



ANTI-GENDER POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT

Edited by
Sonia Corrêa



G&PAL

Género & Política en
América Latina

ANTI-GENDER POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT

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URUGUAY

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FOREWORD

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We are pleased to present another publication of the Gender & Politics in Latin America (GPAL) project, conducted by the Sexuality Policy Watch (SPW), dedicated to anti-gender politics in Latin America. The studies compiled here offer an update on the anti-gender politics scene since 2019, when we published an analysis of the previous period, whose reading we recommend¹. This new stage of research included seven countries – Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Uruguay – in addition to the Organization of American States (OAS). This update aims to examine the confluence of the anti-gender and anti-abortion offensives that took place in the region during the COVID-19 pandemic.

These studies, like previous ones, contemplate the analysis of political dynamics in the broad sense that in the last three years, in the selected countries, there were highly disputed electoral processes, strong shifts to the right, and social insurgencies. In other words, repeating an argument from the panorama elaborated by Fernando Serrano for the publication of the summaries of the studies in Portuguese, published in 2021, “anti-gender politics is politics by other means”.

In this second cycle, it has been crucial to take into account, albeit briefly, the devastating effects of the pandemic not only in health terms but also on the economic and social conditions of the countries analyzed. Although these impacts have been seen throughout the world, in the case of Latin America the pandemic tremendously aggravated the patterns of regional inequality that were already the most accentuated in the world. This high level of socioeconomic inequity has very deep historical roots and was aggravated by the persistent penetration of economic rationalization and neoliberal policies since the 1970s. This structural tendency has not only deepened inequalities but also eroded social protection policies, including public health policies, and its effects were extreme in the pandemic.

1 The results are available at <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL>

This prologue examines the most significant common and differential features of the studies by organizing them into three sections. The first is a review of the contexts of the pandemic and government responses. The second section deals with the political scenarios in which the pandemic unfolded. The third directly addresses the anti-abortion and anti-gender forces in the context of the pandemic crisis that in all countries were strongly enmeshed in complex political dynamics.

THE PANDEMIC LANDSCAPE

Latin America was one of the epicenters of COVID-19. In the seven countries analyzed, the pandemic evolved in a very similar way: two large waves in the periods March-July 2020 and January-June 2021. Another significant aspect is that in all the countries analyzed there was high vaccination uptake, even where there were strong movements against them. In addition, in the countries where social actors and some governments were for a long time propagating speeches of praise and defense of the “family”, there was a clear resurgence of domestic and sexual violence, dramatic proof that the family environment is not a safe space. In almost all these countries the economic impacts of COVID-19 were aggravated by the measures of austerity and fiscal adjustment adopted before or during the pandemic.

STATE RESPONSES

Regarding state responses to the pandemic, they can be organized into three pairs and then Brazil by itself. The first is Argentina and Costa Rica, where the quality of the state response started off well but lost strength over time. In both cases, the responses were initially well-designed and efficient but could not be sustained as the pandemic persisted. In Costa Rica, the difficulty in adopting policies to mitigate the economic crisis over the long term was the determining factor, while in Argentina the loss of quality was due to a combination of economic and political factors.

In contrast, the responses to the health crisis in Ecuador and Colombia, especially in terms of their economic effects, were generally poor. In the first case, the ineffectiveness of the response was very acute at the beginning: Guayaquil had the first COVID-19 catastrophe in the region; in April 2020 dozens of unburied corpses could be seen in the streets there. In the Colombian case, the legacy of privatization – which pervades the health system – hindered the health response that was followed by a deep economic crisis caused by the pandemic that was not duly mitigated. To a large extent, it can be said that this was the cause of the social unrest of April-May 2021. In both contexts, there was militarization or state coercion in the implementation of the measures to contain the movement of people, whose violence, in the case of Colombia, was another factor that triggered the wave of protests.

