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FEATURED Q&A

Will Costa Rica's Foreign Minister Take a Harder Line?



A former judge on the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Manuel Ventura was tapped this month as Costa Rica's foreign minister. // File Photo: Costa Rican Government.

Q Costa Rican President Carlos Alvarado in January tapped Manuel Ventura as the country's new foreign minister. Ventura had previously worked at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights for more than a decade. Is he the right person for the job, and what should his priorities be? To what extent will Ventura's background in human rights influence Costa Rica's foreign policy? Should Costa Ricans and other regional players expect a tougher stance toward governments accused of human rights abuses, such as those of Nicaragua and Venezuela?

A Luis Guillermo Solís, former president of Costa Rica: "Highly praised as one of the country's most reputed jurists in international law, Manuel Ventura is well-suited to bring about President Alvarado's announced commitment to toughening Costa Rica's already critical position toward Nicaragua and Venezuela. Ventura, who is 70 years old, will bring a new sense of rigor, repose and maturity to Costa Rican diplomacy after a tumultuous seven months under his predecessor, Vice President Epsy Campbell, who resigned the position at the end of 2018. With a distinguished career on the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the newly appointed minister is well aware of the threats that the political and economic crises in Nicaragua and Venezuela entail for hemispheric security in general, and for Costa Rican stability in particular. The new foreign minister outlined his other priorities as being: the strengthening of multilateralism; the promotion of environmental diplomacy and its agenda; fostering international security against drug trafficking and terrorism; and supporting free trade. Minister Ventura is

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TODAY'S NEWS

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Venezuelan Troops Quell Protests, Foil Uprising

Venezuelan police used tear gas to disperse anti-government protesters in Caracas Monday as they showed support for a failed mutiny attempted by a group of more than two dozen soldiers.

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POLITICAL

Colombia Calls on Cuba to Turn Over ELN Rebels

Colombia's government on Monday called on Cuba to turn over leaders of the National Liberation Army rebel group after it claimed responsibility for a car bombing last week that left 21 dead.

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BUSINESS

Pemex Defends Itself as Death Toll Nears 100

Pemex chief executive Octavio Romero said his team had followed protocol, though he would not confirm or deny if there was negligence or corruption related to a pipeline explosion that has killed 91 people so far.

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Romero // File Photo: Pemex.

POLITICAL NEWS

Venezuelan Police Quell Protests After Military Uprising

Venezuelan police used tear gas to disperse anti-government protesters in the Cotiza neighborhood of Caracas Monday as they showed support for a failed mutiny attempted by a group of more than two dozen soldiers, CNN reported. Several people and a journalist were injured in the conflict, social media images showed. According to a government statement, in the early morning hours of Monday at least 27 troops stormed the headquarters of an urban security detachment located in Petare, commandeering a cache of weapons and kidnapping four soldiers, El Universal reported. They were rebuffed and taken into custody, according to the president of the National Constituent Assembly, Diosdado Cabello, who said that pro-government troops ensured that the group had been “neutralized, surrendered and captured in record time.” Venezuela’s Minister



Padrino // File Photo: Venezuelan Government.

of Defense, General Vladimir Padrino López, said the rebellion was “surely motivated by dark interests of the extreme right.” The events took place days ahead of a call for national protests issued by the opposition-controlled National Assembly, which says it does not recognize President Nicolás Maduro’s second term after what it calls rigged elections last year. Several countries have said they would not recognize Maduro’s presidency. Newly elected National Assembly President Juan Guaidó, 35, tweeted that Monday’s events are a reflection “of the generalized feelings within the armed forces,”

and called for unity. “We do not want the [military] to be divided or confronted, we want it to become one man on the side of the people, the Constitution and against usurpation,” he said. Venezuela’s Supreme Court, dominated by Maduro loyalists, issued a ruling in Caracas on Monday stating that the National Assembly is invalid and that any agreement presented by the leadership of the legislative body after Jan. 5 would be nullified. [Editor’s note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Jan. 17 issue of the Advisor.]

Colombia Calls on Cuba to Turn Over ELN Rebel Leaders

Colombia’s government on Monday called on Cuba to turn over leaders of the National Liberation Army (ELN) rebel group after it claimed responsibility for a car bombing last week that left 21 dead, El Tiempo reported. “Cuba is obliged to capture the heads of the ELN,” Colombian Foreign Minister Carlos Holmes Trujillo told reporters from the Casa de Nariño after a meeting with President Iván Duque. Colombia contends that Cuba must comply with its United Nations commitments related to international sponsors of terrorism. In a statement, the ELN asserted that the attack at a police academy, which it called a military installation, was a legitimate response to the armed forces’ bombing of a guerrilla camp during a recent unilateral ceasefire, the Associated Press reported. “It is permissible within the laws of war,” the group said in a statement, which added, “There were no non-combatant victims.” Cuba, which has condemned the attack, pushed back against Colombia’s position Monday, saying it is obliged to follow the protocol used by Duque’s predecessor, Juan Manuel Santos, allowing peace negotiators to leave the island in the event of a rupture in talks, according to the report. “Cuba has never allowed, nor it will ever allow, its territory to be used for the perpetration of terrorist actions against any state,” Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez wrote in a tweet. “Cuba has strictly complied with its role as guarantor and alternative venue of the peace dialogue between the Colombian

