

Latin America awash in troubles amid protests, uprisings and a distracted Washington| Miami Herald

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Violent uprisings, congressional coups, alleged narco-presidencies, political assassinations, a resurgent left.

As Washington focuses on impeachment, Syria and the 2020 presidential elections, Latin America and the Caribbean, once again, seem to be falling apart.

From Peru to Ecuador to Haiti to Honduras, there have been signs of trouble that have been either ignored or lost amid Washington's focus on Venezuela and Cuba. Fanned by economic decline, growing protests, disgust with corruption and waning U.S. influence, not a week seems to go by without a new political wildfire breaking out.

"Obviously, national politics are always defined by national realities, but certainly the extremely mediocre growth rates throughout the region are an important underpinning," said Cynthia Arnsion, the director of the Latin American Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. "There is simply less to go around, particularly in comparison to the boom decade of the 2000s. Economic stagnation is an important backdrop to understand what's happening in the region."

In July, the International Monetary Fund cut the projected economic growth rate for Latin America from 1.4 percent to a measly 0.6 percent, citing domestic policies and the U.S.-China trade war.

Families that had recently moved into Latin America's middle class are finding themselves backsliding into poverty.

That helps explain, in part, the furious reaction in Ecuador when President Lenin Moreno earlier this month tried to eliminate long-standing fuel subsidies as part of a deal to retain a \$4.2 billion

IMF loan.

By the time he was forced to back down last weekend, at least seven people had died and 1,507 had been injured, including 435 police officers. As human rights groups accused the government of using excessive force, the administration said that the legitimate protests were used as cover for a violent coup attempt backed by Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro and former Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa — though it never provided convincing evidence.

“There was a protest that was combined with an attempt to destabilize the government and attack the democracy of this country,” Interior Minister María Paula Romo said this week. “One night we saw 600 people in a military-like maneuver and several state capitals were attacked in the central highlands and the Amazon.”

While Moreno appears to have survived the current uprising, his future is in doubt.

The subsidy cuts would have saved the cash-starved country about \$1.3 billion a year, and now he'll need to find other ways to reduce spending. While he's asked the indigenous groups that led the protests to help come up with alternatives, it's far from clear if a deal can be reached. And the demonstrations revealed just how weak and unpopular he is, forcing him to move the seat of government 150 miles from the capital at one point.

“Did the protests against the decrease in fuel subsidies constitute just the tip of the iceberg?” Arnsen asked, wondering if Moreno can survive the tumult. “Was this the match that lit the wick of a much deeper reserve of grievances?”

PERU COUP?

If the economy is a driving factor in Ecuador's troubles, it doesn't explain what happened in neighboring Peru.

On Sept. 30, President Martín Vizcarra used a constitutional clause to dissolve congress and call for new legislative elections.

While the opposition accused him of behaving like a dictator, he saw his approval ratings shoot up to 80 percent, as Peruvians have grown weary of a congress they see as corrupt and obstructionist.

The dramatic move seemed to illustrate one of the central points of a study released this week by Vanderbilt University. The Latin American Public Opinion Project, a survey of 20 countries across the Americas and the Caribbean, found that support for democracy is on the decline. More than 39 percent of those surveyed said they were dissatisfied with how democracy was working in their country — the lowest level since the project began gathering data in 2014.

In addition, almost a quarter expressed support for “executive coups” if it gives their leaders the power to solve issues like poverty, food insecurity, corruption and crime.

“Peru and Ecuador are really interesting studies in contrast,” said Elizabeth Zechmeister, a political science professor at Vanderbilt and the director of the survey, known as LAPOP. “They are both experiencing instability but for very different reasons,” she said.

In Peru, crime and corruption are dominant themes “and growing irritants in the daily lives of Peruvians,” she said. “At the same time, the ruling class is seen as corrupt and unresponsive.”

When Vizcarra tossed the legislators out, the country didn’t condemn him as a tyrant but, for the most part, thanked him.

The rising frustration with crime and corruption is dovetailing with another phenomenon: people willing to take to the street to force change, said Jason Marczak, the director of the Atlantic Council’s Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center.

This is the case, or has been in recent months in Ecuador, Venezuela, Guatemala, Puerto Rico and Haiti.

“I see a common thread of popular disenchantment with the status quo and people feel empowered to do something about it,” Marczak said.

Haiti, in particular, has been enveloped in violent demonstrations for more than a year, but the latest flare-up began last month amid fuel and food shortages and attempts by the country's senate to confirm President Jovenel Moïse's fourth government.

