



CARNEGIE
ENDOWMENT FOR
INTERNATIONAL PEACE

Divisive Politics and Democratic Dangers in Latin America

Thomas Carothers and Andreas E. Feldmann, editors

Divisive Politics and Democratic Dangers in Latin America

Thomas Carothers and Andreas E. Feldmann, editors

The Carnegie Endowment gratefully acknowledges support from the Ford Foundation that helped make this compilation possible.

For your convenience, this document contains hyperlinked source notes indicated by [teal-colored text](#).

© 2021 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

Carnegie does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are the author(s) own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Please direct inquiries to:

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036
P: + 1 202 483 7600
F: + 1 202 483 1840
CarnegieEndowment.org

This publication can be downloaded at no cost at CarnegieEndowment.org.

Photo: PEDRO PARDO/AFP via Getty Images

CONTENTS

About the Authors	iv
INTRODUCTION	
The Intensification of Divisive Politics Thomas Carothers and Andreas E. Feldmann	1
CHAPTER 1	
Bolivia's Old and New Illnesses Carla Alberti	3
CHAPTER 2	
Brazil's Polarization and Democratic Risks Oliver Stuenkel	8
CHAPTER 3	
Chile's Fractured Democratic Consensus Juan Pablo Luna	13
CHAPTER 4	
From Old Battles to New Challenges in Colombia Angelika Rettberg	18
CHAPTER 5	
Mexico's Illiberal Democratic Trap Guillermo Trejo	22
CHAPTER 6	
Peru's Democracy in Search of Representation Paula Muñoz	27
Conclusions Thomas Carothers and Andreas E. Feldmann	32
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	37

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

CARLA ALBERTI is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile and a Young Researcher at the Millennium Institute for Foundational Research on Data.

THOMAS CAROTHERS is senior vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He is a leading authority on international support for democracy, human rights, governance, the rule of law, and civil society.

ANDREAS E. FELDMANN is an associate professor in the departments of Latin American and Latino Studies and Political Science at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His research specializes in international relations with a focus on Latin America.

JUAN PABLO LUNA is a professor of political science at the Instituto de Ciencia Política and the Escuela de Gobierno of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. He is also an associate researcher at the Millennium Institute for Foundational Research on Data, where he is currently pursuing research on the interaction between data-intensive societies, state capacity, and democratic representation.

PAULA MUÑOZ is Professor of Social and Political Sciences at the Universidad del Pacífico (Peru) and author of *Buying Audiences: Clientelism and Electoral Campaigns When Parties Are Weak* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

ANGELIKA RETTBERG is a professor in the Political Science Department at Universidad de los Andes. She is also the co-director of the Transformation and Empowerment Stream of the Gender, Security, and Justice Hub at the London School of Economics. In 2018, she served as a negotiator for the Colombian government in the peace talks with the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN).

OLIVER STUENKEL is an associate professor of international relations at Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV) in São Paulo.

GUILLERMO TREJO is an associate professor of political science and the director of the Violence and Transitional Justice Lab at the University of Notre Dame. He is coauthor of *Votes, Drugs, and Violence: The Political Logic of Criminal Wars in Mexico* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

INTRODUCTION

THE INTENSIFICATION OF DIVISIVE POLITICS

THOMAS CAROTHERS AND ANDREAS E. FELDMANN

1

Latin America startled the world in 2019 when an eruption of massive protests and other profoundly disruptive events shook politics across the region. In Chile and Colombia—two of the most economically successful and politically stable countries in the region—citizens angry about poverty, marginalization, and exclusion held large-scale demonstrations. Similarly, protests in Ecuador resumed over new austerity measures imposed by the government. In Bolivia, a disputed presidential election, in which incumbent president Evo Morales tried for a controversial fourth term, descended into violent conflict and resulted in Morales's departure from the country. Mexico experienced multiple tensions and disruptions, including the “glitter revolution” protests against violence against women, increasingly harsh political skirmishing between left-wing President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and the traditional political and business elite, and continued violence stemming from escalating clashes among rival criminal organizations and between security forces and drug traffickers. In Brazil, political conflict mounted as its right-wing populist president, Jair Bolsonaro, ratcheted up his attacks on critics and opponents and pursued controversial policy measures, like reductions in protections of the Amazon, that sparked major protests.

Some of these conflicts were clearly rooted in or significantly related to the high levels of socioeconomic inequality that have plagued Latin America for generations. But most also drew on other fissures and fractures, whether related to systemic corruption, clashing sociocultural values, urban-rural divides, or long-standing ideological differences. In some countries—most glaringly in Venezuela but also in Argentina and Bolivia—one main axis of political polarization subsumes other cleavages. In many other cases, however, including in Chile, Mexico, and Peru, multiple divisions operate simultaneously. Yet the divisive and confrontational nature of the ensuing disputes—marked by the delegitimization of opponents, gravitation toward extremes, and high levels of distrust—have nevertheless polarized the affected countries.

This turbulent regional context was further roiled by the coronavirus pandemic throughout 2020. The pandemic hit Latin America **harder** than any other region in the world. By late October 2020, seven of

the twelve deadliest outbreaks of the pandemic were in Latin America. Not only were the regional health effects devastating, so too were the economic ones. In 2020, Latin American economies suffered an 8 percent decline on average, greater than that of any other region. Many experts *worry* that Latin America faces a “lost decade” ahead, in which the region recovers very slowly from an economic shock wave that is reversing almost all of the impressive gains made over the past two decades.

The pandemic’s effects have fallen differentially across the line between haves and have-nots, amplifying underlying inequalities and undercutting the possibility that the pandemic might naturally create a greater sense of unity in divided polities. The health crisis has laid bare glaring gaps in governance capacity and triggered arguments over governmental actions related to both the health and economic crises. More generally, the pandemic has created enormous stress in the everyday lives of countless citizens, which almost inevitably turns up the temperature of political debates and confrontations.

Latin America thus enters 2021 shadowed by an ominous sense that democracy is under extraordinary strain. Political observers across the region fear the escalation of divisive politics to the point of political rupture. In some places, they worry about a new surge of illiberal populism that disregards or degrades democratic norms and processes for the sake of demagogic goals. In others, the concern is more about destructive political fragmentation in systems already marked by chronic conflict and dysfunction among an ever-shifting cast of politicians and parties. Moreover, the coronavirus is threatening to further debilitate the already shaky state capacity in many countries—a perennial regional weakness that drives dissatisfaction by yielding unresponsive governance.

To help shine a light on these troubled waters and map the recent trajectories of divisive politics in the region, we commissioned six experts to analyze recent developments in six key countries: Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru. We asked them to focus on four questions:

1. What are the main sociopolitical divisions in the country?
2. How has the pandemic affected those divisions?
3. What are the greatest risks for democracy posed by the current level of divisive politics in the country?
4. What are some steps concerned domestic or international actors should take to help alleviate these risks?

Taken together, the different country accounts present a sobering picture, though not an unrelievedly negative one. Divisions are deep, and the pandemic has intensified rather than lessened them—with some notable exceptions. The risks ahead are serious, and the remedial steps will be challenging. Although there are similarities among the cases, differences in specific sociopolitical patterns are numerous and important. To help illuminate the common patterns as well as the country particularities, the concluding essay synthesizes the main findings of the six studies, organized along the same four-part framework. We hope that the collection will enable engaged actors and observers throughout the region and beyond to better understand the troubling dynamics of rising political division and formulate effective responses.

CHAPTER 1

BOLIVIA'S OLD AND NEW ILLNESSES

CARLA ALBERTI

3

After Bolivia's longtime president Evo Morales resigned in the wake of the 2019 elections, accusations of vote counting fraud wracked the country, and Bolivia plunged into a period of intense polarization. A long-standing divide between followers of Morales and his Indigenous political movement and the traditional sociopolitical elite of the country reached a breaking point. The coronavirus pandemic only further turned up the temperature of Bolivia's fraught political life. Yet in late 2020, successful presidential elections returned Morales's Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS, or Movement for Socialism) to power, though under the new leadership of President Luis Arce. Whether this leadership finds ways to alleviate Bolivia's harsh divide while simultaneously tackling enormous economic pressures resulting from the pandemic will determine whether Bolivia's polarization erupts again in newly destructive ways or stays under control.

THE CORE DIVIDE

Bolivia lives with a fundamental socioeconomic and sociocultural divide between a non-Indigenous urban elite, especially from the country's eastern departments, and a large Indigenous and Mestizo population. In the 2000s, this divide rose in prominence in the country's political life when a broad-based Indigenous movement, the MAS, led by Morales, successfully mobilized to win elections, starting with the 2005 election of Morales to the presidency.

After some years of relatively contained polarization between the two contending sides, the core political fissure began to heat up in 2016. Determined to hold power beyond the established constitutional limit, Morales put before the country a referendum on whether he could run for a fourth term. To the shock of Morales and his core followers, Morales *lost* the referendum, obtaining 49 percent of the vote. Opposition to Morales's reelection came from the traditional elites as well as the eastern departments that resisted the

MAS government from the very beginning. But the government had also accumulated various, seemingly unconnected groups of detractors over the years, including sectors of the urban middle class, some student and women's movements, and Indigenous groups that opposed the government's extractive approach to economic development. While some of these challengers rejected the MAS's project altogether, others simply demanded less personalism and more competition within the party.

A second key polarizing event took place the following year, when the Constitutional Tribunal **decided** that the limits imposed on the reelection of Morales hindered his right to political participation. A year later, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal **allowed** Morales to compete in the 2019 elections, a ruling that exacerbated the existing divisions, sparking protests in the main cities of the country and an opposition call for a national strike.

The 2019 elections took place in this deeply polarized environment. Some public opinion polls prior to the election **showed** a narrowing gap between Morales and his main opponent, former president Carlos Mesa of the coalition Comunidad Ciudadana, raising tensions about the voting process. The presidential elections were held as scheduled, but they took a dramatic **turn** when the Electoral Tribunal stopped reporting the vote count for twenty-four hours. When the counting resumed, Morales jumped ahead. Accusations of electoral fraud spread rapidly, fueling protests and popular discontent. The main opposition leaders demanded new elections. The Organization of American States **raised** serious concerns about the fairness of the electoral process, a position it later reaffirmed after auditing the elections.

