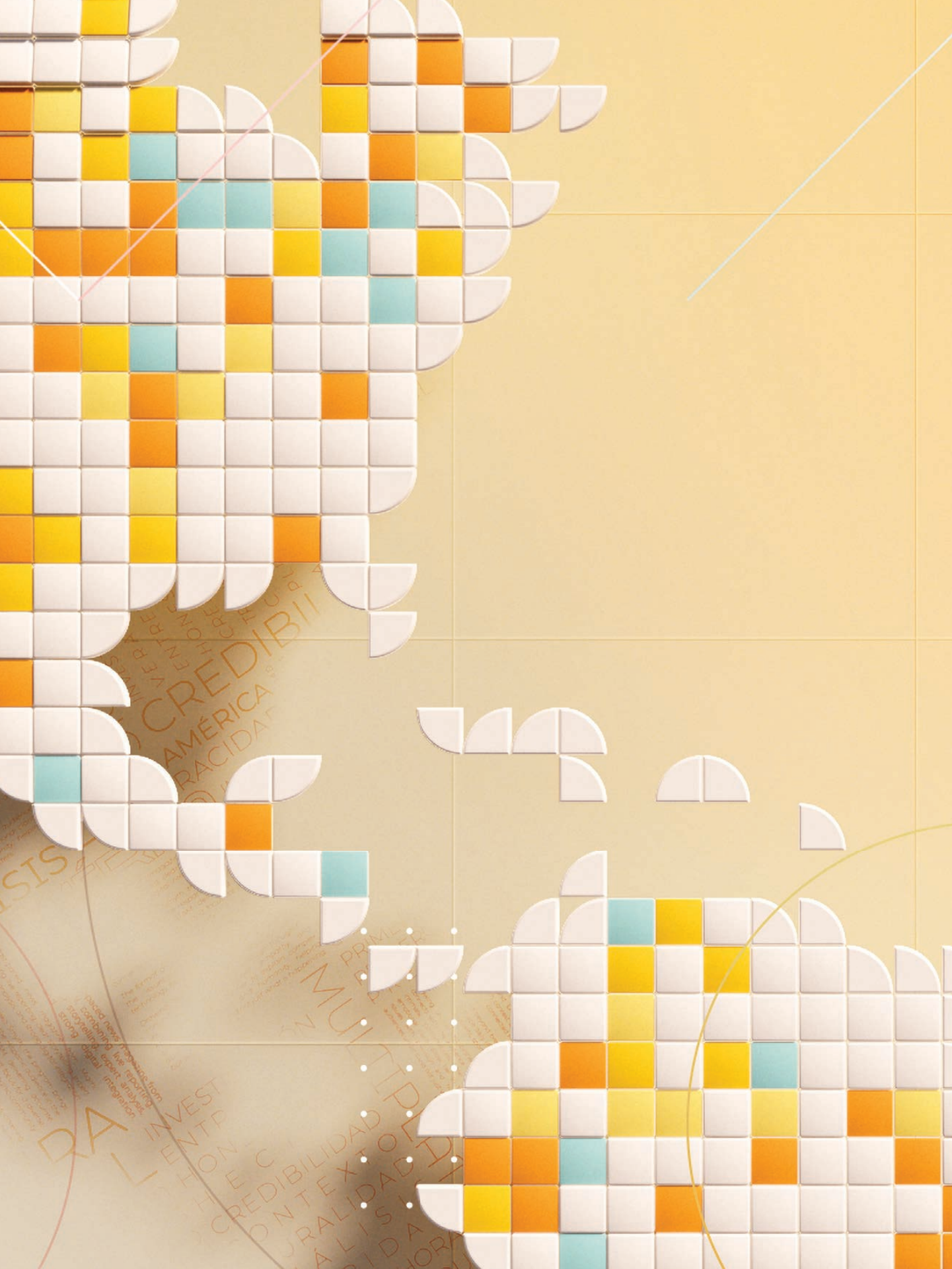
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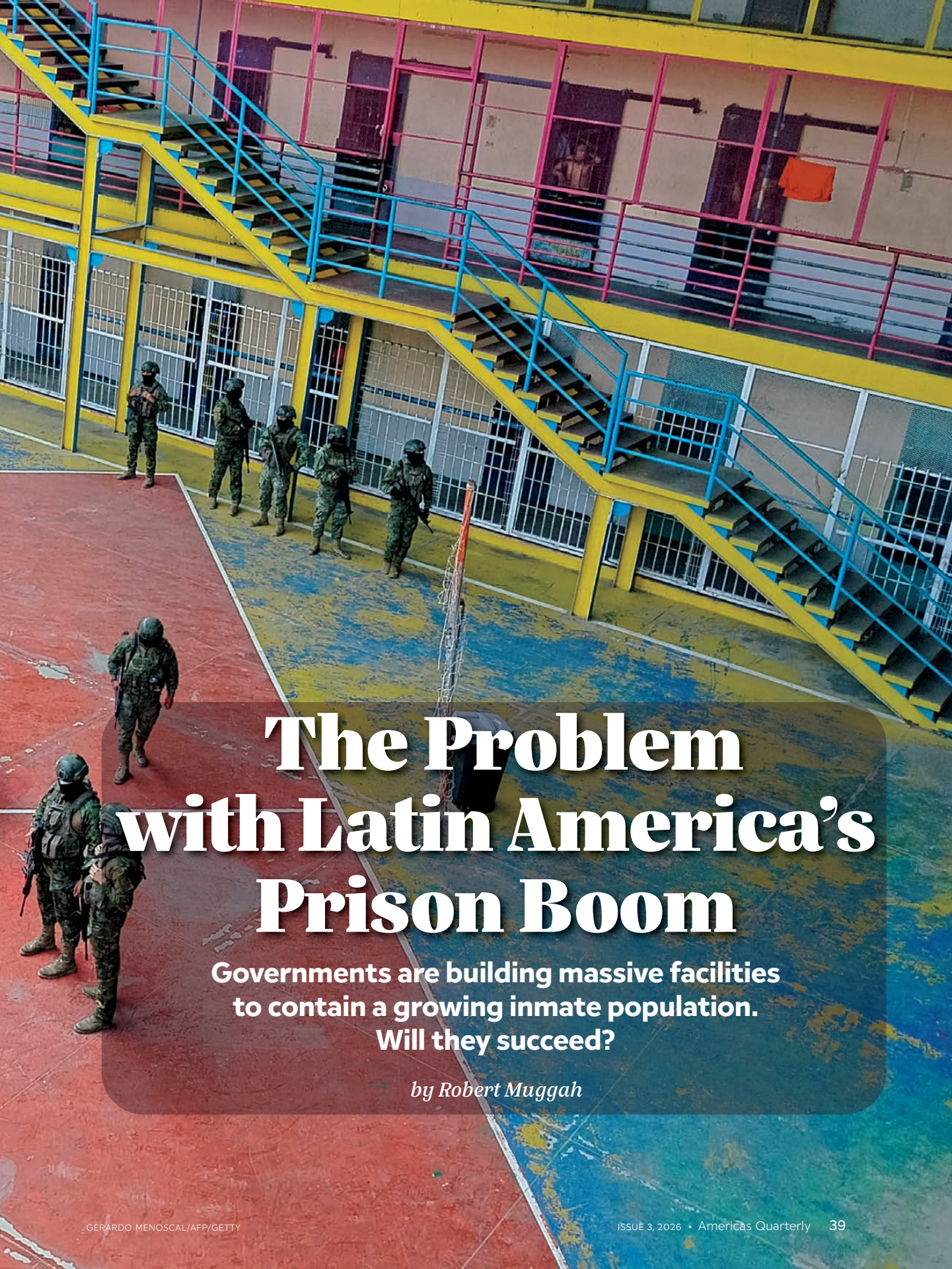
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Ecuadorian soldiers guard inmates at the Zone 8 Detention Center in Guayaquil, Ecuador, in 2025.



A photograph of a prison courtyard. In the foreground, several soldiers in camouflage uniforms and helmets are walking on a red and blue painted ground. In the background, a multi-story building with yellow and blue stairs and railings is visible. The building has many windows with metal bars. A basketball hoop is visible in the center of the courtyard.

The Problem with Latin America's Prison Boom

**Governments are building massive facilities
to contain a growing inmate population.
Will they succeed?**

by Robert Muggah

RIO DE JANEIRO—Smoke rose over the prison walls in Tuxpan, Veracruz, before dawn last August. Inmates had turned on Grupo Sombra, a Mexican criminal group accused of squeezing them and their families for protection money. The fight lasted 12 hours. Seven inmates died, 11 were injured, and soldiers eventually retook the building. Tuxpan held 778 people in a facility built for 735. Crowded, but unremarkable by regional standards. The riot was not about space. It was about who ran the prison.

Across Latin America and the Caribbean, prisons are not simply places where the state confines criminals. In many countries, they are places where criminal groups govern. Gangs use them to recruit, settle disputes, broker drug deals, extort families, and project power from the barrios to the borderlands. Some of the region's most consequential criminal organizations were born in prison. Many still operate from there.

That reality has taken on new urgency as governments across the region increasingly embrace a

model popularized by El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele: building larger, more secure prisons and dramatically expanding incarceration. From Argentina and Ecuador to Honduras and Guatemala, leaders who were elected in part because of rising frustration over crime are investing billions in new facilities and promising tougher prison regimes. The assumption is straightforward: More prison space will translate into greater public security.

Yet the region's experience suggests the relationship is not so simple.

Overcrowding is the most visible symptom of Latin America's prison crisis. But the underlying diseases include the interaction of excessive pre-trial detention, weak penal institutions, systemic corruption, and criminal organizations that have adapted to confinement. Tough drug laws, longer sentences, emergency powers, and *mano dura* politics have filled prisons faster than states can manage them. In many cases, governments have expanded incarceration without expanding their capacity to govern what happens behind prison walls.



Inmates of El Salvador's CECOT mega-prison attend a mass criminal hearing in April.

As a result, today's leaders face a major risk: If their states incarcerate without building out other capabilities, new prisons may simply become recruitment centers, command hubs, and training grounds for criminal organizations that make crime even worse. The question is how they can best avoid this fate.

Champions in incarceration

THE AMERICAS STAND OUT for high incarceration, overcrowding, and unusually acute prison violence. According to the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime, Central and South American and Caribbean prison populations exceeded 400 per 100,000 compared to below 200 per 100,000 in Western Europe, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. Brazil's 2024 figures capture the scale: More than 663,000 people were held in a system built for fewer than 489,000. Meanwhile, countries in the Americas also reported over 17 prison homicides per 100,000 prisoners, against two in Europe,

the next-highest region.