There are also similarities between the state responses in Chile and Uruguay, two countries governed by traditional conservative parties. These governments adopted rational and well-designed health responses while faithful to their neoliberal logic, doing everything possible not to shut down the economy. This was the case even in Uruguay, where the *Cabildo Abierto*, a far-right party potentially averse to restrictive measures to contain COVID-19, chose to be part of the governing coalition, possibly as a result of the majority power of the political alliance. Furthermore, unlike in Colombia, the robust public health system inherited from the governments of the *Frente Amplio* was crucial to the successful health response. In Chile, in turn, the response was also compromised, in some respects, by the privatization of the health system.

Brazil, governed by the extreme right, is an exception in relation to those patterns. In the midst of the pandemic, the dismantling of the management capacity of the Ministry of Health would culminate in the terrible scenes of lack of oxygen in the city of Manaus at the end of 2020 during the first wave of COVID-19. When Omicron arrived in Brazil, in December 2021, a blackout of official COVID-19 data occurred. It was only due to the integrity of the Unified Health System (SUS) and its decentralized structure that the Brazilian health catastrophe has not been more devastating. In addition, at the initiative of the federal Congress, which challenged the ultra-neoliberal orthodoxy of the Bolsonaro

government, the country adopted a robust program to mitigate the economic crisis. However, this has not been able to stop the growth of poverty and hunger in the country. It also had the unfortunate effect that much of the population benefiting from the program thought the executive was responsible for it.

POLITICAL CONTEXTS

In three of the countries studied, the pandemic broke out after significant electoral transitions, that entailed radical changes in their political-ideological direction. Brazil and Uruguay elected right-wing governments just before the outbreak of COVID-19. In both elections, as the studies published in 2020 show, anti-gender campaigns played a very significant, if not crucial, role, especially in the Brazilian case².

In Uruguay, after fifteen years of the *Frente Amplia*, a new government was elected in 2019, a coalition of the National Party, which represents traditional conservatism, and a recently created far-right party, the *Cabildo Abierto*. The government came into office just as the first cases of COVID-19 were identified in the country. In Brazil, where the electoral results of 2018 meant a radical turn to the extreme right, COVID-19 broke out when the Bolsonaro government had barely finished its first tumultuous year, making the pandemic the main (and catastrophic) stage of his peculiar method of ruling. When the first cases were identified, Bolsonaro responded with great intensity, using the peculiar logic of promoting chaos as a method of governance. The federal government responded to the crisis with grotesque denialism, defended keeping the economy open at all costs, and was deliberately negligent. Subsequently, the pandemic crisis and the political crisis were intertwined. On this disastrous path, since the beginning of 2021, we have been witnessing a complex dynamic in which the deteriorated Brazilian political system began to support the government in exchange for favors.

² The summarized versions of the case studies are available at <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL/uploads/E-book-Resumos-completo.pdf>

In Argentina, there was also a transition in 2019, but in the opposite direction, with the return of the left to power. When the pandemic started at the beginning of 2020, the government of Alberto Fernández had just begun, and he enjoyed popularity throughout the year partly due to appropriate responses to the crisis. At the end of 2020, after the frustrated attempt of 2018, the abortion law was finally reformed with strong support from the executive³.

However, the economic effects of the crisis and other factors altered this positive trajectory. Just as this update was being completed, in November 2021, the government was defeated in the mid-term legislative elections by center-right forces. In this situation, the extreme right gained momentum. Obviously, the mobilizations in reaction to the right to abortion and of a denialist nature that have emerged since 2020 have contributed to this new development.

Recalling the studies published in 2020, in Colombia and Costa Rica, the referendum of the 2016 Peace Agreement and the 2018 elections, respectively, were political moments in which anti-gender offensives had a strong impact⁴. In the first case, the defeat of the referendum contributed to the victory of the so-called Uribista right (associated with former president Álvaro Uribe) in the 2018 presidential elections. In Costa Rica, meanwhile, the neoconservative religious right was defeated by the PAC, a centrist party that was already in power.