4

Mobilizations grew violent as groups of protesters began facing off against each other. The situation worsened when the police rebelled against the government in several of the main cities of the country. The army followed suit and "suggested" the president leave office. Faced with this scenario, Morales and former vice president Álvaro García Linera announced their decision to resign and **accused** their opponents of manufacturing a crisis to justify a coup. The president and his closest collaborators were **offered** asylum by the Mexican government and left the country. Morales stayed in Mexico for about a month and then took refuge in Argentina, where he stayed until returning to Bolivia in November 2020, following Arce's victory.

Filling the presidential vacancy in the wake of Morales's departure was no easy task, as the MAS legislators who, according to the constitution, could have been chosen to step in had also resigned. In the absence of MAS legislators, the parliament nominated as Morales's successor Interim President Jeanine Áñez, a right-wing senator from the eastern department of Beni and the second vice president of the senate. The roles Áñez and Luis Fernando Camacho—the leader of the Civic Committee of Santa Cruz, a powerful organization in the prosperous Santa Cruz department and the bastion of the opposition to Morales's rule—played in this crisis embody the deep-seated regional cleavage between eastern elites and the Andean-based MAS.

Polarization did not end with the establishment of a transitional government. The first weeks of the new administration saw a particularly intense period of mobilization by Morales's supporters, who were, in turn, repressed by the police and the military. Violence was particularly acute in towns such as Senkata, El Alto, on the outskirts of the capital; La Paz; and Sacaba in the Chapare Province, where military and

police operations **resulted** in several **deaths** and scores of injured protesters. Nationally, Decree 4078, which was later rescinded, **shielded** police and military forces from any criminal responsibility.

The interim president also agreed with MAS politicians on a timetable to hold new general elections, which would exclude Morales as a contender. Her administration nevertheless did much more than just manage a transitional government. Surprisingly, on a number of issues, her government did not depart dramatically from the MAS and maintained subsidies and social programs. However, on many others, Áñez's policies reflected the deep political fractures in Bolivian society, which were especially evident in her harsh rhetoric toward countries governed by left-wing parties, such as Cuba, Nicaragua, Mexico, and Venezuela. More importantly, the interim government formally accused Morales of terrorism and sedition and initiated criminal investigations against numerous MAS politicians. Signaling her political ambition, Áñez, who had committed to leading a transitional government, decided to run for president in the new general elections.

ENTER THE PANDEMIC

Amid this unstable political scenario, the coronavirus pandemic hit Bolivia particularly hard, exacerbating polarization and the existing political and social crisis. One of the main issues that generated societal discontent was the government's decision to delay the elections twice. Originally scheduled for May 2020, the elections were **pushed** first to September and later to October 18, the date on which they were actually held. Although this situation was justified by the complicated public health situation in the country, detractors of the interim government saw it as an attempt by Áñez to prolong her time in power and use her position to improve her chances as a presidential candidate. This spurred a new wave of protests. Demonstrators blockaded the main roads in the country, which the government claimed was the main cause of the shortage of oxygen and other medical supplies.

The tensions continued brewing as the numbers of coronavirus infections and related deaths rose alarmingly. Even the president and some of her ministers came down with COVID-19. While the interim government blamed the precarious state of the public health system on the incompetence of the Morales administration, MAS supporters criticized the president's policies aimed at containing the spread of the virus and mitigating the economic effects these measures, especially the strict lockdowns, had on the poorest households. A corruption scandal related to the purchase of overpriced ventilators further **complicated** matters for the government and ended with then minister of health, Marcelo Navajas, under arrest.

At the same time, friction between the interim government and the MAS-majority legislative body made it difficult to coordinate and implement adequate measures to fight the pandemic. For instance, the interim government refused to enact a series of laws passed by the legislature, which were intended to deal with the pandemic and its economic effects. Similarly, the legislature approved the use of chlorine dioxide as a treatment for COVID-19, even when the Health Ministry had **warned** against its use on multiple occasions.

The new presidential elections were held under convoluted and tense circumstances. In addition to Áñez, the three other main contenders included the two political coalitions that had competed in 2019—

the MAS, with Arce as its presidential candidate, and Comunidad Ciudadana, led by Mesa—and a third force, Creemos, which emerged as a result of the crisis. Lagging far behind the other candidates in opinion polls, Áñez decided to withdraw about a month before the electoral race, claiming that only a united opposition could defeat the MAS candidates.

The results proved Áñez right, although only partially. A fragmented opposition did favor Arce. But the MAS's decisive first-round victory, in which it **obtained** 55 percent of the votes and majorities in both chambers, signaled that a large share of the electorate still supported the party's policies, even though it did not support the prior concentration of power in the hands of Morales.

RISKS AHEAD

Although the election of a new government put an end to a turbulent year, the political and societal tensions that crystallized in this crisis are not likely to fade away easily. Moreover, the new MAS administration will face numerous internal and external challenges that, if not properly addressed, could spell trouble for democracy in Bolivia.

The high level of polarization is the first and most obvious risk for Bolivian democracy. As the Arce administration prepared for its inauguration ceremony, protests **unfolded** throughout the country, primarily in the city of Santa Cruz, where demonstrators alleged electoral fraud and demanded new elections. At the same time, the MAS-controlled legislature **announced** legal actions against Áñez and some of her ministers for the repression against protesters in the aftermath of the 2019 electoral crisis. These tensions and the government's lack of legitimacy in a rather radicalized sector of the population may put in danger a fragile societal truce and democratic stability.

Arce has established a new government while keeping some distance from Morales. Arce and his vice president have demarcated clear boundaries for Morales's role in their government, emphasizing their autonomy. If they retreat from this distance, discontent from the opposition—as well as those who voted for the MAS but rejected Morales's fourth term—may surge. This is especially true now that Morales is back in the country and has resumed his role as the president of the MAS. He is such a powerful political figure that it is still uncertain how his presence will affect not only the new government but also Bolivian democracy more broadly.

Additionally, considering that the new MAS government will have to continue fighting the pandemic and working to improve a dire economic situation, any ineffectiveness resulting from conflicts within the ruling coalition will likely contribute to the delegitimization of Arce's administration among the opposition, and thus serve as a justification for some segments of society to take their discontent to the streets. This puts a heavy weight on Arce's leadership skills to manage the party and the public health situation.

REDUCING TENSIONS

In this context, it is important that Arce and his collaborators take several concrete and symbolic measures to reduce tensions. First, the MAS government should fulfill its commitment to govern for all Bolivians and eschew both divisive rhetoric and action. Second, and related, dialogue between the government and opposition will be of utmost importance to secure stability and prevent tensions from escalating. This is especially important in a context in which radicalized opposition groups in the city of Santa Cruz have mobilized, demanding the armed forces take control of the country. Additionally, focusing attention on sectors of society that supported Arce but demand more internal competition in the MAS party, especially in the urban areas, is fundamental for the new administration to reduce future tensions.

Third, the Arce government could work to regain citizens' trust in the state and political institutions as the legitimate channels for societal demands. The events that transpired in the last months of 2019 resulted not only from an electoral crisis but also from a profound delegitimization of state institutions among certain groups. And finally, considering the armed forces' politicized stance in the 2019 crisis, it is important that the new administration work to delineate and delimit the role the military, as well as the police, must play in a democratic society.

CHAPTER 2

BRAZIL'S POLARIZATION AND DEMOCRATIC RISKS

OLIVER STUENKEL

8

Polarization in Brazil has become a major risk not only to the country's democracy but also to its capacity to address its most urgent policy challenges such as the coronavirus pandemic. By first promoting a lockdown-versus-economy narrative that weakened the country's willingness to adopt effective measures and then politicizing the choice of the vaccine producer, President Jair Bolsonaro's turbulent administration has become a symbol of how destructive polarization can be. How did Brazil arrive at this troubled state?

THE PATH OF POLARIZATION

Many external and internal observers see Bolsonaro as the main cause of the extreme polarization that characterizes contemporary Brazilian politics. As polarizing as Bolsonaro is, however, Brazilian politics were already harshly divided before he rose to prominence in 2017 and won the presidency in 2018. The key turning point occurred in 2013. For almost twenty years prior, Brazil had enjoyed democratic stability—healthy amounts of partisan competition within a clearly democratic framework. The country was governed by the center-right Brazilian Social Democracy Party from 1995 to 2002 and then by the center-left Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT, or Workers' Party) from 2003 on—first under the leadership of the larger-than-life figure former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and then, from 2011 until 2016, under his chosen successor Dilma Rousseff.

Massive [protests](#) across all major cities in 2013—something not seen in Brazil since its return to democracy in the 1980s—were the first sign of trouble. Sparked by anger over economic issues such as bus and subway fare raises, the protests soon galvanized a broader anger over inadequate social services and then, over the next few years, systemic corruption across the political class including the ruling PT. The PT succeeded in winning reelection in 2014 after an extraordinarily acrimonious contest that involve such systematic use of such vitriolic fake news campaigns and attacks that a postelection return to normal was impossible.

Rousseff's second mandate was so dysfunctional and overshadowed by the bitter PT-versus-anti-PT polarization that Congress stopped approving any of her relevant legislative projects. Hit by a major economic downturn and revelations about corruption of historic proportions involving large companies such as Petrobras and Odebrecht, Rousseff was **impeached** in 2016. The impeachment was a searingly divisive and traumatizing political process that brought polarization to a head, not just on the PT-versus-anti-PT cleavage but also on a deeper axis of establishment versus anti-establishment.

Rousseff's weak, short-lived second term and the selection as her successor of her unpopular vice president Michel Temer, who also stood accused of corruption, reinforced many Brazilians' deep skepticism about the political elites' willingness to fix the system's increasingly evident flaws, including massive corruption, chronically low economic growth, bad public services, and a public security crisis of unprecedented proportions. Into this picture in 2017 came Bolsonaro, a long-time right-wing congressman of little accomplishment who positioned himself as the most anti-PT and anti-system candidate, handily **beating** the PT's presidential candidate Fernando Haddad, former mayor of São Paulo, in the runoff election in 2018.

Brazil's descent into destructive polarization has many culprits. Particularly after the 2014 election, opposition parties failed to adopt a conciliatory rhetoric and instead sought to undermine the government from the very beginning. Yet perhaps more importantly, the PT's refusal to recognize—let alone apologize for—numerous cases of egregious wrongdoing during its thirteen years in power contributed to a political environment dominated by radical PT loyalists and those who demonized the party, with little room for moderates. This intransigence, and the PT's refusal to allow another party to lead the left into the presidential elections, contributed to the poisoned political climate. During the runoff, the relationship between the PT and other democratic parties was so broken that even the candidate who came in **third** in the first round, Ciro Gomes, a center-left politician with proposals similar to those of the PT, refused to support the PT against the anti-democratic candidacy of Bolsonaro. During this process, the near-complete lack of political actors seen as above the fray, such as widely respected and unifying ex-presidents who could have called for the creation of a democratic alliance against the far-right candidate, was keenly felt.