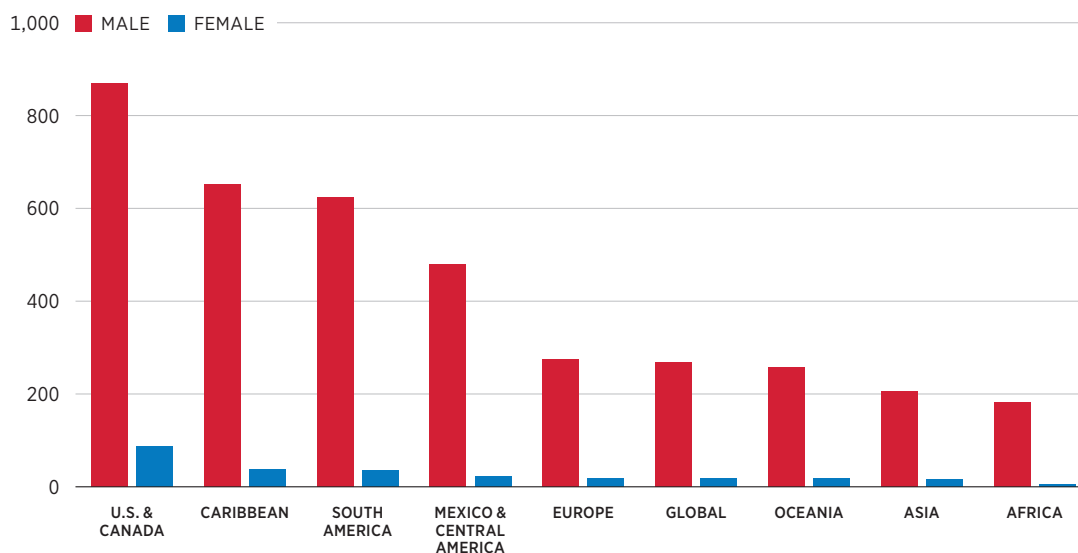
Today's prison-building boom stands to send those numbers even higher. El Salvador's 40,000-bed CECOT supermax prison is an emblem of the new penal politics: both a prison and a signal of state power. Costa Rica is planning a \$35 million facility for over 5,000 inmates. Ecuador has developed high-security capacity in Santa Elena and announced plans for another prison in the Amazon. Argentina's Santa Fe province is moving ahead with a supermax prison near Rosario, and Guatemala has broken ground on El Triunfo, a 2,000+ bed high-security prison in Izabal. And in 2024, Honduras announced plans to build a 20,000-bed megaprison.

There's no doubt that governments are determined to show they can retake control. But are they succeeding?

The political incentives point in the wrong direction. In societies battered by homicide, robbery, and extortion, prison populism sells. Political leaders promise more arrests, harsher regimes, and longer sentences. Voters often reward them. But when

Incarceration rates in the Americas exceed other regions

NUMBER OF MALE AND FEMALE DETAINEES HELD IN PRISON PER 100,000 POPULATION (2023)



SOURCE: UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME, PRISON MATTERS 2025 (JULY 2025)

governments incarcerate faster than they can classify or supervise, they produce crime colleges. Petty offenders, drug users, and people awaiting trial are forced into close contact with seasoned gang members who can offer what the state often does not: food, credit, protection, legal help, and belonging.

Pre-trial detention accelerates the damage. It clogs the courts, fills prisons with people not convicted yet, and exposes low-risk detainees to criminal organizations. Once inside, the incentives shift quickly. A person who entered prison as a defendant leaves with gang debts, gang protection, and gang obligations. This is why reform is so difficult. Building new prisons without reducing inflow only creates more space to fill.

The hardest lesson is that even apparently sensible prison tactics can backfire. Faced with riots or

scandals, governments often transfer leaders, segregate factions, or move prisoners to distant facilities. Sometimes this is unavoidable. But blind dispersal can strengthen the networks it is meant to weaken.

A transferred leader does not arrive as an ordinary inmate. Consider the case of José Adolfo Macías Villamar, alias “Fito,” the leader of Los Choneros in Ecuador. While serving a 34-year sentence in Guayaquil’s prison, he sent recorded messages to the authorities, flaunted privileges on social media, and even appeared in a narco-ballad reportedly filmed inside the complex. He escaped from the prison in 2024 and was recaptured a year later.

Brazil’s Primeiro Comando da Capital, or PCC, is the textbook case. Born in São Paulo’s prisons, it learned to use incarceration as an infrastructure. It developed rules, welfare mechanisms, internal re-



Relatives wait to identify the bodies of inmates after a prison riot left 31 dead in Machala, Ecuador, in November.

When governments incarcerate faster than they can classify or supervise, they produce crime colleges.

cords, and a national brand.

El Salvador offers a different warning. For years, segregating MS-13 and Barrio 18 prisoners reduced some direct clashes but gave gangs protected territory in which to consolidate leadership, discipline members, and coordinate street operations. President Bukele's mass-incarceration model was a drastic reaction to that earlier failure. It sharply reduced visible gang control and lethal violence, but at major rule-of-law cost. By 2026, El Salvador's prison population had risen to an estimated 118,000 detainees, more than double official capacity and roughly 1.9% of the country's population. Human rights groups have documented at least 500 deaths in custody.

Ecuador shows what happens when prisons become extensions of transnational drug markets. Its facilities have been contested by groups linked to ports, cocaine routes and foreign criminal partners. Last November, at least 31 inmates were killed at Machala prison after violence erupted around transfers to a new maximum-security facility. Over 500 inmates have died in Ecuadorian prison riots since 2021.

A state-capacity agenda

REPRESSION ALONE IS NOT the answer. Intelligence is. Governments need to know who gives orders, who moves money, who recruits, who controls phones, and who can be safely separated from whom. That means classifying prisoners by risk, role, and influence rather than by crude gang labels alone.

It also means reducing the recruitment pool. Pre-trial detention should be reserved for serious flight or violence risks, not used as a default response to weak investigations or slow courts. Low-level and non-vi-

olent offenders need credible alternatives to custody.

Ultimately, release must become a managed transition rather than an abrupt return to the same networks. Education, treatment, identity documents, housing, work, and supervision are not humanitarian add-ons. Without them, prisoners leave with fewer options, stronger gang ties, and obligations that follow them home.

There are successful prison models, though none is easy to replicate. Canada has adopted a more security-led approach to gangs by identifying affiliations and mapping influence to prevent gang leaders from enhancing their prestige in prisons. Spain's *módulos de respeto*, first developed in León, encourage prisoners to accept routines, collective responsibility, and work.

There are also regional lessons. Brazil's APAC units show promise in creating islands of order through training in life skills, employment, and family contact. Chile has also experimented with targeted reintegration, including programs that integrate sport, discipline, therapy, and post-release support. The Dominican Republic's new penitentiary management seeks to replace militarized custody with civilian prison staff, treatment programs, and a human rights framework.

Latin America's prison crisis is a public security crisis, a human rights crisis, and a crisis of state capacity. Governments that incarcerate too many people govern them with little intelligence. The region does not need softer prisons or harder prisons. It needs prisons that the state actually runs. Successfully. 

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Muggah is a co-founder and research director of the Igarapé Institute



When the Cuban Missile Crisis Shook the Hemisphere

As nuclear war loomed, ordinary people throughout Latin America made their voices heard.

by Renata Keller



Left: An aerial reconnaissance photograph from 1962 shows a medium-range ballistic missile launch site in Cuba. The discovery of this and other Soviet missile sites led to the Cuban missile crisis.

FROM THE VERY FIRST days of the Cuban missile crisis, in October 1962, U.S. President John F. Kennedy and his top advisors were discussing potential repercussions in the rest of Latin America.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk warned the crisis could threaten political stability throughout the region. Even at the confrontation's height, on October 27, CIA Director John McCone emphasized scenes far beyond Cuba in a briefing to Kennedy and his top advisors, saying: "There are reports that anti-U.S. demonstrations have broken out in several Latin American capitals, including Buenos Aires, Caracas, and La Paz."

As threats of nuclear war grew, the political fallout was causing bloodshed hundreds of miles from Havana. This violence was a stark reminder that the crisis was about more than just Cuba or Soviet missiles — and that the longer it dragged on, the greater its repercussions would become.

From the beginning, Kennedy and his advisors viewed the crisis through a hemispheric lens. Yet histories of this event tend to forget this, focusing on the showdown between Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev and eliding the actions of millions of everyday people. Citizens across the region seized active roles, organizing demonstrations, committing sabotage, and battling each other in deadly riots. Just as McCone reported and Rusk warned, Latin Americans were not willing to sit idly by.

That ordinary people throughout Latin America took action to weigh in on the crisis is an underappreciated part of the story. Today, this level of engagement can seem hard to imagine, raising questions about how ready the region is to respond to provocations from great powers in the modern day.

A tidal wave of action

IN COUNTRY AFTER COUNTRY, thousands of people took to the streets. Some demanded peace, others showed solidarity with Cuba, and still others supported the U.S. As the crisis went on, demonstrators' demands became more urgent — and local authorities' responses became more violent, especially in places where political tensions were already high. The missile crisis lit a match to the dry kindling of Cold War politics.

Thousands of Costa Rican students marched through downtown San José to denounce Castro's decisions. In Chile, thousands gathered along Santiago's main avenue for a pro-Cuba demonstration organized by students and workers. Then a senator, socialist Salvador Allende spoke at the rally, calling for world peace and criticizing the U.S.

Sometimes, the demonstrations were met with violent opposition. A large pro-Cuba rally at Uruguay's National University on the night of October 29 ended in a violent clash between security forces and protesters. For more than two hours, 1,000 police officers assailed 6,000 demonstrators with tear gas, water cannons, and bayonets. Soldiers with trucks and tanks and a cavalry platoon on horseback lent a hand in the fighting, as did paramilitary anti-communist student groups.

