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THEDIALOGUE

FEATURED Q&A

Will Constitutional Changes Help Keep Bukele in Power?

El Salvador's Legislative Assembly recently approved changes that make it easier to amend the country's constitution. // File Photo: Salvadoran Government.

Q El Salvador's Legislative Assembly, which President Nayib Bukele's party controls, on April 29 approved a change that makes it easier to amend the country's constitution. The measure eliminates the requirement that one Legislative Assembly propose constitutional amendments but that the following one, after an election, ratify them. What motivated lawmakers to make the changes? What is the new reform likely to be used for? What will the change mean for Bukele's hold on power?

A Christine Wade, professor of political science and international studies at Washington College in Chestertown, Md.: "Recent legislation makes it significantly easier to amend the constitution by eliminating the one requirement in place to ensure that constitutional amendments reflect popular will across election cycles. Article 248, which will likely be one of the reform's first victims, was intended to prevent capriciousness from any single legislature. By eliminating the requirement that constitutional amendments be approved by a two-thirds majority of the next legislature, opportunities for debate and popular consultation have been effectively eliminated. In practical terms, this will enable Bukele's New Ideas party (and, of course, any future party with a supermajority) to amend the constitution quickly and further consolidate the president's control of the government and undermine what remains of Salvadoran democracy. New Ideas' supermajority has already enabled the legislature to pass laws that significantly erode democracy without much research, debate or consultation, such

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

U.S. Ends Cuba's Designation as Not Cooperating on Counterterrorism

The U.S. State Department on Wednesday removed Cuba from its short list of countries that are not cooperating on counterterrorism efforts. Cuba remains on a list of state sponsors of terrorism.

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IN FOCUS

Paraguay's Peña Wants More Agricultural Exports to China

Paraguayan President Santiago Peña told the Advisor Wednesday that he wants to boost the country's agricultural exports, including grains and beef, to China.

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POLITICAL

Guatemalan Journalist Granted Conditional Release From Jail

A Guatemalan court on Wednesday granted newspaper founder José Rubén Zamora a conditional release from prison.

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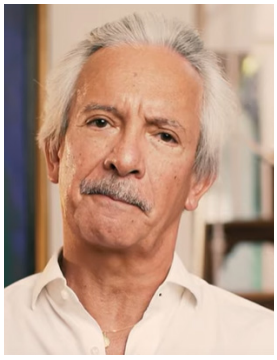

Zamora // File Photo: El Periódico.

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POLITICAL NEWS

U.S. Removes Cuba From Uncooperative on Anti-Terror List

The U.S. State Department on Wednesday removed Cuba from its short list of countries that it deems uncooperative on counterterrorism efforts, though it kept the country on its list of state sponsors of terrorism, Agence France-Presse reported. In a report to Congress, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said four countries remain on the list as uncooperative on fighting terrorism—Iran, North Korea, Syria and Venezuela, the wire service reported. Cuba was on the list last year but has been removed. The State Department said its previous placement of Cuba on the list was based on the Cuban government's refusal to extradite militants from Colombia's National Liberation Army, or ELN, rebel group to the South American country. A State Department spokesperson said Cuba had refused to "engage" with Colombia's government on extradition requests for ELN members who were in Havana for peace talks, supporting Cuba's placement on the list in 2022, the Miami Herald reported. However, in August 2022, Colombian President Gustavo Petro ordered his attorney general to suspend the warrants to arrest 17 commanders of the rebel group, including the ones in Cuba. "Moreover, the United States and Cuba resumed law enforcement cooperation in 2023, including on counterterrorism," said the State Department spokesperson, the newspaper reported. "Therefore, the department determined that Cuba's continued certification as a 'not fully cooperating country' was no longer appropriate," the spokesperson added. Cuba remains on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism since it was added in 2021 during the administration of former President Donald Trump. In its message to Congress on Wednesday, the State Department said the state sponsors of terrorism list "is wholly separate" from the list of countries that are not cooperating on counterterrorism efforts, the Miami Herald reported. "U.S. law establishes specific statutory criteria for rescinding" a country's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism, the State Department said in the notice to Congress. Any review of that list "would be based on the law and the criteria established by Congress," it added. In a statement posted to social media site X, Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez said the United States should also remove Cuba from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. "It is not enough to recognize that Cuba cooperates fully with U.S. anti-terrorist efforts," said Rodríguez. "That government must remove our country from the list of states that supposedly sponsor terrorism, which is only a pretext to apply unilateral coercive measures against the Cuban people," he added.

