

FEBRUARY 2023

CURRENT HISTORY

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LATIN AMERICA

Morphing Models

Sanctions and Authoritarian Capitalism in Venezuela

Benedicte Bull and Antulio Rosales

Cuba's Crisis of Legitimacy

Hope Bastian

Colombia Tries a Left Turn

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Rising Forces

Pentecostal Clout in Guatemala

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Empowered Women Fight Back

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Plus:

Brazilian Democracy's Stress Test

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COMING IN MARCH

Europe

EUROPE'S STABILITY HAS BEEN TESTED, first by the pandemic and then by the war in Ukraine and the resulting energy crisis. The cost of living has surged, giving a lift to extremist parties; the far right has come to power in Italy. Yet these threats have also prompted attempts to increase European solidarity. Sweden and Finland have applied to join NATO, while the European Union has maintained sanctions on Russian energy imports despite spiking prices and the specter of shortages. The March issue of *Current History* will cover these developments and more across the region. Topics scheduled to appear include:

- **The Energy Transition Hits a Storm**
Marco Siddi, Finnish Institute of International Affairs
- **Southern Europe's Pandemic Struggles**
Sofia Perez, Boston University
- **The End of Nordic Neutrality?**
Tuomas Forsberg, Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies
- **Italian Fascism Resurfaces**
Maddalena Gretel Cammelli, University of Bologna
- **Czech Democracy and the Populist Challenge**
Radek Buben and Karel Kouba, Charles University
- **Serbia's European Questions**
Tamara Pavasovic Trošt, University of Ljubljana
- **NATO and the Euromissiles**
Holger Nehring, University of Stirling

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“Although the region has high rates of violence against women, it also has high rates of political empowerment for women.”

Women’s Empowerment and Fight against Violence in Latin America

JULIANA RESTREPO SANÍN

On March 26, 2015, a group of women’s rights activists, academics, journalists, and artists gathered in Buenos Aires for a marathon reading in response to the murder of 19-year-old Daiana García. Later that year, on June 3, the group organized a demonstration in front of the Argentine Congress to protest the murder of Chiara Páez, a 14-year-old girl who had been beaten to death by her boyfriend. Under the slogan “*Ni Una Menos*,” or “not one (woman) less,” activists demanded that the state act to prevent gender-based violence, enforce existing antiviolence legislation, and punish perpetrators. They invited soccer players, actors, television personalities, politicians, and ordinary citizens to join their cause, using social media to raise awareness. Some 300,000 people took part in the first *Ni Una Menos* demonstration in Buenos Aires.

Feminist activists in Latin America have protested more than just inter-partner or domestic violence. During the 2018 *estallido* (social mobilization) in Chile, feminist collective *Lastesis* created a street performance, *Un Violador en tu Camino* (A Rapist in Your Path), convening thousands of women who joined the collective in denouncing the state’s responsibility for perpetuating gender-based violence in all its forms. The song featured in the performance piece gained wide popularity in Latin America, leading to performances in every country in the region. It was also performed in the Turkish parliament in response to the detention of feminist activists who used the chant to denounce women’s rights abuses in that country. The song was reprised in 50 other

countries, from the United States and the United Kingdom to India and Kenya, according to the women’s collective *GeoChicas*, which uses digital mapping tools to make gender gaps visible.

The song calls attention to different forms of gender-based violence: disappearances, rape, and femicide. (The latter term refers to state complicity in gender-based murder through inaction and perpetuation of structural factors that lead to women’s violent deaths.) It also cites invisible forms of violence, including structural violence (preventing women from achieving their full potential) and impunity. Moreover, the song emphasizes the role of the police, judges, and the state in revictimizing women by blaming them for the violence they experience.

Mobilization against violence against women is unsurprising in a region with a long history of transnational activism. Feminist activists in Latin America have worked together to topple authoritarian regimes, promote democracy, and expand women’s rights. Despite their efforts, however, violence against women and girls is prevalent. According to the World Health Organization, more than a third of Latin American women will experience intimate partner or sexual violence in their lifetime. More than any other issue, gender-based violence has united women regardless of class, race, ethnicity, or nationality.

Yet the story about gender-based violence in Latin America and the Caribbean is paradoxical. Although the region has high rates of violence against women, it also has high rates of political empowerment for women. Women hold an average of 41 percent of parliamentary seats in the Caribbean, 30 percent in South America, and 29 percent in Central America, while Mexico and

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several other countries have reached parity, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union's database on women in national parliaments.

To explain that paradox, this essay will examine the roots of gender-based violence in Latin America and show how a region that seems so hostile to women has attained such relatively impressive levels of women in parliaments. It will also detail how violence affects women in politics, what states are doing to combat different forms of gender-based violence, and how effective these measures have proved to date.

CALLING OUT STATE COMPLICITY

Since 1981, feminist activists have organized regional meetings called Encuentros Feministas de América Latina y el Caribe, convening women from around the region to strengthen networks, analyze current challenges to women's rights, share experiences, and strategize. In the first Encuentro, held in 1981 in Bogotá, Colombia, activists from across Latin America discussed the nexus between authoritarian regimes (which were then prevalent in the region) and violence against women. During that meeting, the activists established November 25 as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. It has since become a global day of activism to end gender-based violence. Different countries have hosted 14 meetings, with the next one scheduled to take place in San Salvador in 2023.

Transnational activism has been fundamental in raising awareness about gender-based violence and in demanding state action. In the 1990s, grassroots organizations drew attention to the hundreds of women murdered in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Although these crimes have been greatly underreported, it is estimated that more than 350 women were killed between 1993 and 2005. Women's rights and human rights activists, as well as international attention, put pressure on the Mexican government to deliver justice for the victims and their families. Mexican feminist movements introduced the term *feminicidio* in response to the murder of women in this border city.

Such mobilizations have somewhat paid off. In 2002, a group of women and human rights organizations petitioned the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to consider the cases of three victims of feminicide. The Commission

recommended that the Inter-American Court of Human Rights take up the cases.

In 2009, the Inter-American Court found the Mexican state responsible for the disappearance and murder of three young women in the so-called Cottonfield case. Claudia Ivette González, Esmeralda Herrera Monreal, and Laura Berenice Ramos Monárrez, who were between 15 and 20 years old and from low-income families, disappeared in September and October of 2001, but police did not investigate. Their bodies were found in November of that year, revealing evidence that they had been sexually assaulted and tortured. The Inter-American Court ruled that the government had committed multiple violations of human rights in its handling of the murders, including the rights to life, dignity, and honor, as well as children's rights.

The Mexican state denied that it was responsible for the violation of the victims' rights, since state agents were not involved in their murders. But the court ruled that the state was responsible because it had not taken protective and preventive

measures despite evidence of a pattern of gender-based killings in the region. In addition, it found that the authorities had failed to investigate the murders, denying justice and reparations for the victims and their

families. With this ruling, the first recognizing a state's responsibility to prevent and punish gender-based violence, the court established a precedent and provided a legal framework for Mexico and other states to identify and address such crimes.

Rita Segato and Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos, along with many other feminists in Latin America and the Caribbean, argue that feminicide reflects structural violence and gender regimes that put women in a subordinate position to men. Women in Latin America dedicate twice as much time to unpaid labor as men do, their unemployment rate is higher, and they are more likely to be poor in all countries in the region. Maternal mortality is almost 10 times that of OECD countries, and 10 percent of teenage girls between 15 and 19 are mothers.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) estimates that more than 4,000 women were killed in the region in 2020. But feminicide is just the tip of the iceberg. A 2021 report by the World

*Violence against women in
politics is common across
the region.*

Health Organization found that 34 percent of women in the Americas between 15 and 49 have been victims of inter-partner or sexual violence in their lifetimes. These studies do not measure other forms of gender-based violence that women experience outside of romantic relations, such as sexual harassment in the workplace and street harassment, nor do they analyze other forms of inter-partner violence like psychological abuse and economic control. These omissions suggest that the prevalence of gender-based violence in the region is much higher than the data indicate.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further amplified gender inequality. The regional unemployment rate for women reached 12 percent in 2020, compared with 9 percent for men, according to ECLAC data. Women were 44 percent more likely to lose their jobs, the World Bank found. The pandemic also aggravated gender-based violence. The German Institute for Global and Area Studies reported that calls to domestic violence hotlines increased in Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, and Peru in April and May of 2020, while lockdown measures were in effect.

These data highlight the fact that, despite important advances, Latin American women's life choices, rights, and freedoms are still unequal to men's. Given these circumstances, the murders of Claudia González, Esmeralda Herrera, Laura Ramos, and the countless other women killed every day in the region are the responsibility not just of the direct perpetrator, but of the state. Through negligence and impunity, states perpetuate the idea that women's lives are not important—all the more so if they are poor, indigenous, or Black.

TOWARD PARITY IN POLITICS

Despite the high levels of gender-based violence, women hold a greater share of elective positions in Latin America than in most other parts of the world. The region is second only to Scandinavia in the percentage of women in national parliaments. Bolivia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Cuba have reached parity in the numbers of seats held by women and men in their legislatures. The number of countries with equal representation is set to increase, as several countries have approved measures requiring gender parity.

Rising political representation for women has also been replicated in some countries at the sub-national level. Mexico reformed several articles in its constitution, establishing a goal of *paridad en*

todo (parity in everything) to promote women's political participation in executive and judicial offices at all levels of government. Costa Rica has adopted legislation to guarantee that political parties nominate an equal number of women and men as candidates for executive positions. Several countries have parity in government cabinets, and it is increasingly common to find women in the highest-status ministerial positions, such as defense and finance. The region has had a number of women presidents, and most countries have had viable female candidates in presidential races.

The growing presence of women in politics in Latin America has not come easily. The gains were made possible by feminist activism inside and outside government. The first generation of quota laws did not immediately translate into significant increases in women in politics. But they opened the door for further activism, mobilizing women to pressure their parties to comply with quotas, demand that electoral authorities enforce them, and lobby legislatures to strengthen the measures and close loopholes.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Parallel to the increasing number of women in politics, there have been rising reports of violence against those who have made it into office. Women politicians have reported being pressured, harassed, stalked, and subjected to other forms of violence. Political harassment and violence are behaviors that target women because they are women (that is, based on their gender) and are meant to push them out of politics, either as candidates or once they are elected to office.

In 2012, Juana Quispe, a member of the local council in a small town in Bolivia, was brutally murdered. The case mobilized activists to push for passage of Law 243, a measure specifically targeting “political violence and harassment against women.” It was enacted that year, and has increased the visibility of a common problem by giving it a name.

Violence and harassment against women in politics are common across the region. Women politicians have been killed due to their political work in Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, and Honduras. In September 2022, Argentine Vice President Cristina Fernández was the target of an assassination attempt in front of her home. The murders of Marielle Franco, a human rights activist and member of the Rio de Janeiro city council who was assassinated in 2018, and Berta Cáceres,

a Honduran environmental and indigenous activist killed in 2016, have drawn international condemnation.

Gender-based violence takes many forms in the region. Women are subject to physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and semiotic violence, in addition to murder. Economic violence refers to restrictions and control over women's access to resources, including those needed to effectively do their jobs. It may involve denying access to campaign funds and other resources that parties are supposed to assign to women, refusing to provide women with office space and computers, or destroying women's property.

Semiotic violence occurs in the realm of representation. This form of violence, according to political scientist Mona Lena Krook, uses images, symbols, gestures, and language to symbolically annihilate women. The aim is to render them incompetent or invisible, silence their voices, and delegitimize their presence in politics.

A lack of comprehensive data makes it hard to determine the prevalence of violence against women in politics, but women's rights organizations have helped fill the void with revealing statistics. The Association of Women Councilors of Bolivia has stated that 48 percent of women serving on local councils and as mayors were victims of violence while they were in office. A report by the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy found that 63 percent of elected women in Colombia were victims of different forms of gender-based violence while in office. The National Elections Jury in Peru conducted a study of women candidates and found that 40 percent had faced gender-based violence during their campaigns.

Women in other roles—including environmental and human rights defenders, journalists, campaign volunteers, staff members, and electoral authorities—have also reported gender-based violence motivated by their political work and activism. The goal of these actions, as with attacks on female officeholders, is to push women out of politics, control their activities, or ensure that they are subordinate to men. These other victims of violence against women in politics are less well-studied, but such attacks undermine women's rights by denying them full equality, silencing their voices, and ultimately hollowing out democratic institutions.

Feminist movements have transformed the legal landscape.

Violence against women in politics is multi-directional—perpetrated by regular citizens, community and party leaders, and members of rival parties. Reports by multiple civil society organizations and international institutions have also found that women are often attacked by members of their own parties—including the alternates who would replace them if they stepped down or were otherwise unable to fulfill their duties.

Researchers have found that multiple forms of violence may occur simultaneously and frequently escalate. The case of Juana Quispe is an example of this. Before her murder, she had reported harassment and economic violence. She was beaten and pressured by members of her party, the mayor of her town, other councilors, regular citizens, and members of the governing party. She had publicly denounced these incidents, but the authorities refused to protect her.

A WAVE OF LEGAL REFORM

Despite the high rates of such incidents, Latin American countries have made important advances in tackling gender-based violence against women in all its forms, including in politics. In the 1990s, governments seldom collected sex-disaggregated data for homicides, and antiviolence laws focused on violence within the home. Since then, feminist movements have transformed the legal landscape in the region. The 1994 Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women, known as the Belém do Pará Convention, was the first legally binding treaty on gender-based violence. It has prompted states in the Americas to adopt diverse measures to combat such violence.

To date, 18 countries in Latin America recognize femicide or femicide as a crime distinct from homicide. According to the Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean, most countries have also changed their domestic or family violence laws, turning them into more comprehensive gender-based violence laws. This shift reflects the recognition that such violence takes place not only at home but also in the workplace and the streets, perpetrated by family members and romantic partners, coworkers, friends, classmates, and strangers. Most of these legal reforms also recognize that gender-based violence interacts with or is aggravated by other factors,

such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender expression and identity, age, pregnancy, and geographic location.

Partly in response to the Cottonfield case and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruling, the Mexican government adopted its most comprehensive legislation on gender-based violence, the General Law for Women's Access to a Life Free from Violence, in 2014. This legislation—which was introduced by Marcela Lagarde y de los Rios, who coined the term *feminicide*—recognizes multiple expressions of gender-based violence, including psychological, economic, patrimonial, sexual, and physical variants. The law also recognizes that gender-based violence occurs in multiple settings—the family, the community, the workplace—and can also be perpetrated by the state or its agents. Furthermore, it emphasizes the state's responsibility for preventing, addressing, and punishing gender-based violence, and creates multiple mechanisms to achieve those goals.

Some countries have adopted additional legislation to combat specific forms of gendered violence. Peru, for example, has an anti-street harassment law. After an increasing number of acid attacks against women in Colombia, legislators there approved a law criminalizing that form of violence in 2013. This law also regulates access to the substances that are used in acid attacks, requires protections for victims, and ensures that the state provides them with care—including reconstructive surgery.

More countries have also started to pay attention to violence against women in politics. Bolivia led the way in 2012 with the enactment of Law 243. It has proved highly influential in the region, inspiring legislators in other countries to propose similar measures.