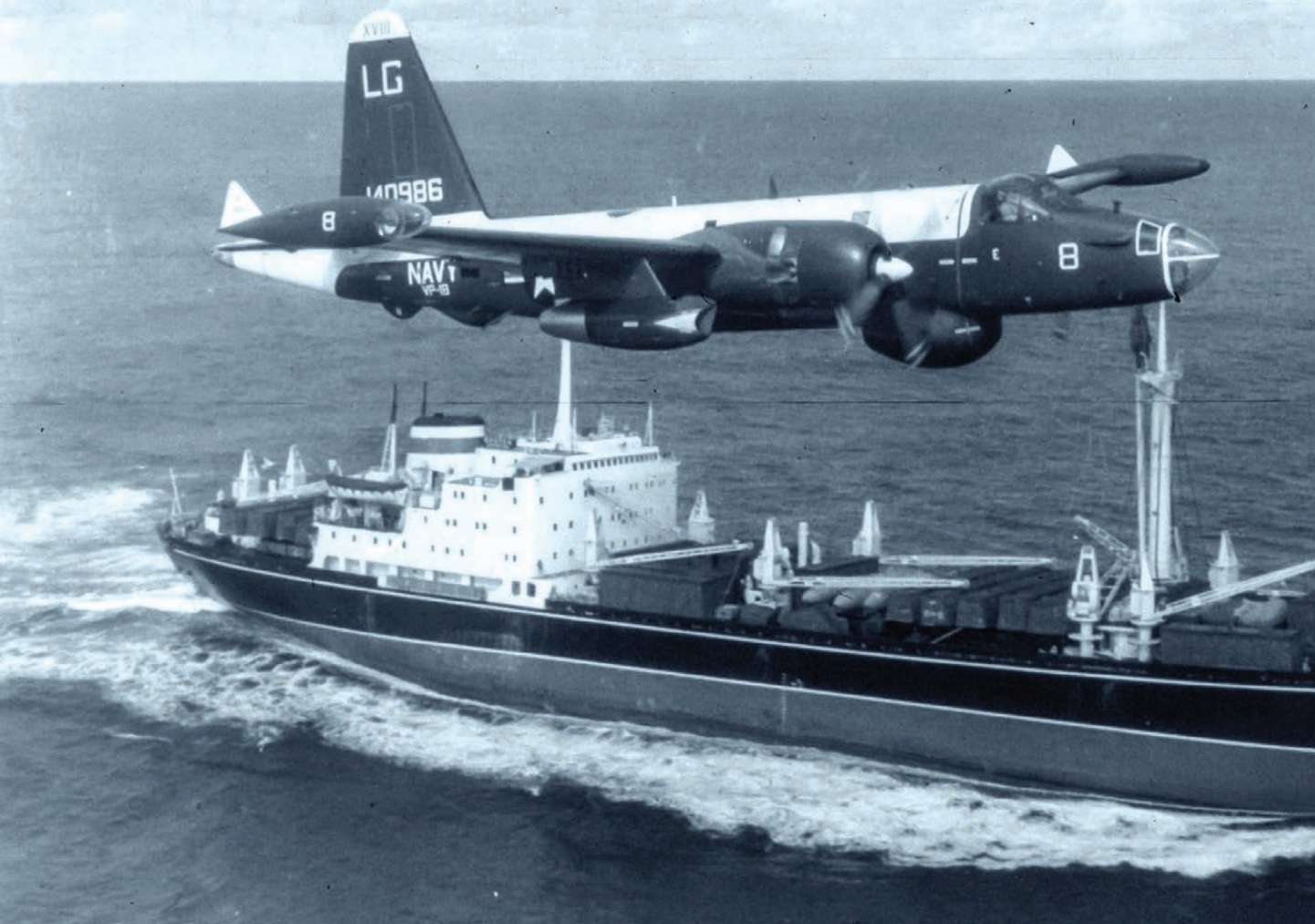
The elegant streets of Argentina's capital, meanwhile, became an urban battleground. Night after night, police chased protesters through Buenos Aires and neighboring cities, leaving broken windows and clouds of tear gas in their wake. Just before midnight on October 23, police confronted members of the Commission of Solidarity with Cuba, who were placing pro-Castro posters on city walls. When the police tried to arrest them, the Castro supporters

**As threats of nuclear war grew,
the political fallout was causing bloodshed
hundreds of miles from Havana.**



Top: Then-Senator of the Socialist Party of Chile Salvador Allende speaks at a solidarity rally for the Cuban revolution in 1962.

Bottom: Violence related to the political fallout of the Cuban missile crisis broke out across Latin America, including in Bolivia under President Víctor Paz Estenssoro (left) and Venezuela under President Rómulo Betancourt (right).



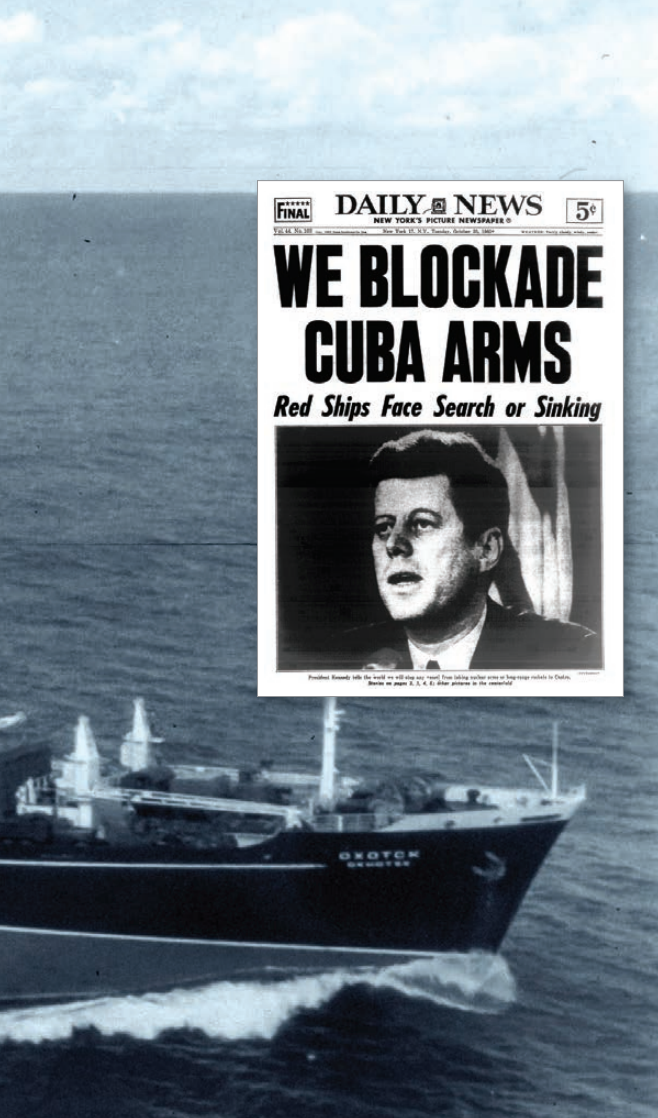
Top: A P2V Neptune U.S. patrol plane flies over a Soviet freighter during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.

Inset: Front page of the *New York Daily News* on October 23, 1962.

answered with gunfire.

The next evening, saboteurs threw Molotov cocktails at a Pepsi-Cola bottling plant, a Ford dealership, a supermarket, a Parker Pen factory, and a Bonafide coffee shop. On the evening of October 25, saboteurs shattered windows at the central offices of the newspapers *Clarín* and *La Nación*, the local IBM headquarters, and the Singer office building. They lobbed incendiary bombs over the fence of a General Motors factory, fired shots at the offices of the public electric company, and threw Molotov cocktails that damaged equipment of the Parke-Davis and Johnson & Johnson pharmaceutical companies.

The next afternoon, they targeted the American Club, scorching its outer walls with incendiary devices. Truckloads of police deployed on the streets of downtown Buenos Aires, using tear gas and batons to break up small “lightning” protests. Two police officers who were chasing a suspect accidentally ran into a crowd of pro-Castro protesters, who beat them until they fired their guns toward the sky to



summon help.

When a thousand people gathered for a larger demonstration on the Avenida de Mayo and started marching toward the Palace of the Argentine National Congress chanting “¡Viva Cuba!” and “*Muerte a los yanquis*,” police filled the air with more tear gas and chased down stone-throwing protesters. By the end of the night, seven people, both protesters and police officers, had been seriously injured.

In Caracas, the U.S. embassy received anonymous phone calls threatening to kill one American in Venezuela for every Cuban who died due to Yankee aggression. Just before midnight on October 24, a bomb exploded in front of a branch of the National City Bank. Two days later, three men armed with machine guns invaded a Goodyear Tires warehouse, forcing employees to the floor

and burning stocks of tires. Other saboteurs set off a bomb in the downtown headquarters of Pan American Airways, and the next day a bomb exploded in front of the U.S. embassy.

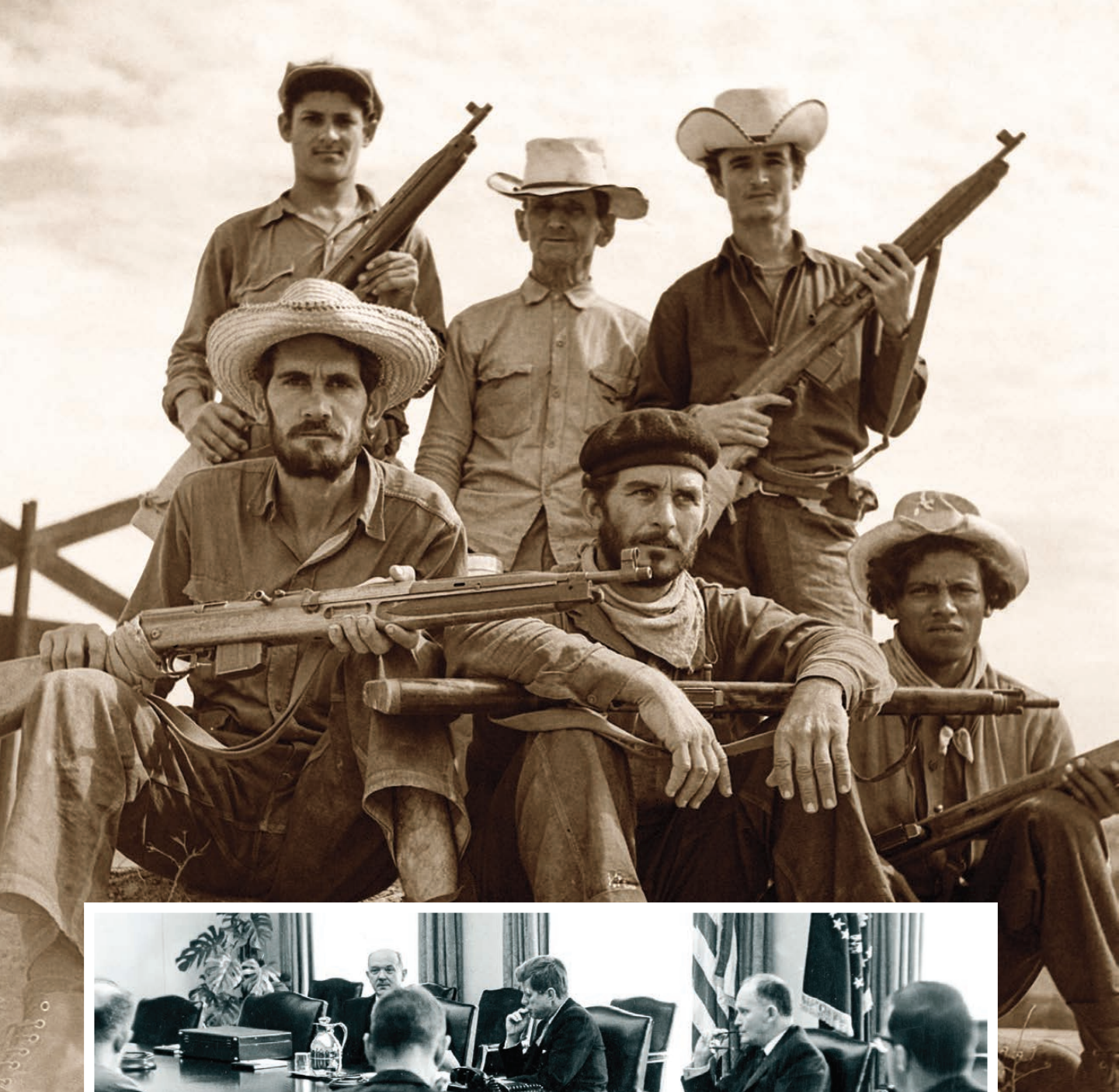
Venezuelan opposition groups also targeted their country’s vital oil industry. Shortly before midnight on October 27, saboteurs dynamited the installations of the Standard Oil subsidiary Creole Petroleum Corporation in Lake Maracaibo, almost completely destroying four power substations. Observers at the U.S. embassy described the attack as “one of the most successful sabotage acts in Venezuelan history.” A leftist guerrilla group took credit for the bombing, issuing a statement that their attack on the oil fields was “in response to the order of military mobilization decreed by [President Rómulo] Betancourt in support of the United States.” Less than a week later, three oil and gas pipelines belonging to the Mene Grande, Texaco, and Mobil exploded.