Guatemalan Court Grants Conditional Release to Journalist

A Guatemalan court granted a conditional release and home detention on Wednesday to journalist José Rubén Zamora, 67, the founder of the El Periódico newspaper who has been imprisoned for nearly two years on money-laundering charges, Agence France-Presse reported. Zamora, a prominent reporter who investigated corruption in Guatemala, has maintained that the charges against him are fraudulent and were used as a tool of political persecution in retribution for Zamora and his newspaper's reporting on corruption under previous President Alejandro Giammattei's administration. Human rights and press freedom groups have denounced Zamora's detention and challenged the charges against him. Zamora's son, José Carlos Zamora, told AFP that his father saw imprisonment as "as part of his work" and believed his jailing "helped expose abuses of power in Guatemala." Three judges ruled that Zamora was not in danger of obstructing the investigation or of fleeing and could be granted home detention ahead of an upcoming retrial on the money laundering charges. However, Zamora will not be allowed to leave the military barracks in Guatemala City until the resolution of a separate case against him, in which he

NEWS BRIEFS

U.S. Imposes Visa Restrictions on More Than 250 Nicaraguans

The U.S. State Department on Wednesday announced that it had imposed visa restrictions on more than 250 Nicaraguans linked to the Central American nation's government, saying they have supported political repression, attacks on human rights and exploitation of migrants. Among those targeted are judges, prosecutors, police, government officials and paramilitary personnel. The statement said that since 2021, the United States has imposed restrictions on over 1,400 Nicaraguan officials over corruption and human rights issues.

Poll Shows Sheinbaum With Wide Lead Ahead of Mexico Presidential Vote

Mexico's ruling party presidential candidate Claudia Sheinbaum held a wide lead over her closest rival, Xóchitl Gálvez, in a poll released Tuesday, Reuters reported. The poll, conducted for newspaper El Economista by consulting firm Mitofsky, showed Sheinbaum holding roughly 49 percent of the vote, while Gálvez came in at 28 percent; 12.7 percent were undecided or abstaining. Mexicans will go to the polls in less than three weeks.

Ecuador Seeking to Plan for Long-Term Stability: Production Minister

Ecuador's government is seeking to create a new plan for long-term stability in order to bring more foreign investment to the country, Production and Trade Minister Sonsoles García told Bloomberg Television Wednesday in an interview. The International Monetary Fund and World Bank are advising the government on designing a policy "that can stay and it doesn't matter what government is in office," said García.

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is accused of obstructing the investigation against him. Zamora told reporters he hoped that case would be "dismissed and I can go home," AFP reported. During Wednesday's hearing, Zamora said that "during my entire life, I have been the victim of attacks, abductions, aggressions for the work that I do," the Associated Press reported. On Tuesday, Zamora, still incarcerated, was awarded the prestigious Gabo award for excellence in journalism.

BUSINESS NEWS

Brazil's Nubank Reports 143% Rise in Net Profit for Q1

Brazil-based digital lender Nubank on Tuesday reported adjusted net profit of $442.7 million for the first quarter, a increase of 143 percent as compared to the same quarter last year, Reuters reported. The results exceeded the estimates of analysts in a survey by LSEG, who had expected adjusted profit of $404.8 million. Nubank also said its revenue rose 69 percent in the first quarter to $2.74 billion, higher than analysts' estimates of $2.49 billion. Nubank also posted a return on equity of 23 percent, which was in line with the fourth quarter, but an increase from 11 percent in the first quarter of last year. The lender also said its loans overdue by between 15 and 90 days in Brazil had risen to 5 percent from 4.4 percent in the same period last year. Loans that were overdue by more than 90 days rose to 6.3 percent from 5.5 percent. Earlier this month, Nubank said it had exceeded 100 million customers, most of them in Brazil. In a statement on Tuesday, Nubank's founder and CEO, David Vélez, said the growth in its number of customers resulted from the company's "steadfast focus on solving people's needs with true product innovation and the highest quality of service." Vélez added that Nubank's return on equity was "among best-in-class financial institutions in Latin America, even though our holding company continues to be over-capitalized and our operations in Mexico and Colombia are still in the early phases of getting to profitability."

