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THEDIALOGUE

FEATURED Q&A

Is Colombia's Petro Getting Derailed by Scandals?

Internal scandals have bedeviled Colombian President Gustavo Petro's administration. // File Photo: Colombian Government.

Q Colombian President Gustavo Petro on Feb. 2 denounced what he called an "institutional rupture" that "has reached maximum desperation," accusing the country's top prosecutor of planning to remove him from office with continued investigations. Petro's son, Nicolás, is on trial for money laundering and illicit enrichment, his brother is mired in separate legal troubles and some members of his staff have also been caught up in scandal. Meanwhile, many of Petro's campaign promises and top goals for his administration remain unrealized, with bills held up in the legislature. To what extent have legal troubles and scandals derailed Petro's legislative agenda? Is Petro likely to prevail in his battle with the prosecutor's office in the court of public opinion—or in the institutional power struggle? What can Petro do to revitalize his presidency?

A Katharine Petrich, interim executive director of the Center on Terrorism, Extremism and Counterterrorism at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey: "President Petro came into office with fistfuls of promises and grand sweeping ideas only to run headlong into institutional weaknesses and a bureaucratic morass. He then set about making things worse with personal scandals and a hands-off approach to the actual business of governing, despite his exciting visions for social reforms which, if successful, would have substantially improved the life of the average Colombian. Some of the slowdowns and holdups affecting Petro's legislative agenda are business as usual for a multiparty government, but

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U.S. Eyes Asylum Restrictions on Migrants Crossing Illegally

The Biden administration is reportedly considering new restrictions on migrants' ability to request asylum if they crossed into the United States illegally.

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MoneyCollect Launches Service in Brazil

Hong Kong-based payment service provider MoneyCollect has launched operations in Latin America by starting services in Brazil.

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POLITICAL

Brazil Calls for U.N. Reforms at G20 Meeting

Brazilian Foreign Minister Mauro on Wednesday called for reforms of the United Nations as foreign ministers opened a two-day meeting in Rio de Janeiro. The U.N. Security Council has failed to stop wars in Ukraine and Gaza, he said.

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Vieira // File Photo: Brazilian Government.

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POLITICAL NEWS

Brazil Calls for U.N. Reforms as G20 Meeting Opens in Rio

Brazilian Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira on Wednesday called for reforms of the United Nations as foreign ministers from G20 countries opened their two-day meeting in Rio de Janeiro, the Associated Press reported. Vieira said the institution needs to be reformed as the U.N. Security Council has failed to prevent or stop wars such as the ones in Ukraine and the Gaza Strip. "Multilateral institutions are not adequately equipped to deal with current challenges, as demonstrated by the unacceptable paralysis of the Security Council in relation to ongoing conflicts," said Vieira, the AP reported. Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has previously said that he wants developing nations to have a greater role in international organizations such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization and multilateral banks. "We need to add more people and end the right of veto in the U.N., because it is not possible for a country alone to be able to veto the approval of something approved by all members," Lula said on Sunday during a visit to Ethiopia. Among the top officials at the G20 foreign ministers' meeting in Rio de Janeiro is U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who met Wednesday with Lula in Brasília before the opening of the G20 meeting. "The United States and Brazil are doing so many important things together, we're working together bilaterally, regionally, globally. It's a very important partnership" Blinken said after meeting with Lula, the Voice of America reported. During the meeting, Blinken briefed Lula on U.S. efforts to bring an end to the Israel-Hamas war and also told him that he disagreed with Lula's comparison of Israel's actions in the war to the Holocaust, the VOA reported, citing an unnamed official familiar with the talks. Lula's comparison on Sunday of Israel's actions to Nazi genocide during World War II angered Israel, which declared Lula unwelcome in the country until he retracts the remarks. Also on Wednesday at the G20 meeting, Western nations blasted Russia over its two-year-old war against Ukraine as Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov listened, Reuters reported. "Russia must be made to pay for its aggression," British Foreign Minister David Cameron told a closed session of ministers, according to his office, Reuters reported. Top officials from the United States, Australia, Canada, Germany, Italy, France and Norway made similar statements. Lavrov calmly responded to Cameron's statement with "a set of alternative facts," Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide told reporters, according to Reuters.