Blurred battle lines

IN ARGENTINA AND VENEZUELA, the line between activism and terrorism blurred, as groups that were prevented from expressing their positions peacefully — the Communist Party was outlawed in Argentina and under threat of banning in Venezuela — resorted to violence. Both countries already had significant opposition movements that were forming guerrilla groups, and the missile crisis added new tension to the situation.

It was in Bolivia, however, where the wave of violence crested and crashed. Groups on both extremes of the ideological spectrum organized demonstrations in La Paz on October 26. Anti-communist students were the first to take to the streets. Around 10:30 a.m., some 2,000 high school students marched, shouting pro-U.S. and anti-Castro slogans and calling on their government to break relations with Cuba.

Then, supporters of the Cuban Revolution took their turn. Among their march of around 500 workers and students were popular communist miners’ union leaders, and a man newspapers dubbed the “Killer in Blue,” who carried a rifle that he fired into the air every few minutes. The march ended in front of the headquarters of the miners’ federation and the Central Obrera Boliviana, where up to 3,000 peo-



Top: Militiamen, fighters for the Castro regime during the Cuban missile crisis, trained in hiding in Cuba's Escambray Mountains in 1962.

Bottom: U.S. President John F. Kennedy at the White House during emergency talks with Secretary of State Dean Rusk and other aides in September 1962.



A protest in front of the U.S. embassy in Havana in January 2026, following the U.S. operation to capture Nicolás Maduro, in which 32 Cubans were killed.

ple had gathered to hear speeches from union leaders. As speeches were made, someone in the crowd set an American flag on fire and raised it high in the air to shouts of derision and a chorus of Bolivia's national anthem. A group of young anti-communists began advancing from about a block away, hurling rocks, which were quickly reciprocated. The two sides clashed in a microcosm of what the missile crisis could become: ideological opponents launching projectiles indiscriminately.

The confrontation devolved into a chaotic riot. The U.S. embassy and local conservative papers painted a dramatic scene of communist demonstrators armed with machine guns, rifles, revolvers, and dynamite clashing with *carabineros* and Catholic school students, supposedly outnumbered 10 to one and armed only with tear gas and stones. *El Diario* claimed that the communist groups posted snipers with backpacks of ammunition in strategic locations, and *Presencia* printed photos on its front page of the so-called Killer in Blue crouching on one knee and firing his rifle forward. President Víctor Paz Estenssoro finally ordered the army to occupy La Paz about two hours after the riot began. By the time order was restored, five people were dead.

Why did so many Latin Americans put their lives

on the line during the Cuban missile crisis? Just like Kennedy and his advisors, people across Latin America knew that what happened in Cuba could affect the rest of the hemisphere. They believed that great power intervention would set a dangerous precedent, and they fought to defend their own sovereignty by defending that of Cuba.

Today, that attitude seems long forgotten. The U.S. has become more aggressive in recent months, abducting Nicolás Maduro, tightening its embargo on Cuba to an extreme, and undertaking deadly military strikes on land and sea in Latin American territory. Yet, compared to 1962, there has been little regional outcry. It seems that Latin America's sense of shared destiny has withered, leaving the U.S. with a freer hand to deal with countries individually. It is no longer treating the region as an interconnected whole, as Kennedy had, and in response Latin America appears quiescent. But back in 1962, Bolivian protesters put it this way: "Today it is Cuba, tomorrow it will be us." 

Keller is an associate professor of history at the University of Nevada, Reno, whose research focuses on Latin America, the Cold War, and drugs and security

Overcoming Latin America's Stubborn Productivity Gap

One of the region's most pressing issues offers an opportunity to governments and private companies alike.

by Nur Cristiani and José Enrique Arriola

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

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PRIVATE BANK

CALL IT LATIN AMERICA'S perennial challenge: Low productivity.

Measured as output per worker or per hour, productivity in most of the region remains a fraction of that in advanced economies and has hardly improved over the past 75 years. The result is a development constraint that scholars and observers use to explain why Latin America and the Caribbean are currently immersed in a “low growth trap” that limits wages and political stability alike.

Early last year, the UN Development Program concluded in a report that low productivity is one of the “biggest obstacles” to regional growth and issued an urgent message to highlight the relevance of that constraint: “The region has struggled to take advantage of past technological revolutions and risks missing out on the benefits of digitalization and AI.”

Recent data puts this structural challenge into perspective: Between 1950 and today, the region's productivity relative to the U.S. barely moved, and a Latin American worker produces, on average, about one-fifth of what a U.S. worker makes, according to

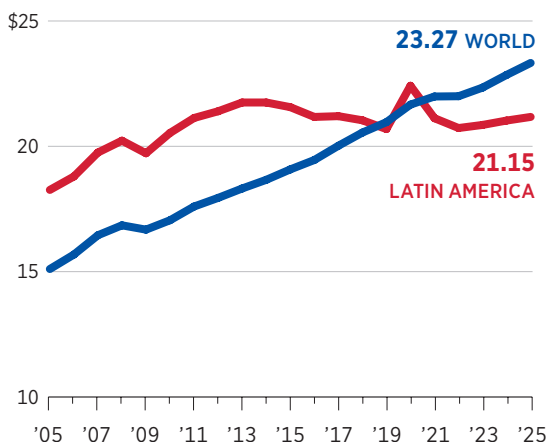
the World Bank. While East Asia used productivity gains to fuel its convergence with advanced economies, Latin America largely stagnated, and from 2005 to 2019, the region's average productivity growth was negative. Growth spurts — such as the commodity exports boom of the early 2010s — came and went without translating into sustained efficiency or development gains.

To make things worse, in 2017, the region achieved a “milestone” in the decline of its productivity, in contrast with growth in average global productivity. That year, it was the first year in which “the region's productivity fell below the global average, since when it has continued to drop further behind,” according to ECLAC.

Often discussed in abstract terms — total factor productivity, capital accumulation, human capital — the productivity problem is ubiquitous and entrenched, and its consequences are visible in everyday life across the region. Take logistics. A Brazilian agribusiness survey noted in 2024 that it can be cheaper to ship soybeans from Mato Grosso to China

Latin America's productivity has fallen behind

OUTPUT PER HOUR WORKED
(GDP CONSTANT 2021 INTERNATIONAL \$ AT PPP)



NOTE: INCLUDES CARIBBEAN COUNTRIES.

SOURCE: INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION MODELED ESTIMATES (NOV. 2025)

than to move them to Brazil's own ports. In Mexico, a country lagging behind the G20 and the OECD on growth charts, small manufacturers complain that unreliable electricity and local extortion cost them more than labor costs, which explains why productivity has decreased from 38.2% in 2016 to 32.7% in 2023. In the Caribbean, the tourist industry quietly admits that bureaucratic delays to import basic equipment can add weeks — and significant costs — to routine investments. These anecdotes, echoed across sectors and countries, illustrate how inefficiency has become normalized.

A growing body of research has identified the persistent culprits, but also the solutions that we urgently need. Low productivity limits the region's ability to capitalize on new global opportunities — including those emerging from today's rapidly shifting trade environment.

Removing distortions

TWO RECENT STUDIES offer insight and some hope about low productivity in the region. In its 2025 Regional Economic Outlook for the Western Hemisphere, published last October, the IMF mentions “productivity” 113 times across its 59 pages,

labeling it as one of the region's “structural challenges.” The report argues that “the lackluster productivity growth associated with persistent resource misallocation is among the most binding constraints in the region, together with sluggish firm-level productivity growth.”

To improve productivity, governments need to implement policies that will enhance the performance of private companies, which are the main drivers of economic growth. “Boosting productivity calls for eliminating barriers to factor reallocation and financing frictions that hinder firm expansion,” the IMF's economists wrote in the paper. “Removing policy distortions, such as subsidies and differential tax treatment, could also strengthen incentives for firms to grow.” The IMF research shows three key problems across the region: lack of competition, size-based regulatory systems, and lack of access to financing. Market structures in Latin America are often characterized by high market concentration, with incumbents operating as monopolies or as dominant conglomerates. Less productive firms of all sizes are often buoyed by subsidies, weak or absent antitrust enforcement, and other preferential treatment afforded to incumbents.

Some of these advantages for incumbents may not even be intentional. Many of the region's countries have size-based regulatory systems that treat large businesses differently than small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), with a view to encouraging SMEs. The downside is that this system causes some of the most productive SMEs to choose not to scale up.

Meanwhile, even some of the region's most efficient firms sometimes struggle to access capital. According to the OECD, Latin America's credit-to-GDP ratios are below emerging-market averages. Consider the case of Micro-, Small-, and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs). They represent 25% of the region's GDP and employ 60% of the population, but “their support to GDP growth is relatively small due to their low productivity and inability to raise funds to scale,” an IDB study concluded in 2023. The situation has resulted in a \$1.8 trillion financing gap, or 35% of regional GDP, the MSME Finance Forum recently estimated. For international investors, this gap signals an opportunity.

The productivity paradox

ALSO IN OCTOBER, the United Nations' ECLAC addressed the region's low productivity by providing a sectoral analysis. Among its many important findings, one stands out: In Latin America, the lowest-productivity sectors account for most jobs.

Agriculture, cattle raising, and fisheries are the sectors with the lowest productivity, followed by commerce and construction, and they employ the majority of workers in each country in the hemisphere. In contrast, sectors such as mining, basic services, and business services account for “only a tiny fraction of the employment,” the report said, which results in labor productivity in Latin America and the Caribbean being only 29.7% as high as in the European Union.

To change this dynamic, Latin American governments and the private sector can collaborate to implement the necessary reforms to tackle this challenge. The IMF highlights New Zealand, Peru, and Estonia as examples of successful policy reforms.