Costa Rica, Mexico, Brazil, and Peru have since approved laws to criminalize violence against women in politics. In Ecuador, a reform of the electoral code included the recognition of violence against women in politics as a crime. Currently, bills to criminalize violence against women in politics are pending in Colombia, Honduras, and Argentina. Other countries have introduced bills to modify existing gender-based violence laws to apply to political violence. Electoral authorities have created guidelines to address gender-related crimes, including violence, during political campaigns and elections. Yet there are challenges to the implementation of these legal advances, and their practical impact is limited.

GALVANIZING ACTION

The legal and institutional transformations intended to end gender-based violence in Latin America are the result of feminist activism, both in civil society and inside the state, as well as international pressure. Women's movements have played key roles in bringing attention to gender-based violence.

The movement *Ni Una Menos* has grown from its birthplace in Argentina to become a regional phenomenon, holding marches in several countries across the Americas. The 2018 murder of Marielle Franco also sparked regional mobilization, especially among Afro-Latinas, demanding state action to end gender-based and racist violence. Transnational activism and demonstrations both online and offline have become ways of showing solidarity, increasing the visibility of the problem, and pressuring governments to act.

Country-level activism has also helped galvanize legal change. In Colombia, the brutal May 2012 murder of Rosa Elvira Cely, a 35-year-old student and street vendor in Bogotá, provoked national indignation and feminist mobilization demanding state action. In 2015, the Colombian Congress approved a law that carries her name and criminalizes *feminicide*. In Bolivia and Peru, the work of associations of women councilors was instrumental in pushing their national legislatures to approve laws addressing violence against women in politics. It was also activism that forced state authorities to respond to the murders of women in Ciudad Juárez and led to the enactment of the Mexican law on gender-based violence.

But civil society activism is not the only explanation for legal changes. Women working within state institutions—as legislators and in government agencies—have also been critical actors in the process of advancing legislation. Women parliamentarians have sponsored proposals, lobbied their colleagues, joined marches, and used their political capital to promote legal change.

In my research on violence against women in politics in Bolivia, I found that women working in the Vice-Ministry for Equal Opportunities helped expedite the revision of the proposed legislation and ensured that it would receive the support of the Ministry of Justice. Women in electoral institutions in Mexico, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, Costa Rica, and other countries have raised awareness about the problem of violence against women

politicians and supported the adoption of a gender-sensitive perspective in electoral codes to encourage investigations into cases of violence and malpractice during political campaigns, even in the absence of legal change.

Finally, the support of international and regional organizations has also prompted governments to act. The Belém do Pará Convention and the Cottonfield case ruling have set important legal precedents that help activists on the ground pressure their governments to act. Similarly, the Follow-up Mechanism to the Convention, known as MESECVI, as well as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and Court of Human Rights, have confronted governments when they have failed in their obligations to protect women's rights and lives. Although not without tension, collaboration among civil society, state actors, and international organizations has helped transform the legal landscape to advance the fight against gender-based violence in Latin America.

SYSTEMIC DEFICIENCIES

Despite the legal progress, there is still a long way to go to end gender-based violence against women in Latin America. Activists in the region recognize that the impact of these laws is limited, given justice systems that are at capacity, states that are negligent or absent, and authorities—including political parties, judges, prosecutors, and police—that revictimize and humiliate victims of gender-based violence, in politics and beyond. Those systemic deficiencies are even worse in rural regions, leaving women in those areas—many from indigenous groups and racialized minorities—beyond the reach of legal protections.

Other challenges are the result of persistent patriarchal attitudes and behaviors on the part of judges, police officers, and other state authorities. Often they pressure women to stay with their abusers to preserve the family unit, even when laws explicitly forbid conciliation. Sometimes they blame women for the abuse they suffer (as the song by Lastesis describes) by questioning how they were dressed and why they were out in a certain location, or justifying men's jealousy and control over women.

There is also stigma regarding domestic violence and abuse; many women do not report offenses out of fear or shame. Many victims are economically dependent on their abusers, but states provide few alternatives, in the form of shelters or economic assistance, so that women victims

of violence can safely leave their abusers and still support themselves and their children.

Similar challenges remain in cases of violence against women in politics. There is still stigma, and authorities reproduce patriarchal attitudes, inhibiting reporting. Justice systems in the region, including branches devoted to electoral justice, have crowded dockets and tend to be slow to respond. Election campaigns last only a few months, which leaves little recourse for women who are targeted. Authorities do not always have the capacity or the power to punish perpetrators or nullify electoral results when there is evidence of gender-based violence against women candidates. In some cases, even when electoral authorities recognize violations of women's political rights, criminal justice systems have failed to punish the perpetrators.

In Bolivia, Magda Haase was forced to resign from her seat on a municipal council in 2011 after being kidnapped and threatened with physical violence. The electoral tribunal eventually reinstated her, ruling that her resignation was not valid because she had been coerced. However, a judge dismissed the criminal case and the perpetrators were not punished.

A final threat to hopes of ending violence against women in Latin America is the reemergence of populist illiberal governments in the region. These regimes, regardless of their ideologies, have targeted women's rights activists and questioned the necessity of addressing gender-based inequalities. In Brazil, the government of President Jair Bolsonaro, a notorious misogynist, transformed gender equality policies and government offices into family policies that undermine women's equality. In Nicaragua, President Daniel Ortega's increasingly authoritarian government has attacked feminist groups and transformed a progressive violence against women law into a more regressive statute that prioritizes the preservation of the family unit over women's safety and rights.

Despite these challenges, progress has been made. A recent survey-based study by Mala Htun and Francesca Jensenius found that even though violence against women laws in Mexico are not strongly enforced, they have had an important social impact: women have become less tolerant of violence, more likely to report it, and more aware of their rights. Although these results are limited to one country, they offer hope for ending the silent pandemic of violence against women in Latin America. ■

“Sanctions and the Maduro regime’s policy responses to them have accelerated Venezuela’s transformation from so-called twenty-first-century socialism to authoritarian capitalism.”

How Sanctions Led to Authoritarian Capitalism in Venezuela

BENEDICTE BULL AND ANTULIO ROSALES

In February 2019, US President Donald Trump told an enthusiastic crowd in Miami that “all options are on the table” to pressure the regime of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela. This phrase, often repeated by Trump’s national security adviser, John Bolton, summarized the US strategy of applying “maximum pressure” on the Maduro regime. The Trump administration believed that imposing individual and sectoral sanctions, indicting the regime’s leadership, and threatening military intervention would cause the Venezuelan government to crumble.

Weeks earlier, in January, Juan Guaidó, the speaker of the opposition-controlled National Assembly, had been sworn in as the interim president of Venezuela. He was immediately recognized by over 50 countries, most of which were leading democracies in Europe and the Americas. Neither the Venezuelan opposition nor its foreign allies recognized the May 2018 presidential election in which Maduro won a second term. The National Constituent Assembly, a supra-constitutional entity packed with regime loyalists, had called and organized the elections, provoking an opposition boycott. Most opposition parties had been banned, and their candidates were persecuted.

The United States quickly imposed harsh economic sanctions after recognizing Guaidó, aiming to suffocate the Maduro regime’s sources of income. State-controlled oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela* (PDVSA) was no longer able to sell oil to Citgo, its subsidiary in the United States.

These measures added to sanctions imposed in August 2017 that prohibited the Venezuelan government from borrowing in US financial markets, and to a number of individual sanctions imposed over the past several years, freezing the assets of top government officials and regime allies and banning them from entering the United States. Sanctions were eventually also extended to third-country companies trading with PDVSA, closing off most possibilities for Venezuela to sell crude oil, which had accounted for around 97 percent of its dollar revenue stream.

The goal of the sanctions was to pressure the military and other levers of power to withdraw support for Maduro and transfer power to the National Assembly, the last democratically elected institution in the country. The refrain that “all options” were on the table signaled that the Trump administration was willing to go beyond sanctions; the threat of military intervention was intended to prompt the Venezuelan army to oust Maduro. But the strategy of maximum pressure failed to bring about regime change. It turned out that there was no agreement on intervention. The only attempt at an armed insurrection was Operation Gideon, a May 2020 operation ineffectively planned and executed by exiles who landed in Venezuela’s coastal town of Macuto with a handful of poorly trained armed men.

Latin American states did not support a military takeover, while the United States was preoccupied with its own domestic polarization. The Trump administration used Venezuela as a socialist bogeyman in the 2020 presidential election, seeking to energize the Hispanic vote in Florida. Since 2021, under President Joe Biden, the United States has supported a negotiated solution in Venezuela, yet sanctions have been left in place with only minor exceptions.

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THE SANCTIONS SPIRAL

Even before the introduction of the most comprehensive sanctions—the oil sanctions of January 2019—critics such as economists Mark Weisbrot and Jeffrey Sachs argued that the sanctions on Venezuela were having severe humanitarian consequences. At that point, however, it was virtually impossible to distinguish the impact of sanctions on inflation, poverty, and mortality from existing negative trends. These trends started around 2012, even before the 2014 oil price plunge from over \$100 a barrel in January to \$44 seven months later, and long before the main sanctions were introduced. They were easily attributed to economic mismanagement and institutional decay.

But economist Francisco Rodríguez and others argued that despite several additional factors that negatively affected the oil sector—including the replacement of sector specialists with military officials in PDVSA's top management—it was the financial sanctions of 2017 that inhibited Venezuela's capacity to recover from the 2014 oil shock. Inflation had already reached three digits by the time those sanctions were imposed, but quickly rose to four digits in the fall of 2017, initiating one of the longest periods of hyperinflation in recorded world history. The 2019 sanctions further limited Venezuela's oil production and contributed to a plunge in gross domestic product per capita of more than 80 percent between 2013 and 2021, though most of this decline occurred well before 2017.

And yet, by 2021, it was generally concluded that Maduro held power more comfortably than he had before sectoral sanctions were imposed. This chain of events in many ways confirms well-known conclusions from the literature on sanctions. Scholars have shown that sanctions have achieved their goals of changing the behavior of targeted governments in only around one-third of cases. The rate of success is much lower when the aim is to achieve a democratic regime shift.

In a recent article in *International Affairs*, political scientist Daniel Drezner laid out many of the problems with contemporary sanctions strategies. Among them is the lack of feasible demands on targeted states: vague, broad demands can make any potential bargain difficult or impossible. States imposing sanctions that hurt the economies of

targeted countries hope that the pain will force regime change, but it rarely does. This has been true in the case of Venezuela. But that does not mean sanctions have had no impact.

Sanctions are not simply a unidirectional foreign policy tool that ends with their imposition on another actor. As sanctions “land,” targeted governments respond, and their policies tend to have unintended consequences. In Venezuela, the Maduro government implemented a series of measures to counter the impact of the sanctions and, with time, was able to use them in its favor. The regime employed targeted repression and harassment against political opponents, especially the elected members of the National Assembly. It also intervened directly in opposition parties by banning key leaders from political participation and using government-allied courts to reassign their party symbols to friendlier challengers. This confirms one conclusion from the specialized sanctions literature: sanctions tend to lead to less democratic regimes, not more democratic ones.

Moreover, the Maduro regime carried out substantive changes in the economy, transforming the socialist rentier model that it had maintained until then—a model rooted in tight controls on profits, prices, and currency allocation. The result has been an

arbitrarily regulated, neopatrimonial form of capitalism that cements Maduro's power, while transferring assets and resources to new elites and opening market opportunities for them. This is what we label a new authoritarian capitalist economy.

With this concept, we seek to highlight that Venezuela is moving back toward a system where private ownership of the means of production is the rule, and economic agents operate for profit. Yet there is frequent state intervention that denies certain individuals' fundamental political and economic rights. The division of the public and private spheres is generally determined by the state. Laws and regulations are not equally applied or motivated by the common good, but implemented in order to ensure regime survival and provide personal wealth for regime supporters. Sanctions and the Maduro regime's policy responses to them have accelerated Venezuela's transformation from so-called twenty-first-century socialism to authoritarian capitalism.

*Top-down and targeted
liberalization is accompanied
by repression and state control.*

STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT, VENEZUELA-STYLE

Seeking to safeguard the economy and ensure regime survival in the context of hyperinflation and sanctions, the Maduro regime undertook a series of economic reforms that resembled in many ways the structural adjustment programs that were prescribed for many developing nations by international financial institutions (IFIs) in the 1990s. But this time the measures were not encouraged by IFIs, nor were they carried out in exchange for sanctions relief.

Faced with hyperinflation, the government drastically restricted credit, forcing banks to keep nearly 100 percent of deposits as legal reserves. Prices rose so rapidly, soaring more than 100,000 percent in 2018, that the state could not keep up the supply of bank notes, so people relied on electronic payment systems. Trust in the Venezuelan currency, the bolívar, eroded. Sanctions on individuals and businesses linked to the government forced well-connected Venezuelans to use their dollars within the country, rather than invest them abroad.

The progressive erosion of the national currency reached a tipping point in March 2019, when a nationwide blackout that lasted over a week impeded electronic transactions. Regular citizens began using US dollars to pay for essentials. The resulting multicurrency system is uneven both geographically and in terms of social strata. In rural areas, for example, coffee beans and gold have been used as mediums of exchange. Meanwhile, cryptocurrency transactions and electronic payments in dollars have become commonplace, often with the help of migrants who settle transactions abroad for goods and services provided in Venezuela—especially in urban areas with better infrastructure, including Internet service.

In this emerging multicurrency system, the bolívar is no longer the most widely accepted means of payment. Currently, over half of transactions in Venezuela are carried out in US dollars. In 2022, the government began allowing formal bank accounts and transactions to be conducted in dollars. This informal and ad hoc dollarization has provided an escape valve to alleviate the extreme pressure from hyperinflation and sanctions.

The dollarization of the economy went hand in hand with a policy of trade liberalization intended to ease severe scarcities of goods. This allowed the private sector to purchase end products from

abroad without taxes or legal or sanitary import restrictions. The open-door policy stimulated the rise of luxury retail stores known as *bodegones*, where customers began to find not only essential products but also high-end food items at prohibitively high prices. This model later expanded to include supermarkets, as well as electronic devices and other products.

The proliferation of *bodegones* throughout the country was incentivized by the import liberalization policy and facilitated by the use of US dollars internally. Due to the notoriety of these businesses, political scientist Guillermo Avelledo Coll has labeled the emerging era of the Bolivarian regime as the *pax bodegónica*, characterized by top-down and targeted liberalization that is accompanied by repression and state control. It is defined by arbitrary concessions granted by those who control the state, rather than a process of institutional rethinking and inclusive deliberation.

The Maduro government has allowed the silent privatization of many state-owned assets. Some have been transferred back to previous owners, others sold to new investors. This privatization campaign has occurred largely under the guise of “strategic alliances” between the government and private capital. An important feature has been secrecy. It is little known who the beneficiaries of these sales are, how much capital the government has been able to obtain in the process, or how the assets were chosen for privatization.

Behind the secrecy is the infamous anti-blockade law approved by the National Constituent Assembly in October 2019. Under this measure, oil fields are subject to lease, sale, or transfer—contradicting the requirement of state control stipulated by the Law of Hydrocarbons, which calls for joint ventures to have 50 percent or more state ownership. In this way, the Maduro government has carried out a privatization policy and an opening of the oil sector without directly changing the legal framework inherited from the Chávez era.