NEWS BRIEFS

Sony to Fold Crackle Latin America Business

Sony Pictures Television said last week it is shutting down its Crackle Latin America subscription video-on-demand service, Variety reported. The service, which has 400,000 subscribers across 17 countries, first launched in Latin America in 2012 as an ad-supported streaming service. In 2016 Crackle Latin America switched to a subscription model distributed through pay-TV partners. “We have decided that Crackle Latin America is not sustainable in the present highly competitive local environment,” Keith Le Goy, Sony Pictures’ president of worldwide TV distribution, wrote in a memo to staff.

Schlumberger Sees Latin America Revenue Fall 6 Percent in 2018

Houston-based oilfield services provider Schlumberger said Friday its consolidated revenue from Latin America fell 6 percent in 2018 as compared to the previous year. The company reported \$3.74 billion in revenue from Latin America during 2018, down from \$3.97 billion in 2017. Revenue of \$978 million reported for the fourth quarter was flat compared to the third quarter of 2018. The company cited lower license sales in Mexico and Central America in part for the decline.

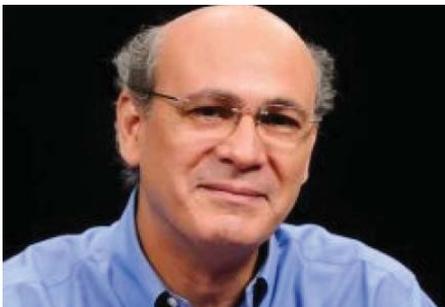
Brazil Stocks Poised to End Year Higher: Surveys

A majority of investors expect Brazil’s stock market to post big gains this year, Bloomberg News reported Monday, citing two recent surveys. A Banco Santander poll of Latin American executives showed 68 percent expect Brazil’s stocks to be the top performers in the region this year, while a survey by Bank of America Merrill Lynch showed that about 90 percent of respondents expected the country’s stock gauge to end the year above current levels.

government and the ELN." Shortly after taking office last year, Duque canceled peace talks with the ELN, demanding the guerrillas release all hostages as a prerequisite to renew the peace process. The group is believed to be holding at least 17 hostages. Thousands of people took to the streets in peaceful marches across Colombia on Sunday to protest the latest violence, Agence France-Presse reported. Marchers wearing white waved Colombian flags and chanted slogans like "cowardly killers" and "life is sacred."

Nicaragua's Best-Known Journalist Flees to Costa Rica

Prominent Nicaraguan journalist Carlos Fernando Chamorro said Sunday he had gone into exile in Costa Rica under political pressure from what he called the "dictatorship" of President Daniel Ortega, The Guardian reported. The editor of *Confidencial*, Chamorro said he will "continue to fulfill my duties as



Chamorro // File Photo: Wilson Center.

a journalist from Costa Rica—investigating and denouncing the crimes, corruption and the impunity and documenting the terminal crisis of this dictatorship." Last month, armed police raided and ransacked *Confidencial's* offices, a move that press freedom advocates described as an act of intimidation. Authorities weeks later repeated the tactic at news outlet 100% Noticias, taking two of its directors into custody, where they remain. Nicaragua's biggest newspaper, *La Prensa*, last week printed an almost blank front page in protest of the Ortega government's pressure to silence journalists. Chamorro called on Nicaraguans

to continue using social media to challenge Ortega's rule. "I am confident that better days lie ahead for Nicaragua," he wrote. The European Union on Monday warned Nicaragua it was ready to impose sanctions over the country's crackdown on media and civil society groups, saying fundamental rights were being abused, Agence France-Presse reported. Meeting in Brussels, 28 foreign ministers said recent measures targeting civil society organizations and independent media "constitute another blow to democracy, human rights and civic freedoms." "The EU will continue to monitor the situation closely and underlines its readiness to use all its policy instruments to contribute to a peaceful negotiated way out of the current crisis and react to further deterioration of human rights and rule of law," the statement said, using language that paves the way for possible future sanctions, according to the report. Meanwhile, one of Nicaragua's most influential business groups, Cosep, along with the local American Chamber of Commerce and other civil society organizations, on Monday announced plans for a march this Thursday, issuing a statement publicly asking police to guarantee the safety and security of participants, *La Prensa* reported. The business groups have not called for widespread strikes or marches since last September. More than 300 Nicaraguans were killed last year in violent clashes with police and pro-government vigilantes that spanned several months. [Editor's note: See also a [video](#) of the Inter-American Dialogue's event last month on press freedom in Nicaragua.]