New Zealand became a model after its 1980s reform efforts increased competition, improved access to credit, and enhanced labor flexibility. The outcome was significant and vibrant. Peru passed similar laws in the 1990s, which led to increased capital and credit flows, turning the country into an economic success story during its Golden Decades (1993–2019), a 26-year stretch of steady growth that often doubled the pace of its regional peers. Estonia adopted new technology in the 2000s, embracing digital governance, making its former-Soviet economy more transparent, and creating an environment where new companies in emerging industries could emerge and grow.

The recent success of Poland — now the world's 20th largest economy — helps show how. A World Bank study found that most of Poland's explosive productivity growth over the last decade came from improvements within companies, driven by the adoption of new technologies, managerial practices, and a focus on innovation.

A new horizon ahead

MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS (MNCs) can also play an important role in this transformation. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) has found that these companies play a special role by bringing advanced technologies, global market access, and managerial expertise to emerging markets. Costa Rican firms collaborating with MNCs, for example “saw employment rise by 26% and productivity improve by 4%–9% within four years,” the bank recently reported. In other words, smart foreign investment can sometimes provide its own momentum for productivity gains.

There are other signs pointing to hope. The OECD recently observed that Latin American countries are increasingly shifting toward knowledge-intensive sectors — industries less vulnerable to commodity price swings and better aligned with global technology and innovation networks. This trend is occurring across sectors, such as pharma, technology, and agriculture.

Costa Rica, Uruguay and Guatemala are building on their strong pharma production, and countries like Colombia and Brazil have drafted “bioeconomy plans” that touch sectors like chemicals, food, pharma and more. For investors, the growth of knowledge-driven sectors creates a virtuous cycle of opportunities in tech education and what that education will produce. Data centers also offer a clear opportunity for a breakthrough, given the region's wealth in hydropower and other renewable energy sources. At present, the region accounts for about 5% of global data center infrastructure. However, since 2024, close to 30 new data centers have either opened or are under construction, according to a report by IDB Invest, the investment arm of the IDB. Brazil, Mexico, and Chile are leading the expansion, but Colombia, Peru, and Costa Rica “are also emerging as attractive tech hubs,” the study found.

The growing global demand for food may also help the region's performance. Over the past few de-



High-voltage electricity wires over a sugar cane field near Cali, Colombia

acades, Latin America has been one of the better-performing regions globally in agricultural productivity growth. Last December, a McKinsey report estimated that the region's agri-food sector could generate about \$425 billion in additional annual revenues by 2040, but this would require cumulative investment of up to \$760 billion. "Latin America's agri-food sector showcases a powerful combination of production capacity (crops, meat, fish, and fruits) and processing expertise (crops, meat, fish, fruits, and vegetables; beverages; oils and fats; and animal feed) across the value chain," the study concluded.

Finally, an apparent shift toward a world of more regionally integrated supply chains may also play a role. Latin American countries, in addition to drawing closer to the U.S. supply chain, have huge growth possibilities if they can better integrate with each

other; at present, only 15% of its trade occurs within the region, far below Europe (68%) or Asia (55%), according to the IDB. This means that Latin America can still realize productivity gains from deeper supply chain linkages, technology diffusion, and sectoral specialization.

Latin America's productivity challenge stems from deep structural barriers and cannot be solved overnight. However, proactive governments and entrepreneurs recognize that the time to act is now, as we face the prospects of a third lost decade of growth, as ECLAC's study warns. As the global economy shifts, the region has a crucial window of opportunity. **AQ**

Cristiani is the head of Latin America Investment Strategy at J.P. Morgan's Private Bank

Arrioja is AQ's managing editor





Why the Liberal Order Is Unraveling in the Americas

**Citizens and leaders are abandoning
the rules of liberal democracy.**

We live in the Age of Exit.

What can reverse the trend?

*by Juan Pablo Luna, Andrés Malamud,
and Alberto Vergara*

Following a protest in December 2022, debris from a burned-out fake coffin of Peru's then-President Dina Boluarte lies in Cusco's Plaza de Armas.

PERU HAS HAD NINE presidents in a decade. None were removed by a coup in the traditional sense; most fell to congressional maneuvers, corruption scandals, and the relentless pressure of a constitution designed to make presidents removable. Earlier this year, a record 35 candidates entered the presidential race, but after a months-long recount, the first-round results confirmed that the two leading candidates didn't even reach 30% of the vote combined.

Peru's political landscape mirrors trends elsewhere, though not always as extreme. Across Latin America, elites have sidelined democratic norms, the rule of law is under assault by various social and political forces, and if citizens abandoned parties long ago, they have now simply disengaged from formal politics. Elites and citizens seem to be exiting the democratic consensus, giving way to institutional hollowing out without a classic authoritarian takeover.

For years, analysts have cited external shocks to explain the fraying of the Western liberal order: the rise of China, a revanchist Russia, and the global surge of illiberal populism. Although these challenges are real, they are symptoms of a deeper problem: The central dynamic weakening liberal societies today is disintegration from within.

The economist Albert Hirschman classically analyzed this dynamic of "exit," or the decision to leave rather than fight. His framework, originally designed for firms, now describes our societies. When citizens conclude that raising their voice or participating in politics is futile, they stop trying. They vote for outsiders, work off the books, emigrate, or simply disengage. Leaders do the same: They abandon democratic norms, withdraw from international treaties, and govern as if institutions were obstacles rather than foundations.

This creates a vicious cycle in which, as more peo-

ple disengage, the institutions people rely on weaken further, making exit an even more rational alternative for those who remain.

Leaving democracy behind

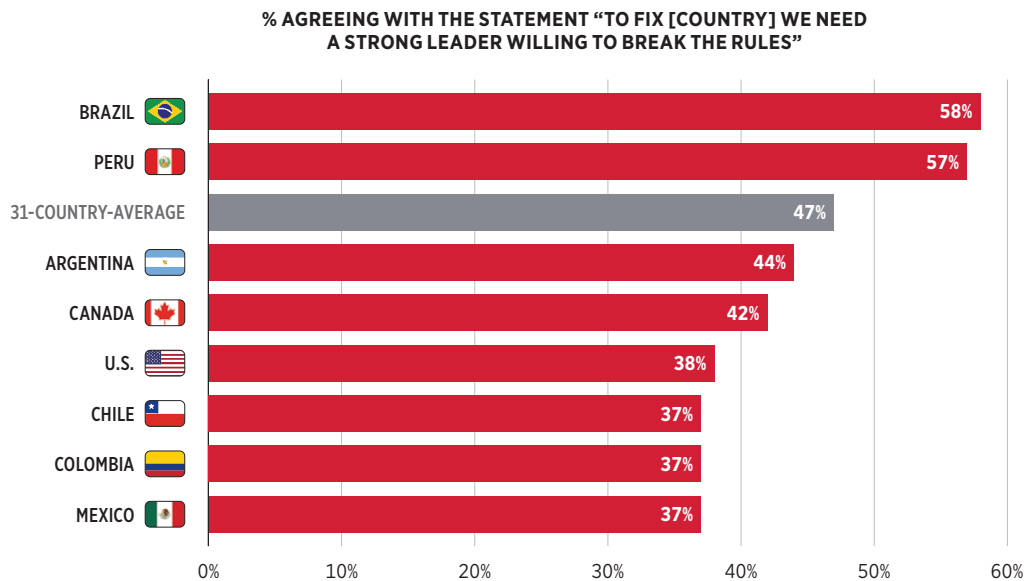
FOR LEADERS SUCH AS Gabriel Boric, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Nayib Bukele or Javier Milei, to name only a few, running against the establishment became a competitive advantage regardless of ideology. Traditional political parties are crumbling everywhere: In 20 Latin American presidential elections held between 2021 and 2025, 16 were won by parties fewer than 10 years old. Political parties are the connective tissue between citizens, executive branches, and legislatures. When they collapse, three things fray at once: voters lose a reliable cue for retrospective accountability; presidents lose stable legislative coalitions; and the orderly machinery of succession degrades.

The case of Guatemala in 2023 captures all three. Semilla, a political party barely six years old, won the presidency under the leadership of Bernardo Arévalo, but immediately faced legal harassment from prosecutors aligned with traditional elite networks. Without a consolidated party behind it, the elected government's path to power depended on episodic street mobilization.

This is no defense of the old party systems, which were responsible for regional ills, including extensive patronage and corruption scandals. Yet, for varying periods and unevenly across countries, those parties provided a modicum of order and legitimacy that their successors have not reproduced.

In turn, the politicians who run against the establishment often treat institutional constraints as the next thing to discard. President Donald Trump has claimed he "does not know" whether he must uphold the U.S. Constitution. Latin America's left largely re-

Many in the Americas feel their country needs a strong leader



NOTES: REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF 23,228 ADULTS AGED 16-74 IN 31 PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES, FEBRUARY 21-MARCH 7, 2025. CHART INCLUDES ONLY COUNTRIES IN THE AMERICAS.
SOURCE: IPSOS POPULISM REPORT 2025

fused to acknowledge that Peru's Pedro Castillo attempted a coup in December 2022, and the right denied that Jair Bolsonaro's supporters did the same against President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

An Ipsos global survey found that 47% of respondents would support a strongman willing to break the rules if it meant they achieved results. In Latin America, 54% said in 2023 they would accept a non-democratic government if it solved their problems, up from 45% in 2001.

The exit is not only at the top. According to International IDEA, global voter turnout fell from 65% in 2008 to 55% in 2023. But it's more than apathy: Decades of unaddressed inequality, corruption, and criminal violence have convinced many that neither voting nor protesting produces change.

When citizens do mobilize, the results often

deepen frustration. Protests can topple a government overnight but rarely succeed in reconstituting power, legitimacy, or order. Chile's 2019 *estallido* and its aftermath illustrate a society that explicitly demanded a new constitution but twice failed to adopt one. Chileans knew what to reject but were unable to articulate what they wanted instead.

Exiting the formal market

WHEN THE FORMAL ECONOMY fails to deliver opportunity, people build their own. According to the International Labor Organization, six out of 10 workers and four out of five enterprises operate informally. And contrary to decades of predictions, informality is growing in many countries. The COVID-19 pandemic reversed

years of modest progress in the Global South. Meanwhile, illegal markets have expanded everywhere, generating the income that the formal economy could no longer provide for a significant portion of the world's population.

Consider what this looks like on the ground. In Ecuador, the national homicide rate surged from 5.7 per 100,000 in 2018 to 45.1 in 2023, as criminal organizations moved into the spaces the state had abandoned, controlling neighborhoods and informal economies. The promise of social inclusion through education and formal jobs rings hollow for youngsters raised in violent, corrupt, and unequal democracies. As a result, they're embracing a kind of vernacular libertarianism built around crypto speculation, synthetic drugs, platform work, and social media self-branding.

This expansion of informal and illegal markets renders state policy less effective in shaping people's lives. At the same time, the institutional capture of politics by organizations that profit from these economies escalates corruption and makes formal democracy less meaningful. The spread of illegal markets and the violence that accompanies them is visible not just in Latin America, but across the globe, from Rosario to Malmö, Marseille, and Guayaquil.

