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## Latin American Governments Move Right, Lose Female Leadership

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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Latin America begins a year of high electoral intensity that will draw a new political map in which right-wing governments dominate and no country will have a female president. Election plans move ahead with many of the main political leaders excluded, disqualified due to constitutional reasons, or because of judicial persecution.

Elections in Brazil, Colombia, Paraguay, and Venezuela will put South America center stage, and Mexico's July 1 contest will be notable for its regional importance ([SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2018](#)). Leaders will be elected in four Central American and Caribbean countries including Cuba, where a new leader will be elected on April 19 after six decades of revolutionary government with the Castro name at the top of the political structure ([NotiCen, Feb. 1, 2018](#)).

Although its election was held last December, Chile will be the next country experiencing a changing of the guard on March 11, when Michelle Bachelet, a progressive president and the last woman to head a Latin American country, turns over the presidency to Sebastián Piñera, a conservative ([NotiSur, Jan. 12, 2018](#)).

El Salvador's election is scheduled for March 4. On Feb. 4, Costa Rica, the most solid of Central American democracies, held presidential election that will require a run-off on April 1 ([NotiCen, Jan. 25, 2018](#)).

### *Ex-presidents not allowed to run*

In Colombia, neither former President Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010) nor the current head of state, Juan Manuel Santos, can register as a candidate. Constitutionally, only one re-election is allowed and both have already had two consecutive terms. In Venezuela, the former presidential opposition candidate, Henrique Capriles of the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD), and other leaders whom the Justice Department left outside the game for various reasons will be marginalized. In Brazil, everything indicates that two-time president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2011) will be ineligible after being found guilty in a corruption case ([NotiSur, July 28, 2017](#)). Finally, in Paraguay, former President Fernando Lugo (2008–2012) and the current president Horacio Cartes have both been excluded from the election for constitutional reasons, as in Colombia, and despite the fact that Lugo had not finished his term when he was overthrown by a parliamentary coup ([NotiSur, July 13, 2012](#), and [Jan. 19, 2018](#)).

Undoubtedly, most attention will be focused on elections in Brazil and Venezuela. In the first one, scheduled for Oct. 7, polls, as they did two years ago, show the leader to be Lula. But, short of a last-minute miracle in the courts, he will not be allowed to participate. On Jan. 24, an appeals court sentenced him to 12 years in prison for alleged corruption, even though there was no proof. Even after the ruling, he remains the Brazilians' top choice ([NotiSur, July 28, 2017](#)). According to the polling firm Datafolha, an affiliate of the right-wing newspaper Folha de São Paulo, Lula continues to gain popularity and currently would capture just over 37% of the votes. In second place, 22 points

behind Lula, is Jair Bolsonaro, a retired military man and current deputy whose political views are on the far right and who a local humorist dubbed “our own Trump, a Brazilian contribution to the worldwide far right.”

During the impeachment trial that felled Dilma Rousseff last August, Bolsonaro paid tribute to the coronel who had tortured Rousseff during the dictatorship. Previously, Bolsonaro had become known for saying things such as “Black people aren’t even good for procreation,” or “I won’t rape you because you don’t deserve it,” or that he “would be incapable of loving a homosexual son.”

Oscar Laborde, an Argentine political analyst, said Bolsonaro “would be the candidate with the best possibility of becoming Brazil’s next president if Lula is not redeemed in the end and stops being the world’s best known victim of ‘lawfare’” ([NotiSur, Feb. 9, 2018](#)). Laborde defined ‘lawfare’ as “an unconventional style of war in which the law is used as a means to achieve a military objective.” It has been used in this way since the publication of *Unrestricted Warfare*, a 1999 essay on military strategy. In 2001, he added, the concept began to be used outside the US armed forces following the publication of an article by Charles Dunlap, executive director of Duke University’s Center on Law, Ethics, and National Security in North Carolina. At that university, Laborde said, “Justice Sergio Moro, the man who began the persecution against Lula and sentenced him to prison, received his master’s degree.”

### *A surprise in Venezuela*

Over the past year, foreign political leadership, domestic opposition, power centers, and leading media organizations have expressed doubts about the possibility that the Venezuelan government would call for elections. In recent months, after breaking the opposition with a clever political game of twists and turns, the government finally held elections for governors and mayors ([NotiSur, Jan. 12, 2018](#)). The elections were overwhelmingly won by the ruling Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV). With this incentive, the government made the surprise announcement that it would hold presidential elections before April 30; it later set the date for April 22. Constitutionally, elections should be held in December.

In its confusion, the opposition is negotiating with President Nicolás Maduro’s government, even though it accuses it of being a dictatorship, and has said it will participate in the elections, even though it calls them a farce, as it did on the two previous elections. The PSUV is aiming for another six years in power by backing Maduro’s candidacy. Five leaders are vying to be the single candidate for the opposition, but they still don’t know how they will choose the person who will compete against the ruling party.

### *Colombia’s peace process at risk*

In Colombia, the May 27 elections put into play a peace process that President Santos negotiated over more than three years with the guerrilla group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). The ruling party thought that legacy would guarantee four more years of continuity, but it has arrived at the elections fragmented, without a visible candidate, and according to analysts, condemned to trail in third or fourth place in the contest. In recent weeks, as the Colombian Congress took its final steps on legislature to enact the agreements achieved at the negotiating table in Havana, the ultra-right opposition, led by Uribe, came out again against the peace agreements. Sen. José Obdulio Gaviria, a faithful Uribe supporter and spokesman for Uribe candidate Iván Duque, made statements that set many Colombians on edge. He announced that if Duque or any

other right-wing candidate should win the elections, the right would try to modify everything being approved in Congress regarding the peace process ([NotiSur Aug 4, 2017](#), and [Dec. 8, 2017](#)).

“Santos’ legacy is fragile,” a German Deutsche Welle radio-television correspondent commented on Dec. 30. “The peace process is being delayed, which disappoints many citizens who had hoped the peace would be quick and tangible. In addition, the opposition spreads the darkest rumors.”

### *Two lead the field in Paraguay*

The fourth South American election will be held April 22 in Paraguay, where only two candidates have a chance of winning: Sen. Mario Abdo Benítez of the ruling Partido Colorado, and opposition leader Efraín Alegre, representing the Gran Alianza Nacional Renovadora (GANAR). The opposition renewed the agreement between the progressive Frente Guasú and the Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico that carried Lugo to the presidency in 2008 and later took him to his demise, when the Partido Liberal betrayed Lugo and voted in Congress to overthrow him and install one of their own, Federico Franco (2012-2013), in the presidency ([NotiSur, July 13, 2012](#)).

“That was an alliance of convenience, but this one now has a real action program for Paraguayans,” said journalist Leo Rubín, Alegre’s running mate on the opposition platform. The Colorado candidate, who is clashing with Cartes even though they belong to the same party, is considered a “right-wing ultraconservative” by political analysts.

### *End to era of women*

Although the situation seems to have gone unnoticed by journalists and political analysts, the transfer of leadership in Chile ends a 44-year period in which several women led Latin American governments. The first female president was Argentina’s María Estela Martínez de Perón (1974–1976). She was followed by Lidia Gueiler in Bolivia (1979–1980); Violeta Chamorro in Nicaragua (1990–1997); Prime Minister and President Janet Rosenberg Jagan in Guyana (1997–1999); Rosalía Arteaga in Ecuador (1997); Mireya Moscoso in Panama (1999–2004), Bachelet herself (2006–2010 and 2014–2018), Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina (2007–2015); Laura Chinchilla in Costa Rica (2010–2014); and Dilma Rousseff in Brazil (2011–2016).

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