As currency and price controls were lifted, spaces for market and regulatory experimentation were created and new sources of income emerged. Along with privatizations, the government encouraged alliances between state-controlled firms and private capital in certain markets, especially in the retail, construction, service, and mining sectors. A few international allies gave Maduro a lifeline by purchasing oil and gold at large discounts, providing food and other basic necessities in return.

Russian state energy giant Rosneft was the first that came to the rescue. Through subsidiaries Rosneft Trading and TNK Trading, it assisted PDVSA with transshipment of oil. When these companies also became targets of sanctions, firms registered in small tax havens stepped in. New trade relations were also established with other sanctioned countries, including Turkey, Syria, and Iran. From these new ties emerged a new elite associated with the government and the armed forces. Many of these elites established businesses importing cheap goods from new trading partners. Others benefited from the thriving illegal economy enabled by the government, including drug trafficking, human trafficking, illegal mining, and the smuggling of gasoline and various other products. The divide between illegal actors (such as drug-trafficking organizations) and legitimate economic actors became increasingly blurred.

Meanwhile, state expenditures were slashed and public sector salaries were cut. The steep pay reductions forced the vast majority of public sector employees to participate in additional economic activities, such as running their own businesses, while spending little time at their official jobs. Thus, the cuts contributed to strengthening the private sector and weakening the public sector.

The Maduro regime's responses to the sanctions and the ensuing hyperinflation led it to impose an economic agenda that in many ways resembled structural adjustment, but in the name of "anti-blockade" and anti-imperialist policies. Unlike the structural adjustments of the 1990s, this agenda was not accompanied by public discussion of the national budget, significant tax reforms, or broader negotiations with creditors and IFIs.

PRIVATE SECTOR INFORMALIZATION

Alongside the government, private enterprises also carried out new strategies in response to the sanctions. One of the most immediate consequences of the financial sanctions was that Venezuela's private companies were cut off from international credit and the ability to pay and be paid by international suppliers and customers.

Though the sanctions did not technically target private companies, few foreign banks or private entities were still willing to do business with Venezuelans. This avoidance, commonly called "overcompliance," was due to fear of being targeted

by US third-party sanctions. Some private companies tried to circumvent such obstacles by establishing bank accounts in other sanctioned countries, such as Russia, Turkey, Serbia, and various Caribbean islands, in order to "triangulate" payments and credits through these jurisdictions and third countries.

Another strategy employed by the private sector was to enter into more informal activities. This was partly a direct result of the sanctions, as formal businesses were cut off from markets and finance. But it was also indirectly linked to the sanctions' impact on government finances. As its income diminished, the state's dependence on taxes collected from businesses increased. Taxes were raised and collected more frequently, and enforcement became more politically motivated, driven by the aim of creating a government-friendly private sector. This in turn motivated increased "informalization."

At the same time, after years of strained relations, the private sector emerged as a potential ally of the state for solving practical problems. The relationship between the Bolivarian governments

and the private sector had been difficult from the start. The 2002 coup attempt led by the main Venezuelan business federation, FEDECAMARAS, and an expropriation spree in the late 2000s were

low points. Though many private companies thrived in Venezuela during the years of the oil boom and state-subsidized dollars (2003–14), the business sector, much like the political opposition, was battered by policy restrictions.

When the sectoral sanctions were first imposed, many businesses approved of them as a means of putting pressure on the government. But as the sanctions started to affect businesses directly, sentiment shifted. This contributed to divisions within the opposition, with which much of the private sector was associated.

As state finances became increasingly strained, parts of the government approached the private sector to reestablish working relations. The National Council for the Productive Economy was reactivated, and the few Venezuelan companies still able to secure independent income in dollars were courted by the government. New business groups benefited from targeted liberalization or used long-term connections and contracts with the government to take advantage of new market opportunities.

The Venezuelan state has reduced its sphere of action in society.

In another relatively new trend, some private sector firms that have been able to survive the crisis now offer better wages than the public sector. Although sanctions have not terminated conflicts and tensions between the government and the private sector, they have forced the government to facilitate private investment and business activities, strengthening the capitalist features of the economy.

RISING INEQUALITY AND REPRESSION

Maduro achieved success with the policy changes on two fronts. First, the targeted liberalization reforms allowed for some relief in the long-lasting economic crisis. After seven years of continuous contraction, in 2021 the Venezuelan economy finally saw growth again, and the painful cycle of hyperinflation ended that year. Second, Maduro's hold on power has solidified. The strengthening of the regime is a result not only of policy changes, but also of mistakes by the opposition.

The so-called interim government, led by Guaidó, devoted its political strategy to maintaining the support of foreign powers and controlling the assets of the Venezuelan state abroad, instead of focusing on building a movement and consensus within the country. As the political scientist Maryhen Jiménez has explained, this created problems of accountability, lack of coordination, and intra-opposition divisions that the government cultivated and exploited. Sanctions also contributed to dividing and weakening the opposition. There was an increasing divide between those who believed sanctions would contribute to the regime's collapse and others who saw sanctions as a means of weakening the economy that would bring them few political gains.

The opposition was thus unable to capitalize on the bottomless social crisis generated by the Bolivarian revolution. As a result of the combination of policy failures and sanctions, the Venezuelan state has reduced its sphere of action in society. Social protection policies have been reduced or eliminated. Targeted economic liberalization and de-regularization have led to increasing informality among businesses and workers.

Wages have been decimated, particularly in the public sector. In fact, the state has virtually stopped paying significant wages to its workers; instead, it compensates the labor force through non-wage remuneration, such as irregular bonus payments and boxes of food. Wages in the

business sector are often triple those in the public sector, contributing to rising inequality among different swaths of workers in the country. On average, the private sector wage is around \$60 a month, whereas monthly pay in the public sector rarely reaches \$20. Wage differentials also leave a profound gulf between managerial positions and unskilled workers.

According to the ENCOVI survey on quality of life, conducted by a consortium of Venezuelan universities, Venezuela's Gini coefficient, which measures income inequality, reached 56.7 in 2021. Venezuela had gone from having among the lowest inequality in Latin America to the highest in the course of a decade. The survey also revealed an increase in the poverty rate measured by income, with more than 90 percent of households under the poverty line. Though the increasing dollarization of the economy has allowed some businesses to survive and even grow, workers often are not remunerated in dollars, leaving the poorest struggling to make ends meet.

The social consequences of the crisis and the targeted liberalization carried out by the government include the largest wave of migration in the Western hemisphere in recent history. According to the Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants, an umbrella organization composed of United Nations agencies, civil society organizations, and NGOs, over 7 million Venezuelan migrants have fled the country, mostly for economic reasons.

The decline in state action also translates into deficient public services, from failing infrastructure to poor provision of utilities. This relinquishing of state responsibilities contrasts with the highly interventionist and purportedly redistributive state that defined the early years of the Bolivarian revolution. It also highlights the privatization of responsibility for sectors ranging from health and education to communication, basic infrastructure, and sanitation.

Meanwhile, the state has invested in its capacity to exert repression, targeting not only its political opponents but also what traditionally had been considered its base of support. Recent scholarship has revealed the repressive apparatus's increasing focus on massive campaigns targeting the poor.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has issued several reports alleging violations of the rights of the Venezuelan political opposition. The UN-supported Independent Fact-Finding Mission has also reported gender-based

violence carried out by the security forces, as well as the collusion of state officials in the violation of workers' human rights in the gold mines of Bolívar state. These reports reveal that the chain of command in the security services and the military, possibly rising to the top level of government, may have ordered torture and the inhumane treatment of prisoners.

Despite this repression, a number of civil society organizations have taken the lead in demanding that the government provide solutions to acute problems such as hunger and lack of health care and public services. These groups are also attempting to limit abuses of power, denouncing harassment, and calling on international actors to put pressure on the government. A platform of civil society organizations known as Foro Cívico campaigned for reform of the National Electoral Council (CNE) and promoted two opposition-linked candidates for the CNE board in 2021, ahead of the 2024 presidential election.

Activists have also focused on making wage demands in sectors including universities and health care. Other groups are working on issues such as environmental protection and women's bodily autonomy. Their efforts demonstrate the remarkable resilience of Venezuela's civil society despite the asymmetry of power with the Maduro regime.

SANCTIONS AND VENEZUELAN DEMOCRACY

Sanctions can have long-lasting effects on targeted countries, including unintended consequences. In the case of Venezuela, the haphazard opening of the economy by Maduro's authoritarian regime, and the ensuing processes of informalization and illegalization, have been among the unintended consequences of sanctions. They have transformed the state-dominated model of the Bolivarian revolution into a form of authoritarian capitalism.

The government has blamed the sanctions for its own policy failures, trying to generate a "rally around the flag" effect, while the economic opening has created new business opportunities for a small elite. Taken together, these factors have contributed to the consolidation of the Maduro regime. The question is how long this dynamic of authoritarian capitalism and regime consolidation can last, given the empowerment of new and old business actors, as well as international pressure for democratic concessions in return for sanctions relief.

Since 2019, several rounds of negotiations between the government and the opposition have been brokered by Norway. The easing of sanctions has been at the core of the government's negotiating agenda. Previously, the United States declined to fully back the negotiations and create clear pathways toward lifting sanctions based on concrete conditions. This reduced the credibility of sanctions relief as an incentive to forge an agreement on a democratic transition.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent rising demand for different sources of energy in the global economy have prompted Washington to rethink its Venezuela sanctions policy and promote the reactivation of negotiations. This has led to new talks focused on securing somewhat fair electoral conditions for the 2024 presidential race. The talks have spurred the Venezuelan opposition to reorganize its strategy around movement-building and internal coordination to prepare for a joint campaign.

In November 2022, the government and the Unitary Platform of the opposition reached a partial agreement on a formal return to the negotiating table. This agreement would allow for approximately \$3 billion of Venezuelan state funds that had been frozen abroad to be released into a UN-managed trust fund to finance humanitarian work. At the same time, the US Treasury Department issued an extension of Chevron's licenses to produce oil under its four joint ventures with PDVSA. Though most of the funds would be channeled back to the United States to pay off existing debt, the Chevron deal gave rise to new optimism in government as well as private sector circles.

Moreover, the economic space opened by the government has increased the bargaining power of the business sector, which may have weaned itself off dependence on oil rents and the state. This emerging force is still politically timid, but it is capable of supporting civil society projects and activism. The challenge for the parties organized around the Unitary Platform is to harness these connections and incorporate different sectors' demands into a cohesive agenda to rebuild state capacity in order to serve the population.

The business sector can become a balance between government and opposition interests. Productive negotiations may lead to improved governance mechanisms, such as power-sharing arrangements to manage Venezuelan assets abroad and deploy foreign aid for humanitarian purposes.

Programs of this kind are sorely needed, and both sides hope to demonstrate results to their constituents ahead of a potential return to electoral competition in 2024. Power-sharing mechanisms would necessitate the international community's active involvement in accountability measures and oversight to prevent large-scale corruption.

In such a scenario, the transformation toward authoritarian capitalism might prove to be a transitory stage. Yet whatever the prospects for an agreement on lifting sanctions and holding free and fair elections, the sanctions have had severe consequences that no agreement can remedy in

the short term: the collapse of public services and the flourishing of illegal actors that benefit from a dysfunctional state, territorial control, and informal economic structures.

Sanctions have also transformed the nature of the Bolivarian coalition. To remain in power, what used to be a centralized and redistributive rentier political movement has engineered an economic adjustment, liberalized currency controls, and opened some markets. Now the political and economic forces that this authoritarian capitalism has empowered will determine the pace of change in Venezuela's future. ■

“The way the state has responded to Cubans’ everyday struggles since the beginning of the pandemic has created a crisis of political legitimacy.”

Cuba’s Pandemic Crisis

HOPE BASTIAN

In 2016, Cuba’s prospects looked bright. Relations between the United States and Cuba had been formally reestablished, and commercial flights between the two countries had resumed, leading to President Barack Obama’s March 2016 visit. Many young Cubans decided to stay rather than emigrate, investing their energy in building a future on the island. But five years later, Cubans took to the streets across the country to protest for the first time in decades, and in just 12 months more than 220,000 Cubans had entered the United States via the southern border. Several trends have led to multiplying hardships on the island and a rapid change in young Cubans’ perspectives on their country and their future.

As the COVID-19 pandemic began, a robust public health response kept transmission rates extremely low in Cuba throughout 2020. But these control measures exacted high economic and political costs for a nation already suffering from President Donald Trump’s reversal of the US opening toward Cuba under Obama. In early 2021, infections gradually increased. Then, with the arrival of the Delta variant, case rates soared into the tens of thousands, leaving the public health system unable to manage the crisis. Thanks to historic investments in human capital and pharmaceutical development, several homegrown COVID-19 vaccine candidates were ready for use in a massive experimental campaign in the summer of 2021. This intervention flattened the curve, resolving the epidemiological crisis. But the economic and political damage has been more difficult to address.

The past three years in Cuba have been exhausting. Since the beginning of the pandemic, everyday struggles with food shortages, blackouts, and

soaring inflation have created a crisis of legitimacy for President Miguel Díaz Canel. He took office in April 2018 pledging, “We are continuity” (*Somos continuidad*). This was a radical departure from the promise made by his predecessor, Raúl Castro, to “change what needs to be changed” (*cambiar lo que debe ser cambiado*). Though Díaz Canel’s promise of continuity could have served as a reassuring signal for Communist Party leaders nervous about passing power to the next generation, it might have been the worst possible message for outward-facing communications with young people eager for change. Few young Cubans are interested in repeating their parents’ struggles during the Special Period, the economic crisis in the 1990s following the dissolution of the regime’s main ally, the Soviet Union.

During the short period of improved US–Cuba relations under Raúl, this generation grew accustomed to new opportunities for mobility and space for debate and popular participation. The exhaustion of the past three years, changing state discourses, and the unresponsiveness of the leadership to popular suffering led to discontent that erupted in historic street protests on July 11, 2021, and again from September 30 to October 2, 2022. Recent events have shown that Cubans of all ages have many reasons to vote with their feet, either by joining street protests or by seizing the opportunity to leave the island, as hundreds of thousands have done in the past year since international flights resumed.

LOSING CONTROL

In early January 2020, Cuba’s Ministry of Public Health developed emergency response plans to prepare for the coronavirus threat. On March 11, 2020, three tourists tested positive; on social media, frightened Cubans called for borders to be quickly closed. On March 20, Díaz Canel announced a package of COVID-19 control measures: international arrivals were quarantined, and

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Cubans were instructed to stay at home, avoid large groups, cancel social events, wear masks, and practice social distancing. Soon after that, international flights were suspended, schools were closed, and many workers were sent home.

I was living in Cuba at the time. Everyone stayed home. Neighborhood teams of doctors, nurses, and medical students visited daily to ask if anyone was experiencing symptoms, ready to transport suspected cases to new isolation centers. Every morning, we tuned in to updates from Dr. Francisco Durán, the national epidemiologist. Every evening, along with people across the city, we stepped onto our balconies to applaud the heroic efforts of health care workers.

Cuban doctors fighting the virus in neighborhood clinics and quarantine centers, and on international missions, were a source of nationalist pride, reinforcing the prestige of the public health system as the embodiment of the revolution's moral commitments. Internally, the revolution's legitimacy was built in the early 1960s on the expansion of access to health care for all. An island with well-developed universal health care and strong political will to protect public health seemed like a safe place to be as we watched the collapse of powerful health systems around the globe. The focus on prevention, contact tracing, testing, and quarantine kept Cuba's national case counts in the single and double digits. In most provinces, restrictions were lifted in mid-June 2020 (Havana followed on July 3), and the government declared victory in the fight against COVID-19.