As expected, Bolsonaro has governed in an intensely polarizing fashion—the anti-system populist battling the elite system. This has caused many of his critics to see a new axis of polarization pressing on the country—that between emergent authoritarianism (on the part of the president) versus democratic survival (represented by the traditional political parties and civic actors). The PT-versus-anti-PT division has become dormant as Lula's party struggles to recover from multiple poor electoral performances—though the government has actively sought to keep this strand of polarization alive—projecting itself as the only viable alternative to the supposed socialist threat posed by the PT.

PANDEMIC FUEL ON THE POLARIZATION FIRE

When the pandemic hit Brazil in early 2020, Bolsonaro **minimized and belittled** the disease, criticizing social distancing measures and attacking both the medical establishment and China. Together with similarly inclined presidents from countries such as Belarus, Nicaragua, and Turkmenistan, Brazil joined the infamous group **dubbed** the “Ostrich Alliance.” Bolsonaro's strategy was more radical

than that of U.S. President Donald Trump's administration, which despite its elements of denial and avoidance did maintain within its ranks health professionals such as National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci. Bolsonaro, by comparison, sacked two health ministers after they refused to publicly defend hydroxychloroquine, a medicine that the president recommended to treat COVID-19 and professed to take after he himself was infected with the virus. Bolsonaro's peculiar approach to the acute national emergency did not backfire politically as many critics expected but instead served the polarizing approach at the core of his strategy of political survival in multiple ways. First, by criticizing governors and mayors for imposing distancing measures, Bolsonaro deflected blame for the economic crisis caused by the pandemic. Second, by establishing in the minds of many citizens a false dichotomy—lockdown versus economy—Bolsonaro positioned himself as a defender of the poor against an elite that could easily adapt to restrictions, such as by temporarily moving into their vacation homes and working without leaving the house. Third, Bolsonaro's highly confrontational rhetoric—attacking mainstream politicians, the media, public health professionals, and the Chinese government—stoked the anger of his followers. Finally, the government's active promotion of conspiracy theories—such as that the pandemic was a globalist plan to impose communism, as the foreign minister [argued](#)—further drove many Bolsonaro supporters away from the traditional public discourse, making it increasingly difficult for centrist politicians to find consensual middle-ground positions.

Thus far, the president's strategy has been relatively successful. In a [poll](#) conducted by Datafolha in December, when the number of coronavirus-related deaths in Brazil had reached 180,000, only 8 percent of respondents thought Bolsonaro to be primarily responsible. A remarkable 52 percent thought the president had no role at all. Bolsonaro's approval ratings improved during the second half of the year, helped by a monthly cash transfer program (that he had initially opposed) to the country's poorest to address the economic crisis caused by the pandemic. Meanwhile, polarization reached levels unprecedented in the past decades. Several months into the pandemic, political tensions reached a new high point when Bolsonaro was about to send troops to close the Supreme Court, only to be convinced by military advisers to wait.

More recently, Bolsonaro created outrage among his critics when he falsely [argued](#) that he had never called COVID-19 “the sniffles.” Yet while several observers [wrote](#) that Bolsonaro had lost his mind or that he lacked a clear strategy, it was another example of the president's deliberate effort to push the boundaries of what is politically acceptable and thereby deepen polarization. As is the case with other populists with authoritarian tendencies, brazenly lying serves as a test of loyalty. His followers must make a choice: either they are with or against the movement. Absolute loyalty involves defending the leader even if they are obviously wrong. As a sign of how much Brazil's public had normalized deceit, there was little reaction when election officials [said](#), in November, that it was “inevitable” that Bolsonaro would question the results of the 2022 elections if he were to lose.

POLARIZATION'S FUTURE AND ATTENDANT RISKS

Although Brazil's democracy had already been at risk prior to the pandemic, there is little doubt that the heightened polarization and growing inequality in 2020 have made the country's democratic institutions even more vulnerable to the authoritarian threat posed by Bolsonaro and his followers. Moreover, the

economic devastation brought by the pandemic will likely make overcoming this deep-seated polarization even more difficult, as Brazil's already extreme level of inequality will rise still higher. While greater socioeconomic inequality does not necessarily translate into greater polarization, the millions of Brazilians who escaped poverty during the commodity boom in the 2000s and who slid back in the 2010s—when Brazil's economy practically did not grow at all—have had their expectations reversed and will be far more vulnerable to radical solutions and populist temptations during the 2020s.

Brazil's November 2020 municipal elections presented an inconclusive picture vis-à-vis the future of the country's polarization. Both those candidates associating themselves with Bolsonaro and those representing the PT performed poorly. In the majority of large cities, other parties, largely on the center-right, won; and in São Paulo and Porto Alegre, two mayoral candidates of the Socialism and Liberty Party did well, suggesting that both Bolsonaro and the PT are facing competition as the standard bearers of the right and left. If the election in 2022 proceeds similarly to that of 2018—when Bolsonaro faced the PT in a runoff—it would exacerbate polarization still further. As in 2018, both candidates would argue that the other side's victory would pose a mortal threat to the very future of the republic. A runoff involving only one of the two key sides of Brazil's ongoing political drama would certainly polarize society somewhat less. A runoff between two candidates tied neither to Bolsonaro nor the PT might noticeably reduce polarization.

Given the formidable threat the Bolsonaro presidency poses to democratic institutions, there is no doubt that the formation of a broad pro-democracy alliance involving parties from the center-right, center, center-left, and left may stand the best chances of safeguarding democracy. After all, elected authoritarians, as in Hungary, the Philippines, Turkey, and Venezuela, tend to implement more radical anti-democratic reforms after winning reelection. Bolsonaro might well be emboldened by another victory at the polls in 2022. It will be equally crucial to protect election officials who are likely to be put under pressure by Bolsonaro.

MANAGING THE PROBLEM

For all that Bolsonaro has done to fan the flames of social and political division, it is crucial to remember that he must be understood as a symptom of a political system that was profoundly weakened by the extreme polarization that set in after the mass protests of 2013 and the events that followed. Even if new political forces succeed in marginalizing both Bolsonaro and the PT, Brazil will remain vulnerable to the destructive polarization that has infiltrated its politics.

Given the depth of the problem, it is better perhaps to focus less on reversing polarization than on managing it. The international community can play a role in this effort by engaging Brazil with the aim of locking in key democratic processes and institutions via international institutions such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Mercosur, the Organization of American States, the World Health Organization, and the World Trade Organization. While populists often vilify or ignore such organizations, doing so costs them politically. And even when populists violate the precepts or commitments that such organizations entail, those positive elements give democratically oriented political actors a sense of direction for how to push back.

By demonizing a host of international organizations, Bolsonaro has sought to stoke tensions outside the country to help animate his most loyal supporters. Largely because Brazil could swim in the slipstream of the Trump administration over the past years, the consensus among Bolsonaro's advisers and Brazil's economic elites was that the president could largely get away with this controversial international strategy. Trump's defeat at the polls in November 2020 provides an opportunity for centrist leaders in both North America and Western Europe to articulate a joint strategy to stand up to Bolsonaro and other illiberal populist leaders who thrive on extreme polarization and who often utilize foreign policy to bolster it.

CHAPTER 3

CHILE'S FRACTURED DEMOCRATIC CONSENSUS

JUAN PABLO LUNA

13

The eruption of massive popular protests in Chile in October 2019—sparked by an increase in subway fares but soon galvanizing around a wide set of socioeconomic demands—startled many Chileans and external observers. A country long considered one of Latin America's most renowned economic success stories and most consensus-oriented political systems revealed itself to be harshly divided. The central rift behind the protests has been between the country's social, political, and economic establishment, on the one hand, and most Chileans, who feel excluded from and abused by that establishment, on the other. A fractured political party system unable to channel demands—and perceived as out of touch with peoples' desire for change—opened deep fissures in the society, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. The upcoming election of a Constituent Assembly in April 2021 and the ensuing process of drafting and approving a new constitution will take place in a country facing serious risks of either political fragmentation or a turn toward illiberal populism. International actors can play a helpful role in reducing these risks if they take seriously the depth of the divide and its long roots.

ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT VERSUS ESTABLISHMENT DIVIDE

Massive social turmoil in October 2019 cemented the formation of a broad anti-establishment movement, directed not only at traditional political elites but also at business elites and, in fact, at most social and political institutions. In the wake of the 2019 protests, two still-standing institutions suffered abrupt legitimacy declines. First, the security forces' massive human rights violations against protesters dealt a major blow to their reputation. Second, mainstream media came under attack for its purported pro-government coverage of the events, in particular its tendency to emphasize riots, looting, and protesters' violence.

The anti-establishment movement strengthened in opposition to what it considers an "abuse coalition" made up of influential social and business elites as well as the "political class," represented by the

main institutions in the country. In this view, under the permissive conditions allowed by the 1980 Constitution, the abuse coalition colluded and disproportionately captured the rents of Chile's long run of unprecedented economic growth. Several simmering developments laid the ground for this rift.

First, for decades, consumption and education were financed through debt, and economic returns on education were less than expected. The generation of young people coming of age in the past ten to fifteen years found it hard to access better jobs, while, at the same time, their parents were moving into financially precarious retirement. Healthcare disparities between the elite and the rest exacerbated the picture.

Second, a series of corruption scandals starting in the 2000s further shattered many institutions' reputations as protectors of the common good. These scandals **exposed** how business elites financed political campaigns and inappropriately (if not illegally) gained leverage over legislative and regulatory processes that favored their interests. Other **scandals** related to irregularities and abuse, such as using usury rates in debt financing, especially education- and consumption-related debt incurred by the middle and lower-middle classes to finance their upward mobility aspirations. Another series of scandals buffeted highly prized political and social institutions, such as the police, the armed forces, and the Catholic Church.

A third element fueling pressure was the fact that the consensus-oriented party system demobilized civil society and depoliticized conflict in society. Chile's democracy seemed unresponsive to people's grievances. Declining voter turnout rates became a chronic feature of the political system, fueling the system's tendencies to operate at some distance from society and social organizations.

