

Latin America and the Caribbean

Andes

↓ 🌟 **Colombia** **Anti-govt protests escalated further as protesters, armed civilians and security forces clashed, leaving dozens killed; Cali city faces high risk of spiralling violence in coming weeks.** Following late April protests against gov't's tax reform, President Duque 2 May withdrew reform proposal and adopted other concessions in following days; tens of thousands however continued to rally across country, with protests taking increasingly deadly turn as protesters faced security build-up and armed civilians. Notably, civilians opposed to strikes 9 May opened fire on protesters including indigenous groups in Cali city, Valle del Cauca department (west), wounding at least eight. Videos of police firing into crowds, chasing civilians and using teargas indiscriminately circulated on social media, and Human Rights Ombudsman 11 May reported 42 killed and 168 missing since protests started. Duque 17 May authorised security forces' "maximum deployment" to lift blockades across country. Clashes between protesters, police and armed civilians 28 May left several people dead in Cali; Duque same day announced deployment of 7,000 troops to Cali and rest of Valle del Cauca. Negotiations between gov't and strike leaders, which started mid-May, remained stalled by month's end. Meanwhile, High Commissioner for Peace Miguel Ceballos 9 May revealed gov't had been conducting indirect talks with National Liberation Army (ELN) to explore group's "disposition" toward gov't's pre-conditions for talks, including releasing hostages and ceasing kidnappings, child recruitment and use of mines; Ceballos 26 May resigned, citing former President Uribe's contacts with ELN outside gov't's purview. Gov't 16 May named jailed ELN leader Tulio Gilberto Astudillo Victoria, alias Juan Carlos Cuellar, as "manager of peace", hereby allowing him to play mediating role; ELN commander Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista next day released statement supporting anti-gov't protests and urging soldiers to disobey orders. UN Security Council 11 May renewed mandate of Verification Mission for Colombia until 31 Oct; mission's mandate now due to include monitoring compliance with sentences of Special Jurisdiction for Peace, established under gov't-Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) peace deal to handle cases deriving from conflict. Clashes between Venezuela's military and FARC dissidents continued near Colombian border (see Venezuela).

↓ **Peru** **Maoist rebels staged deadly attack ahead of 6 June presidential election.** Suspected remnants of Maoist revolutionary group Shining Path 23 May killed at least 16 people in San Miguel de Elne village, Valle de los Ríos Apurímac, Ene y Mantaro (VRAEM) region known for coca production; pamphlets warning against voting in 6 June presidential election reportedly found on site after attack. Interim President Sagasti next day said he had ordered deployment of armed forces and police in area, promised there will be "no impunity" for those behind massacre.

↑ **Venezuela President Maduro made several gestures signalling possible willingness to negotiate with rivals, including appointment of opposition members in new electoral authority.** Govt-controlled National Assembly 4 May appointed new National Electoral Council (CNE), with five-person leadership including two opposition members, strongest opposition representation in 15 years – signalling Maduro’s possible openness to further concessions. New CNE divided opposition. Mainstream opposition leader Juan Guaidó same day said new CNE was creature of “illegitimate” National Assembly and would “drag country toward greater disaster”, while former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles, who heads moderate opposition politicians engaged in dialogue with Maduro, 5 May welcomed “essential first step to open the constitutional and democratic reconstruction path”. Guaidó 11 May proposed “National Salvation Accord” including timetable for “free and fair” presidential, parliamentary, regional and municipal elections, release of political prisoners and humanitarian aid access in exchange for progressive lifting of international sanctions and guarantees for current govt officials. Capriles 25 May expressed support for Guaidó’s proposal, which U.S. 11 May and EU 13 May also welcomed. CNE 13 May announced regional and municipal elections for 21 Nov. In response, Guaidó next day said opposition would not “lend itself to a farce”. Meanwhile, chief prosecutor 1 May announced charges against low-ranking govt and military officials in three high-profile political killings for which govt had hitherto denied responsibility; move came day after six imprisoned oil executives, whose freedom is sought by U.S., were released into house arrest. In Apure state near border with Colombia, low-intensity conflict continued between Venezuela’s military and dissident faction of Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) known as 10th Front, with clashes leaving at least seven soldiers injured near La Victoria municipality early May. After 10th Front 15 May released video of eight soldiers reportedly taken prisoners in Apure late April, Defence Minister Gen Padrino López same day confirmed soldiers were in guerrillas’ hands. Jesús Santrich, leader of another FARC dissident faction known as “Segunda Marquetalia”, reportedly killed 17 May in Venezuela.