But the worst was yet to come. As the pandemic continued, shortages grew. Every day was consumed with finding food as basic products and fruits and vegetables disappeared from markets. Social distancing measures were occasionally enforced in shop lines, but it was difficult to stay apart from other customers while fighting to keep one's spot. At times, people were allowed to shop only in stores in their own municipalities, adding to the hardships of those living outside wealthier coastal areas. Anyone without hard (convertible) currency had to wait for items like milk, chicken, toilet paper, and other dry goods to be resold on the black market at even higher prices in local currency. In many households, adults began to eat just one meal a day, prioritizing food for children

and elderly relatives—desperate measures reminiscent of the Special Period.

Over the summer of 2020, exercise in public places was banned and children were barred from leaving their homes. Beaches and parks closed, and a 9 p.m. curfew was imposed for months on end. In the fall, limited flights resumed to repatriate Cubans who had been stranded abroad since March. In late November, Western Union closed its money transfer branches in Cuba in response to new sanctions imposed by Trump, cutting off the only remaining way to receive remittances from relatives.

Flights to Havana resumed in November, carrying Cuban Americans eager to visit their families and bring aid. However, it wasn't until January 1 that arriving passengers were required to show a negative PCR test. Predictably, COVID-19 cases began to climb. Daily cases shot from the double digits to the hundreds, reaching 800 a day by February 2021, when a new 7 p.m. curfew was announced. Flights were suspended again; US airlines were limited to one flight per week.

Meanwhile, Cubans were also exposed to a currency shock. Since the 1990s, two currencies have circulated on the island: the Cuban peso and the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC). State salaries and pensions are paid in Cuban pesos, and goods subsidized by the state are purchased with them, but many basic goods and services are available primarily or exclusively in CUC, which must be bought at a rate of 24 Cuban pesos to 1 CUC in local currency exchanges. Many Cubans see the dual currency system as the cause of economic inequalities, since those who could obtain CUC (through remittances or working in tourism or other privileged sectors) had more access to imported goods.

After maintaining for nearly a decade that reunification of the two currencies would not happen until the economy was strong enough to allow for devaluation without inflation, the government announced in December 2020 that the change would occur on January 1, 2021, in the middle of the worst crisis in decades. That led to an increase in the minimum wage, from 400 pesos to 2,100 pesos (\$17 to \$87) per month, but prices of almost everything also increased. The cost of rationed goods increased 780 percent, and soup kitchens for the most vulnerable families stopped subsidizing meals.

Few young Cubans are interested in repeating their parents' struggles.

SACRIFICES AND SHORTAGES

Cuba's pharmaceutical industry had five COVID-19 vaccine candidates in development when the highly contagious Delta variant was detected in April 2021. Another strict curfew was imposed, and extended power outages became more routine occurrences. Losing power often meant no water for basic hygiene.

For more than a year, from the safety of the island, Cubans had watched health systems from New York to Milan collapsing under the strain of COVID-19 cases. But as the summer of 2021 began, both official statistics and alarming updates on social media revealed that Matanzas province was in crisis. Despite months of strict measures, including nightly curfews, limitations on mobility, and closed borders, videos showed blocks-long lines for testing and treatment, as sick people languished in the hallways of health centers. Friends and relatives asked for help via private chats on WhatsApp. Matanzas was the epicenter of COVID-19 in Cuba, and the country had become the pandemic's epicenter in Latin America.

Faced with growing case numbers, the state gambled on a massive vaccination campaign using its own vaccines, though they had not yet received emergency-use authorization. Between May and August of 2021, three million people were vaccinated. When the vaccination rate reached 63 percent, infections began to fall. By the end of August, 88.4 percent of the population was vaccinated. In September, emergency-use authorization was granted for a juvenile vaccine. All children over the age of 2 were vaccinated, and classes resumed for the first time since March 2020.

None of this would have been possible without Cuba's celebrated public health system and the dedication of its personnel. But the Cuban people had also made great sacrifices. By the summer of 2021, many were exhausted from food shortages, power blackouts, a rapidly devaluing currency, and steep inflation, with no way to receive remittances or even leave the island.

Young Cubans responded to the need they saw around them by organizing, across the island and oceans. They worked to fill the ever-widening gaps between acute needs and the capacity of the public health system. Fundraising with Cubans abroad, they loaded shipping containers with medications and responded to requests for help in their communities and on social media by delivering aid directly to people in need. In this moment of crisis,

messages from the nation's leadership offered little hope.

STRUGGLES OF A POST-CASTRO LEADER

The way the state has responded to Cubans' everyday struggles since the beginning of the pandemic has created a crisis of political legitimacy. Born in 1960, Díaz Canel had neither toppled a bloody dictatorship nor delivered improvements in the quality of life for those who had been most marginalized under US-style democratic capitalism. It was clear from the beginning that, lacking the charisma of Fidel, he would have to earn the population's respect after his election by the National Assembly.

But Díaz Canel's administration has been plagued by disasters. Naturally, people compared his presidential response to each disaster with "what Fidel would have done." Those were very big shoes to fill. Even before he took office, the economy was suffering, and US aggression continued to escalate.

In addition to the pandemic and the unfolding economic crisis, Díaz Canel has been hampered by poor communication. He began his term promising to be a force for continuity at a time when people were demanding significant changes to "socialism as usual." He has failed to recognize Cubans' legitimate grievances and enormous sacrifices. Instead of building consensus, his government has often blamed the population and attacked critics, implementing a series of new laws to criminalize dissent.

Díaz Canel's predecessor, Raúl Castro, had the advantage of being part of the "Historic Generation," but clearly understood that he was no Fidel and worked to gain popular support. Raúl started by listening and acknowledging that Cubans wanted change—and that the government could not keep saying that the embargo or the United States was the cause of everything wrong in Cuba. He promised to "change what needs to be changed" to build a new, "prosperous socialism." He balanced the budget by laying off workers from "bloated payrolls" and stimulated the development of small businesses to absorb them, inviting Cuban émigrés to repatriate and invest their savings in new ventures.

There were winners and losers in these structural adjustments. But the changes were attractive to the Obama administration, which reestablished diplomatic relations, removed limits on remittances and restrictions on travel, and created opportunities for bilateral cooperation.

Raúl promised change, and thanks to improved relations with the United States, he was able to deliver. For the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union, young college graduates found themselves able to use their education, skills, and creativity to earn decent incomes. They could have a better life than their parents, without having to leave Cuba. But this window of opportunity proved fleeting.

After Trump became president, he quickly reversed the policies that had contributed to improvements in the quality of life for Cubans. In response, many of Díaz Canel's actions have focused on attempting to prove to outside observers that the revolution still enjoys widespread popular support. At times, doing so has appeared to take priority over initiatives to actually build and maintain such support. Unlike Raúl, Díaz Canel did not begin his term with listening sessions. He started by proposing a constitution designed to institutionalize the revolution, subject to ratification by a referendum. (In Cuban political discourse, "the revolution" refers not simply to an event that occurred in 1959, but to the ongoing process of constructing a socialist society, and to the sole political actor composed of the Communist Party and the state.)

The proposed constitution would also have allowed same-sex couples to marry, a long-standing demand of LGBTQ+ Cubans. The inclusion of the marriage measure in Article 68 of the draft charter made for good international public relations. Internally, it acted as a lightning rod for controversy, deflecting criticism from other changes meant to codify the party's control of the state.

Ultimately, the National Assembly eliminated Article 68, while praising the democratic nature of the consultation process. The question of same-sex marriage instead would be decided at a later date by a separate referendum. Removing Article 68 also helped the state build alliances by appeasing the Catholic Church and emerging evangelical churches, averting a boycott of the constitutional referendum.

In February 2019, 87 percent of voters approved the constitution; the referendum drew voter turnout of 84 percent. It was a victory for the Cuban state, as well as for conservative religious institutions. But the perception that the state ceded power to fundamentalist sects has hurt Díaz

Canel's image among progressive Cubans who identify strongly with the revolution's historical commitment to social justice.

Meanwhile, on January 27, 2019, a powerful tornado hit Havana, directly affecting over 250,000 people in the capital. Six were reported dead and 195 were injured. People living in the affected areas were left without basic services; more than 144,000 lost electricity. Many young people sprang into action as social media facilitated spontaneous civil society initiatives that connected Cubans on and off the island: collecting donations, organizing work brigades, and delivering aid directly to households in need.

Díaz Canel was heavily criticized for not canceling an annual march held the day after the tornado, when large parts of the city were still paralyzed. Students were expected to rally to show their support for the continuity of the revolution and the constitutional referendum. Producing a regular stream of images of pro-government crowds in the streets has evidently been a preoccupation of the president.

On November 27–28, 2020, more than 300 young artists peacefully protested at the gates of the Ministry of Culture, asking for dialogue with authorities about respect for freedom of expression and an end to censorship and harassment of artists who do not share official ideologies. The next day, Díaz Canel appeared at a "spontaneously organized" youth rally to denounce the protesting artists. This rally was publicized in state media with the slogan "young Cubans defending their revolution."

In July 2021, less than a week after the nationwide protests, with over 400 people still in jail or missing and COVID-19 transmission at an all-time high, the president again called for a rally of revolutionary reaffirmation. After two years of lockdowns and life under curfew, when Cubans were subject to strict fines for gathering in public spaces—measures justified as necessary to control the pandemic—the call went out at workplaces and universities to attend this mass event. It was widely criticized as extremely risky and irresponsible, given the epidemiological situation. University of Havana biology students wrote an open letter refusing to attend the march and counseling the government on the risks the event would entail, at a moment when Cuba had the highest

*Many Cubans feel that their
legendary public health system
has failed them.*

rate of contagion per capita in Latin America. But the rally went ahead despite these objections.

DELEGITIMIZING DISCONTENT

Failing to recognize that Cubans have legitimate grievances has proved to be a major political error. Some of these grievances are related to the state's growing acceptance of economic inequalities and lack of action to address the racialized and gendered nature of economic disadvantage. These inequalities have their roots in the Special Period and the first wave of economic reforms in the 1990s that restructured paths to social mobility.

During the period of restructuring led by Raúl in the early 2010s, new economic opportunities were managed in a way that excluded groups already at a disadvantage, such as internal migrants, rural residents, workers in the state sectors like education and health care, and families without access to hard currency. (Black Cubans and women are overrepresented in these vulnerable groups.) The government did not make credit available for small business creation. Under Raúl there was a push to eliminate “unnecessary subsidies,” and spending on social welfare was cut. Between 2008 and 2011, close to 400,000 elderly Cubans, people with disabilities, and mothers providing care for children with disabilities had their welfare benefits cut off. Products were dropped from the ration book, but the state stopped short of eliminating it completely. For those without the means to take advantage of the new opportunities, the subsidies provided by the ration system are still necessary.

Since 1959, the legitimacy of the Cuban revolution has been built and maintained on the pillars of universal access to high-quality education and health care. Yet these core services have been deteriorating for decades. Since the 1990s, salaries have been insufficient to retain talented teachers capable of implementing Cuba's world-class curriculum. Families must provide basic resources to keep schools functioning. This leads to inequalities in education between urban neighborhoods and across the country.

As other institutions faltered, the public health system was widely described as “all we have left.” But in recent years, shortages of basic medications have become so severe that even vaccinations of newborn babies are delayed. It is often up to patients to find their own medications, either on the black market or with support from abroad. People I knew died from acute infections due to

the lack of antibiotics. Among my friends and family are epileptics who go without antiseizure medication, people with heart conditions who have no blood thinners, pregnant women struggling to find prenatal vitamins and folic acid, and people with mental illnesses unable to access antipsychotics and antidepressants.

In 2020, the initial success in controlling the pandemic was achieved through primary prevention strategies: comprehensive lockdowns, behavior modification, and effective contact tracing and quarantines. These measures required the collaboration of all sectors of society and took advantage of existing public health infrastructure and human resources.

But in the summer of 2021, cases soared in Matanzas, a province intimately linked to international tourism. Rumors pegged the cause of this surge to Russian tourists at beach resorts who did not wear masks or follow Cuban pandemic protocols, exposing local workers and communities. Under the increasing weight of new cases, local public health systems collapsed and were unable to care for patients in dire need. The country's oxygen infrastructure also failed. The drive to produce COVID-19 vaccines was a success, and the curve of infections was flattened, but this came at the cost of a 50 percent reduction in production of other medications, worsening previously existing shortages.

Social media helped facilitate grassroots efforts to fill the gaps, but many Cubans feel that their legendary public health system has failed them. The severity of the crisis is reflected in the struggles of Cuba's most vulnerable citizens, long prioritized by the health system. The number of maternal deaths increased from 40 in 2020 to 175 in 2021. Cuba's infant mortality rate, long among the region's lowest, increased 55 percent in the same year.

Instead of communicating that it values the massive sacrifices made by the population in this period of extreme crisis, the Cuban state has resorted to victim blaming when it is unable to fix problems. COVID-19 control policies required great commitment and sacrifice from citizens. As pandemic fatigue set in, restrictions unconnected to evolving scientific evidence—such as curfews, masking infants, and barring children from public spaces—stirred discontent. Though they understood the economic rationale for opening the borders in late 2020, many Cubans criticized lax health rules for visitors, from the lack of

vaccination and pre-arrival testing requirements to the presence of unmasked Russian tourists in beach towns. Yet when case counts began to rise, state media blamed the spread of infections on “irresponsible actions of the population.”

The impacts of domestic economic policies on households have been severe since the currency reunification. Salaries and pensions are no match for rampant inflation and an unraveling safety net. Poorly stocked stores fail to meet basic needs. Hard currency, for purchases on the black market, has become essential to basic survival.

Rather than recognizing systemic problems with production and dependence on imports, or outlining solutions, state media placed the blame for pandemic food shortages on the population. Daily reporting in television, radio, print, and digital news coverage used racialized and gendered images to fan a moral panic in 2020. *Coleros*—poor people from marginalized communities who wait in days-long lines for goods to resell—were described as scum, an immoral virus, whose indefensible actions prey on honest workers. Local officials were deputized to mount “an offensive against *coleros*,” criminalizing the actions of the already poor and desperate.

Closely related to the state's lack of recognition of widespread suffering and the legitimate reasons for protests is another strategy: portraying such expressions of discontent as the acts of provocateurs serving as paid agents of the United States. Such propaganda willfully ignores the reality that Cuban citizens face many everyday problems that may motivate them to protest. But this strategy of discrediting critical voices has historically been effective in isolating and silencing them, since few will dare defend those who are labeled as US agents intent on destabilizing the country.

VOTING WITH THEIR FEET

The current protests in Cuba are the logical outcome of recent developments. Connections made possible by the expansion of Internet service and social media have facilitated new forms of popular participation for upwardly mobile Cuban youth with greater online access.

After years of official discourse criticizing the population for passively waiting for the state to fix social problems, people are taking measures into their own hands. This shift has been evident in extreme disasters like the 2019 tornado and the 2021 COVID-19 health crisis in Matanzas. It has also been manifested in smaller campaigns to provide

aid to strangers in need, such as collecting donations for a family after a house fire, diapers for an orphaned infant, or jars for a hospital milk bank. Experiences of organizing via social media to provide mutual aid have contributed to a growing awareness of collective efficacy at the margins of the state.