ECONOMIC NEWS

IMF Lowers Latin America Outlook

The Washington-based International Monetary Fund on Monday lowered its economic growth forecast for Latin America and the Caribbean in 2019 and 2020, Bloomberg News reported. In its latest *World Economic Outlook*, the multilateral lender projects 2 percent growth for the region in 2019 and a rise of 2.5

percent in 2020, slightly lower than projected in its previous report issued in October, citing lower-than-expected growth in Mexico and a severe contraction in Venezuela. Argentina's economy is expected to contract before returning to growth in 2020, the report said.

BUSINESS NEWS

Pemex Defends Itself as Death Toll From Explosion Nears 100

Officials with Mexican state oil company Pemex on Monday defended their response to a fuel pipeline explosion last week in central Mexico that killed at least 91 people, Reuters reported. Hundreds of people near the small town of Tlahuelilpan in Hidalgo State rushed to collect fuel from a gushing duct which authorities said was punctured by suspected thieves Friday. Pemex chief executive Octavio Romero said his team had followed protocol, though he would not confirm or deny if there was negligence or corruption related to the delay in closing the pipeline. "Everything will be looked at," he told reporters. Mexican Attorney General Alejandro Gertz said that Pemex officials involved would be called in to answer questions this week. Romero said about 10,000 barrels of high-octane gasoline were in the section of the pipeline between the Tula refinery and the village when it blew up. The defense ministry said the 25 soldiers present could not hold back some 800 townspeople who flocked to the scene. Critics say authorities should have been firmer in controlling the crowd. Mexican drivers have faced gas shortages after newly installed President Andrés Manuel López Obrador cracked down this month on fuel thefts that have cost Pemex billions of dollars in revenue. Speaking to reporters after the explosion, López Obrador said he was doubling down on the policy, Bloomberg News reported Monday. "Rather than stopping the strategy, the fight against the illegality and theft of fuel will be strengthened," he told reporters.

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author of several books, and he was one of the experts who drafted the latest report of the Organization of American States on the state of human rights in Venezuela.”

A **Kevin Casas-Zamora, managing partner of Analítica Consultores, former vice president of Costa Rica and senior fellow of the Inter-American Dialogue:** “Manuel Ventura’s appointment at the helm of Costa Rica’s diplomacy has been met with acclaim, both in the country and abroad. He is a respected lawyer who made his career at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, eventually becoming one of the court’s judges, a position he held for a decade (from 2004 to 2015). His appointment is timely, in light of the challenges for democracy and human rights in Latin America. Given its history, Costa Rica is not merely expected to have a clear position on these issues, but rather

“**So far, Ventura has ruled out severing ties with Venezuela, but almost certainly he will be vocal about abuses there.**”

— Kevin Casas-Zamora

to play a leadership role in the region. Even under his predecessor, Epsy Campbell, Costa Rican diplomacy had undergone a shift toward a tougher stance on authoritarian abuses in Venezuela and Nicaragua. So far, Ventura has ruled out severing ties with Venezuela, but almost certainly he will be vocal about abuses there. Last year, Ventura was part of a commission of experts, appointed by the OAS secretary general, to determine whether Venezuela’s security forces committed crimes against humanity while cracking down on street demonstrations in 2017. The commission recommended that the cases be sent to the International Criminal Court.

Ventura is on record saying that the torture practices that the investigation detected are the worst he has seen in his career. More demanding of his attention, however, will be the crisis in Nicaragua, which has already caused a spike in the flows of migrants into Costa Rica. It is likely that Ventura’s efforts will focus on mobilizing international pressure toward a political settlement in Nicaragua, while intently requesting support from the international community to deal with the crisis’ migratory consequences. Given the deafening silence of the other Central American governments with regard to Nicaragua, and their preoccupation with their own domestic crises and upcoming elections, Ventura has his job cut out for him.”

A **Nuria Marín, Costa Rica-based political analyst:** “The appointment of Manuel Ventura has been well-received because of his experience, prestige and ample trajectory, not only in Costa Rican diplomacy, but also at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Ventura is expected to have a much stronger and leading role in areas such as the promotion of democracy (in alliance with democratic countries in the region), the defense of human rights and a diplomacy focused on strengthening multilateral organizations. This is demonstrated by his clear position toward Venezuela and Nicaragua in terms of the application of the democratic charter, and in the past, has included an appeal to the International Criminal Court to investigate violations of human rights. In addition to these, other priorities will include the defense of peace, the environment, disarmament, migration and foreign trade (by supporting the foreign trade ministry). Another highlight is his interest in the professionalization of the foreign service, a key difference from his predecessor.”

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gene.kuleta@thedialogue.org.

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