In Colombia, at the end of 2019, there were also massive protests, although smaller than in Chile and Ecuador, against an educational reform. The response by the state was very violent and there was an upsurge in state and paramilitary violence against urban populations and social leaders. Once the pandemic hit, the government responded poorly

3 To learn more about this background, see the summarized version of the previous study available at <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL/uploads/E-book-Resumos-completo.pdf>

4 Summary versions of the two studies are available at <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL/uploads/E-book-Resumos-completo.pdf>

to the crisis, especially in terms of its economic effects. At the beginning of 2021, the call for a general strike had a wide popular response. The state response was even more violent, which amplified the insurgency and paralyzed the country from April to June. During that crisis there were brutal human rights violations.

In Costa Rica, although neoconservative religious forces have lost ground since the 2018 elections, the PAC won the presidency but lost seats in the national legislature. In 2019, the government committed to a fiscal reform the response to which was the longest strike in the country in decades. The adverse economic conditions resulting from the pandemic created a favorable environment for negationist upheavals and favored the growth of mainstream conservatism, which could return to power in the 2022 elections.

In Chile and Ecuador, the pandemic was immediately preceded by massive social eruptions that repudiated persistent patterns of inequality, poverty, and lack of social protection. Both countries also experienced complex and intense presidential elections in the midst of the pandemic. In Chile, the vigorous 2019 insurgency's major demand was the reform of the constitution inherited from the Pinochet dictatorship. The response of the Piñera government was brutal, the country was paralyzed for two months, and the political system was unable to handle the crisis. The credibility of both countries' governments was almost non-existent when the health crisis broke out in March 2020.

In Ecuador, at the second peak of the pandemic, in 2021, presidential elections were held in a context of episodes of violence, a lot of misinformation, and suspicions of fraud. Two leftist candidates, the indigenous leader Yaku Pérez and the candidate of former president Rafael Correa, clashed fiercely to reach the second round, an unprecedented situation in Latin America. Arauz, the "Correista" candidate, won the contest, but in the second round he was defeated by Guillermo Lasso, a banker from the old right. That result also ended a series of leftist governments. However, since the elections, political instability has persisted in Ecuador.

In Chile, the pandemic crisis coincided with the intense political dynamics that followed the uprising of 2019, paving the way for the plebiscite that approved the constitutional reform (May 2021). In July a constitutional convention was convened with gender parity and the broad participation of indigenous peoples. Conventional partisanship lost ground and conservatism was defeated. However, in the presidential elections in November, José Antonio Kast, an extreme right-wing candidate with strong ties to anti-gender and anti-abortion forces (and known as the Chilean Bolsonaro) had the most votes in the first round, followed by Gabriel Boric, the candidate of the new Chilean left. This was followed by a tense campaign for the second round in which Boric emerged victorious. The elections portend a return to regimes governed by progressive forces in a context in which rightward turns have prevailed since the early 2010s.

Finally, when looking at the environment of the OAS, where anti-gender offensives have been gaining strength since 2013, the impacts of both regional political dynamics and the contested US situation are evident. This has been reflected in the position of the secretary-general, increasingly aligned with continental conservative and right-wing forces, and also in critical positions adopted in relation to the inter-American system by some countries in which the right had come to power, as well as the appointments of well-known figures in the anti-gender and anti-abortion field, an iconic example being Alejandro Ordoñez, current Colombian ambassador to the OAS⁵.

The political dynamics of the system were not as affected by the pandemic as the national contexts were. In fact, with the imposition of remote work, the convening of virtual meetings favored, in some aspects, the participation of civil society. However, it is even more significant that the growing conservatism and rightward turns in regional politics have not had a more substantive impact on the 2021 elections to elect three new commissioners of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and four new judges of the Inter-American Court. This is a positive sign that the autonomy of the regional human rights system is largely intact despite systematic attacks in recent years.

⁵ Alejandro Ordoñez was analyzed in detail in the previous study, see note 4.