The increased reach of social media has also created new spaces for debate, strengthening ties between those who have stayed on the island and Cubans abroad, who continue to participate in exchanges in the digital sphere as if they never left. Facebook walls have become venues for serious social critique and expressions of opinion that people might not feel comfortable making in official sites of formal citizen participation, such as neighborhood or workplace forums.

Satire takes the form of memes and WhatsApp stickers through which creators challenge state discourses. They point out absurd claims, such as a commander saying that farming ostrich eggs will solve the problem of food insecurity. In the middle of the pandemic, a generation of Cubans who were assumed to have given up on official state news sources were tuning in to create their own memes or to understand the latest jokes circulating online.

Instead of taking online debates and satire seriously, state organs have dismissed them as part of a “digital war against Cuba” and attempted to fight back by producing their own memes and new programs. A month after the July 2021 protests, *Con/filo*, a 15-minute news program designed to speak to Cuba's youth and directly respond to critical voices online, debuted in the most desirable slot on the television schedule, right before the soap opera. The program's young hosts were tasked with “putting the opinions circulating in traditional and online media about Cuba in perspective.” Mainly they do so by attacking critics and accusing them of being funded by the United States.

Official decrees have imposed further limits on freedom of expression in digital spaces and via new technologies. People arrested for participating in the July 2021 protests have received long prison sentences. Such measures have prompted progressive voices to question why the right to criticize the state is only granted to fundamentalist churches.

The expansion of rights for the LGBTQ+ community through the Families Code followed broad public consultations and was approved in a popular referendum on September 25, 2022. But there was no similar process for soliciting popular opinions or final approval of the new penal code,

which was approved in May 2022, published in September, and took effect on December 1. It increases the number of offenses punishable by death and life imprisonment, makes it a crime to attempt to change any aspect of the constitution or the form of government it establishes, and places any person or entity receiving vaguely defined “external funding” at considerable risk. Internet and social media channels are subject to the penal code. Many are concerned that it could be used to curtail online activism and mutual aid.

In the face of constant insecurity and cascading crises, a new generation faces the choice of leaving the country or attempting to change what needs to be changed. But change is no longer encouraged by the state. And between the 2017 closure of the US consulate in Havana and the pandemic travel disruptions, leaving became nearly impossible. With no way out, in July 2021 voting with your feet meant protesting in the streets. As soon as the borders opened again in November 2021, people began to vote with their feet by leaving Cuba. ■

“The ongoing expansion of Pentecostalism, from its initial boom in the late 1970s to the present, directly maps onto Guatemala’s current political and social conditions . . .”

Pentecostalism and Power in Guatemala

VIRGINIA GARRARD

Guatemala has a unique contemporary history, defined by a protracted armed conflict. This government-sponsored war of counterinsurgency against a small but persistent leftist militant movement lasted 36 years, from 1962 to 1996, and left more than 100,000 people dead, the vast majority of whom were killed by the security forces. Due to deeply held racist tropes framed in Cold War language, the war disproportionately affected the indigenous Maya population, who constituted more than 80 percent of the victims.

The armed conflict left a legacy of violence that has made Guatemala one of the most dangerous countries in the world, measured by basic statistics such as homicides, femicides, and violent crime. The conflict and its long aftermath also displaced millions of people over the decades, directly contributing to an extensive Guatemalan diaspora in the United States, as well as to the endemic culture of criminal and gang violence that continues to compel Guatemalans to emigrate.

Yet Guatemala has also advanced in certain remarkable ways since the dark days of the armed conflict. The nation has enjoyed significant capital investment in recent decades. New opportunities have opened up for young Guatemalans across a variety of social sectors, including education and entrepreneurship. The government is corrupt, but relatively stable. Perhaps most notably, there has been an unprecedented efflorescence of Maya intellectual leadership in Guatemalan cultural and even political life.

Guatemala is also the most Protestant nation in Latin America today (over 40 percent of the population), a title it has held since the 1980s. Most Guatemalan Protestants are Pentecostals, and

nearly all Christian denominations, including Catholicism, have to some extent “pentecostalized” in their liturgical practices, emphasizing emotional worship. To a large extent, the ongoing expansion of Pentecostalism, from its initial boom in the late 1970s to the present, directly maps onto Guatemala’s current political and social conditions, serving as a catalyst for change in ways that are both transparent and opaque.

A PIOUS DICTATOR

Guatemala’s contemporary politico-religious convergence dates to the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period now remembered as *la violencia*, the nadir of the three decades of armed conflict. It was during this period that the Guatemalan army and security forces launched a scorched-earth campaign to permanently excise the armed left and its supporters from the nation. Between 1980 and 1984, government-sponsored massacres and assassinations, actions by military-supported village-level “civil patrols,” and, to a lesser extent, violent guerrilla responses exacted by far the highest death tolls of the entire civil war.

The 17 months from March 1982 to August 1983 stand out, corresponding to the brief term of a born-again Pentecostal general, Efraín Ríos Montt, as chief of state. Ríos Montt and two other generals (who quickly ceded control to him) seized power in a coup in March 1982. Ríos Montt, initially regarded by fellow officers as a mild reformer, was a career soldier who had converted to Pentecostalism through a US-based church, El Verbo (Church of the Word), a few years earlier in the wake of his loss in the 1974 presidential election.

On the night he assumed power, Ríos Montt declared to the nation: “I have confidence in God, my master and king, that he will guide me. Only He can grant and take away power.” His advisers—

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leaders of his church rather than fellow military officers—responded to the general's political apotheosis ecstatically. "We feel a great door has been opened," said one elder of the Church of the Word on the afternoon of the coup. "We don't understand what is going to happen, but he will be operating with a power that is not like men's corrupting power," the elder enthused. "He is going to have an anointing from God." Shortly thereafter, US evangelical television host Pat Robertson, in an effort to circumvent a Carter-era embargo on aid to the Guatemala military, which had been imposed because of its egregious record on human rights, urged his viewers to "pray around the clock for Ríos Montt" and pledged \$1 billion toward Guatemala's reconstruction.

Ríos Montt's regime was like no other. He immediately stamped out crime in Guatemala City by demanding that death squads—which were tied to the army he commanded and its auxiliaries—"leave no more cadavers in the streets," and reinstating the death penalty for common crimes. He forced all government officials to take the pledge "*No robo, no miento, no abuso*" (I don't rob, lie, or abuse)—an attempt to end rampant corruption that also provoked disgruntlement by cutting off the perquisites that public servants had come to expect. Both of these measures brought an enforced peace to the capital city. For the time being, this satisfied both military and civilian elites, including the powerful urban planter class.

In the countryside, Ríos Montt showed no quarter, initiating a scorched-earth campaign—though the general joshed with US President Ronald Reagan that it was better described as "scorched communists." In July 1982, the military committed a series of large-scale massacres in the Mayan highlands, destroying whole villages, killing thousands, and displacing more than a million people. Shortly after that, Ríos Montt launched his *Fusiles y Frijoles* (Guns and Beans) campaign, designed to reclaim the highlands once and for all from the guerrillas, and to subjugate the Maya people to the *ladino* (non-indigenous) national state. So severe was this assault that the United Nations-backed Truth Commission, in its 1999 report, identified it as the moment at which the Guatemalan state defined the Maya as the "internal enemies of the state." In 2013, this charge would

form the basis for Ríos Montt's conviction for genocide and crimes against humanity.

At the time, however, the general enjoyed national support, in part because of his willingness to advance his program in a public manner that was unusual during the reigns of prior generals. Every Sunday night, Ríos Montt delivered a televised address to the nation to promote both his moral and his political agenda. Wearing civilian clothes, speaking in front of a brass candelabra, in dulcet tones that contrasted dramatically with the fierce shout he would use when denouncing subversion, Ríos Montt used the forum to explicate his vision for a "New Guatemala." The nation, he claimed, was blessed by God, and destined to be a new City on the Hill, built along explicitly "Christian" lines of biblical obedience, authority, and respect.

Ríos Montt also enjoyed euphoric support from conservative Christians at home and abroad—particularly the newly emergent "Moral Majority" in the United States—who saw the unlikely rise to power of a committed Pentecostal, corresponding as it did to the dramatic expansion of Pentecostalism across Guatemala, as clear evidence of God's salvific plan. Many Guatemalans flocked to new *evangélico* (the generic term for "Protestant" in Spanish) churches during *la violencia*. Some sought solace in Pentecostalism's promises of salvation at a time when families, homes, communities, and traditional faith refuges, most notably those of the Catholic Church, were all devastated by the violence. Others (vainly) hoped affinity with the general's churches of choice would provide some modicum of protection in the maelstrom.

In 1982, foreign and domestic *evangélicos* saw the massive celebration of Protestantism's centennial in Guatemala (commemorating the arrival of John Hill, the first Presbyterian missionary to the country), presided over by the general himself, not as coincidence, but as *kismet*. Evangelical pastors and missionaries boldly predicted that Guatemala was poised on the threshold of its "*hora de Dios*"—its *kairos*, or prophetic moment—the tipping point when prayer and large-scale conversions to Protestantism would allow the troubled country to undergo wholesale transformation.

But then Ríos Montt was overthrown in an August 1983 coup led by fellow military officers

*Guatemalans flocked to new
evangélico churches during
la violencia.*

who accused him of being a “religious fanatic.” The coup was supported by government employees and elites who resented the general’s pious moral platitudes and his sanctions on payola.

The general’s complicated legacy would prove to be much more enduring than his abbreviated stint in power. While some Guatemalans lionized him for his success in nearly destroying the guerrilla movement—an accomplishment that Latin American generals applauded as “the Guatemalan solution”—others saw him as a villainous figure who had authorized the worst Indigenous genocide since the Spanish Conquest. Virtually everyone, for better or worse, strongly associated him with his evangelical faith, and projected that image on Guatemala’s growing evangelical population at large, associating it either with positive values such as honesty and efficiency, or with malevolent motives.

In the short run, Ríos Montt’s ouster took the starch out of his reputation as a “Christian soldier” and compelled his conservative Christian supporters in the United States to distance themselves from him. But he remained an influential political figure in Guatemala for the rest of his life. His genocide conviction was vacated by the court on a technicality after he spent just 10 days in confinement; a retrial began in 2017, and he died the next year.

A SPIRITUAL ENTREPRENEUR

The first attempt to capitalize on the new (paradoxical) social capital that Ríos Montt had generated for his evangelical cohort came with the brief presidency of Jorge Serrano Elías from 1991 to 1993. Serrano was a civilian and fellow Pentecostal (though not a member of the Verbo church) who had served on Ríos Montt’s staff. He built his campaign on the popular perception cultivated by the general: that Christians (specifically evangélicos) were honest, trustworthy, and incorruptible.

Serrano’s own ouster, in a coup provoked by his misguided effort to upend the constitution, tarnished that reputation. But it had rather the opposite effect among Guatemala’s rapidly growing evangelical population, reaffirming the stark binary that already existed in their worldview between The Church (a place of salvation and safety) and The World (a corrupt and evil sphere where the sanctified did not belong).

As a result, for many years Guatemalan evangélicos shunned outright efforts to influence

politics—for example, by forming religiously influenced blocs or parties. Their reluctance to sully themselves through direct political action has diminished over time. But in those earlier days, they overwhelmingly threw in their lot with prayer and dreams of a divine transformation of their nation into a truly godly society.

It would take a new generation of local evangélico leaders to reconceptualize the relationship between their faith and politics in hopes of transforming their troubled nation. (“Transformation” is a term of art in certain Pentecostal circles, referring to a moment when a society, culture, nation, or—eventually—the whole world reaches a tipping point, when all people turn to Christ and thus herald his Second Coming.) Foremost among these new leaders in Guatemala was Harold Caballeros, the founder and now the former pastor of the wealthy megachurch El Shaddai.

Caballeros’ ministry speaks directly to a precise definition of “Christian citizenship” that calls for direct engagement by neo-Pentecostals in prayer and politics for the “redemption” of their nations. He asked why, if one can “name and claim” blessings for oneself, as modern Pentecostalism proposes, the same should not be true at ever-larger scales. Dominion theology, of which Caballeros was one of the earliest major exponents in Guatemala, calls for the transformation of first the individual, then the family, the community, the nation, and, ultimately, the world.

Such thinking was at the heart of a nationwide prayer campaign that Caballeros sponsored in the early 1990s, called “*Jesús es Señor de Guatemala*.” This campaign, which Caballeros now considers his first real foray into politics, was a textbook example of dominion theology in action. Through their fasting and fervent prayers, the faithful of El Shaddai would expel the demons that hindered the nation’s progress. In Caballeros’ vision, this would bring Guatemala to redemption and transformation.

Even if Caballeros’ tipping point for national or even international transformation has remained elusive, the principles of “Christian citizenship,” largely by way of small prayer and study groups affiliated with El Shaddai, have become active nodes for capacity-building among Guatemalan Pentecostals, as anthropologist Kevin Lewis O’Neill has shown in his 2009 book *City of God: Christian Citizenship in Postwar Guatemala*. Pentecostals encourage and cultivate self-improvement,

often nurtured in small groups where adherents learn basic modern skills, such as how to open a bank account or further an education, or, on a more advanced level, how to start a business and network with other successful people.

In a middle-/upper-middle-class congregation like El Shaddai or Fraternidad Cristiana (Guatemala's largest single congregation today), it is not at all unusual to see professional people—accountants, small business owners—whose parents were campesinos a generation ago. Although the prosperity gospel preached in many of these churches accounts in part for the strong emphasis on believers' full engagement with capitalism and consumerism, it is not just a Weberian affinity that makes the difference, but the churches' specific strategies—the capacity-building, leadership training, networking opportunities, and steady encouragement that they provide for their members.

The principles of Christian citizenship have paid off not least for Pastor Harold himself, who ran for president twice. Though he was unsuccessful both times, his 2011 presidential bid resulted in his being named foreign minister in the administration of President Otto Pérez Molina. He served in the post for only one year before resigning in 2013 due to disagreements with the president's *mano dura* (iron-fist) security policies.

In recent years, Caballeros has expanded his influence to almost every key sphere of society. Perhaps mindful of recent history, his work tends to have a light touch and does not veer toward the totalitarian approach of Ríos Montt. His wife, Cecilia, serves as head pastor of the 12,000-member El Shaddai church, which remains the spiritual home of many political and business leaders.

Caballeros serves as rector of Universidad San Pablo, Guatemala's largest evangelical university, which he founded. Its mission is to train professionals who, through Christian moral values and principles, "can be agents of transformation in the society they live in." Evangelical schools are a traditional purview of Protestant work—early missionaries stressed the necessity of literacy in order to read the Scriptures. But the widespread presence of evangelical higher education in Guatemala is something relatively new, another reflection of evangélicos' fierce commitment to the capacity-building and self-improvement that many churches encourage in their members.

In addition, Caballeros is founder and head of Fundación Educativa El Shaddai, a system of

Christian schools in rural areas of the country, designed to "inculcate a worldview of values and principles that affect the nation." Along with his wife, he also heads *Manos de Amor*, a church-affiliated development program that works in rural Guatemala. In yet another role, he is president and founder of Radio Vision Corporation, a network of 25 evangelical radio stations.