Starting in the mid-2000s, young people and other groups, such as pension beneficiaries and feminist social movements, responded to this troubled convergence of institutional deficiencies by turning to the streets, politicizing discontent in ways that bypassed political and other mainstream institutions. Mobilization and violent protests brought results, emerging as the only viable way to elicit concrete responses from the establishment. Over time, the protest impulse gained strength from the underlying patterns of socioeconomic exclusion, political stasis, and institutional delegitimization—until finally exploding in massive protests in 2019.

FRAGMENTATION IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

The protest movement coexists uneasily with a political system that weakened due to both the traditional political parties' credibility crisis and the consolidation of increasingly personalistic leadership in those parties. The electoral system reform—**introduced** in 2015 to replace an unrepresentative electoral system inherited from the military regime, which was called the binomial system—also introduced features that have encouraged the mushrooming of new political parties and groups. The reform introduced an open-list, proportional representation system, with districts ranging from three to eight elected representatives each for the lower chamber. It not only induced greater fragmentation and competition through the creation of new parties outside the bounds of the center-left to center-right spectrum but also favored electoral mobilization attempts by anti-establishment and more personalistic leaders.

These changes began to undercut Chile's politics of compromise and consensus that had long been viewed as central to the country's economic development and social progress. Centrist politics gradually changed its valence as many Chileans came to see the perceived virtuous negotiations and pacts among ideologically diverse groups of the past as arrangements and processes of abuse, collusion, smoked-filled rooms, and political kitchens.

It was in this context of an inflamed protest movement and a fragmenting political system that the Acuerdo por la Paz Social y la Nueva Constitución (Agreement for Social Peace and the New Constitution) was reached in November 2019. It set out a plan for a referendum to be held in 2020 on whether to initiate a constitutional reform process. This process would allow Chileans to move the country away from its current constitution put in place by former authoritarian president Augusto Pinochet and associated with the neoliberal model's negative distributive impacts. The agreement was drafted by the major parties in desperation after days of uncontrollable rioting and heavy repression by security forces. According to a confidential author source in the presidential palace, the president decided to negotiate the pact with Congress only after the army withdrew to its barracks and the police threatened to strike.

In the lead up to the referendum, both political camps polarized the debate and the campaign. Contrary to the expectations of many observers, the protest movement proved capable of gaining electoral traction, even though it lacked leaders and a clearly articulated programmatic base. In the October 2020 referendum, the movement demonstrated its disruptive electoral potential: 78 percent of the electorate supported the drafting of a new constitution and 79 percent of voters opposed the participation of incumbent members of Congress in a constituent assembly.

In short, polarization in the formal political sector was much greater than in society, where a broad consensus had emerged around the imperative of fundamental change. The political system and social and business elites had lost touch with society and artificially recreated an imaginary right-left cleavage. In other words, political elites engaged in polarization in a futile effort to recast societal demands in their own terms. Ultimately, they failed to realize that the main problem is not the message but the illegitimacy of the messengers.

PANDEMIC EFFECTS

Into these churning sociopolitical waters, the pandemic arrived. Having sunk to a popularity rating of 6 percent in December 2019, the government of President Sebastián Piñera saw the arrival of the pandemic as an opportunity for redemption. It rolled out an innovative strategy called dynamic quarantines to manage the pandemic without crippling the economy. That plan soon backfired as deaths surged and a new scandal related to purported sizable omissions in the official death toll emerged. The government ended up facing accusations of letting people die to save the economy, reinforcing its troubled reputation among the population. This polarized environment contributed to the undoing of a promising plan to secure intensive care for those in need.

Moreover, the government significantly delayed its economic assistance packages and sought to target assistance in ways that delayed implementation and provoked debate over its targeting criteria. Those

discussions triggered opposition proposals to allow families to tap into private pension savings to self-finance their needs. Congress passed such a measure with the votes of numerous government-affiliated legislators who defected from their leadership positions in response to social pressure. Social elites in the country (like technocrats, business associations, and the mainstream media) actively opposed the project, although popular support for it was close to 90 percent.

Confrontation between the executive and the legislative branches of government rose sharply while mayors increased their visibility by opposing some national-level actions and politicians. Such opposition widened the emergent, post-October 2019 divide between local, socially connected politicians and the political establishment. The president's low popularity ratings incentivized infighting within his coalition, increasing factionalism and personalistic attempts at taking advantage of the legitimacy crisis. The perception that Piñera was a premature lame duck grew, and various presidential wannabees emerged from the infighting, both congressional mavericks and municipal leaders.

At the same time, the coronavirus pandemic has weakened social mobilization and protests—at least for the time being—due to quarantines and restrictions on movement, including a nighttime curfew apparently motivated more by politics than by public health concerns. The long tail of economic damage could prolong this effect, as people are less likely to strike and protest when desperate to make ends meet. In the long to medium run, however, pandemic-related outcomes might reinforce discontent and ultimately rekindle mobilization. Most available evidence to date points to the regressive impact of the pandemic, as most deaths concentrate in poorer communities. The same communities are also disproportionately hit by the recession and school shutdowns.

TWO FUTURE RISKS

A comparative analysis of Chile's current political situation suggests that fragmentation and personalization may continue to grow, deepening polarization and further denting the system's legitimacy. Two future scenarios seem most likely. On the one hand, fragmentation may intensify, reducing governability and increasing political turnover (a Peru-like scenario). On the other hand, a personalist leader could emerge, successfully channeling discontent against the system (a populist scenario). These two outcomes are not mutually exclusive; they could occur in sequence.

These risks are apparent in discussions concerning the ideal composition of the Constituent Assembly to be elected in April 2021. While the electoral system strongly favors incumbent parties, society did vote in the October 2020 referendum against the parties and their leadership. Demands for independents to be included in the lists have mushroomed, as have self-proclaimed independent candidacies. Yet, established parties read the referendum's outcome (due to the relatively high turnout and societal enthusiasm with the process) as the endorsement of their purported success at channeling popular discontent.

WHAT COULD HELP?

Though marked by the actions of many specific political and social actors, the causes of Chile's current political situation are largely structural and asymmetric. In other words, they cannot be reversed in the near term by inducing systemic actors to rapidly switch gears from the last three decades. Such an entrenched elite can hardly turn on a dime to absorb a massive wave of popular discontent. Trying to carry off such a shift would likely exacerbate legitimacy problems instead of successfully addressing them.

What can international actors do to help improve the situation? First, they can depolarize social and political elites. This could include fostering needed debates about alternative development models for the country. Economic elites in Chile need to recraft the country's capitalist system to make it more socially, institutionally, and environmentally sustainable. Yet, in their current discourse, they characterize all alternatives to the current economic model as the pathway to a leftist Venezuelan nightmare—even though the existing system has lost its institutional embeddedness and moral economy and cannot be salvaged. Helping to moderate and enhance the sophistication of this economic debate is an urgent task.

Second, international actors could promote the social and political articulation of popular discontent, both to develop sound and feasible political alternatives and to promote a dialogue between political actors and society. Existing mechanisms—like promoting *cabildos* (town halls) to discuss the constitution—do not go far enough. Those initiatives are prey to huge selection biases, which favor already politicized and engaged citizens. While the process is important and engaging such persons is useful, it falls short of engaging popular actors that today are outside the system, dedicating themselves to organizing collective action to oppose and disrupt institutional politics. It is thus fundamental to design complex policy interventions purposely aimed at enabling the political voice of those most affected by the intersectional inequalities that characterize contemporary Chilean society.

CHAPTER 4

FROM OLD BATTLES TO NEW CHALLENGES IN COLOMBIA

ANGELIKA RETTBERG

18

The historic 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People’s Army) formally ended the conflict between them, but it also became a major fault line in Colombian politics, dividing those who felt the accord represented a reasonable basis for peace and those who felt it was too forgiving of the FARC. In the past year, however, this harsh division, while still reverberating in political life, has begun to lessen as the accord has gradually grown institutional roots. The coronavirus pandemic has, surprisingly, further reduced tension thanks to the achievement of remarkable consensus in the country over a science-driven approach to managing the deadly virus. Yet the pandemic has also brought to the fore a range of socioeconomic and other political issues that constitute other axes of division that the country must now grapple with as it moves beyond the battles of the past.

A LONG-STANDING DIVISION EASES

The major divide affecting political life in Colombia in recent years centers around the 2016 peace agreement. The divide is not about whether it was appropriate to end the conflict by negotiated means (which has historically been supported by the majority of the population) but instead what concessions to the FARC are acceptable in return for peace. Many Colombians believe that the agreement was too favorable to the FARC and resent both the FARC’s newly gained right to participate as a political party and the lenient treatment afforded to guerrilla members under a transitional justice scheme agreed in the accord that granted them light sentences in exchange for their confessions.

To understand the depth and power of this division, it is necessary to recall what the FARC has meant for many Colombians: in the peak years of the conflict, the late 1990s, the group controlled large swaths of Colombian territory under a harsh militaristic grip, regularly attacked towns and villages in government-

held areas, and **kidnapped** thousands in the Colombian jungles, including many members of the national security forces. The hard-line, so-called democratic security strategy pursued by then president Álvaro Uribe (2002–2010) in the 2000s involved not just hunting down FARC commanders but developing a harsh rhetoric that sought to stoke public resentment of the FARC. Thus, when peace was finally achieved in 2016, it rested on sociopolitical soil marked not only by hope for a peaceful future but also by profound distrust and bitterness toward the FARC.

The first presidential elections after the signing of the agreement, in 2018, were dominated by conflicting attitudes toward the FARC and the value of the peace agreement. The hard-line camp, represented by President Iván Duque Márquez, a protégé of Uribe, harshly criticized the agreement and won the election. Once in power, however, Duque did not fully dismantle the accord. As a result, ongoing arguments about the agreement gradually became less about trying to overturn the agreement and more about each side playing to the entrenched sentiments of its core electoral base.

In fact, by late 2020, the peace agreement had lost appeal as a primary electoral dividing line. First, much of the agreement's transitional infrastructure has been put into place, including justice provisions for human rights violations, the reintegration of former fighters, and the conversion of the FARC into a political party. The development of these schemes has built significant momentum and reinforced the peace process. The FARC's **admission** that kidnappings were a mistake—as well as revelations about an ominous body count policy **implemented** by the Armed Forces that led to scores of “false positives,” or deaths of people wrongly accused of being part of the guerrilla—have also contributed to cementing the peace process. Attacks on the agreement and attempts to change it have repeatedly failed, showing both growing institutional strength and accountability as well as the declining appeal of claiming the agreement amounted to handing the country over to FARC communists. Both Duque's and Uribe's popularities have declined in the past months. Against this backdrop, their threats to tear down the agreement no longer sound feasible, let alone desirable, to most Colombians.