Protesters have set businesses and police stations ablaze, and barricaded streets throughout the nation of 11 million, while demanding that Moïse resign. An entrepreneur with no political experience when he took office 32 months ago, Moïse is accused of corruption and mismanaging the country's already fragile economy.

Inflation stands at 22.6 percent, prices are rising and the currency is fast depreciating against the U.S. dollar.

"There is no money in the country. Gas is a problem. The economy is completely falling apart. If it weren't for the remittances, Haiti would be a country that was completely broken," said Robert Fatton, a Haiti-born political science professor at the University of Virginia.

At the core of Moïse's political troubles is Venezuela, and allegations that past Haitian governments misappropriated billions of dollars in aid from the South American nation's subsidized PetroCaribe oil program — a program that was meant to improve the lives of the poor in Central America and the Caribbean.

Moïse himself is accused of being part of what Haitian government auditors called an embezzlement scheme to defraud the poor when companies he controlled or were associated with received millions in dollars in contracts, prior to him becoming president, for work that wasn't done.

Moïse has denied the allegations, but protesters continue to swarm the streets demanding his resignation, and decrying corruption. On Thursday, protesters in a town south of the capital set fire to several government buildings and a radio station, Radio Excellence FM, owned by a pro-government lawmaker. At least one person was killed from a gunshot wound to the head. The unrest has left at least 30 dead, the United Nations said.

"Corruption in Haiti has long been an endemic problem, as it is in Honduras and many other

countries,” Marczak said. “But I think the Haitian people increasingly see they can have a voice, that they are empowered to take the situation into their own hands and push back against what they see as a lack of government response and the government siphoning off resources.”

But for Haitians waiting on the U.S. to step in and depose Moïse, as previous administrations did in 1986 and 2004, it may be a long wait. In voting with the Trump administration earlier this year against Maduro and longtime ally Venezuela, Moïse ingratiated himself with some in Washington.

“The Trump administration has determined that it has three main interests with regard to Haiti: securing Haiti’s vote in the OAS against Maduro, preventing Haiti’s recognition of mainland China, and avoiding a mass migration crisis,” said Daniel Erikson, a former senior adviser for the Western Hemisphere at the State Department who currently serves as managing director at Blue Star Strategies.

“As long as President Moïse continues to meet these criteria, the U.S. is not going to engage in the disputes over democracy and corruption that are currently rocking Haiti to its core.”

The same theme is playing out in Honduras. Last month, the Trump administration and Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández agreed to a migration agreement that forces the impoverished Central American nation to house asylum seekers that the United States turns back from its southern border.

This despite, or perhaps because, Hernández is being accused by his own brother in a U.S. federal court of receiving at least \$1 million from Mexican drug kingpin Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán.

Members of the presidential guard provide security on the road as they await the passage of the president’s convoy on its way to the National Palace, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Tuesday, Oct. 15, 2019. Rebecca Blackwell AP

WANING U.S. INFLUENCE

The transactional nature of U.S. foreign policy in Latin American policy seems to be taking a toll. For almost a decade, Vanderbilt's LAPOP survey has been measuring the region's trust of China and the United States. In 2012, 14 out of the 20 nations surveyed said they trusted the United States more than China.

While trust in both nations is declining, this year's survey found that only Panama, Nicaragua and Colombia still trusted the United States more than China.

Washington's draconian immigration policies and withdrawal from multilateral agreements, such as the Paris climate accord, the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the North American Free Trade Agreement seem to have soured the region.

"The Trump administration has been turning its back on multilateralism and international cooperation, which have always been the Latin American preference, as opposed to U.S. unilateralism," Arnson, with the Wilson Center, said. "The U.S. government only has itself to blame for this."

While waning U.S. influence can't be entirely blamed for the region's problems, it might be a factor.

Analysts said Washington's obsessive focus on ousting Venezuela's Maduro has reduced its capacity to effectively deal with other issues like Nicaragua's crackdown on the opposition, potential trade deals with countries like Brazil, and increased political violence in Colombia.

One of the clearest indicators of this came earlier this year, when the State Department suspended aid for Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala and redirected it to Venezuela. On Wednesday, the administration announced it was resuming "targeted" aid to the Central American countries, but Washington made its priorities clear.

As Trump and his State Department continue to fight for their political survival amid the Ukraine scandal and Syrian troubles, it's likely that Latin America, with a few exceptions, will continue to be overlooked, analysts said.

“There’s been a change in international and U.S. support for democracy, rule of law and human rights in the region — with the exception of Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua,” Arnson said.

“Times are fairly bleak.”