ANTI-GENDER AND ANTI-ABORTION FORCES ON THE MOVE

The most salient conclusion of the studies is that anti-gender politics have not lost strength in the pandemic context. Although this dynamic is unique in Latin America, its expressions from 2020 to 2022 have been affected by obvious connections with the United States and Europe – as previous studies have demonstrated, international alliances that have long promoted anti-gender and anti-abortion politics both religious and secular, in the Americas and Europe, are numerous and dense. Some are very old, as is the case with those who use the channels of the Catholic Church and ultra-Catholicism. Other more recent ones have been forged in the heat of the recrudescence observed in the last decade, as is the case of the web of connections between libertarian and neoliberal currents. All of these connections have become much more visible since 2019.

This has happened, above all, in Brazil, which, since the election of Bolsonaro, has become a central node of these currents, especially the connections with characters and groups of the US right. However, this is also the case regarding European state actors, as with Bolsonaro's rare trip to Russia and Hungary in early 2022⁶. It is also very striking that during 2021 not only were leaders of VOX Spain in the region seeking the accession of regional forces to the Madrid Charter⁷, but also important figures of the German extreme right, whose connections are most evident in Brazil and Chile, made an appearance.

No less important, since 2020, when the International Campaign for the Rights of Women for Reason of Sex was launched, as has been the case in Spain and the UK, anti-gender feminist movements have gained visibility and impact, a fairly new development on the regional scene. Although they define themselves as progressives, these feminist voices inhabit the same ecology as anti-gender conservative activism; their agendas have clearly been amplified by their turn to the right.

6 Read Sonia Corrêa's interview about this trip, available at: <https://apublica.org/2022/02/as-aliancas-de-bolsonaro-putin-e-orban-contra-o-aborto-e-pela-familia-tradicional/> (in Portuguese)

7 <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-10-18/vox-teje-una-alianza-anticomunista-en-america-latina.html>

While the conservative anti-gender field has multiple goals, feminist currents exclusively attack the rights of trans people, especially gender identity in childhood. It is not an exaggeration to say that they challenge the right of non-binary people to exist. They are better defined as anti-transgender or trans-exclusive currents. In this region, they are very active in Mexico, which has not been studied in this round of investigations. In this publication, the mobilizations of anti-gender feminism are addressed in the cases of Colombia, Chile and, above all, Brazil.

Against the background of earlier studies, another significant novelty of the 2019-2021 period was the arrival of anti-abortion and anti-gender forces to executive power in Brazil and Uruguay. As we have long known, these ideological agendas have been present in the regional state apparatuses, be it in the old tradition of infiltrating conservative Catholic values in state institutions or as an effect of the evangelical politicization of recent decades that had a significant impact in the legislature. Now we are facing electoral political reconfigurations that result from the systematic promotion of these agendas, leading to power for political forces for whom these guidelines are concrete ideological priorities.

The results of these processes in Brazil and Uruguay, however, are somewhat different. In the first case, the election of Bolsonaro visibly resulted in the conversion of the anti-gender and anti-abortion positions into macro governmental policies. Nowadays, Brazil is one of a small group of countries in which anti-gender ideology has become state policy, such as Hungary, Poland, Russia and, in the region, Guatemala. In the case of Uruguay, on the other hand, the *Cabildo Abierto*, which during the 2019 campaign gave priority to anti-abortion and anti-gender ideology, is part of a coalition mostly of the traditional right that, although it shares some of these values, has not made them a priority. However, these discourses continue circulating, especially in their articulation with Marxism, as a strategy to attack opposition forces.

Looking at this series of studies, a strong common feature is noted in this new phase of anti-gender politics: the forces that mobilize them have made the pandemic

a platform to expand their scope of action. On the one hand, they kept addressing the issues specific to their political agenda. On the other, with greater or lesser intensity, they metamorphosed into movements rejecting the measures to contain the pandemic, that is, deniers, contemptuous of the science, against vaccines, and supporting ineffective treatments for COVID-19. Another salient and novel characteristic of these mobilizations is the use of the catchword “freedom”, which was not seen in previous studies. This recourse to “freedom”, among other things, reveals the robust link between anti-gender agendas and neoliberal ideology.