Second, there have been increasing calls—from different sides of the political spectrum, including elites—to overcome this long-standing polarization and **develop** a “pact on the fundamental” (*acuerdo sobre lo fundamental*). This is very much in line with a decade-old Colombian tradition to seek elite-level consensus at times of profound division. It is notable because even new elites on the left and in the center are taking part in this call to mitigate extreme polarization. In sum, while polarization may still pay off in electoral terms, the main political actors will have to find new divides to foster it.

A third factor explaining the change of emphasis in the political debate relates to the sources of ongoing violence, which is still considerable despite the peace agreement. Much of this violence stems from conflicts related to the drug trade and criminal organizations, which lie outside the scope of the peace agreement. Critics of the agreement with the FARC point at a production increase in coca leaf, the raw material for cocaine. According to the United Nations, in 2019, coca leaf production levels were the **highest** ever recorded—proof of the agreement's failure and of the FARC's willing deceit. But for most domestic and international experts and observers, fighting the drug trade is a larger task than resolving the issue of the FARC. As a result, the accusation that Colombia's illicit economy-related violence can be attributed to a problematic peace agreement is not persuasive to many.

PANDEMIC PROGRESS

Somewhat surprisingly, the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic in Colombia has reinforced a more constructive tone and content of the political debate. In contrast with other Latin American countries, remarkable policy consensus has prevailed in Colombia on the epidemiological management of the crisis, facilitating scientific convergence among the national and local governments (most notably between Duque and Claudia López, the mayor of Bogotá, who was elected with a center-left coalition). One tangible result of this consensus has been the prevention of health system overload, as has occurred in other countries with much stronger health institutions than Colombia.

According to a recent [survey](#) by consulting firm Cifras & Conceptos, the National Administrative Department of Statistics, the National Health Institute, and the health minister enjoy some of the highest levels of popular support, indicating overall satisfaction with this technocratic approach to the virus. This is also reflected in popular support of the more than 180 presidential decrees enacted during the initial lockdown and the subsequent months, covering topics such as the sanitary emergency; the closing of borders with Venezuela; more flexible tax payments and public contracts; consumer credits; subsidies for lower-income groups to access food and health services; the closing of schools; regulations on the size of private, religious, and public gatherings; and limitations on national and international travel.

At the same time, the pandemic has thrown into sharp relief existing social and economic divisions, many of which stood at the source of the significant social unrest that erupted in late 2019. A major national [strike](#) in November 2019 started when university students took to the streets demanding affordable, high-quality education. The movement expanded to include feminists; environmentalists opposing deforestation, mining activities, and the sale and export of shark fins; defendants of the peace agreement; peasant communities criticizing the slow speed of illicit crop substitution; victims of the armed conflict decrying failure in reparation payments and attacks on historical memory; Indigenous leaders demanding protection of their ancestral lands; public teachers seeking job security and better wages; rights activists demanding an end to the killing of social leaders and a reform of the police; anticorruption activists; critics of the banks and of neoliberal policies, including free trade agreements; parties on the political left; and skeptics of the political system in general.

The movement, which was marked by daily pot-banging (*cacerolazo*), has failed to keep its momentum, not only because of the pandemic (which operated as a temporary deterrent and distraction) but also because the surfeit of issues and leaders made a clear direction impossible. Those hardest hit in both economic and health terms were already poorer, more disenfranchised, and less engaged in politics—underlining the continuing importance of the issues raised in the outbursts of social unrest, especially for youth who played a central role in the unrest. In this way, social unrest and the pandemic have combined to lay bare the many pending contradictions in Colombian socioeconomic and political life that the civil conflict had long overshadowed.

FUTURE PATH

The growing rootedness of the peace agreement, the calls for depolarizing politics and society, and the realization that the pandemic's harsh social consequences need to be addressed for the benefit of the whole

of society—including to reduce violence and insecurity in several regions—may ultimately augur well for Colombian democracy. Colombian institutions have shown remarkable resilience and strength in these demanding times and have been able to channel criticism and unrest. Colombian civil society has gained maturity, and a significant center-left coalition seems to be in the making.

At the same time, risks remain. Most importantly, booming illicit economies related to the drug trade and illegal mining of gold and coltan (especially along the border with Venezuela) provide ample opportunity for old and new criminal organizations to operate and consolidate their territorial presence. As a result, the aftermath of FARC demobilization has seen a reconfiguration of armed groups and rising insecurity in some peripheral areas. Murders of social leaders and former FARC combatants have been frequent in these regions. In addition, needs laid bare by the pandemic and by the steady flow of Venezuelan migrants into the country have raised the possibility of diverting funds initially earmarked for peace implementation. These risks failing to fulfill the promise of strengthening the state and formal economies in regions that have been traditionally left out of national development, a crucial component of the peace agreement and a trademark of a wide academic and policy literature suggesting that building capable states is essential to building peace.

HELPFUL STEPS

Several steps are needed to help the country confront its deep socioeconomic divisions and inequalities.

21

First, government at the national and local levels should promote dialogue among institutions at the central and local levels and between institutions and different sectors of civil society to address the concerns raised in the 2019 social unrest, which were heightened by the pandemic. It is time to seize the opportunity created by calls for overcoming polarization over the peace agreement and to address issues such as historical inequality and the urban-rural divide. The upcoming presidential campaign may boost or hamper such an improvement of the political debate. It may provide an opportunity for the political center to gain strength, as in the previous presidential election, or it could end up promoting polarizing messages by candidates seeking to gain the public's favor.

Second, sources of ongoing violence need to be addressed. Most importantly, security needs to be bolstered in the most vulnerable regions by strengthening the state response beyond military means. This is crucial to increase Colombians' trust in institutions and their well-being and productivity. In addition, the Colombian and other foreign governments should continue to promote a systemic approach to the discussion of the drug trade and its social, political, and economic impact at the international level. There is abundant evidence suggesting that, from both a public health and security perspective, Colombia cannot fight this problem alone.

In sum, Colombia today faces both old battles and new challenges arising from the pandemic. Whether this will turn into an opportunity will depend on the vision, negotiation skills, and democratic will of political and civil society leaders across the country.

CHAPTER 5

MEXICO'S ILLIBERAL DEMOCRATIC TRAP

GUILLERMO TREJO

22

In 2018, a left-wing government led by the assertive, often divisive President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) arrived to power, inflaming partisan debates in Mexico. Yet due to some striking continuities in AMLO's approach to the country's ongoing war on drugs, this alternation of power has not changed the more fundamental divide in the country—between underlying authoritarian enclaves in the security and judicial sectors and citizens and victims of political and criminal violence struggling to achieve rights, peace, and justice. The arrival of the coronavirus pandemic has brought still more suffering to an already battered citizenry, but it has not changed basic political dynamics. The key to addressing the essential divide will be broadening and intensifying the difficult quest for a democratic rule of law and a peaceful society.

AMLO'S ARRIVAL TO POWER

In 2018, Mexico **elected** a leftist president for the first time since the country transitioned from authoritarian rule to democracy in 2000. In the three previous conservative administrations, the right-wing National Action Party (PAN) and the center-right Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) had joined forces to pursue an agenda of market-oriented reforms and launched a major war on drugs against the country's main cartels. In response, Mexican voters elected a presidential candidate who promised to reverse neoliberal reforms, end the war, and build a democratic rule of law through major security-sector and judicial reforms that previous administrations had failed to enact. AMLO, a three-time presidential candidate, was elected president with 53 percent of the vote, and his coalition led by the Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (MORENA, or National Regeneration Movement) won a legislative majority.

Once in power, AMLO rapidly developed a personalistic and highly centralized presidency and defined his administration as a transformational movement—by AMLO's **count**, the fourth of Mexico's great

transformations since the 1810 Independence Movement. Despite having a parliamentary majority, AMLO's leadership style heavily relies on popular engagement and mobilization. He speaks directly to the people in his lengthy daily press conferences and uses referenda to confirm public support for his most emblematic policies. Further, AMLO dislikes institutional checks and balances. He has **engaged** in court packing, **appointed** loyalists in the newly independent Public Prosecutor's Office and in the National Human Rights Commission, routinely **attacks** the national election management body, and **undermines** the credibility of civil society organizations and the press. From the pulpit of his daily conference, AMLO defines friend and foe, good and evil, classified by whether they are loyal to his movement.

AMLO's opponents and critics accuse him of polarizing Mexico and introducing illiberal political habits and measures as part of a strategy of division and demonization of his rivals. Yet the concern that Mexico is sliding back from liberal to illiberal democracy is misleading. In fact, Mexico's political transition never gave rise to a liberal democracy.

CONTINUITIES PREVAIL

When the country transitioned from one-party rule to multiparty democracy in 2000, PAN and PRI elites opposed a transitional justice process that would have investigated the country's long history of state repression. They also failed to reform key authoritarian enclaves, including the armed forces, the police, and the judicial system. While citizens gained the right to select their leaders through free and fair elections, most other civil and human rights were limited or routinely trampled upon. And when PAN or PRI governments engaged in the twelve-year-long war on drugs, their reliance on repressive and corrupt security and judicial sectors resulted in the adoption of militarized iron-fist policies that triggered multiple criminal wars and caused unprecedented levels of violence and gross human rights violations.

Despite AMLO's claim to be leading a transformational movement, his government has been marked by continuities. His refusal to adopt a transitional justice process and to reform the armed forces, the police, and the judiciary are reminiscent of every administration since 2000. His leadership style has added a new layer of anti-democratic politics to the illiberal democracy he inherited and is unwilling to reform. Instead, AMLO has developed a historic strategic alliance with the armed forces, delegated national and public security to the military, and kept de facto control over the national public prosecutor, whose office has guaranteed impunity for the president's allies and punished his detractors since the authoritarian era.

In short, the fundamental division facing Mexico's democracy is not between AMLO and his party on the one side and the parties of the center right and the right on the other—as noisy and fractious as that division is. It is something much more insidious and dangerous: the reluctance of the ruling elite as a larger class, regardless of its particular party attachments, to transform the authoritarian enclaves in the security and judicial sectors, which are central to producing large-scale criminal violence and gross human rights violations in the drug wars. It is a division between the state's political establishment and an emerging movement of victims of forced disappearance, feminist and Indigenous movements, pro-human rights and anti-corruption NGOs, academics, and international NGOs.

