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South America Gears Up for Busy Election Year

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Presidential elections are set to take place in four South American countries this year, starting with Colombia, where the right is expected to keep its hold on government.

At the other end of the political spectrum are the governments of Bolivia, Brazil, and Uruguay, where progressives are also looking to retain power. All three face challenges from conservative forces, which are doing everything they can to push for leadership change. Convincing voters in those countries will not be easy, however, given the success the governments have had incorporating previously marginalized groups into the social, economic, and political fold.

"The state altered its role and began answering the concrete needs of society," political analyst Óscar Laborde wrote in an article published Feb. 4 in Tiempo, an Argentine daily. "Part of this new reality is that, in each of those countries, there has been an appropriation of democracy and of the electoral instruments by poorer sectors of the population, who increasingly see their votes as a tool that can bring about major changes."

Predicting a runoff

Colombia, unlike many other western democracies, does not hold its parliamentary and presidential elections at the same time. The two elections instead take place at least 60 days apart. Voters start by choosing the country’s 102 senators and 166 deputies. Only then do they elect the president. And if no candidate earns a majority of 50% plus one valid vote, the top two presidential contenders compete in a runoff (NotiSur, March 7, 2014).

This year, Colombia’s congressional and presidential elections will be held on March 9 and May 25, respectively. Polls favor the far right, led by ex-President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), in the parliamentary vote. Uribe’s more moderate successor, President Juan Manuel Santos, is expected to be re-elected. Should those predictions prove accurate, the results will be oddly contradictory given how divided Santos and Uribe are regarding the government’s ongoing peace talks with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerillas (NotiSur, Jan. 17, 2014). Santos wants to sign a peace accord, which most Colombians hope will happen, and thus end the country’s half-century-long civil war. But voters are also likely to elect Uribe, whose ultraconservative congressional followers want the war to continue so that the Army can ultimately exterminate the rebels.

Most observers expect the presidential contest to end in a runoff even though Santos’ principal rival, Uribe-backed candidate Óscar Iván Zuluaga, is polling at barely 8%. Another ambiguous sign coming out of the polls is the increasing number of respondents—at last count more than 30%—who say they will "votar en blanco" (submit blank votes).

Albert Traver, an analyst with the Spanish news agency EFE, sees the blank-vote tendency as evidence of a serious disconnect between the leading candidates and the people they are supposed to represent. Voters are not convinced by either the peace Santos is promising or the war that Uribe and his allies are pushing, Traver explained in a Feb. 21 article. "Neither of these extremes represent
the sectors that have been protesting in recent months and demanding structural reforms," he said. There is even a possibility, the EFE analyst added, that come election day more than 50% of voters could end up submitting blank ballots. In that event, Colombia would have to call new elections with different candidates—a "serious crisis," Traver wrote.

**Bolivia's Evo Morales aims high**

Bolivians head to the polls on Oct. 5. President Evo Morales is favored to win in just a single round, as he did in both 2005 and 2009. Morales, an Aymara Indian who also leads a union of coca-leaf producers, will face two far-right opponents: Samuel Doria Medina, a powerful businessman, and Rubén Costas, governor of the eastern department of Santa Cruz. Both are old enemies of the indigenous leader and of Bolivia’s indigenous groups in general, seeing them as unfit to hold ministerial posts, legislative seats, and, obviously, the presidency. The two were implicated in 2008 in a plot to overthrow President Morales’ government.

Morales, perhaps just to irritate his opponents, says his goal "is to win 74% of the vote, 10% more, as always, than in the previous election." He won the 2005 presidential election with 53.7% of the vote and was re-elected in 2009 with 64.2% (NotiSur, Jan. 6, 2006, and Dec. 18, 2009). The president is happy to point out as well that his government has won six elections overall: three with more than 50% of the vote and three with more than 60%.

One of President Morales’ strongest selling points, as the news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) recently pointed out, is his economic record. The Bolivian economy grew 6.5% last year, up from 4.5% in 2006. During that same seven-year span, per capita income more than doubled, from US$1,100 to US$2,450, while the rate of unemployment fell from 5.2% to 3.2%. Inflation rose slightly, from 4.8% to 6.5%. But export earnings, in the meantime, improved dramatically, from US$4.1 billion in 2006 to US$12.5 billion in 2013, as did Bolivia’s foreign reserves, which increased from approximately US$3 billion to US$14 billion.