On top of all this, Caballeros is also the founder of a political party, Vision con Valores, for which he ran as a presidential candidate. In 2015, Zury Ríos, an evangelical Christian and daughter of none other than General Efraín Ríos Montt, headed the party's ticket. But Caballeros has also served as a key facilitator for the Vision Plan, a UNESCO-sponsored initiative to broaden public participation in Guatemala's political process.

Caballeros' successful initiatives across so many fields of the secular world—as pastor and prayer warrior, aspirational social engineer, politician, evangelical reformer, and now university rector—have made him one of the most influential men not only in Guatemala, but throughout the region, notwithstanding his losses in the two presidential campaigns. (Those defeats may actually have served him well by keeping him publicly untainted by *la política*.) At the same time, his career is a microcosm of the ways in which Pentecostalism has pervaded nearly every aspect of Guatemalan society over the past four decades.

WORLDLY ENGAGEMENTS

After Pérez Molina's ouster, former television comedian Jimmy Morales surprisingly won the 2016 presidential election, becoming the nation's next evangélico chief of state. Having run on the low-bar slogan, "*Ni corrupto ni ladrón*" (Neither corrupt nor a thief), Morales failed to live up to even that modest promise. He was prosecuted for corruption and money laundering after he left office in 2020, though he did manage to complete his term despite popular protests demanding his removal.

As president, Morales avidly supported conservative causes. He denied that there had been a genocide in the 1980s. He also attempted to expel the Colombian head of the International Commission against Impunity (CICIG) after it began investigating his administration for corruption and money laundering. CICIG was established by the UN in 2007 to build capacity and professionalism in Guatemala's post-conflict judicial and law-enforcement systems. After initially focusing

on investigating and dismantling criminal networks, the commission eventually extended its mandate to help prosecute elected officials and military officers accused of corruption. When CICIG started probing alleged misappropriation of public funds by Morales and his brother, the president moved to shut down the respected and effective organization, forcing it to leave the country.

Morales' conservative agenda was influenced more by right-wing political considerations and self-interest than by conservative evangelical factions, except in one instance. This was the relocation of Guatemala's embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a move which Morales announced in late December 2017, just a few weeks after US President Donald Trump announced the same decision for the US embassy. That was a popular gesture among evangélicos, whose strongly philosemitic outlook complements an established pro-Israel tendency in Guatemala that dates from the Ríos Montt years, when Israel, with tacit US approval, supplied weapons to circumvent the US arms embargo.

Notwithstanding Morales' claim to be a lifelong evangelical, even "a pastor without a church," and despite many evangélicos' belief in what they call the "King David paradox"—that "God chooses flawed men to lead"—they were generally not closely allied with Morales. In fact, it was during his administration that more and more congregations began to move aggressively from the cocoon of "The Church" into the dangerous, sin-filled World of secular activities. They attempted to fill the gaps in areas where the rule of law or state services were frail or absent entirely—drug rehabilitation, domestic violence programs, prisoner rehabilitation, gang intervention, anti-crime vigilantism.

Several scholars have demonstrated that evangélicos empowered by capacity-building programs have been increasingly effective in creating functional systems for improving outcomes in education, security, and problems of everyday violence in a nation that otherwise functions much like a failed state. Guatemalan sociologist Claudia Dary's research (as in her 2016 book *Cristianos en un país violento*) describes important work carried out by the Iglesia de Dios (Church of God)—a very traditional and widespread Pentecostal denomination in Guatemala, with a large presence in the

heavily indigenous parts of the country. Its *Baja la Voz* (Lower Your Voice) program is designed both to help women escape domestic violence and to teach men to give up harmful behaviors. US scholar Robert Brenneman has extensively studied religious conversion's effectiveness in allowing young men to leave gang life, detailed in his 2011 book *Homies and Hermanos*.

But even these successes carry some serious caveats. Kevin Lewis O'Neill's most recent book, *Hunted* (2019), is a study of evangelical-run Guatemalan addiction centers, showing how the state's abdication of its own responsibility easily leads to abuse and misuse by these unregulated, unmonitored entities.

Some of the most serious criticisms of evangelical groups in recent years center on the role that some have taken in community policing in the many areas of the country where the rule of law is rarely enforced or absent altogether. Another word for this would be vigilantism—though it bears noting that Guatemala has the dubious distinction of one of the world's highest rates of extrajudicial killings per capita. Evangélicos are not the only ones engaged in this kind of behavior.

Even so, self-policing has been a particular problem in rural indigenous areas, where law enforcement is scarce and distrusted. There is a long-standing tendency among indigenous people to resort to "customary law" within their communities, rather than take their grievances to the racist and corrupt system associated with the state. Other factors, including religious bias against practitioners of traditional spiritual rites, also come into play. These biases are generally not ethnically based: many Mayans are themselves devout evangelicals and pastors who now see the traditional practices of their own communities as not simply misguided, but actually demonic.

In June 2020, in the community of Chimay in the northeastern department of El Petén, a lynch mob made up predominately of evangélicos accused Domingo Choc Che, a Q'eqchi' native healer, of practicing witchcraft. He was doused with gasoline and set on fire. A video of the murder was posted on YouTube, with the final words: "*Lo quemaron por brujo*" (They burned him for being a witch). The family and neighbors of a local man who had died in the hospital believed he had been

*The ongoing expansion of
Pentecostalism serves as
a catalyst for change.*

killed by magic; one of the man's sons admitted to direct involvement in the lynching and turned himself in to the local police.

AN IMPERFECT TRANSFORMATION

Has evangelical Protestantism, then, transformed Guatemala in the ways that Pentecostals of a generation ago anticipated that it would? Given the precise sense in which they meant it, the answer is a definitive “no”—even as the nation's Pentecostal population continues to climb, albeit at a much slower rate than in decades past, inching toward the 50 percent mark that church growth experts had once predicted would be the supernatural tipping point for national transformation. With phenomenally high rates of public violence, homicide, and gang and narco-trafficking activity, as well as persistent political corruption and new problems related to climate change, drought, and other twenty-first-century afflictions, the country remains very far indeed from the transformed society that church leaders

expected one or two generations ago, or even what Ríos Montt envisioned for his Nueva Guatemala.

Yet evangélicos have transformed Guatemala in other ways. Their achievements in education, leadership training, and various kinds of social investment have provided crucial spaces for improved access, if imperfectly, to many services that the state and other sectors have otherwise failed to provide. The churches also continue to offer what religions do best: they help people make order in their lives, and they provide meaning and hope in a chaotic and dangerous world. These churches and their leaders are a part of the nation's future, just as they have been central to its recent history.

The relationship between faith and power is a complicated one in Guatemala, as it is in many places—helping to order and benefit society in new ways, but at the same time opening up manifold opportunities for abuse and misuse. Guatemala has proved itself a bellwether, for better and for worse, as it edges ever closer to its tipping point of a Pentecostal majority. ■

“The country long referred to as Latin America’s oldest democracy had at last displayed political inclusion worthy of that name.”

Colombia Tries a Transformative Left Turn

WILL FREEMAN

In June 2022, Gustavo Petro made his final campaign speech from behind a wall of bullet-proof shields—an unusual precaution for a presidential frontrunner in Latin America, but normal protocol for a leftist candidate in Colombia. The fates of several of Petro’s predecessors show why: liberal reformer Rafael Uribe Uribe, cut down by axe-wielding assassins in 1914; left-populist Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, fatally shot in 1948 after becoming the favorite to win the presidency; and leftists Carlos Pizarro Leongómez and Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa, both gunned down while running for president in 1990.

Petro’s bid for Colombia’s highest office ended differently. On June 19, he became the country’s first leftist elected president in decades, after narrowly winning a runoff. His running mate, Afro-Colombian environmental activist Francia Márquez, also made history by becoming Colombia’s first Black vice president. Politicians on the right quickly laid fears of postelection disputes to rest by recognizing Petro’s win, and a peaceful transfer of power ensued.

Nothing about Petro and Márquez’s victory was preordained. While most of South America turned left in the early 2000s, Colombia remained a right-of-center island. Assassinations of thousands of trade unionists and peasant leaders by right-wing paramilitaries throughout the 1980s and 1990s disintegrated networks that might otherwise have undergirded a strong leftist party at the national level. Right-wing populist Álvaro Uribe concentrated power during his 2002–10 presidency and loomed large over national politics afterward, backing successors Juan Manuel Santos, who first won the presidency in 2010, and Iván Duque, who held the office from 2018 to 2022.

There was also a stigma attached to running as a leftist in a country long terrorized by left-wing insurgencies. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which officially demobilized with the signing of the 2016 Peace Accord, had a brutal record of kidnapping and killing civilians and forcibly recruiting child soldiers. A sector of Colombian society saw left-wing parties and candidates as guilty by association, even when they disavowed violence.

Last but not least, family dynasties dominated politics in many rural areas and in small and medium-sized cities. Their vote-buying machines were often decisive in national elections—support that came at the price of government pork-barrel spending, which leftists, almost perpetually in opposition, had limited ability to offer. Colombia had an almost unbroken record of holding democratic elections, but the deck was stacked against the left.

In 2022, several forces combined to weaken Colombia’s historically strong political establishment and create an unprecedented opening for the left. Like the rest of Latin America, Colombia was swept by a wave of anti-incumbent fervor. As the slow growth of the mid- to late 2010s became the new normal and opportunities for upward mobility dwindled, Colombians—like Brazilians, Chileans, and others—blamed their government. A high debt burden constrained the state’s ability to provide adequate social services. Then COVID-19 hit, exacting a staggering human and economic toll. Millions slipped back into poverty, and unemployment and inflation hit multiyear highs.

Incumbent parties have lost the last 15 consecutive presidential elections in Latin America. By electing Petro, Colombians joined the trend. But the left’s win was not attributable only to outrage at incumbents. It was also fueled by three longer-term developments: the downfall of Uribe’s movement, *Uribismo*, as Colombia’s dominant political

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force; Petro's construction of a new coalition uniting leftist outsiders with some of the wildest operators in traditional politics; and the waning influence of regional political machines on national elections. These developments set the 2022 election apart from earlier contests. The orthodoxies that had defined Colombian politics since Uribe's first election in 2002 were gone, opening a new era of uncertainty.

The victory of Petro and Márquez owed just as much to their bold vision of change. They promised to lead the country through a dual transition: from the status quo of simmering violence to a state of "total peace," and from an economy dependent on fossil fuels and the illicit drug trade to one grounded in green energy and sustainable development. In its first hundred days, their new government took ambitious steps toward implementing total peace and passed a major tax reform. But Petro's broader economic agenda faced mounting obstacles. Rising inflation, Colombia's costly foreign debt, and the looming prospect of a global recession threatened to undermine his boldest plans.

Achieving the dual transformation of Colombia's security situation and economy would never have been easy; 2022 turned out to be a particularly difficult year to start. Still, the fact that Colombia inaugurated a leftist president without major disturbances or bloodshed was a remarkable milestone. The country long referred to as Latin America's oldest democracy had at last displayed political inclusion worthy of that name.

ADIOS, URIBISMO

Not long ago, it was unthinkable that Uribe would find himself on the sidelines of a national election. During his two terms as president, the former governor of Antioquia cut Colombia's homicide rate in half, demobilized most of the right-wing paramilitaries, and oversaw the armed forces' success in reclaiming large swaths of territory from the FARC. His ascendancy rendered Colombia's centuries-old two-party system obsolete and etched a new dividing line into the political landscape: Uribistas versus the anti-Uribista opposition.

The opposition could point to a series of chilling human rights abuses and antidemocratic maneuvers by Uribe. But many Colombians

regarded Uribe as a hero for restoring a semblance of order. His approval rating never dipped below 65 percent during his two terms, and often climbed into the 70s and 80s. Even after a falling-out with his successor, Santos, whom he had originally backed, Uribe remained a political heavyweight. His Democratic Center became one of the largest parties in Congress.

Ironically, the victory of an Uribista candidate in the 2018 presidential election marked the beginning of the end. Iván Duque, a one-term senator backed by Uribe, comfortably beat Petro, a former rebel whose radical past instilled fear in many voters. Once in office, however, Duque quickly proved he was no Uribe 2.0. Founders of personalist movements often struggle to find successors who match their charismatic appeal and political acumen; sometimes they deliberately choose lackluster protégés for fear of being upstaged. Duque, relatively new to politics when he took office, fit this profile exactly.

From Santos, Duque inherited a sound economy, relative political stability, and most importantly, the 2016 Peace Accord—an ambitious set of commitments to reincorporate ex-FARC rebels, implement rural land reform, and extend state services across Colombia's neglected peripheries. These inherited advantages did not last long. Whether by incompetence or design, implementation of the Peace Accord—which Duque and Uribe had fervently opposed—stalled. Paramilitary successor groups, FARC dissidents, and local mafias battled for control of drug trafficking routes left behind by the FARC. Violence surged. On the eve of the 2022 elections, the homicide rate had rebounded to levels not seen since before the accord was signed.

The economy also fared poorly. The national debt climbed from 40 to 60 percent of gross domestic product during Duque's first three years in office as a result of pandemic spending and insufficient tax revenue. The peso lost a third of its value.

It was only a matter of time before political stability slipped away, too. Young people, the middle class, and social movements from Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities took to the streets in unprecedented numbers to denounce inequality, violence, and overburdened public services. Mass protests flared up in successive waves

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from 2019 to 2021. Though many protesters participated peacefully, others attacked police and destroyed property. The Duque government responded by dispatching the feared riot police. Dozens of protesters were killed, tortured, sexually assaulted, or disappeared. Uribismo had built its brand as a force for security and order, but under Duque, Colombians had neither.

By the time the 2022 presidential campaign began, the writing was on the wall: Uribismo, the force that had dominated electoral competition for a generation, was on its way out. Uribe first backed Óscar Iván Zuluaga, his own party's candidate, and then shifted his support to center-right contender Fico Gutiérrez. But Fico's poll numbers dropped after Uribe endorsed him.

The contender who advanced to the runoff with Petro was neither an Uribista nor part of right-wing establishment politics. Instead, Rodolfo Hernández was a right-leaning populist who decried the political class and promised to build a government of politically independent businesspeople. The fact that Hernández, a 77-year-old political outsider, had claimed the mantle of the Colombian right was a sign of just how far Uribismo and the center-right establishment had fallen. A new period of electoral uncertainty had begun.

PETRO'S REALPOLITIK

Petro took advantage of this moment. When Uribismo ruled the day, his profile as a leftist iconoclast was a liability. But as Colombians grew increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo, it became an asset.

As a young man, Petro had participated in the urban AD-M19 insurgency. After demobilizing with the rebel group in 1990, he built a political career in Congress, exposing the abuses of the Uribe government and its ties with right-wing paramilitaries. He served a polarizing term as mayor of Bogotá from 2012 to 2015. But his rebel past seemed to put an unmovable ceiling on his electoral aspirations; both times Petro ran for president, in 2010 and 2018, he lost badly. His coalition—a motley crew of small center-left and left parties—was not up to the task, and his flirtation with radicalism scared away moderate voters.

As Petro took to the campaign trail in 2021, he made a strategic about-face. First, he swapped out bromides against the political class for a new message: “the politics of love.” Now all were welcome in his coalition, even former rivals. Instead of

upending Colombia's market-based economy, Petro committed to “developing capitalism in Colombia,” although he vowed to do so by replacing fossil fuels with renewables and catalyzing green development. He also called for a national dialogue between the state and Colombia's myriad armed groups to chart a path toward “total peace.” Petro's newfound moderation and mellow tone counteracted his reputation for divisiveness and broadened his base of support.