To understand the rise of Mexico's illiberal democracy and the ruling elite's reluctance to democratize the security and judicial sectors and to change tack in the war on drugs, it is necessary first to explore why the PRI and the PAN established a limited democracy and went to war in the first place.

THE NEOLIBERAL ORIGINS OF MEXICO'S ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY

For three decades (1988–2018), Mexico was ruled by a center-right conservative coalition of the PRI and the PAN. This coalition defined the economic agenda, the pace and nature of democratization, and the main cleavages of Mexico's ideological debate. A staunch commitment to market-oriented neoliberal reforms was the glue binding this alliance, a commitment that brought Mexico macroeconomic stability across two major waves of privatization (in the 1990s and 2010s) and the conclusion of two free trade agreements with the United States and Canada (in 1994 and 2018). Anyone who opposed or even slightly criticized Mexico's economic reform was demonized in the public arena as a populist. In this neoliberal era, economic growth and poverty alleviation were meager while socioeconomic and regional inequalities deepened.

Democratization during the PRI-PAN era was only a secondary priority and was dependent on the progress of market reforms. The PAN made major concessions to the PRI to slow down the pace of the transition to democracy in exchange for the privatization of key sectors the PAN had long favored. The impetus for creating an independent election management body did not come from PAN pressure but from the uprising of Indigenous Mayan peoples in Chiapas in 1994. And when PAN candidate Vicente Fox unseated the PRI for the first time in seven decades in 2000, he gave up on a transitional justice program and left the armed forces, police, and judiciary untouched to retain the PRI's support for his economic agenda.

The PRI-PAN duopoly led Mexico into a major war on drugs. The deployment of the armed forces to the country's most conflict-ridden regions between 2006 and 2018 triggered multiple state-cartel and intercartel wars. And the use of the kingpin strategy, by which Mexican security forces arrested or killed the cartel's leaders, led to a dramatic fragmentation of the cartels from five to over 200 organized criminal groups (OCGs), who expanded their activities into extortion, kidnapping for ransom, human smuggling, and the illegal exploitation of oil, mining, and forests. Over 150,000 people were murdered in these conflicts and more than 60,000 went missing. In these criminal wars, cartels use selective violence against mayors and party candidates, journalists, Catholic priests, human rights defenders, and small business owners to gain control over populations, municipal governments, local economies, and subnational territories, where they develop subnational criminal governance regimes. They have become de facto local rulers, subverting local democracy, in at least 10 percent of Mexico's municipalities, home to one-third of the population.

The PRI-PAN coalition entered into a major political crisis in 2014. A year earlier, a parliamentary majority led by the two parties approved a series of second-generation market-oriented reforms. But the electorate was divided on the reforms, particularly on the privatization of the energy sector. The country became polarized along the neoliberal and anti-neoliberal divide. But in the fall of 2014, three major events turned the country against the PRI-PAN elite and the recently elected PRI candidate, then

president Enrique Peña Nieto: first, the extrajudicial **execution** of fifteen alleged criminals and civilians by the military in the township of Tlatlaya; second, the **forced disappearance** of forty-three students from the rural teachers' college of Ayotzinapa in the state of Guerrero; and finally, a major corruption **scandal** that involved the president's wife. People began taking to the streets in unprecedented numbers to demand an end to state impunity.

A SHIFT TO THE LEFT AMID WAR

A three-time presidential candidate dubbed by his political rivals the Mexican Hugo Chávez, AMLO seized the anti-neoliberal and anti-impunity moment to position himself in the 2018 presidential race. Although the PRI and the PAN candidates adopted anti-corruption rhetoric, their messages rang hollow. AMLO's two-decade-long defense of honesty, pro-poor policies, and fierce opposition to both the war on drugs and the country's militarization made him the leading contender. He promised to reverse the 2013 neoliberal reforms, end the war on drugs, bring the military back to the barracks, and engage in a transitional justice process.

But once in power, AMLO adopted dramatically different policies than those he had promised. The most drastic shift was his decision to turn the armed forces into the central political actor of his transformational project. During the transition period, after a closed-door meeting with General Salvador Cienfuegos, then secretary of defense, AMLO began a process of militarization by surprise. Cienfuegos may have threatened a military backlash if AMLO pursued a transitional justice process and brought members of the armed forces to justice for prior atrocities. Or AMLO may have seen the writing on the wall and decided to keep the military on his side, but with a different faction than the one led by Cienfuegos.

AMLO has dramatically expanded the role of the armed forces in public life. He used MORENA's legislative majority to pass a **law** that replaced the federal police with a new National Guard under military control and made up of active members of the military. The armed forces now control public and national security and all ports and border crossings. They are also in charge of AMLO's emblematic infrastructure projects, a new airport in the outskirts of Mexico City and a high-speed train in the Yucatán Peninsula. Military expenditure is rising and the Mexican armed forces continue to have one of the lowest levels of transparency, accountability, and civilian oversight in the region.

Although the president rhetorically declared the end of the war on drugs, the armed forces and the National Guard continue to use the kingpin strategy, which entails selectively arresting or killing cartel or OCG bosses. State-cartel and intercartel wars remain pervasive. During AMLO's first year, Mexico experienced 23,964 murders associated with these conflicts, according to Lantia Intelligence—a number nearly identical to the last year of the PRI administration. At the current rates, by 2024 Mexico under AMLO would have accumulated over 143,000 battle deaths—that is, more than 90 percent of all battle deaths during the two previous administrations.

The mass violence associated with Mexico's ongoing criminal wars and the selective violence against journalists, mayors, party candidates, human rights defenders, and local business owners reveal that

violent competition for a wide range of illicit markets continues unabated and that cartels continue to transform local political orders across the country. AMLO's assumption that bringing all security forces under military tutelage would end corruption and collusion has proved illusory. In Mexico's drug wars, the armed forces have adopted iron-fist policies based on anti-insurgency practices that stimulate violence and result in gross human rights violations. Further, important sectors of the military protect the cartels or have defected to become their private militias.

While the coronavirus pandemic has hit Mexico hard, **infecting** as many as 1,400,000 Mexicans and killing up to 120,000 by the end of 2020, it has not altered the basic dynamics of AMLO's rule. Despite the government's dismal response to the pandemic—neglecting the gravity of the problem, concealing information, failing to promote and comply with basic health protocols, and failing to adopt an economic stimulus to support stay at home measures—AMLO has not faced much political damage beyond even greater dislike than before from Mexicans already opposed to him.

A TRUTH AND JUSTICE STRATEGY FOR PEACEBUILDING AND DEMOCRATIZATION

Over the past decade, an emerging coalition of families of victims of forced disappearance, feminist and Indigenous movements, pro-human rights and anti-corruption NGOs, academics, and international NGOs have been working on the building blocks of a transitional justice process in Mexico. These groups have identified five priorities for transitional justice: first, new laws and institutions to search for missing persons; second, truth-seeking processes; third, judicial prosecution of perpetrators of atrocities; fourth, reparations for victims of political and criminal violence; and fifth, institutional reforms to prevent future atrocities.

Due to the massive volume of violations, and because **impunity rates** for any crime are above 90 percent, Mexican anti-impunity forces are increasingly demanding the adoption of extraordinary mechanisms of justice. And because a significant number of military and police officers, public prosecutors, and judges collude with drug cartels and OCGs, anti-impunity activists are demanding international assistance, particularly from the United Nations, following the example of the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala. Mexican civil society organizations are demanding international cooperation to allow a radically different approach to the war on drugs, geared at dismantling state-cartel criminal networks through scientific investigation and effective prosecution rather than through militarized interventions and war.

As international experience shows, mechanisms of extraordinary justice can not only safeguard victims' rights but also stimulate the democratization of authoritarian enclaves in the security and judicial sectors. Since 2014, civil society has launched a struggle to develop a democratic rule of law and transform Mexico's thin democracy into a system in which citizens' rights are expanded from the electoral arena to other spheres of economic, political, and social life. Led by victims of state and criminal atrocities, this is a moral struggle for democratic transformation and peacebuilding from below that transcends political parties and challenges Mexico's illiberal ruling elites.

CHAPTER 6

PERU'S DEMOCRACY IN SEARCH OF REPRESENTATION

PAULA MUÑOZ

27

Beset by chronically inadequate political representation and weak state capacity, Peruvian politics have long been buffeted by an evolving set of political divides. In recent years, the formal political sector has been riven by conflict between reformist and antireformist forces, producing political instability and profound citizen anger. The coronavirus pandemic hit Peruvian social and economic life hard, intensifying this recently emergent political cleavage. Significant risks lie ahead, including heightened political fragmentation and conflict, deeper clashes between police and protesters, and the potential rise of new, illiberal, and populist alternatives. Finding ways to diminish the representation gap and reengage citizens, especially youth, in organized politics is crucial.

EVOLVING DIVISIONS

Peru's dominant political challenge of the last two decades has been the continuous, unresolved quest by a diverse, unequal, and fragmented society for adequate political representation—institutional channels that can effectively transmit their demands to the state and a state institutional capacity capable of responding to their needs. Lacking both a state apparatus capable of effectively governing and well-organized, stable political parties that can aggregate diverse and dispersed societal demands, Peruvian democracy flails, beset with constant political crises and increasingly disappointed and alienated citizens.

Since the collapse of Peru's party system in the 1990s under the weight of civil conflict and rising illiberal forces, Peruvian politics have been in near-constant flux, marked by constant and profound divisions and clashes. The absence of stable, well-established political groupings and institutions that can organize and encapsulate these divisions has meant there has not been one overriding, crystallized political divide. Instead, Peru has witnessed a shifting landscape of divisive actors and clashes.

Underlying the turbulent dynamics of Peru's formal political life are two latent fissures that rise to the surface periodically, injecting pressures and tensions into the system. The first of these is a profound socioeconomic division—between those who are integrated into the market economy, which privileges mining and hydrocarbon investment, and those left behind or even damaged by it, including Indigenous groups. The second is a territorial divide—between a powerful and often dismissive Lima-based center and the neglected provinces. These two divides sometimes overlap, aligning Peruvians who are integrated economically and closer to the center of power against those left behind economically and in the provinces.