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many are self-induced speedbumps, created by poor campaign finance policies, a messy public feud over the new attorney general and a tendency toward flashy histrionics like the recent protest he promoted that devolved into a mob outside the Palace of Justice. It is unlikely, given his antics over the last 18 months, the declining economy and rising levels of violence (particularly kidnapping), that Petro will be able to recapture the momentum he needs to spring his pending labor, health and pension reforms from their legislative limbo. Further, given the qualifications of the three prospective candidates for attorney general, it is doubtful that the new woman in the seat (whomever the Supreme Court selects) will be an ardent supporter or willing to stop any of the pending investigations against Petro's staff and family members."

Peter DeShazo, visiting professor of Latin American, Latino and Caribbean Studies at Dartmouth College and former U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs: "The political outlook for the Petro administration is unpromising. In the wake of his coalition's defeat in the October 2023 regional

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NEWS BRIEFS

Trial of Former Honduran President Hernández Begins in New York

Former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández appeared in a New York federal court on Tuesday for the start of his trial, in which he stands accused of drug trafficking and weapons charges, BBC News reported. Hernández was once a close U.S. ally, but nearly two years ago he was arrested and extradited to the United States, only weeks after leaving office. Prosecutors allege that Hernández ran Honduras like a "narco-state," accepting bribes from drug traffickers in exchange for protection and assistance. Hernández has pleaded not guilty and has denied wrongdoing.

Attorney Rejects Accusations Against Former Haitian First Lady

U.S.-based attorney Paul Turner, who represents Martine Moïse, the widow of slain Haitian President Jovenel Moïse, told the Associated Press on Wednesday that he rejects the allegations against her and believes the judge who indicted her in connection with the former leader's assassination was acting on political motivations. Martine Moïse was injured in the attack on her husband, and her attorney says she denies any involvement in the plot.

Ecuador Seeks an Additional $214 Million in Security Spending

Ecuador's government late Tuesday published a budget proposal that includes an additional $214 million in security spending for 2024, Reuters reported. President Daniel Noboa last month declared a state of emergency to combat spiraling gang violence, saying Ecuador was in a state of "internal armed conflict." The government's security budget under the proposal would total $3.52 billion but must first be approved by the legislature.

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U.S. Eyes Restrictions on Asylum After Illegal Crossings

The administration of U.S. President Joe Biden is considering an order to restrict the ability of migrants to seek asylum at the country's southern border if they entered illegally, CNN reported Wednesday. The executive order would be reminiscent of hardline immigration policies during the administration of former U.S. President Donald Trump. The former president also attempted to close the U.S.-Mexico border to asylum seekers, but courts rejected the legality of that policy. The Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel is reviewing the proposed executive order to assess whether it would stand up to legal challenges, as it employs the same authority that Trump sought for his failed border shutdown, CNN reported, citing an unnamed source familiar with the matter. Meanwhile on Wednesday, the Biden administration implemented another policy aimed at curbing migration, targeting transportation operators that facilitate migration with expanded visa restrictions, Reuters reported. The visa restrictions target "owners, executives, and senior officials of charter flight, ground, and maritime transportation companies" whose services are primarily used by migrants intending to illegally migrate to the United States, the U.S. State Department said in a statement. The United States is currently facing record-breaking levels of migration at its southern border.

THE DIALOGUE CONTINUES

Why Are Concerns About Corruption So High in Peru?

Q Peru's corruption score worsened significantly in Transparency International's annual study, published Jan. 30, falling to its lowest level in a decade and seeing the Andean country fall 20 places in the group's Corruption Perceptions Index, into the bottom third of the most corrupt countries in the world. The AmericasBarometer study by Vanderbilt University similarly showed that 88 percent of Peruvians believe "more than half" of all politicians are corrupt, and less than 21 percent of Peruvians said they were satisfied with democracy. What factors have led to these increased concerns about corruption in Peru? What can President Dina Boluarte's government do to bolster trust in institutions and address issues of rule of law in Peru?