IN FOCUS

Paraguay's Peña Wants More Ag Exports to China While Maintaining Ties With Taiwan

By Gene Kuleta

WASHINGTON—Paraguayan President Santago Peña said Wednesday that he wants to increase exports, particularly of agricultural goods, to China while still maintaining formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

"The sector that we think we should expand our trade is agricultural production—grains and beef," Peña told the Advisor in an interview in Washington. "We are very open. We think that Paraguay has good, high quality, competitive production. China is buying from the region, so it makes perfect sense for them also to buy from Paraguay. We are very clear that, from our side, there are no restrictions to maintain that relationship with China."

Peña // Photo: Latin America Advisor.

Paraguay is the only country in South America that maintains formal relations with Taiwan instead of China. Peña said breaking off relations with Taiwan won't happen while he is president. "They have been always pushing for not recognizing Taiwan any more, and we think that this is not something that is going to happen, at least not during my administration," Peña said in the interview. "We have a longstanding commitment with Taiwan. They have been very good friends."

Peña spoke with the Advisor after a round table discussion at the Inter-American Dialogue. He said during the discussion that his government is seeking to increase trade with several countries and does not want to over-rely on any one trading partner. "We are now in the process of opening the Mexican market, the Japanese market. We argue that it is not good for countries if they have a high dependence on China," he said during the discussion.

Paraguay's agricultural sector has pushed for the country to establish relations with China in order to open the Asian country's market to products such as beef and soybeans. Peña said at the discussion Wednesday that Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has also tried to convince him to switch diplomatic recognition to Beijing.

"The pressure comes in different ways. One of the ways is from Brazil, our largest trading partner. President Lula in one of our conversations, he said to me, 'Santiago, China is so big.' I said to him, 'President, I recognize China is huge, but I'd rather cross the river to reach Brazil than to go all the way to the ocean to get to China,' " said Peña.

During his trip to the United States, Peña is also scheduled to visit San Francisco and has a series of meetings related to security and technology on his agenda.

On Friday, he heads to Taipei, where he is expected to attend the inauguration of Taiwan's new president, Lai Ching-te, who is to be sworn in on Monday.

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FEATURED Q&A / Continued from page 1

as the electoral reforms that significantly reduced the number of municipalities and changed the vote calculation formula for the 2024 elections. This latest maneuver places the constitution in Bukele's hands. It seems almost certain that the elimination of presidential term limits will be among future changes to the constitution, following a regional trend. Bukele would then be able to seek a historic third term. Bukele, now in his second consecutive term, was dogged by critics who stressed that the current constitution prohibits consecutive re-election. It's also possible that the legislature will grant more powers to the president, such as eliminating legislative approval of the state of exception, which could allow the president to govern by fiat."

> **"This latest maneuver places the constitution in Bukele's hands."**
>
> **— Christine Wade**

Mneesha Gellman, associate professor of political science at Emerson College: "The Legislative Assembly change essentially gives lawmakers the ability to make as many constitutional changes as they want, free from previously required checks and balances through subsequent assembly ratification. President Bukele's supermajority in the assembly is an opening for the president to push through as many constitutional changes as he wants, as those approving it are his loyal followers. This reform has many possible applications, including changing the constitution to get rid of presidential term limits, or the term limits of other officials, as well as continuing the state of exception and other suppression of human rights. This change deepens and extends Bukele's hold on power and further contributes to the erosion of democracy in the country."

Leonor Arteaga, program director at the Due Process of Law Foundation: "The recent reform makes it easier to amend El Salvador's constitution. It is essentially another way for President Bukele to ensure he can hold on to power indefinitely; it also drastically reduces space for debate and citizen participation in matters of public interest. This is not the first time that the president and his allies have sought to expand their powers and diminish checks and balances. At a moment when the president already controls the legislative and judicial branches of government (following the unconstitutional dismissal of the magistrates of the supreme court's constitutional chamber and the attorney general, whose roles were then given to officials who respond to the ruling party's interests), this latest proposal chips away at the democratic safeguards that constitutional amendment procedures provide, and it seeks to make the constitution bend to Bukele's political agenda. The proposal's timing and the Bukele government's anti-democratic record thus far lead us to believe that it is another indicator of Bukele's increasingly dictatorial nature. There is no credibility to the claim that the reform will be used to expand constitutional rights; in fact, Bukele has allied himself with anti-rights groups in recent months. On the contrary, it appears to be another powerful and dangerous tool in the hands of a populist leader such as Bukele."

[Editor's note: The Advisor requested a commentary for this issue from El Salvador's ambassador to the United States but received no response.]

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

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