Morales’ tongue-in-cheek election goal may not actually be that far off the mark. A poll released Feb. 25 by Página Siete, an opposition newspaper, estimated support for the president at 73%. How exactly that high approval rating translates into votes remains to be seen.

"An unbeatable duo"

Brazil will also hold its presidential election on Oct. 5. President Dilma Rousseff is hoping to follow in the footsteps of her predecessor and close political ally, ex-President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2011), and win a second term in office. Both represent the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT). Lula, arguably Brazil’s most popular politician, is expected to campaign with Rousseff, who is a heavy favorite to win. "Together they will make an unbeatable duo," correspondent Darío Pignotti of the Italian news agency ANSA wrote on Jan. 27.

Standing in Rousseff’s way are the conservative Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB), the progressive Partido Socialista Brasileiro (PSB), and the country’s leading newspapers, upon which the opposition relies heavily to push its ideology. Opposition forces, according to Pignotti, are crossing their fingers that the election heads to a second round. From there they can form a broad alliance that might even include high-profile ecologist Marina Silva, a PT dissident who served as Lula’s environment minister and drew nearly 20 million votes in the last election (NotiSur, Oct. 22, 2010). "The right has come to the conclusion that, come what may, it must make it to a second round—even if it has to encourage social upheaval," the ANSA correspondent wrote.
The opposition parties have never said anything to that effect. The newspaper Folha de São Paulo, however, warned that the upcoming FIFA World Cup soccer tournament "will spark social unrest, and many are saying the armed forces will be needed to repress the rebellious people." The tournament, being hosted at stadiums throughout Brazil, will take place in June and July.

Other news outlets are sowing similar seeds of discontent. The influential O Globo daily, part of a media empire that includes other newspapers, magazines, and radio and television stations, has been sounding the alarm with statements such as: "order is a prerequisite to democracy." And on Feb. 16, O Estado de São Paulo, another daily, published a long write-up about a young man named Pedro, an encapuchado (hooded demonstrator) and supposed student who claims to be part of the Black Bloc, a miniscule direct-action group pushing right-wing interests. "We have 10 cells with 30 members each," said Pedro, who promised to "give the gringos a good scare by using Molotov cocktails to attack busses carrying delegations of World Cup participants and attack the hotels where the teams are staying." O Estado gave the story major play although the Black Bloc—even if Pedro’s claims are true—represents just 300 people in a nation of 200 million.

Second term for Tabaré Vázquez?

South America’s final 2014 presidential election will take place Oct. 26 in Uruguay. The major parties will officially name their respective candidates in June following internal elections. Several names have already emerged, however, as likely contenders. Ex-President Tabaré Vázquez (2005-2010) is expected to represent the governing Frente Amplio (FA). The most probable candidate for the Partido Colorado (PC) is Pedro Bordaberry, the son of Uruguay’s first 20th century dictator, Juan María Bordaberry (1973-1976).

With Pedro Bordaberry at its helm, the PC—which traditionally emulated the Democratic Party in the US and was responsible, in its day, for modernizing Uruguay and giving it Latin America’s most progressive social legislation—has shifted to the far right. The country’s other major conservative party, the Partido Nacional (PN or Blanco), has made no indication yet who its candidate might be. The PN is currently the FA’s strongest rival.

Desperate to gain ground on the FA, the two opposition parties have taken steps of late toward forming an alliance. The "Partido Rosado" (pink party)—as some have taken to calling the emerging Blanco (white) and Colorado (red) partnership—will officially debut in the May, 2015 municipal elections as the Partido de la Concertación (NotiSur, Feb. 7, 2014), in an effort to break the FA’s stranglehold on the government in Montevideo. The political and economic capital, Montevideo is also home to nearly half of Uruguay’s 3.4 million people.

If their strategy works, the PC and PN could eventually pursue the partnership on a national level. In the meantime, all eyes are on October. "In this race, winning doesn’t necessarily mean finishing first," the Blanco-affiliated newspaper El País, with surprising sincerity, wrote on Feb. 9. "Instead, it will be about positioning itself as a viable governing option, winning legislative seats, and trying to stop the Frente Amplio from getting the parliamentary majority it needs to govern effectively."

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