To match his new inclusive message, Petro built a campaign team of seasoned establishment operators—two of them under investigation by Colombia's Supreme Court for corruption. Roy Barreras, a former Senate president and close ally of Uribe and later Santos, brought years of experience negotiating tough deals, including the 2016 Peace Accord. Armando Benedetti, another senator who had once been close to Uribe and Santos, became Petro's campaign manager. Even some Conservative party politicians with paramilitary ties expressed support for Petro. The resulting coalition made for strange bedfellows as Petro's party-movement, Colombia Humana, continued to attract the support of constituencies long excluded from traditional politics, including rural social leaders, environmentalists, and Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities.

The pairing of establishment insiders and social movement outsiders behind a leftist presidential candidate was not unusual in the region. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva first won Brazil's presidency in 2002 by peeling off a sector of the center-right establishment and welding it onto his social movement base; he repeated that successful strategy in 2022. After several failed bids for Mexico's presidency, Andrés Manuel López Obrador won the 2018 election with help from conservative politicians and evangelicals. Petro's pragmatic alliances similarly produced a winning coalition. Even flanked by establishment allies, Petro and Márquez still represented the forces of change for many Colombians.

MACHINES OUT OF GAS

Uribismo's fall from grace and Petro's realpolitik created an opening for the left, but no guarantees. There was still another force that might have acted as a backstop for the center-right and conservative establishment: dozens of regional family dynasties, or clans. Powerful clans have been a constant throughout Colombian history, keeping control over local fiefdoms through such seismic

changes as the collapse of the traditional party system and decentralization. They provided center-right and conservative national politicians with votes in return for public money to fuel their political machines. These relations between local and national power historically limited chances for political outsiders, including leftists, to win office.

Take the example of the Char family: Colombia's most powerful clan, often referred to as the "owners" of the Caribbean coast. The Char have governed Barranquilla, Colombia's fourth-largest city and its major Caribbean port, for nearly two decades. By exploiting Barranquilla's poverty, the family built a vote-buying machine capable of supplying hundreds of thousands of votes to candidates in national elections. Rather than tie themselves down to any one party, they migrated from one power center to another, aligning first with Uribe and later with Santos. In 2014, the support of the Char and other coastal clans was critical to Santos's winning bid for a second term. Meanwhile, the Char's political power and business empire kept growing.

The Char and other family dynasties had little interest in seeing the status quo overturned, but they failed to block Petro's rise. Clans were accustomed to operating under conditions of predictability; the 2022 election season was uncertain and fluid. When no center-right or conservative frontrunner emerged, clans adopted a wait-and-see approach rather than pool their support behind any one candidate. Then it became clear that Petro's second-round challenger would be Hernández, a political outsider who had challenged his region's dominant clan. The Char and other clans halfheartedly announced support for Hernández at the last minute, but it was too late.

National elections, unlike local ones, did not put clans' political survival at stake. In 2022, their vote-buying machines remained on the sidelines. But there were other signs that the clans' grip on local politics might finally be loosening. In 2019, outsider candidates running on anticorruption platforms and shoestring budgets wrested control of city halls from clans in Cartagena and Cúcuta. The spread of smartphones also made it easier to expose vote buying and election day fraud. Colombia's new era of political change extended down to the local level.

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A DOABLE DUAL TRANSITION?

Petro and Márquez's call for Colombia to undergo a dual transition resonated on the campaign trail, though they were rarely specific about how they planned to navigate from organized crime-fueled violence to "total peace," and from an economy dependent on fossil fuel and illicit drugs to one powered by sustainable development. A conventional approach to fighting organized crime, focused on eliminating kingpins, had failed to arrest rising violence not only in Colombia, but across Latin America. Slowing economic growth in the wake of the 2000s commodity boom revealed the shortcomings of natural resource dependence. Illegal logging and mining boomed in territories vacated by the FARC after 2016, adding to the urgency of addressing the climate crisis.

Petro and Márquez's vision made a contrast with *mano dura* (firm hand) security policies and extractive development models embraced by Latin American governments of the left and right alike in the 2000s and 2010s. Some among the wave of center-left and leftist governments that swept into

power across the region in the early 2020s harkened back to twentieth-century models. Petro and Márquez offered a forward-looking agenda.

Achieving either transition—let alone both—would require unprecedented, sustained political will. At Petro's inauguration on August 8, and for weeks afterward, the outlook was promising. Although Colombia Humana had won just a plurality of seats in the Senate and a smaller share in the House of Representatives, Barreras, the new Congress president, negotiated commanding pro-government majorities in both chambers. By the end of August, 64 percent of Colombians approved of Petro, creating a bandwagon effect.

Meanwhile, the intense right-wing opposition that many believed would emerge in the wake of Petro's win never materialized. Out of hundreds of senators and members of the lower chamber, just over two dozen joined the opposition. Even Uribe seemed uninterested in leading the anti-Petro charge. "The first one who has to cure himself of Uribismo is me," he told interviewers—a stunning rebuke of his own movement.

Petro's cabinet reflected his heterogeneous campaign coalition. For defense minister, he chose human rights lawyer Iván Velásquez, sending

a clear signal to top brass—Velásquez was famous for investigating right-wing paramilitaries' ties to the state. But as finance minister, Petro named a moderate—José Antonio Ocampo, a center-left economist with previous ministerial experience—which reassured foreign investors. The choices gave an early indication of Petro's priorities.

PEACE MOVES

To chart a path toward total peace, the new government proposed holding simultaneous dialogues with armed groups and criminal organizations. These groups included the National Liberation Army (ELN)—a Cuban-inspired insurgency founded in the 1960s that maintains approximately 4,000 fighters in strongholds on the Pacific coast and the Venezuelan border—and FARC dissidents who rejected the 2016 Peace Accord. The Gulf Clan, Colombia's largest criminal group and successor to its right-wing paramilitaries, was also invited, as were dozens of smaller regional mafias and narco-trafficking groups operating across the country.

At a minimum, the government said, it would require these groups to ask for pardons from society, observe a cease-fire, and cooperate with the justice system. In exchange, it would suspend arrest warrants and extradition orders for those who complied. Representatives of the ELN, who had not met with state officials since the group ordered a deadly Bogotá car bombing in 2019, returned to the negotiating table. The government's peace commissioner, Danilo Rueda, announced in late September that 10 groups, including the Gulf Clan and FARC dissident factions, had ordered a unilateral cease-fire to signal their willingness to join the talks.

The Petro administration also moved aggressively to counteract potential sources of resistance within the state, purging more than half of Colombia's military generals and police commanders—many of whom had criticized the negotiations—in just six weeks. In August, the government asked Venezuela to act as a guarantor to talks with the ELN and restored diplomatic ties with autocratic President Nicolás Maduro, which had been ruptured since 2019. Though ideology may have partly driven this outreach to a fellow leftist, pragmatism played a role, too: the ELN and other armed groups rely on bases and drug trade routes inside Venezuelan territory. The Petro government argued that this made it necessary to have Maduro

at the table, though the move drew criticism from Venezuela's democratic opposition.

In October, Congress passed the Total Peace Law, creating a legal framework for the state to suspend sentences and extraditions if leaders of armed and criminal groups hand over illicit goods and information on criminal activities. In November, an eclectic team of negotiators chosen by the government—including leftists, members of the military, and a right-wing representative of ranchers and landowners—formally opened a dialogue with representatives of the ELN in Caracas. But the ELN is a federated organization, so even if the leaders taking part in the talks strike a peace deal with the government, it is unclear how they would get the group's factions dispersed across Colombia to comply.

By Petro's hundredth day in office, continued violence cast doubt on several of the participating groups' commitment to total peace. Contrary to the government's claims that the Gulf Clan and FARC dissidents had put down their weapons, reporters across the country uncovered grisly tales of new assassinations and disappearances. In September, a bomb planted by FARC dissidents killed six police officers in the southeast. In late October, the Gulf Clan announced a plan to assassinate mayors, social leaders, and military officials in central Colombia.

In 2021, coca cultivation in Colombia hit a record high, and groups including the Gulf Clan and FARC dissidents reaped huge profits. Whether they would dismantle their criminal fiefdoms in return for more lenient treatment by the state—and what would become of Colombia's booming illicit economies if they did—remained open questions.

ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS

While Petro's security agenda moved forward in his first months in office, the other half of the dual transition—the shift to a green economy—was bogged down by obstacles. Petro introduced a tax reform bill that would increase levies on oil and coal companies, as well as on wealthy individuals. Although the reform drew staunch opposition from business lobbies, a modified version passed both houses of Congress by wide margins in November. Still, it remained uncertain how Petro would finance his most ambitious plans—including a transfer of vast tracts of rural land to small farmers—without ballooning public debt.

Meanwhile, the constraints Petro inherited from his predecessor—a depreciating peso, high debt, and slow growth—only tightened. Investors nervous about increased taxes on gas, oil, and coal dumped government bonds, sending the peso plummeting. From late June to late October, the currency lost 19 percent of its value, posting record-setting lows against the US dollar. Inflation climbed to 11.4 percent, a two-decade high, and was predicted to continue rising through 2023.

The high debt burden also threatened to hamstring Petro's spending plans. Even with the tax reform in place, projected to increase state revenue by 1.2 percent, economists estimate that the budget deficit will grow considerably in 2023, to 7.3 percent of gross domestic product, from 5.8 percent in 2022. Debt service, which already consumed one-third of government revenue, was set to become even more costly as the US Federal Reserve hiked interest rates, since more than 30 percent of Colombia's public debt is denominated in dollars.

The combination of high inflation, slow growth, and unprecedented depreciation of the peso took a toll. In October, inflation became Colombians' top concern, according to public opinion polls. In response to these constraints, Petro and his government sent mixed messages, exposing latent rifts.

Petro criticized rate hikes by Colombia's central bank and proposed a tax on transnational capital flows as an anti-inflationary measure. But Ocampo, the relatively orthodox finance minister, swore such a tax would not happen. When Deputy Minister of Mines and Energy Irene Vélez insisted that the government would not sign new contracts for oil exploration and gas fracking, Ocampo once again pushed back, and official policy in this area remained murky.

By the end of the year, it was uncertain which Petro Colombians had elected: the conciliatory moderate from the 2022 campaign trail, or the anti-establishment firebrand from years past. The stakes were high. The government's vision of total peace was premised on creating alternative livelihoods for those engaged in the illicit drug trade and organized crime. But doing so would require

fiscal stability and growth. Under Duque, both started to slip away, and the situation only seemed to deteriorate in Petro's first hundred days.

A TEST FOR DEMOCRACY

Colombia is one of Latin America's longest-standing democracies, but it has not been one of its most inclusive. Informal barriers to genuinely free and fair competition at different points in time have limited Colombian democracy's potential. When one set of informal barriers disappeared, another seemed to take its place: collusive power-sharing by traditional parties gave way to paramilitary violence; local party bosses were succeeded by political machines for hire. Over time, these barriers eased, but center-right and conservative parties remained the protagonists while leftists were consigned to minor roles. Colombian politics seemed slow to change.

The 2022 election proved otherwise. In fact, much had changed in a brief period: Uribismo and regional machines had started to fade from the national political scene, while new forces—Petro and Márquez's green leftism and Hernández's outsider right-wing populism—emerged to take their place. A period of electoral fluidity and uncertainty appeared to have begun.

Many had doubted that a leftist candidate could reach the home stretch of a national election without triggering polarizing political instability—or worse, violence. Fortunately, neither occurred, and Colombia's democratic institutions passed the test.

What comes next will be as, or even more, decisive. If Petro's dual transition derails, the country could end up back where it started—only with less macroeconomic stability, less foreign investment, and possibly more severe violence. But a dual transition done right would put Colombian democracy on new and stronger footing, and could position the country as a regional or international model for green development and peacebuilding.

The start of Petro's presidency marked the end of a long period of predictability in Colombian politics. Time will tell if the change was for better or worse. ■

A Victory for Democracy in Brazil?

REBECCA ATENCIO AND FERNANDA SANGLARD

Last October, soccer icon Neymar Jr. took to social media to support Jair Bolsonaro for reelection as president of Brazil. He also pledged his first goal of the 2022 World Cup, starting in November, to Bolsonaro. But the star forward's endorsement and pledge came to naught in the end. On October 30, former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of the Workers Party (PT) defeated Bolsonaro, the Liberal Party (PL) candidate, in a runoff. Moreover, the incumbent was denied the consolation of the promised World Cup goal after an injured Neymar was sidelined in the group stage—and refrained from making an overt homage when he finally did score in the round of 16. As it happened, Brazil's first two goals of the tournament came off the boot of fellow forward Richarlison, the favorite of many progressives for having leveraged his soccer fame to denounce racism and champion COVID-19 vaccination (fueling the widespread but unsubstantiated rumor that he had declared his vote for Lula).

Futebol has long had a way of bleeding into politics, and vice versa, in Brazil. Bolsonaro's followers took to donning the national team's signature yellow jersey as a show of support for their candidate. It was no surprise that the team's two forwards became political lightning rods during the election.

The candidates that came to be associated with them represent two starkly different visions for Brazil. Bolsonaro campaigned on fearmongering, portraying his rival as a communist who would close Brazil's churches. The incumbent stood accused by Congress of crimes against humanity for his gross mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic. He had also allowed the disastrous acceleration of deforestation in the Amazon during his first term, and attacked the rights that Afro-Brazilians, women, and

LGBTQIA+ people had won under the previous administrations.

Lula centered his campaign around a promise to unify the country and rebuild democracy. He ran on the legacy of economic and social inclusion policies enacted during his first two terms (2003–2010), which had lifted millions out of poverty. Despite the taint of a vote-buying scandal known as the *mensalão*, he had left office with an approval rating well over 80 percent. Other corruption charges in 2018 resulted in a controversial conviction that was thrown out on a technicality a year and a half later.

By all accounts, the 2022 presidential election was ugly. Bolsonaro sowed distrust in the democratic process with spurious predictions of electoral fraud. His inflammatory rhetoric incited a spike in politically motivated violence. Disinformation benefiting one candidate or the other proliferated on social media. Pro-Bolsonaro federal highway police erected roadblocks in an attempt to suppress the Lula vote on the day of the runoff.

The chief judge of Brazil's Superior Electoral Court (TSE), Alexandre de Moraes, intervened aggressively, using expanded powers, instructing social media platforms to remove fake news within hours or face penalties, and ordering the highway police to stand down. Bolsonaro has long regarded Moraes as his top enemy due to the judge's oversight of a probe by the Supreme Court—on which Moraes also serves—into his alleged meddling with the federal police.

In the run-up to the October 2 election, polls showed Lula with a comfortable lead, prompting speculation that he might pull off a landslide and preempt a second round of voting. (In Brazil, presidential contests are decided by an absolute majority of ballots.) On election day, however, Bolsonaro outperformed expectations, winning 43 percent of valid votes to Lula's 48 percent, forcing a runoff. Lula ultimately prevailed, albeit by a razor-thin margin in the runoff, garnering 50.1 percent of the vote to the incumbent's 49.1 percent, a difference of two million votes.