These primary divides made themselves felt during the 2006 presidential contest—in which a radical candidate of the left, army officer and later president Ollanta Humala, lost the presidency to Alan García from the traditional Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (APRA, or American Popular Revolutionary Alliance), who, though elected on a center-left electoral platform, shifted to the right once in power. But the benefits of Peru's subsequent economic boom and optimistic political narrative about economic progress obscured these two major rifts. Instead, a political identity division less aligned with traditional left-right groups came to dominate Peruvian political life for a time: the clash between fujimoristas and antifujimoristas.

The fujimoristas were followers of Peru's strongman president Alberto Fujimori who led the country in the 1990s. Gradually recovering after Fujimori's downfall and departure from the country in 2000, but holding to very conservative and often illiberal values, the fujimoristas regrouped in 2006 within the Fuerza Popular (FP, or Popular Force) party under the leadership of Keiko Fujimori, Alberto's daughter. Keiko Fujimori came close to winning the presidency in both 2011 and 2016, but she was narrowly defeated as a result of strategic coordination among antifujimorista actors.

This divide has morphed in complex ways since 2016 into a different clash—between, on the one hand, presidents and their teams trying to advance different sorts of reform agendas, such as educational, anticorruption, and political reforms, and, on the other hand, legislators opposing those reforms. This conflict began during the last years of Humala's government after his Partido Nacionalista Peruano (PNP, or Peruvian Nationalist Party) disbanded in Congress, opening space for the emergence of an obstructionist APRA-Fujimorista opposition coalition. It worsened after the 2016 elections when Keiko Fujimori lost to Pedro Pablo Kuczynski of the party Peruanos Por el Kambio (PPK, or Peruvians for Change). But her party, the FP, won a super majority in Congress. Refusing to admit its electoral defeat, the fujimorista-dominated Congress stepped up confrontation with the antifujimorista executive. Corruption accusations—[linked](#) to the international corruption investigation about bribes paid by major Brazilian companies to officials in multiple Latin American countries—embroiled almost all major Peruvian political actors, including both Keiko Fujimori and Kuczynski. The executive-legislative confrontation intensified until Kuczynski resigned in 2018 to avoid being dismissed by Congress.

Far from easing up, the executive-legislative conflict escalated further after Kuczynski's vice president, Martín Vizcarra, assumed the presidency upon Kuczynski's departure. Vizcarra managed to connect with the citizenry and its hunger for governance reforms and to define the executive-legislative conflict as an anticorruption and reformist crusade against a corrupt Congress and political class. The first phase of this struggle between Vizcarra and the legislature ended with Vizcarra dismissing the legislature in 2019.

ENTER THE PANDEMIC

COVID-19 hit Peru hard. At times during 2020, the country had the **highest mortality rate** from the disease in the world. The pandemic has inflicted economic devastation and enormous political upheaval as well. Debates over the government's problematic handling of the pandemic and its economic impact sharpened the political struggle between a popular president and the newly elected but increasingly unpopular Congress.

The election of a new Congress in January 2020, under the new principle of single terms only for Congress members, resulted in a fragmented body in which the president has no members representing him (having not presented a list of congressional candidates for the election) and the FP's representation has diminished from seventy-two legislators in 2016 to only fifteen (out of 130). Moreover, this post-fujimorista Congress is not only fragmented but also populated by second-tier politicians—because the more experienced ones did not run in the January 2020 elections so that they could run in the 2021 legislative election—who seem prone to the influence of particular interest groups and are interested in rolling back reforms.

Pandemic-related restrictions on public events and travel widened the political gulf between legislators and citizens. New corruption **allegations**, this time against Vizcarra, fueled yet another interbranch conflict. The gulf between the legislature and the citizenry became particularly evident when, on November 9, 2020, legislators struck against Vizcarra, despite majority public opinion **disfavoring** such a move. They ousted him from power, using the dubious and disputed legal **maneuver** of claiming “permanent moral incapacity,” and formed a new government led by the Congress's president, Manuel Merino. Citizen indignation flared, leading to mass protests in multiple parts of the country under **slogans** such as “Merino usurper,” and “this Congress does not represent me.” Rocked by the protests, the illegitimate government resigned within a week, and Congress elected a caretaker government that will rule until national elections are held in April 2021.

The extensive involvement in the protests by young people of the so-called *generación del bicentenario* (bicentennial generation) expanded and recast the earlier divide between fujimoristas and antifujimoristas into a broader divide between political stasis, as represented by many congresspersons, and a wider, more ambitious reform agenda. Whether this divide will be politically channeled and represented in the next electoral process remains to be seen. Also, the electoral weakening of the FP, which had been trying to represent the conservative sector that is active in various sociocultural policy fights, opens the question of whether a divide between conservative groups and defenders of a more progressive agenda (that includes, for example, supporting LGBTQ rights and gender equality) will endure beyond the slow demise of fujimorismo.

In addition to sharpening these conflictive political dynamics, the pandemic has shone a harsh new light on underlying structural problems that Peru's recent economic growth obscured rather than solved, including income and wealth inequality, the vast scope of the informal economy, and acute problems of state capacity. The coronavirus pandemic hit less advantaged Peruvians hard, and the sharp economic recession produced by the strict quarantine and problematic policies devised to contain the virus has pushed countless households back into poverty or severe economic stress. By deepening and highlighting

existing socioeconomic gaps and inequities, the pandemic has set the grounds for the re-politicization of the deep socioeconomic divide. The sharp [protests](#) in November 2020 over labor conditions and low salaries in the agricultural sector illustrate this potential effect. It is not clear yet, however, that there will be a political actor capable of successfully articulating, organizing, and representing these festering political grievances.

MORE TROUBLE AHEAD

Given the mounting pressures and political turbulence of 2020, what are the prospects and risks for Peruvian democracy? One major risk is the continuation or even intensification of political instability, due to the likelihood of continued electoral fragmentation and the serious constitutional ambiguity around legally vacating a president's [seat](#) due to permanent moral incapacity, an uncertainty that has not been settled by the Constitutional Court.

Second, although the military refused to get involved during the recent political crisis, making clear its commitment to democracy, this crisis and the pandemic have revealed a serious problem with an authoritarian-oriented and corrupt police force. The police establishment backed the conservative-right coalition, which attempted to seize power through dubious means. Moreover, through their brutality, the police have distanced themselves from the citizenry even more than before. This increasing popular illegitimacy of the police—and their open resistance to reform—spells trouble for democratic governance in a context in which civil unrest and protest will likely continue.

Third, the emergence of a reformist, pro-institutional agenda aimed at defending democracy is good news for Peru. However, with only an incipient social organization and little political representation or organization behind it, this agenda will likely struggle to contain nondemocratic tendencies and interest groups. Those who support it may be able to shield Peruvian democracy from an openly authoritarian threat, such as a coup, but it is not clear if they could hold off a more populist leadership aligned with popular demands that is willing to erode democratic balance from within, such as by closing Congress and interfering with the judiciary.

NEEDED ACTIONS

In this troubling and uncertain context, what can be done to diminish the risks for democracy? A key priority is fostering pro-democratic oversight of political processes by civic groups, the media, and the public generally. This is crucial considering that it was pro-democratic social protest that stopped Congress's recent authoritarian drive. In particular, civil society organizations that aim to defend and foster democracy should seize the opportunity and channel new youth participation toward a pro-institutional and democratic agenda. They should work to bolster their organizational capacity to aggregate citizen demands and coordinate diverse citizen agendas. Furthermore, civil society should work more intensively through social media as an alternative and complementary means to traditional face-to-face organization and mobilization, as it proved to be a successful tool in coordinating dispersed initiatives and generating a unified message for the recent protests.

But civil society oversight and protest are not enough. Peru's privately owned media outlets should step up too. Ever since the 2000 democratic transition, major private media companies have assumed that citizens only want to distract themselves and have abjured from their duty of providing high-quality political information and promoting a deliberative public. Television and radio broadcasters could prove critical in creating open spaces for deliberation and thus help to foster politically informed debates among the wider public.

A second huge challenge is finding ways to diminish the representation gap between citizens and elected authorities by channeling this renewed youth interest in politics, as evidenced by the protests, toward more organized political participation. This could either oxygenate existing political organizations or build new ones. Disrupting the vicious circle of societal depoliticization and antipolitical outlooks among citizens is key for strengthening democracy.

A third priority is pushing forward the pending political reform agenda during the upcoming electoral process, particularly regarding the regulation of executive-legislative relations. And, finally, under the vast agenda of state strengthening, it will be difficult but crucial to take advantage of the citizen pro-reform momentum and advance civilian-led police reforms. The big question here, as in many of the other areas, is who will be willing and politically able to do so.

CONCLUSIONS

THOMAS CAROTHERS AND ANDREAS E. FELDMANN

32

The six case studies in this collection highlight both the remarkable diversity and the central significance of divisive politics in Latin America. They illuminate how sociopolitical divisions have, in most cases, been intensifying over the past several years—a dynamic accelerated by the coronavirus pandemic. The authors point not only to a host of serious risks in the near future but also to some steps that domestic and international actors can take to help alleviate those dangers. In this concluding essay, we extract some common patterns and national particularities, drawing comparatively from the six case studies, organized along the same four-part structure as the country cases.

THE COMPLEX LANDSCAPE OF DIVISIONS

A critical pair of variables among the main divisions affecting Latin American politics are stability and duration. Some of the divisions are long-standing and relatively constant, at least in their basic structure, even if they wax and wane in intensity. As Carla Alberti shows in her essay on Bolivia, a single overarching division has been a defining feature of Bolivian politics for decades—a core socioeconomic and sociocultural divide between the non-Indigenous urban elite and the Indigenous and Mestizo population. Colombian politics, as Angelika Rettberg describes, has been grappling for a decade with a deeply felt division about the acceptable terms of peace between the government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). But as Colombia's principal cleavage is less rooted in basic socioeconomic and sociocultural attributes than Bolivia's, it appears that differences related to the peace process have some chance of healing. In contrast, in Bolivia, the challenge is more to manage a profound rift that seems a semipermanent feature of Bolivian life.

In contrast, divisions that are strongly present today in some countries are products of recently shifting political tides. Oliver Stuenkel notes the complex process by which the fissure between followers and opponents of the center-left Workers' Party in Brazil radically intensified in the last decade as major corruption scandals broke out. These morphed into a wider cleavage between pro-establishment and anti-establishment actors when seemingly bottomless corruption scandals crippled the reputation of most political elites. During the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro, who successfully took up the anti-establishment mantle to get elected in 2018, this division has evolved still further into one between Bolsonaro's serious impulses toward authoritarianism and opposing political actors who are trying to stand up for democratic survival.