Walking away from home

MIGRATION IS EXIT in its most concrete sense. Although Trump's border enforcement has slowed migration flows into the United States, it has not touched the structural forces that push people out: authoritarian governance, economic informality, climate stress, and violence. Migration as an exit persists, albeit now directed toward other destinations.

And it reshapes politics in receiving countries. According to an Ipsos global survey, negative views of immigration rose 4 percentage points from 2016 to 2021. National defection in one country fuels democratic defection in another, as xenophobic backlash empowers anti-immigrant movements across the West. Chile's new president, José Antonio Kast, built his campaign on harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric, and his success is a case in point.

Perhaps the most consequential defection has occurred at the international level. Both right and left have returned to nation-state programs, portraying globalization as a vehicle for exploitation. As Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes argued during Trump's first term, his rhetoric erased the U.S. tradition as a "beacon of liberty," recasting the country as simply another self-interested power. The second Trump administration has deepened this logic, withdrawing from the World Health Organization and the Paris Agreement (for the second time) and projecting a vision of international relations stripped of any normative content.

The pattern extends well beyond Washington. Brexit was the highest-profile case, but withdrawal from international commitments has become fashionable everywhere. In South America, domino departures reduced UNASUR from 12 members to five between 2018 and 2020. This meant less regional cooperation.

The retreat rests on the fundamental assumption that international cooperation is naive: There are always winners and losers, and nations should act accordingly. Hugo Chávez famously lamented, "While we leaders go from summit to summit, our peoples go from abyss to abyss." Today's leaders have found a simpler solution: Skip the summits rather than fix the abysses.

Rebuilding the case for engagement

DISENGAGEMENT IS THE RATIONAL instinct when institutions fail to respond. Reversing that dynamic requires rebuilding the case for engagement, even if it requires new political experiments.

As Moisés Naím noted, minilateralism — bringing together the smallest possible number of countries needed for impact — has emerged as a pragmatic alternative. Sometimes, fewer is more. The Argentine-Brazilian nuclear accountability agency ABACC has become a global model of confidence-building and technological cooperation, proving that bilateral commitments can succeed where multilateral ones falter. The U.S. rupture with Canada and Mex-



U.S. President Donald Trump speaks at the Shield of the Americas Summit in March in Doral, Florida.

ico need not be the inevitable fate of neighboring democracies. This time, the South of the Americas may be showing the way to the North.

Political scientists have often argued for democratic reform, but they have done so timidly, within the box, seeking marginal adjustments. The fixation on measuring “backsliding” from an assumed democratic endpoint is itself a trap; it assumes a teleology that history does not support. Democracy has always been an experiment, one that flourished first in small places and weakly centralized states. Ironically, the most experimental political system nowadays is China’s, combining subnational autonomy, policy tinkering, and career promotion based on successful innovation.

Relegitimizing democracy will require balancing gradualism with boldness, central planning with regional experimentation, and less demand on citizens’ attention with institutions that reward participation.

Better societies are built through engagement, not alienation. Many people in the Americas and around the globe have lost hope that engagement works. What we need is to make engagement worthwhile through institutional experimentation, the appeal to a future our youngsters envision as worth living — in their own terms — and a democratic politics that delivers more than the promise of the next election. 

Luna is a professor of political science and Diamond Brown Chair in Democratic Studies at McGill University, and a researcher at the UC School of Government (Chile).

Malamud is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon.

Vergara is a political scientist and professor in the Universidad del Pacífico’s Department of Social Sciences (Lima, Peru).



Climate Has Disappeared from the Agenda. Or Has It?

The issue is more persistent than it seems, emerging in other topics like crime and mining, writes a former president.

by Carlos Alvarado Quesada

THERE IS A PARADOX unfolding across Latin America and the Caribbean. Climate change appears to occupy a smaller share of political debate than many expected a decade ago, often overshadowed by concerns such as crime, inflation and economic hardship.

Yet at the same time, climate and environmental pressures are increasingly shaping those very challenges. The question, therefore, is not simply whether we are talking more or less about climate change. It is whether climate change is increasingly becoming embedded in the issues that dominate public and political attention.

Hard data suggest that public concern about climate change remains strong across Latin America. A *Lancet* study using Google search trends found that climate-related engagement has increased significantly over time in both Spanish- and Portuguese-language searches. A 2023 European Investment Bank survey of more than 10,000 people across Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) found that 91% of respondents throughout the region believed climate change affects their daily lives, and 88% support stronger government action to promote



A firefighter works to extinguish a forest fire in Argentina's Chubut province in February 2026.

climate-friendly behavior.

However, while the public awareness and concern in LAC seem to remain remarkably high, surveys such as Latinobarómetro and the OECD Trust Survey show that it seldom ranks among the most pressing political priorities. Instead, immediate concerns such as crime, inflation, employment, corruption, and economic hardship continue to dominate public attention.

But what strikes me as most significant is not how much we talk about climate change, but how we talk about it. Across the region, climate and environmental issues are increasingly moving beyond the confines of environmental policy and becoming intertwined with questions of security, economic development, public health and quality of life.

We see it in the Panama Canal, where water scarcity in the basin has turned an environmental chal-

lenge into an economic one for Panama, the region, and global trade. We see it in countries like Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Peru, where illegal mining sits at the intersection of organized crime, forest destruction, public health risks, and limited economic opportunities, frequently linked to broader criminal economies involving human trafficking, arms trafficking, money laundering and illicit gold markets.

We see it in the difficult choices facing fossil fuel-exporting countries such as Colombia, Brazil, Ecuador, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and Venezuela. As the global energy transition advances, these economies must prepare for a future of declining demand for oil and gas or risk falling export revenues, fiscal pressures, stranded assets, and employment disruptions.

We see it in the growing impacts of extreme heat, wildfires, floods and droughts, which are disrupting livelihoods, affecting public health, straining infra-

structure, and, in some cases, contributing to migration. Across the Caribbean, sea-level rise threatens critical infrastructure concentrated along vulnerable coastlines, increasing both economic and social risks. At that point, it matters little whether a government or a mayor is on the left or the right; communities expect leadership and effective solutions.

It is one of the lessons I draw from the launch of Costa Rica's National Decarbonization Plan in 2019, during my presidency. The plan was the first long-term decarbonization strategy presented by a country following the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015. Independent research conducted in 2020 by the RAND Corporation, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), and the University of Costa Rica estimated that its implementation could generate approximately \$41 billion in net benefits for the country by 2050.

It projects reshaping virtually every dimension of national development, from transportation, air quality, and public health to climate finance, agricultural productivity, energy systems, and the long-term competitiveness of key sectors such as tourism.

Yet, if I had the chance to do it again, I would place less emphasis on the decarbonization narrative and would highlight more intentionally how putting people at the center of the plan improves various dimensions of their livelihoods.

In other words, climate change should be discussed less as a standalone topic, and increasingly as an interconnected force shaping many of the challenges that dominate public and political attention.

This shift is also occurring in a geopolitical context in which security and defense have re-emerged as dominant priorities. From the United States to Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, governments are confronting choices about how to strengthen national security while maintaining ambitious climate commitments.

As a senior European official from the donor community told me not long ago in Berlin, the challenge today is to strengthen military preparedness while maintaining ambitious climate action. Reconciling both priorities is proving to be one of the defining policy dilemmas of our time.

But recent evidence from the region's principal

multilateral development institutions suggests that climate finance in Latin America and the Caribbean has continued to grow substantially. The IADB increased climate finance from \$7.5 billion in 2023 to \$8.2 billion in 2024 and aims to reach \$11.3 billion annually by 2030; CAF committed \$40 billion over five years for climate action, biodiversity, and the energy transition while reporting record approvals of \$18.7 billion in 2025.

It remains insufficient and falls well short of closing the financing gap required to meet the region's climate and development needs. Nevertheless, it points to an encouraging trend: While climate change may have lost some visibility as a standalone political issue, institutions increasingly recognize its economic and social impacts, as well as the growing imperative of investing in resilience.

Perhaps the lesson is that climate change was never a separate agenda. It is woven into the prosperity of our economies, the security of our communities, the health of our families, and the opportunities available to future generations. We may discuss it through different lenses, but we experience it through the conditions that shape everyday life. Climate change does not compete with these concerns; it increasingly helps define them.

As David Bohm, the physicist and thinker whom I deeply admired, observed in the 1980s: “We are the Earth because all our substance comes from the Earth and goes back. It’s wrong to say it’s an environment, (or) to say it’s just surrounding us.”

That's a perspective shared by many Indigenous peoples across the Americas. And in a sense, the same may be true of climate change as well. It is not merely an environmental issue competing for space on the public agenda. It is an expression of our relationship with the natural and human systems upon which all dimensions of life depend. The sooner we integrate that reality, the better equipped we will be to build a more resilient, prosperous, and sustainable future. 

Alvarado Quesada was president of Costa Rica from 2018 to 2022. He is now a senior fellow at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.



A detail of Diego Rivera's *Flower Festival: Feast of Santa Anita* (1931). The painting is on view at New York City's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) until September.

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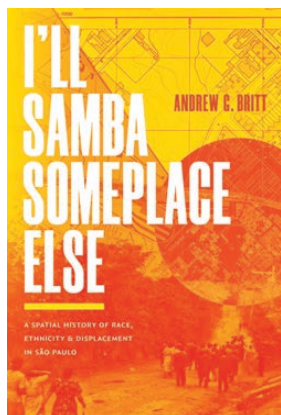
Miranda Mazariegos on a collaboration between The Met Opera and MoMA that highlights Frida Kahlo's relationship with Diego Rivera.

Books

Nonfiction

The hidden history of São Paulo's Japanese neighborhood

Reviewed by Brian Winter



I'll Samba Someplace Else: A Spatial History of Race, Ethnicity, and Displacement in São Paulo

By Andrew G. Britt
Duke University Press
March 2026
406 pages

IN A CITY THAT IS NOT exactly famous for its tourist attractions, Liberdade is something of an oasis.

With its charming red *suzurantô* street lanterns, shops selling manga comics, and a bevy of sushi restaurants, the neighborhood on the edge of São Paulo's old downtown has long attracted Brazilian and foreign visitors alike. A well-curated museum tells the story of the 200,000 Japanese immigrants who arrived in Brazil beginning in the 1900s, many of them toiling on coffee fazendas to work off the debts from their journey before moving to the city. Today, São Paulo has the world's largest Japanese-descended population of any city outside Japan.

A great story, one most *paulistas* know by heart.

But not the actual origin story of Liberdade.

As Andrew G. Britt writes in his new book *I'll Samba Someplace Else*, Liberdade had another identity well before the arrival of the Japanese — as a home to freed slaves. This story remains largely unknown among Brazilians, even though the neighborhood's true origin is, after all, (probably) contained in its name.