Southern Cone and Brazil

➔ **Brazil Tensions ran high between President Bolsonaro on one hand, and Congress, state governors and military on the other.** Current Health Minister Marcelo Queiroga and three of his predecessors throughout month testified before Senate’s parliamentary commission investigating federal govt’s handling of COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in over 450,000 deaths in country since early 2020. Notably, former Health Minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta 4 May said that under his tenure he had “systematically” urged Bolsonaro to change his stance on pandemic, while former Health Minister Nelson Teich next day said he had resigned from his ministerial position over Bolsonaro’s pressure to widely use malaria drug hydroxychloroquine as COVID-19 treatment. Bolsonaro 5 May reiterated call on governors not to implement social distancing measures, said he will issue decree to “secure right of freedom of movement”. Thousands of govt supporters gathered in federal capital Brasília 15 May and country’s second most populous city Rio de Janeiro 23 May. Former health minister under Bolsonaro and lead witness on Senate’s parliamentary commission, Gen Eduardo Pazuello,

appeared at 23 May protest, breaking military rules against active duty officers' political involvement and furthering tensions between president and Army High Command. Bolsonaro 27 May threatened once again military action against any state govts announcing new COVID-19 related lockdowns. Tens of thousands 29 May protested across country against govt's COVID-19 response, denouncing "dictatorship" and demanding Bolsonaro's impeachment; police threw tear gas and shot rubber bullets at protesters in north-eastern city of Recife. Meanwhile, police raid in Rio de Janeiro's Jacarezinho neighbourhood 6 May left 28 dead including one police officer; Rio de Janeiro's Prosecutor's Office 11 May announced creation of task force to investigate incident, including accusations that police carried out arbitrary killings and tampered with crime scene.

Central America and Mexico

➔ **El Salvador President Bukele moved to take control of judiciary, further straining relations with U.S.** Newly inaugurated govt-controlled Legislative Assembly 1 May voted to remove all five justices of Supreme Court's Constitutional Chamber, who had previously ruled against Bukele's handling of COVID-19 pandemic; although Constitutional Chamber immediately declared move unconstitutional, four of five removed magistrates resigned in following days. Lawmakers overnight 1-2 May also dismissed Attorney General Raúl Melara, who had been investigating allegations of govt corruption and negotiations with gangs, over accusations of political affiliation. Washington slammed moves as dangerous power grab; notably, U.S. Special Envoy for Central America Ricardo Zuñiga 11 May decried removals as "unconstitutional". Legislative Assembly 5 May approved legislation shielding officials from corruption investigations in COVID-19-related purchases since March 2020. U.S. Congresswoman 18 May disclosed names of five senior Salvadorian officials whom State Dept accused of corruption or involvement in narco-trafficking; Bukele immediately criticised list for not including opposition ARENA party representative, and Legislative Assembly next day ratified 2019 cooperation agreement with China in alleged response to U.S. pressure. U.S. development agency USAID 21 May redirected assistance away from National Police and Institute for Access to Public Information to civil society organisations; Bukele 25 May warned it would be illegal for USAID to fund opposition movements.

➔ **Honduras Despite approval of new electoral law, uncertainty continued to loom over electoral process in lead-up to Nov polls.** National Congress 25 May approved new electoral law. Opposition leader and former presidential candidate Salvador Nasralla same day decried law as "farce" that consolidates three-party system and excludes others, said his party will boycott Nov elections if not granted representatives at polling stations. National Anticorruption Council 26 May also criticised law for allowing individuals facing corruption investigations to run. U.S. court 13 May requested extradition of former police chief, Juan Carlos "El Tigre" Bonilla, on drug-trafficking charges. U.S. Congresswoman 18 May disclosed names of five Honduran lawmakers accused by U.S. State Dept of embezzlement or narco-trafficking. Govt continued to face criticism over management of COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, National Anticorruption Council 6 May urged President Hernández's govt to immediately address deficiencies and shortcomings of triage centres in seven departments.