In Chile, the yawning divide between the establishment and many Chileans who feel excluded from it erupted unexpectedly in late 2019. Juan Pablo Luna explains that this divide was many years in the making, resulting from long-accumulated dissatisfaction with an economic model that, in the eyes of many Chileans, accentuated exclusion and marginalization. In contrast, Paula Muñoz shows how, in Peru, a recent but acute division between anti-reformist forces in Congress and a reform-oriented president, Martín Vizcarra, resulted in the latter's 2020 impeachment by the same Congress.

A second crucial dimension of the main sociopolitical divides in Latin America today is the contrast between countries where the main division is represented in the formal political sector versus those where it lies outside the formal political sector. In Bolivia and Colombia, the main political division is directly represented in formal political life, forming the principal axis of electoral choice that citizens have. In Bolivia, this is the ongoing contest between the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS, or the Movement for Socialism), which represents Indigenous and Mestizo peoples, and opposing parties primarily representing the traditional elite. In Colombia, it is between center-right political forces that have taken a critical view of the 2016 peace accord with FARC and centrist and center-left forces that have taken a more positive view. In Brazil, too, the current division gripping the country is directly embodied in the formal political life of the country—at this point, embodied in whether one supports or opposes Bolsonaro.

But in the other cases, the relationship between principal division and the formal political sector is less direct. Mexico is an important example in this regard, as Guillermo Trejo makes clear in his essay. A powerful long-standing division exists between center-right and centrist political actors, on the one hand, and left-wing actors, currently under the leadership of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, on the other. Yet the more profound division facing the country exists at a different, less visible level, between authoritarian enclaves within the security sector and related parts of the state establishment versus democratically oriented political and civic actors. In Peru, weak and personalistic political parties work against any stable mapping of sociopolitical divisions onto the electoral choices presented to citizens—the country suffers from a chronic, often debilitating weakness of basic political representational structures. Instead, as Muñoz notes, serious socioeconomic and sociocultural divides, both between haves and have-nots and between sociocultural conservatives and progressives, lurk below the surface of formal political life, rising to the surface at different times, injecting divisive dynamics, and submerging again as conditions change.

In Chile, a consensus-oriented political sector, long dominated by relatively moderate center-left and center-right parties, was deeply startled and challenged in 2019 when an underlying fissure between haves

and have-nots—initially triggered by a modest hike in subway fares—erupted in massive protests. Luna argues that whether the formal political sector is able to genuinely incorporate the concerns and needs of citizens who feel excluded by mainstream politics—in effect, whether formal political life is able to actually embody the country’s real political dynamics—will be central to the future democratic stability and health of the country.

PANDEMIC EFFECTS

When the pandemic first began to spread, political observers and experts in many parts of the world wondered if a sweeping public health crisis might bring divided countries together, allowing political and social actors to put aside their differences and fight the deadly disease together. Yet as Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Press have [argued](#), on the whole, the pandemic has in fact accelerated confrontational political dynamics, embodied by surging protests, deepening polarization, more populism, and a growing distrust in existing institutions. The case studies in this collection affirm that this pattern of confrontation largely holds true in Latin America. In Bolivia, conflict emerged quickly between the main two political sides over the government’s pandemic response measures, culminating in violent protests that shut down much of the country. The interim government’s decision to delay the election twice due to pandemic risks heightened polarization further. Peru was hit especially hard by the pandemic, at some points during 2020 suffering a higher mortality rate than any other country in the world, and the government’s response to the crisis became one more issue for the already fractious political elites to fight over.

The Chilean government initially hoped that an effective response to the pandemic might deflect attention from rising social protests and bolster its wavering support. But instead of strengthening the government’s popularity, clashes over both the efficacy and the fairness of the government’s response became one more area of contention. In Brazil, a president who has made polarization his core governing strategy weaponized the pandemic, employing a defiant, populist stance of denial and ridicule about the virus to further mobilize his base and demonize his opponents.

The pandemic has been not just another major policy issue to fight over, but the driver of deeper divisions. By hitting poor and marginalized citizens everywhere much harder than privileged sectors, the pandemic aggravated and threw into still sharper relief the basic divide between haves and have-nots that undergirds the sociopolitical life of most Latin American countries. In Peru, this differential effect was a particular shock, shattering the common national myth that Peru’s sustained run of economic growth had somehow closed the long-standing gap between rich and poor. The pandemic has spurred a harsh reckoning in Brazil as well, forcing the country to confront just how much the economic downturn of the last five years has hurt many Brazilians. Scrambling to not get caught in the downdraft of this reckoning, Bolsonaro shifted gears in the midst of the pandemic to suddenly favor direct cash transfers to the poor that he had long opposed.

Colombia has been a notable exception to these pandemic effects. In contrast to confrontational politics elsewhere, Rettberg shows that Colombia’s remarkable national consensus and acceptance of a scientifically grounded public health approach helped the country avoid pandemic-fueled polarization. This consensus

also helped the country both avoid the worst of the public health devastation that many other countries faced and also contributed to a larger pattern of growing consensus around the long-term future of the peace accord.

SERIOUS RISKS

With the punishing effects of the pandemic coming on top of the various political crises that were already occurring before 2020, the sense of risk that many Latin Americans feel vis-a-vis democracy in their countries is understandably high. The case studies in this collection underline and illuminate these risks. The central concern is that divisions may keep intensifying to the point of producing uncontrollable conflicts, which may trigger a breakdown of democratic processes and institutions. Having narrowly escaped such a breakdown over the disputed 2019 election that ended Evo Morales's long tenure as president of Bolivia—and living now with considerable social damage and economic precarity resulting from the coronavirus—Bolivia faces a daunting political road ahead. Alberti emphasizes that Bolivia's challenge is to continue to keep the profound societal divide contained within the framework of democratic institutions—despite their relatively shallow roots. Peru has also just survived a democratic cardiac arrest, manifesting in the dubious ouster of a popular president and the resignation just six days later of his successor. Muñoz warns that a country that has seen more than twenty years of repeated presidential catastrophes and disruptions must be ready for further divisions and dangers as it faces national elections in April 2021.

Brazil's decades-long project of democratic consolidation appears to have taken a turn down a very uncertain road marked by distinct risks of authoritarianism, or at the very least, entrenched illiberalism. In Mexico, the warning lights of autocratization are also flashing, as Trejo shows, by the potential of a slow strangulation of the country's already limited democratic space by unaccountable enclaves within the state security apparatus.

Several of the authors express concern about the potential for the emergence of new illiberal populist figures who will capitalize on widespread citizen disaffection and alienation from the formal political sector. The fear is of repeating past regional patterns of anti-establishment populist "saviors" offering demagogic solutions that attract mass support and ultimately lead to incoherent governance and democratic degradation. Muñoz highlights this risk for Peru, given the chronic problem of weak political representation in the country, and Luna does for Chile as well, despite the long hold of relatively moderate and consensual political parties.

Although Rettberg sees a possible positive path ahead for Colombia, marked by diminishing polarization and a new effort to tackle long-standing socioeconomic inequities, she nevertheless identifies a serious potential risk: the possibility of a relapse into widening violent conflict. This threat would be especially acute if criminal organizations and extremist political groups succeed in reconfiguring old grievances and conflicts in ways that find traction among citizens in rural areas.

WAYS TO HELP

Bridging, or even just better managing, fundamental sociopolitical divisions is never an easy or quick task. But the authors do highlight a range of approaches that domestic and international actors committed to helping protect democracy and rights should consider.

Political actors will have a vital role to play. Stuenkel holds that in Brazil, the formation of a broad pro-democratic alliance in the run-up to the next presidential election could be of fundamental importance in resisting the growing illiberal pressures. Alberti notes that in Bolivia, the ruling MAS has a responsibility to avoid divisive rhetoric and political tactics if the country is to avoid slipping back into the extreme fractiousness that marked the 2019 elections. She also signals the need for new channels of dialogue between the government and opposition in the years immediately ahead.

Citizens and civic groups will have a major role as well. Trejo argues that broad-based citizen action aimed at ending impunity for violators of basic rights, establishing mechanisms for transitional justice, and strengthening the rule of law generally is the most important—possibly even the only—way to truly safeguard Mexican democracy. Similarly, Muñoz highlights the urgent need in Peru for greater civic and citizen oversight of politicians. Channeling the energy and engagement of youth, a rising political force in Peru, will be a crucial part of that. She also insists that major media outlets should step up to provide more open spaces for broad-based citizen deliberation over core political issues.

International actors should also look for key entry points. In Chile, Luna recommends that external actors could help break the intellectual logjam over acceptable economic models and help inject new thinking into debates over how to open up Chilean capitalism to address the needs of disaffected citizens. Stuenkel points to the need for international actors to hold Brazil to its commitments in diverse multilateral forums regarding democratic values and good governance. As defiant as Brazil's nationalist illiberal forces are, they will still pay a political cost for abrogating Brazil's strong attachments to transnational institutions and processes. He also argues that North American and European governments committed to democracy will need to develop a more concerted and effective strategy of standing up to illiberal populists, whether in Latin America or more widely.

In short, as the broader global [study](#) of political polarization in democracies by Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue emphasizes, making progress to reduce divisions in troubled democracies is a challenge that requires concerted, sustained efforts by a wide range of domestic and often international actors. There are no guarantees of success. The trend toward heightened polarization and fractious sociopolitical life is profound across almost every region. This is abundantly true in Latin America, with its historical patterns of inequality, weak structures of political representation, and shaky state capacity. Yet the growing demands of Latin American citizens for justice and rights—and the efforts of at least some political actors to respond positively—show that democratic safeguarding and even renovation is not just a necessity, but a possibility.

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

37

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a unique global network of policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East, India, and the United States. Our mission, dating back more than a century, is to advance peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decisionmakers in government, business, and civil society. Working together, our centers bring the inestimable benefit of multiple national viewpoints to bilateral, regional, and global issues.

DEMOCRACY, CONFLICT, AND GOVERNANCE PROGRAM

The Carnegie Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program rigorously analyzes the global state of democracy, conflict, and governance, the interrelationship among them, and international efforts to strengthen democracy and governance, reduce violence, and stabilize conflict.



CarnegieEndowment.org