Liberdade was for decades a center of Black culture in a city that long thought of itself as whiter than the rest of Brazil. The neighborhood was the site of the headquarters of the Black Brazilian Front, founded in 1931 and widely considered the first organization of its kind to fight for better education and equal rights. São Paulo's first samba school had its origins there. Liberdade's tiny, dilapidated Chapel of the Afflicted, built in 1779, is still today a pilgrimage site for people, many of them Afro-Brazilian, who leave their wishes on the church doors in the hope they will come true.

How could this history be so often ignored? As Britt, an assistant professor at the University of Texas, documents extensively, the city had a custom of paving over, literally, its Black past. Liberdade



The Tanabata Matsuri street festival celebrating Japanese culture draws crowds to São Paulo's Liberdade neighborhood in 2024.

and other historically Black neighborhoods including Bexiga and Saracura were targeted for destruction when 20th-century planners wanted to build highways and otherwise modernize the city.

That is a story with parallels in many U.S. cities, but it had an extra twist given São Paulo's carefully curated identity as a city of immigrants from Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. In the 1930s, when São Paulo state adopted a flag with white and black stripes and a red inset, which its designer meant to symbolize the country's "three races," the historian in charge of São Paulo's state history museum lashed out, saying "it attributes to the *paulista* population a dose of African blood that is entirely false."

Today, there is a growing consciousness of the real history — in São Paulo, and Brazil as a whole. In the 2022 census, 43% of city residents identified themselves as Black or mixed race, up from 30% in

2000. This, advocates say, was the result not of major demographic change, but a growing racial consciousness, aided by both Brazilian factors (rising university enrollment, especially among Black and working class students) and global ones (the murder of George Floyd).

Liberdade itself has only recently begun to reflect this evolution. Today, the neighborhood's central plaza is home to a statue of Deolinda Madre, founder of Liberdade's samba school. It is now one of 12 monuments honoring Black people out of a total of 366 in the city, according to several counts. The plaza itself was also renamed in 2023 by São Paulo's mayor. Its new title? Praça da Liberdade África-Japão. **AQ**

Winter is the editor-in-chief of *Americas Quarterly* and the author of *São Paulo: The Ugliest City You'll Ever Love*, to be published in November.

Fiction

In Dahlia de la Cerda's new story collection, Greek mythology and Mexican *corridos* collide to capture what it means to be a woman living through Mexico's security crisis.

Reviewed by Daniela Ordoñez Delgado



Medea Sang Me a Corrido

By Dahlia de la Cerda

Translated by Heather Cleary and Julia Sanchez

Feminist Press

July 2026

112 pages

GREEK TRAGEDIES MEMORIALIZE HEROES. Mexico's *corridos* the outlaws. In Dahlia de la Cerda's latest book, *Medea Sang Me a Corrido*, characters see them as two sides of the same coin.

In this linked collection of stories, Mexican writer and activist De la Cerda embraces literary appropriation. By transposing Greek tragedy into the worlds of fictional Aztlán and San Miguelito, De la Cerda highlights the universality of the Mexican experience, narco-violence included. Through six linked short stories guided by the mythical Medea — the Greek sorceress and princess of Colchis — she narrates how people survive when the institutions around them have collapsed, and guides us through the lives of women searching for missing children, teenagers who believed fake promises of success, and the networks that rule where the state has failed.

Each story reveals another layer of Aztlán's complicated reality. Paulina searches for her boyfriend while deciding whether to continue a pregnancy. Antonia fights to protect a desperately wanted baby because being a mother is her form of rebellion. Jordán is recruited into organized crime from a young age. Reina searches through unmarked graves for her son's body, while Perla is trapped in a relationship with a drug lord who enjoys *corridos* that brag about arsenals of weapons he doesn't know how to use.

Each tale is individual and unique, but they also accumulate into a collective portrait of systemic failure amid Mexico's security crisis and cartel violence. "The government cut off one head thinking it would kill the monster, but the monster grew twenty stupid, crude, violent heads in its place," explains one character, Antonia, about the situation in her town.

In the final story, Medea finally speaks for herself. She shows up at people's doorsteps driving a tuned-up Jetta with vertical-opening doors, cornrows on her head and snake tattoos on her arms. Through the book, she becomes a witness to the war and a companion for women moving the infrastructures of care they built in lieu of institutional support. In that space, Medea even

gets to enjoy herself: She drinks *Kittychelas* at festivals, gets her *perreo* on, learns *corridos* by heart, and sings them with strangers at night.

The *corridos* — narrative Mexican ballads and folk songs — promise a form of immortality. Fight, die young, and they'll sing your name forever. In the book, they become a part of these characters' lives, always in the background, blasting from car speakers, parties, town festivals, and the house radio. Jordán was 17 when he first fell for their narrative. "Troy is my favorite movie," he says, "That shit blew my mind — like, imagine being a legend!" When he was later recruited into the narco-trade, his girlfriend waited for him to come home.

Medea chose to come Aztlán deliberately. Although her grandfather, the Sun God, warned her it was dangerous even for the gods — a land of war, bloodshed, and no hope — she went anyway, mostly to purge the guilt of killing her children after Jason's betrayal. Greek tragedies would've made her flat, but De la Cerda gives Medea a present instead: a chance to be imperfect, to repent. Medea becomes capable of both harm and care. In Aztlán, she finds horror worse than anything she witnessed in Greece, but she also finds resistance, sorority, and women who won't let the war have the final word. That's what makes her stay. As she says, "a redemption that embraces all the shit and turns it into resistance."

De la Cerda, cofounder of feminist collective Morras Help Morras, was raised in working-class

Aguascalientes and rural Jalisco, which she describes as deeply conservative communities enmeshed with organized crime. She brings that background into the collection, where contradictions within motherhood, love, safety, fear, and womanhood coexist.

In *Medea Sang Me a Corrido*, translators Julia Sanches and Heather Cleary worked in tandem to navigate the book's oral rhythms and code-switching, which range from street slang to deep philosophical reflections and mythmaking all at once. Their collaboration mirrors the book's own insistence on sorority: Two women working together to carry these stories across languages is something Medea herself would have blessed.

Overall, the book insists on free will over fate: One character cites Jean-Paul Sartre to say, "We aren't what they made of us, but rather what we make of what they made of us." Medea, the tragic story of a scorned woman betrayed by her husband, was first written by Euripides. These Mexican women are written by violence that the state either perpetuates or fails to stop. De la Cerda gives all of them agency: the ability to turn themselves into something beyond what circumstances tried to force them to be. 

Ordoñez Delgado is a Colombian writer, literary translator and editorial assistant at Sundial House. Her translation of *69 38 78*, by Juan Carlos Méndez Guédez, is forthcoming in October.

Upcoming Books

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

FICTION

It's All River

Carla Madeira
Translated by Alison Entrekin
Liveright
192 pages

Asmodeus

Rita Indiana
Translated by Achy Obejas
Graywolf Press
224 pages

NONFICTION

Claiming the Nation: The Politics of Nationalism in Modern Brazil

Andre Pagliarini
University of California Press
244 pages

Mrs Gargantua: Reports from Cuba

J.S. Tennant
William Collins
352 Pages

Film

Documentary

A Cuban filmmaker returns home to find the town he grew up in is slowly disappearing, even if its artists continue to hold on.

Reviewed by Ena Alvarado

WHEN CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS AND his crew glimpsed Cuba for the first time in October 1492, the lush terrain they likely saw included a stretch of land known today as Gibara. This small town is the subject of Cuban filmmaker Armando Capó's latest documentary, *The Land of the Whale*.

Capó grew up in Gibara but left as a young man for Havana to pursue filmmaking. Many years later, he returned home armed with a camera and a sound recorder, assuming the role of an encyclopedic historian and hoping to record every possible anecdote about his fading town. Simple shots of Gibara's modest buildings interlock with conversations between Capó and three of his former teachers, all in advanced age: Antonio Lemus Nicolau, a pianist; Tony Ortega Piferrer, a taxidermist; and Luis Catalá, a master of watercolors. Obsessed with preserving the past, they bring to life precious stories, not just about Gibara, but about Cuba's cultural history and what's been lost.

Antonio reminisces about José Rey de la Torre, one of Cuba's most celebrated classical guitarists of the last century, while Tony gives Capó a detailed breakdown of the moment in 1978 when an enormous dead humpback whale was found by the locals and collectively cut for its meat. Tony was a part of the team responsible for preserving the whale's bones, exposing *gibareños'* refusal to forget any piece of their town's story and, in a way, mirroring Capó's desire to document it before it's too late.

For all their color, as these tales pile up, they come to feel bland and provincial, turning the film into a book report on Gibara. It's a kind of nostalgia that leaves little room for renewal. A possible saving grace emerges during a visit to Luis' personal studio, when the old artist stumbles upon one of his very first watercolor works and tearily admits: "In all sincerity, I can't do this now." The tender scene ends with Luis' recognition that he'd love to go back to when he was younger, because he would have preferred "not to have seen this." By "this," he means the town's



The Land of the Whale (La tierra de la ballena)

Directed by
Armando Capó

Screenplay by
Armando Capó

Where to stream:
Icarus Films

Cuba

Starring Antonio
Lemus Nicolau, Antonio
"Tony" Ortega Piferrer,
and Luis Catalá



In this sense, Luis' remarks highlight the film's most interesting question about the human cost of being left behind, even if they fail to wake the film from its slumber. They also catalyze Capó's reflections, spurring him to wonder whether craftworks may be uniquely immune to loss. Can a whale's bones, a piano recording, or a watercolor far outlast a town and its inhabitants? Perhaps. Yet, in Capó's film, remembering Gibara seems relegated to the adventures of chance, much like a whale washing up on the shore.

Capó shot the film in 2020, but he edited it about three years later, realizing that he had inadvertently “recorded a farewell.” The film is an elegy not just to Gibara’s memories and people but also to Cuba’s cultural tradition. Amid political and economic turmoil, Capó bets that art will live on, even when no one is there to savor it. **AQ**

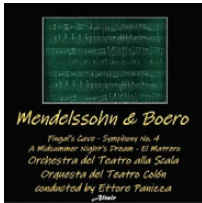
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Music

AQ's Summer Playlist

This issue's playlist focuses on a genre that thrived in Latin America's colonial courts, Jesuit missions and revolutions.

by Sebastián Zubieta



**Listen to our
playlist now!
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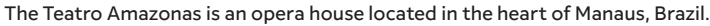


IN THE AMERICAS, OPERA has been thriving since at least 1701, when Tomás de Torrejón y Velasco premiered *La púrpura de la rosa*, in Lima, an opera still performed around the world. The piece, with libretto by Pedro Calderón de la Barca, was commissioned to celebrate the 18th birthday of King Philip V and his first year on the Spanish throne. A decade later, Manuel de Sumaya, the most important Baroque composer born in New Spain, premiered *La parténope* in Mexico City. Both follow that era's predilection for pseudo-mythological and pastoral settings and were the first operas written in the Western Hemisphere.