A José Urizar, partner at Almeida Guzmán & Asociados: "Part of the increased concerns about corruption in Peru may derive from the fact that both President Dina Boluarte and the Congress currently have very low approval ratings, both under 20 percent according to some polls. Peru is currently in a governance crisis and has been since before Pedro Castillo attempted a coup and was deposed in turn—perhaps even before he was elected president. The governance crisis in turn may have resulted in a steady weakening of institutions, making them more prone to corruption. Furthermore, weakened institutions allow for an easier creation, entrance and encroachment of criminal organizations in the country and its institutions. Unfortunately, Peru is victim to several home-grown criminal organizations related to drug trafficking, illegal mining and other activities, and it has also been a recipient in previous years of criminal organizations migrating from other countries in the region (including Venezuela and Colombia), which find it easier to establish their activities in countries with poor institutions. These organizations ultimately infiltrate institutions and seek to prevent anticorruption controls. Unfortunately, the very low approval ratings of the president and Congress make it very difficult to improve public perception of corruption. I am afraid Peru may need to wait until the next government, with higher approval ratings, to be able to implement deep institutional changes that could have lasting effects in reducing corruption."

EDITOR'S NOTE: The comment above is a continuation of the Q&A published in Wednesday's issue of the Advisor.

BUSINESS NEWS

MoneyCollect Enters Latin America With New Service in Brazil

MoneyCollect, a Hong Kong-based payment service provider, has launched operations in Latin America by offering payment options for customers in Brazil, The Paypers reported today. MoneyCollect seeks to offer merchants increased access to the country's consumer base by allowing them to pay with locally preferred methods, the news site reported. Diverse and secure payment options have grown in importance in Brazil amid the growth of digital commerce. MoneyCollect services in Brazil include the ability to make payments with local credit and debit cards, as well as through instant bank transfers and e-wallets, The Paypers reported. MoneyCollect officials have called the company's entry into Brazil a significant milestone that is designed to make e-commerce more secure, efficient and inclusive, the news site reported. A tech-savvy population in Latin America is helping to spur the growth of financial technology providers, Ernesto Haikewitsch, executive director of Mazaltech Consulting, told the Latin America Advisor. "The region's widespread smartphone adoption, coupled with a surge in digital payments accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, contributes to the favorable conditions for digital banking growth," Haikewitsch told the Advisor.

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elections, Petro's approval ratings have plunged even further, to around 25 percent in one influential poll, with some two-thirds of respondents disapproving of his performance. The Liberal Party, with its sizable congressional delegation, appears poised to withdraw from the governing coalition, a move that would exacerbate Petro's already substantial difficulties in advancing key pieces of legislation. Colombia's economic performance was disappointing in 2023, and the outlook for 2024 points at best to modest growth. Unemployment, inflation and poverty levels remain persistently high. Petro's 'Total Peace' initiative has thus far failed to stem the rising tide of narcotics production and the power of criminal gangs and insurgents fueled by drug money. These inter-related factors require that Colombia address more coherently the perennial challenge of extending and strengthening legitimate state presence and the rule of law. That will require a consensus-based rethinking of security policy and a larger fiscal commitment to asserting state authority during the remainder of Petro's term in office. Political polarization and weakened government capacity are precisely what Colombia does not need at this juncture."

Martha Maya Calle, regional director for Latin America and the Caribbean at the Institute for Integrated Transitions: "President Gustavo Petro's assertions about an 'institutional rupture' in Colombia need to be understood within a wider regional pattern, where conflicts between presidentialist regimes and other democratic institutions are on the rise. There has been a growing inclination to criticize and weaken institutions, portraying them as hurdles to meeting the fundamental needs of the population or essential transformations. Petro's administration has the right to express legitimate concerns regarding the decisions and effectiveness of different institutions. However, there is no proof suggesting that Colombian institutions have misused official resources to undermine his government. Investigations into members of the cabinet or relatives of the incumbent president are not uncommon, and both criminal and disciplinary inquiries fall within the constitutional mandates. Personal conflicts, like the one between President Petro and former Attorney General Francisco Barbosa, must not jeopardize the integrity of the respective institutions, obstruct their normal procedures or exert undue pressure over constitutional processes, such as the election of the next attorney general. Upholding the strength of these institutions is paramount. The success of Petro's progressive agenda relies on transparency, accountability and robust institutions. A divisive discourse—that calls individuals 'friends and foes' of the administration, makes accusations against perceived enemies and calls for social protests against institutions—may erode the democratic process and also distract attention and resources from Petro's legislative priorities as well as undermine the right to dissent that President Petro and his constituency have long defended."

> **"The success of Petro's progressive agenda relies on transparency, accountability and robust institutions."**
>
> **— Martha Maya Calle**

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta.

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Gene Kuleta
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Carl David Goette-Luciak
Reporter

Nili Blanck
Reporter

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1155 15th Street NW, Suite 800
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