➔ **Mexico Armed group violence continued, notably targeting politicians and journalists in lead-up to 6 June legislative, regional and local elections.** Authorities 29 April-12 May excavated 26 bodies in and around Irapuato town, Guanajuato state (centre). Amid turf battles between Jalisco Cartel New Generation (CJNG) and rival Sinaloa Cartel in north of Jalisco state (centre), unidentified armed group 7 May abducted and later killed three siblings in state capital Guadalajara; thousands 12 May took to streets in Guadalajara to call for justice. In Sonora state (north), unidentified assailants early May killed local journalist in Sonoyta municipality and 13 May shot dead former state attorney and current mayoral candidate in Cajeme municipality. Also in north, unidentified gunmen 24 May ambushed and killed Sinaloa state police director near state capital Culiacan. Unidentified assailants 25 May killed mayoral candidate in Moroleon city in Guanajuato state, bringing to 34 number of candidates and to 88 number of politicians murdered ahead of 6 June vote. President López Obrador 7 May accused National Electoral Institute of tolerating vote buying by two opposition candidates in Nuevo León state (north). Attorney General's Office 10 May announced investigations into both candidates over allegations of campaign irregularities; cases are currently the only ones made public out of 450 ongoing investigations for suspected electoral fraud. After collapse of Mexico City metro overpass 3 May killed 26, hundreds in following days took to streets to demand justice for victims and protest corruption and negligence; authorities had reportedly ignored successive warnings about structural weaknesses and damages in construction of elevated track. Ruling MORENA party-dominated Senate 6 May rejected creation of investigative commission into accident. López Obrador and U.S. VP Kamala Harris 7 May vowed to collaborate to tackle root causes of migration in Central America; more concrete steps expected during Harris's visit to Mexico City scheduled for 8 June.

↓ **Nicaragua President Ortega tightened his grip on electoral process by filling electoral authorities with loyalists and barring opposition from running.** Ahead of general elections scheduled for Nov, govt-controlled National Assembly 4 May elected Supreme Electoral Council (CSE)'s magistrates, mostly members of ruling Sandinista National Liberation Front; same day amended electoral law, de facto restricting opposition participation and limiting international electoral observation. U.S. State Dept, Organization of American States and EU 6 May all condemned appointment of new CSE magistrates and changes to electoral law; U.S. State Dept also warned it will continue to use diplomatic and economic tools against Ortega's govt. In response, Ortega 18 May accused U.S. and European diplomats of election interference. CSE 18-19 May withdrew legal status of Democratic Restoration Party, electoral vehicle of opposition bloc National Coalition and Conservative Party. Attorney General's Office 20 May said opposition presidential hopeful Cristiana Chamorro is under investigation for alleged financial irregularities and money laundering; police same day raided premises of Chamorro's NGO and independent news outlet *Confidencial*, run by her brother, in capital Managua. U.S. State Dept 21 May condemned "another alarming step away from democracy". Attorney General's Office by 26 May had summoned at least 16 journalists in relation to case. Meanwhile, opposition remained divided, with National Coalition and Citizen Alliance failing to form electoral alliance by 12 May deadline set by new CSE.

Caribbean

☛ **Haiti Authorities confirmed intention to proceed with controversial constitutional referendum in late June despite dwindling international support; vote could worsen political crisis and fuel violent unrest.** Interim PM Claude Joseph 4 May confirmed govt's intention to hold constitutional referendum 27 June. EU Ambassador to Haiti Sylvie Tabesse 6 May said EU would not send electoral observer mission, deeming process insufficiently transparent and democratic; move follows late April withdrawal of support for referendum by Core Group – composed of representatives from UN Sec-Gen office, U.S., EU, France, Germany, Canada, Brazil, Spain and Organization of American States (OAS). After Joseph late April said govt was ready to host OAS mission to facilitate inclusive dialogue on political crisis, U.S. 12 May urged OAS to swiftly stipulate mission's provisions, and OAS Permanent Council 26 May approved terms of reference for three-day mission to be deployed “no later than mid-June”. Protesters 3 and 7 May burned tyres and erected road blocks in several areas of capital Port-au-Prince to protest recent kidnappings of two residents by suspected gang members. Local media 11 May reported authorities had paid gangs in Port-au-Prince to stop or reduce kidnappings; govt immediately denied claim. Meanwhile, health authorities 14 May confirmed presence of two COVID-19 variants in country; World Health Organization 19 May said govt had accepted 130,000 doses of AstraZeneca vaccine in reversal of previous position, and govt 22 May declared state of emergency for eight days to curb rise in infections. UN Children agency late May warned number of children suffering from severe acute malnutrition could double this year due to impacts of COVID-19 and rising violence. Dominican Republic mid-May reported completion of first 23km of fence aimed at stemming illegal migration and smuggling along Dominican-Haitian border.