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The TSE certified the election results the same day, courtesy of the country's electronic voting system. Some of Bolsonaro's closest and most powerful allies, including the president of the Federal Chamber of Deputies, Arthur Lira, immediately congratulated Lula on his victory, as did many foreign leaders. The armed forces ignored calls from some of Bolsonaro's supporters to stage a military coup.

Now that he has left office, what might the future hold for Bolsonaro? A look back at his and the PL's reaction to the final election results offers some hints. During his campaign, Bolsonaro melodramatically predicted that there were only three possible outcomes to the 2022 presidential contest for him: prison, death, or victory—none of which came to pass. (At least not yet: prison is still a possibility.) Following the runoff, Bolsonaro sent mixed signals as to how he would respond. After maintaining two days of uncharacteristic silence, he announced he would follow the constitution and cooperate with the transition. Shortly thereafter, he even called on his supporters to cease protesting the outcome and blocking hundreds of roadways. Many of the demonstrations dispersed, but others persisted, including one in front of the military headquarters in Brasília.

Still, Bolsonaro never conceded the race, and along with his party he petitioned the TSE to investigate older-model voting machines, seeking to nullify their results. Moraes rejected the suit and fined the PL almost 23 million reais (over \$4 million) for litigating in bad faith. Soon after, Bolsonaro let it be known that he would not participate in Lula's inauguration, during which tradition dictated he hand over the presidential sash to his successor.

On balance, Bolsonaro's response was more subdued than expected. He lacked the political and military support to overturn the election, and likely was wary of further jeopardizing his chances of running again in four years. The PT and other left-leaning parties have filed well over a dozen lawsuits accusing him of interfering with the election, and any conviction would render him ineligible to seek office for eight years.

LULA'S CHALLENGES

Bolsonaro may have opted to lie low after his defeat, but one thing is clear: he and his brand of

antidemocratic politics will remain fixtures in national politics for the foreseeable future. PL president Valdemar Costa Neto hastened to declare Bolsonaro the party's 2026 presidential candidate and made him honorary party president, signaling (aspirationally, perhaps) that Bolsonaro will lead the opposition to Lula's government. Aside from the defeat in the presidential contest, the PL and its allies in other right-wing parties did extremely well in the congressional and gubernatorial races.

Most importantly, the bloc of parties aligned with Bolsonarismo will wield considerable power in the new Congress, where they control 36 out of a total 81 Senate seats and close to half of the seats in the lower house, the Chamber of Deputies. The new Congress is one of the most conservative in Brazilian history, going by both the proportion of seats held by the political right (or more accurately, multiple permutations of the right) and the ultraconservatism of the politicians occupying them. But the left-leaning bloc in Congress, for its part, is the most progressive ever, based on the political bona fides of those who won office.

Consider the case of Minas Gerais, often regarded as an electoral microcosm of Brazil because it is the only state to have picked the winner in every presidential race since the late 1980s. There, a twenty-something ultraconservative influencer and lawyer with the PL, Nikolas Ferreira, received more votes than any other candidate elected to the Chamber of Deputies. Yet this same state not only went for Lula, it also made history by electing its first transgender woman, Duda Salabert of the Democratic Labor Party, and its first indigenous woman, Célia Xacriabá of the Socialism and Liberty Party, to serve as deputies alongside Ferreira. This trio of newly minted lawmakers from Minas illustrates the extent of the polarization of Brazilian politics.

Lula returns to office at a time when the left-leaning bloc has shrunk, having won only 13 seats in the Senate and 141 in the Chamber of Deputies. Then there is the center-right, or *centrão*, which finds itself relatively weakened. With a long history of controlling Congress through patronage politics, the *centrão* lacks a distinct political ideology and is thus potentially open to dealmaking with whatever party occupies the presidency. It previously allied with Bolsonaro, but might support Lula's proposed reforms if the president can

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cut the right deals—in the form of political appointments and other perks.

Still, Lula will face the challenge of finding sufficient support in this highly fragmented Congress. He will need the votes of at least 41 senators and 257 deputies to advance his agenda. Seeking support from the right-wing bloc, Lula has included among his ministers members of the União Brasil, an opposition party that he is trying to bring into his base.

Lula has his work cut out for him in terms of satisfying his base and delivering on his ambitious campaign promises. In the lead-up to his January 1 inauguration, he cleared one major hurdle by successfully negotiating with Congress to pass a constitutional amendment raising the ceiling of the 2023 budget in order to fund his popular antipoverty initiatives. He also delivered on his campaign promise to create a Ministry of First Peoples, after reportedly having considered downgrading it to the status of special department. The fulfillment of other promises is less certain, however. For instance, the necessity of reconciling his environmental policy with Brazil's powerful agribusiness interests has cast doubt on his vow to curb deforestation.

The outlook for Brazil is unclear. The nation managed to preserve a defining feature of a stable democracy: the peaceful transfer of power. And yet, Bolsonaro's backers continued to challenge the election outcome even after Lula was sworn into office, most notably by invading Brazil's National Congress, Supreme Court, and presidential offices on January 8, 2023.

Lula was inaugurated without incident—and without Bolsonaro, who had departed Brazil for

Miami two days earlier. The snub backfired, as it gave Lula the opportunity to highlight his commitment to social inclusion by inviting eight representatives of Brazilian society to participate in the ceremony: an indigenous man, a Black boy, a young man with a disability, a Black woman who collects recycled material for a living, a teacher, a metallurgist and rapper, a cook, and an artisan.

If history is any guide, it would be a mistake to underestimate Lula, who had to surmount incredible odds (including a stint in jail) to return to power. The president, who has argued that political polarization can be “healthy” for a democracy, is a seasoned leader prepared to hit the ground running, a hostile Congress notwithstanding. Still, Lula—who is 77—has said he will not run for a fourth term, giving him only four years to achieve his ambitious agenda.

On the eve of the inauguration, it appeared that Bolsonaro might even be losing his monopoly on the national team jersey, the *canarinho* (little canary), as the bright yellow shirt is affectionately called. Progressive fans who once shunned the jersey for political reasons forcefully reclaimed it during the World Cup, and there were also reports that some of Bolsonaro's own supporters stopped wearing it at their election protests so as not to be mistaken for soccer fans. But the yellow jersey was once again the uniform of choice for the Bolsonaroista protesters who stormed Congress and other government buildings in Brasília. Such developments leave little doubt that the *canarinho* and Brazil's democracy have yet to fully escape the cage of Bolsonaroismo. ■

The Rebels Who Fought Mexican and US Oppression

ALEXANDRA DÉLANO ALONSO

On the tall green fence of Chapultepec Park in Mexico City, enlarged photographs of Ricardo Flores Magón hung in 2022 alongside reprints of the cover pages of *Regeneración*, the oppositional newspaper that he and his brothers, Jesús and Enrique, started in the early 1900s. The articles printed in *Regeneración* are known as the first public challenge to the long-standing dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. The power of the Flores Magóns' pens met with government raids and the destruction of their offices and printing presses, followed by persecution, imprisonment, forced exile in the United States, a US-Mexico joint counterinsurgency campaign, and the death of many of their collaborators. But the *magonistas* and the few thousand farmworkers, sharecroppers, miners, intellectuals, exiles, and labor migrants who supported them persevered against all odds. At the opening of the photography exhibit in September 2022, the director of the National Institute of Historical Studies on the Revolutions of Mexico declared that without Ricardo Flores Magón and the men and women with whom he and his brothers worked, there simply would not have been a Mexican Revolution.

The Flores Magóns' writings and actions in defiance of the Díaz regime were the basis for the foundation of the Mexican Liberal Party (PLM) and sparked the political movement that ousted the dictator in 1911, leading to a revolutionary conflict that ended in 1917 with a new constitution. Titled "¡Tierra y Libertad! El sueño de una revolución" (Land and Liberty! The Dream of a Revolution), the exhibition in Mexico City recalls one of the main slogans of the *magonistas* (famously embraced by Emiliano Zapata) and

marks the 100th anniversary of Ricardo Flores Magón's death, bringing the history of the PLM and of the Flores Magón brothers to a wide public on Avenida Reforma, one of the busiest streets in the center of the city.

The Mexican government declared 2022 "the year of Ricardo Flores Magón," and his image and name were stamped on every official document issued during the year—a recognition that the Flores Magón brothers would have most likely opposed, since they strived for a non-hierarchical, collective, and horizontal movement. Throughout the year, a series of programs and events honored Ricardo Flores Magón's legacy in the struggles for labor rights, land rights, freedom of the press, and democracy in Mexico. Published the same year, Kelly Lytle Hernández's book *Bad Mexicans* takes this effort further, explaining the importance of this rebellious writer, publisher, anarchist, intellectual, and organizer not just in Mexican history, but in the history of the United States. As Lytle Hernández writes, the *magonistas* "changed the course of history both north and south of the border."

The book offers a gripping account of how the Flores Magón brothers started a movement to oust the Porfirio Díaz regime and remake the economic, social, and political landscape of the country. While the government disqualified and denounced them as "bad Mexicans" who were unpatriotic and a danger to Mexico, the siblings presented themselves as the true defenders of democracy and the Mexican people. Their message had particular appeal among Indigenous and rural communities who had lost their lands and saw the interests of foreign investors taking precedence over their own.

Ricardo Flores Magón was the heart and mind credited with starting this movement. In the pages of *Regeneración*, he was the first to publicly call out

Bad Mexicans: Race, Empire, and Revolution in the Borderlands

Kelly Lytle Hernández
(W. W. Norton, 2022)

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Díaz's regime as a dictatorship, "daring to print a word no one else would." This challenge was followed by damning statements that have marked Mexican history. Flores Magón yelled repeatedly at a liberal conference that the Díaz administration was "a den of thieves," declared that "General Díaz has killed democracy," and on February 5, 1903, the anniversary of the 1857 Constitution, he unfurled a massive banner on the streets of downtown Mexico City that read: "The constitution is dead."

Lytle Hernández's book traces the development of the magonista movement and its historical significance for a broad English-speaking audience, providing an accessible and engaging narrative of the ideals, strategies, tactics, friendships, and romantic relationships that shaped it. Her research draws on various historical archives in Mexico as well as US Department of State and Department of Justice records, along with the already rich historiography (in English and Spanish) on Ricardo Flores Magón and the magonistas.

An award-winning author and professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, Lytle Hernández tells a story full of rich details: the many clandestine spaces where the magonistas wrote their essays and manifestos, the complex codes and pseudonyms they used in their correspondence, the smuggling of newspapers and letters across the border or into prisons, hidden in laundry and skirts. With a careful selection of their letters, she shows their resolve in situations of great risk, incarceration, poverty, and hunger, and their uncanny ability to escape the authorities in Mexico and in the United States who sought to capture them and squelch the movement that threatened powerful political and economic interests.

RACIAL TERROR

The magonistas have been recognized by historians as the first transnational grassroots political movement to span the US–Mexico border. Lytle Hernández starts from the premise that the way this rebellion developed across the border, and particularly in the borderlands, is central to understanding not only the Mexican Revolution, but also how the magonistas "rattled the workshop of U.S. empire, challenged the global color line, threatened to unravel the industrialization of the

American West, and fueled the rise of policing in the United States." Threading together the themes of race, empire, and revolution, Lytle Hernández shows the connections between US imperialism and its support for a regime that served its economic and geopolitical interests at the cost of political repression, forced displacement, and racism experienced by millions of Mexicans and Mexican Americans who became a major labor force in the development of the American West.

Mexican migrant workers faced exploitation and abuse by their employers, but Lytle Hernández recounts a broader history of racial violence against Mexicans and Mexican Americans, particularly the hundreds of lynchings that took place between 1848 and 1928 and ignited riots and anti-American protests all the way down to Mexico City. While the rebellion started by the Flores Magón brothers threatened Porfirio Díaz's hold on power, it also jeopardized the interests of US investors who had taken over land, railroads, and other industries in Mexico, of employers dependent on migrant workers who increasingly

supported the magonistas' calls for free wage and labor rights, and of the US imperialist project in Latin America.

Calling for recognition of Mexican, Mexican American, and Latino histories in the United States, Lytle Hernández

shows how the magonista rebellion, often "shunted to the sidelines of U.S. history," has much to teach us today. The US surveillance, counterinsurgency, and policing apparatus evolved during the period of the search for Flores Magón and his accomplices; his case was one of the first assigned to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The operation set precedents in practices of extradition and deportation that were developed in collaboration with the Mexican government. The displacement resulting both from Díaz's economic policies favoring US interests and from the armed conflict during the Revolution set the stage for a mass Mexican migration to the United States that reshaped the demographic composition of the country.

Lytle Hernández follows the legacy of Flores Magón to one of the "largest—and deadliest—movements against white settler supremacy in the United States." In 1915, a manifesto titled *El Plan de San Diego* called for a Liberating Army for Races and Peoples, summoning African American, Asian,

They were the first grassroots political movement to span the US–Mexico border.

and Indigenous peoples to seize the land that was formerly part of Mexico, return it to their communities, and declare them independent nations free of Anglo-American domination. The US government responded to the raids the rebels carried out by deploying the army and the Texas Rangers to hunt down and arrest or kill anyone suspected of participating in the Liberating Army. Lytle Hernández describes the killings of this period, known as “La Matanza” (The Massacre), as “indiscriminate, limited only by race.” More than 5,000 Mexicans and Mexican Americans were hanged or shot in the back, and their bodies were left on the streets.

Bad Mexicans challenges accounts of US history that leave out both this episode of racial terror and the rebellion against white supremacy called for by *El Plan de San Diego*, as well as the binational context in which they took place. Ricardo Flores Magón, then living with his family and friends at a commune in Edendale, Los Angeles, only learned about this event through newspaper reports. They brought out their old printing press to produce new issues of *Regeneración*, writing in support of *El Plan de San Diego* and against “the threats that people of our race are so frequently the victim of in this country.” Again, they were sentenced to prison for endorsing a movement that called for violence. Although their sentences were commuted, other accusations followed, and Flores Magón eventually died at Leavenworth Penitentiary in Kansas in 1922.

Often hailed as “*el alma de todo*” (the soul of everything), Ricardo Flores Magón continues to

inspire individuals and movements that follow the anti-capitalist, anti-state, anti-church, communal, and anarchist ideas that he and his collaborators in Mexico and the United States put forward. Numerous streets, schools, libraries, and cultural centers bear his name, as does an autonomous Zapatista municipality in Chiapas. The current president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, often cites Flores Magón’s writings in support of his proposals, and the full name of his MORENA party, Movimiento Regeneración Nacional, invokes the brothers’ newspaper. Yet López Obrador’s opponents also use Flores Magón as a reference point to call out the president’s threats against freedom of the press and criticize his antidemocratic tendencies to silence critics and erode checks and balances.

The indomitable legacy of Flores Magón and the magonistas continues to challenge the abuse of power ingrained in the institutions of the state, the church, and the capitalist economy. Their words and actions, controversial as they may be, also offer a foundation for alternative frameworks of abolition, mutual aid, equity, and communality that are central to current political movements globally. Their unwavering stance against injustice and racism, and for liberation and solidarity across struggles, is as relevant today as it was in their time, on both sides of the US–Mexico border and beyond. Lytle Hernández makes their call heard loud and clear in this powerful and transformative historical account: “We, the anarchists, cannot shut up: we shall not shut up. So long as injustice reigns, our voice shall be heard. . . .” ■