Not far from Lima, but worlds apart from the Spanish colonial cities, the religious opera *San Ignacio* was composed in the 1720s in the Jesuit missions of Chiquitos, in the Bolivian lowlands, almost certainly by Jesuits Domenico Zipoli and Martin Schmid, possibly alongside local composers. It was performed across the missions and probably in cities as well, and later entered the population's folk music repertoire after the expulsion of the Jesuits.

Opera, with its combination of music, poetry, narrative, stagecraft and dance, has never been cheap to produce, so a solid base of patronage and a willing public are necessary for its existence (except in the missional context). We know that the genre and its Spanish variety, *zarzuela*, were extremely popular in many of the large Viceroyal cities throughout the 1700s, but, as with Sumaya's opera, the scores of most locally composed works were lost, so we don't know exactly what local opera sounded like.

French opera had remarkable popularity in the second half of the 1700s in Saint-Domingue and the other Caribbean colonies, starting in Cap-Haïtien (then Cap-Français), where a theater company was founded in the 1740s. The *Comédie du Cap*, which was the center of the city's social life, presented hundreds of operas in its 1,500-seat theater until it was destroyed in 1793 during the early battles of the Haitian Revolution. While Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Le devin du village* was a Caribbean fa-



The first half-century of independence was a turbulent time for most young Latin American republics, but as the new nations stabilized, the fervor for opera continued to grow. Creole composers started to professionalize, with many starting their training in institutions founded by earlier musical entrepreneurs and continuing their studies in Italy, Germany or France. Some of their works tell stories set in the Americas, such as romances between Indigenous and European characters or heroic tales from vari-

Our playlist includes examples of some of the works mentioned, plus a jewel of an exoticist opera by the most French of Venezuelan composers, Reynaldo Hahn (1874-1957). 

Zubieta is music director at Americas Society

Cultura

Visual Arts

A collaboration between The Met Opera and MoMA in New York City brings Frida and Diego back to life.

by Miranda Mazariegos



Isabel Leonard as Frida and Carlos Álvarez
as Diego in Gabriela Lena Frank's
El último sueño de Frida y Diego.





Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Mexico in 1946.



El último sueño de Frida y Diego

Ran from May 15 to June 5 at The Metropolitan Opera

Frida and Diego: The Last Dream

On view through September 12 at The Museum of Modern Art

SET ON DAY OF the Dead in 1957, the new Metropolitan Opera production of *El último sueño de Frida y Diego*, with a score by Gabriela Lena Frank and a libretto by Nilo Cruz, is a play on the Orpheus myth. Instead of the living descending to reclaim their dead, it's Frida Kahlo who rises from Mictlán, the Aztec underworld, to retrieve Diego Rivera from the living. Tortured with grief after Frida's death, Diego summons her from the underworld. For Frida, though, the world was nothing but agony.

Isabel Leonard brings Frida to life through her mezzo-soprano, which fills the theater with anguish, a representation of the entrapment of pain that followed Frida for much of her life. The tumultuous relationship with Diego Rivera is also palpable throughout the piece, as Frida decides whether it's worth coming back for him or not. Diego is played by Carlos Álvarez, whose baritone commands the imposing authority befitting Rivera without losing the emotional weight brought about by grieving his wife's death. The score includes traditional Mexican instruments — marimba and mariachi trumpets, for example — without over-imposing them, creating music that feels visceral and mystical. The eerie pangs fit well not only with the backdrop of Day of



Center: Gabriella Reyes plays Catrina in Gabriela Lena Frank's *El último sueño de Frida y Diego*.
Right: Isabel Leonard as Frida

the Dead, but also with the main tension throughout the story: whether Frida will give in and come back for Diego. Eventually, she says, “*Mi arte me invita a regresar.*” Her art invites her back. And so, she travels from Mictlán back to Mexico City, pursuing the promise of a life without pain and the possibility to return to painting.

Although elegance was struck carefully with the music, I can’t say the same of the storyline, which felt tenuous and slow at its best and utterly confusing at its worst. Almost all the subplots or supporting roles — a character dressed in drag as Greta Garbo coming back from the underworld, Frida singing about poverty in Mexico, and Diego refusing to eat fruit because he’d gain weight — felt arbitrary and cartoonish, disconnected from the opera’s otherwise careful cultural architecture.

To judge it merely on its narrative fortunes, however, would be to do it injustice. Its most striking element is indeed the set design, created by Jon Bau-

sor, which brings a whole new world to life. At moments colorful and lively, inspired by the Day of the Dead decorations, and at other points dark, unearthly and surreal, the set elevates what could have been another retelling of an overdone story into something inventive. The real world contains papel picado, marigolds, and a chorus of laborers; and in the underworld, jagged tree roots evoke Frida’s broken back, and from their cracks a chorus of dancers dressed as muscle skeletons emerges in sync with the music. Vibrant and magical, but also eerie and palpable, the chorus of dancers accompanies the characters throughout the entire show, reminding us of the constant presence of death, the way it steps on our toes even when we don’t see it. This set doesn’t quite work logically — both worlds bleed into one another and bodies spill from one to the next without any clear structure — but it’s precisely that porousness that gives it the intriguing mix between a Greek myth and a magical Latin American story.



Installation view of *Frida and Diego: The Last Dream* at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.

Part of the artistry of the set design is that it recalls Frida and Diego's artworks, some of which are on view in New York City's MoMA until September. This collaboration with MoMA extends Bausor's world beyond the stage — blue curtains, the bare tree, the mural's scaffolding, even the ominous red lighting — and recreates the surreal feeling for those unable to see the full production on stage. Surrounding it is a selection of iconic works from the couple: Frida's *Fulang-Chang and I* (1937) and *Self Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940), and Diego's *Agrarian Leader Zapata* (1931).

In real life, Diego's final dream was for his ashes to be mixed with Frida's upon his death. Because his wish was denied by his family, The Met gives him this world in which spending eternity with Frida was possible. Yet, the title of the opera implies that the dream was shared. Given their history, though, that seems unlikely. What did Frida really dream of? In

her last journal entry, she wrote: “*Espero alegre la salida ... y espero no volver jamás.*” (I hope the exit is joyful ... and I hope never to return). Her last words suggest another dream entirely, one of freedom — of leaving this world that gave her so much pain.

At its heart, The Met's opera production is a love story, between the artists, of course, but also about Frida's devotion to her art. Frida and Diego, the art world's most beloved couple, might be overproduced, their art commercialized to the point of fatigue. But to reimagine their stories in different settings, different disciplines and expressions, is to allow their art to live on. Perhaps, then, that's how The Met gives Frida her dream as well: a life where her art outlasts her pain. 

Mazariegos is a Guatemalan journalist based in New York. She is an editor and podcast producer at *Americas Quarterly*.



Top: *Fulang-Chang and I* (1937, assembled after 1939), Frida Kahlo
 Bottom left: *Self-portrait with Short Hair* (1940), Frida Kahlo. Bottom right: *Agrarian Leader Zapata* (1931) Diego Rivera

LATIN AMERICA AT A GLANCE

INCLUDES DATA PROVIDED BY

Bloomberg

AI adoption is increasing across Latin America, yet the usage gap between the Global North and the Global South continues to widen. According to Microsoft, in the first quarter of the year, 27.5% of the working-age population in the Global North used generative AI, compared to 15.4% in the Global South, which lags the global average of 17.8%.



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BRAZIL



CHILE



COLOMBIA



DOMINICAN
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GUATEMALA



MEXICO



PERU



VENEZUELA

AI USAGE

Q1 2026	21.9%	19.1%	22.7%	24.5%	24.8%	19.5%	16.4%	20.1%	16.4%	10.3%
pp change from H2 2025	2.3	2.0	1.9	2.5	2.1	1.8	1.6	2.3	1.7	1.3
Rank out of 147 countries	50	58	47	41	39	57	68	56	69	100

SHARE OF PEOPLE 15-64 WHO HAVE USED A GENERATIVE AI PRODUCT

GDP GROWTH (PROJECTED)

2026	3.0%	1.9%	1.7%	2.5%	3.9%	2.5%	3.8%	1.1%	2.9%	8.1%
2027	3.0%	1.8%	2.6%	2.4%	4.1%	2.2%	3.6%	1.8%	3.0%	6.0%
2028	3.0%	2.0%	2.3%	2.7%	4.4%	2.2%	3.9%	2.0%	3.0%	5.0%

PROJECTIONS CURRENT AS OF JUNE 2026

ECONOMIC INDICATORS (PROJECTED)

2026 Inflation	31.0%	4.6%	3.5%	5.8%	4.4%	2.4%	2.6%	4.2%	2.8%	365.0%
2026 Unemployment rate	7.2%	5.6%	8.4%	9.1%	5.3%	4.2%	N/A	2.8%	5.3%	N/A
2026 Govt. deficit as % of GDP	0.1%	-8.5%	-2.2%	-6.6%	-3.3%	-2.5%	-2.4%	-4.3%	-2.4%	N/A

PROJECTIONS CURRENT AS OF JUNE 2026

PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL RATINGS

President	 Javier Milei	 Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva	 José Antonio Kast	 Gustavo Petro	 Luis Abinader	 Daniel Noboa	 Bernardo Arévalo	 Claudia Sheinbaum	 José María Balcázar	 Delcy Rodríguez
Approval	35%	47%	44%	46%	52%	46%	34%	69%	20%	25%

SOURCES: AI usage: Microsoft Global AI Diffusion (May 2026); GDP growth forecasts, inflation rate, unemployment rate, government deficit as percentage of GDP: Bloomberg (June); Dominican Republic unemployment, Guatemala 2028 GDP growth: IMF (April). NOTE: Figures rounded to nearest decimal point.

PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL: Argentina: Encuesta de Satisfacción Política y Opinión - Universidad de San Andrés (May); Brazil: Genial/Quaest (June); Chile: Plaza Pública Cadem (June); Colombia: Invamer (May); Dominican Republic: Gallup for Diario Libre (May); Guatemala: CID Gallup for Fundación Libertad y Desarrollo (May); Mexico: El Financiero (May); Peru: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos (April); Venezuela: Latam Pulse (May). NOTE: Figures rounded to nearest percentage.

ARGENTINA: QUIRINALE VIA COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA; BRAZIL: PALÁCIO DO PLANALTO VIA COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA; CHILE: GOBIERNO DE CHILE VIA COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA; COLOMBIA: FOTOGRAFÍA OFICIAL DE LA PRESIDENCIA DE COLOMBIA VIA COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA; DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF VIA COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA; ECUADOR: PRESIDENCIA DE LA REPÚBLICA DEL ECUADOR VIA COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA; GUATEMALA: DANIEL HERNÁNDEZ-SALAZAR/GOBIERNO DE GUATEMALA VIA COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA; MEXICO: AZUZAGAWA VIA COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA; PERU: MINISTRO DE LA PRODUCCIÓN VIA COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA; VENEZUELA: GOVERNMENT.RU VIA COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.

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