Likewise, attacks on reproductive health services and, especially, the right to abortion are still a common trend. In the case of Brazil, these attacks are carried out through grotesque state measures, while, in other countries, public campaigns predominated. In Colombia, in response to the demand made to the Constitutional Court by the Just Cause Movement to eliminate the crime of abortion from the criminal code, there were vigils at the doors of the clinics and the Constitutional Court, and the recruitment of young people for online training courses by pro-life agents increased.

In Costa Rica, what had been a strong anti-gender offensive, after the approval of same-sex marriage by the Constitutional Court, was turned by conservative forces against therapeutic abortion. In Uruguay, there are insidious legislative strategies and institutional measures to restrict access to abortion. In Ecuador, the years 2019-2021 were marked by a fierce struggle for the right to abortion in the case of rape, which was finally recognized by a decision of the Constitutional Court in April 2021. Above all, in the area of attacks on and barriers to the right to abortion, the promotion of conscientious objection has spread everywhere, the most striking case of which is Argentina, where there has been a campaign of great intensity following the legalization of abortion at the end of 2020. The barriers caused by objection and conscience are also a serious problem in Chile, where the legislation was reformed in 2017.

More specifically in the field of offensives directed at “gender ideology”, the most affected field continues to be that of education, where, as previous studies show, these crusades started in the years 2012 and 2013. Having as its target especially basic education and most visible in Uruguay and Brazil, their most striking tactics are the efforts to legitimize the guardianship of fathers and mothers over the education of their children and to stigmatize the “school as a dangerous place”. Nor is it trivial that the agenda of the rights of fathers and mothers in the education of their children has also entered the agenda of OAS debates in association with the religious freedom agenda.

In the case of Uruguay, a bill was presented to modify pedagogical practices, allowing mothers and fathers to select not only the curriculum and the readings, but also the teachers, in addition to expanding religious education in public schools. The bill still has not been voted on. In Brazil, the situation of public and private basic education is a real catastrophe. To the systematic speeches of the different ministers of education against “gender”, new bills against “gender ideology” have been added to the hundreds of similar proposals made since 2014 whose contents are much more drastic, since they advocate the criminalization of the “propagation of gender ideology”, or in other words, the “promotion of pornography in schools”. Though several of the laws passed in recent years have been declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, these proposals continue to proliferate.

Direct attacks on school teachers of basic education also continued to multiply. In this area, the most striking episode was the conversion of the hotline for complaints of human rights violations managed by the Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights into an ideological patrol apparatus against gender, Marxism, and the criticism of racism. In addition, anti-gender offensives in education have put forward proposals not only for new modalities of public education, military civic schools, and homeschooling, but also for the elimination of ethical standards in relation to gender, race, and other inequalities in the standards for academic material.

Since 2020, in Brazil, projects to ban inclusive language have proliferated. This can also be seen in Chile, where, in 2021, two pastor congressmen from the *Renovador* National Party presented a bill against inclusive language. However, the most striking similarity between the two countries can be seen in the attack on gender in higher education, that is, against the production of gender knowledge.

In Brazil, these attacks took shape in 2017, when an effigy of Judith Butler was burned as a witch in a protest in São Paulo, and there were the first attacks on feminist teachers. Since 2019, criticizing “gender ideology” has become habitual in the speeches of ministers of education. Since 2021, the government has been committed to consolidating a conservative knowledge production platform. In Chile, in turn, in July 2021, just before the presidential elections, two right-wing congressmen from José Antonio Kast’s party asked the Ministry of Treasury to collect information on “resources allocated annually to finance the courses, centers, and study programs that refer to gender studies, ideology and gender, sexual diversity, and feminism”. It is not absurd to suppose that this line of attack will proliferate in the coming years because it is intertwined with the rejection of the plasticity of gender and non-binary identities.

On the other hand, this conservative linguistic agenda can be understood in connection with a new line of attack launched in the OAS, during the General Assembly of 2021, against an understanding of “intersectionality” that has been totally perverted. This development is linked to ongoing dynamics in the United States and especially in France where “intersectionality” has become the same “Trojan horse” as before was used to argue about the “fallacies and dangers of gender”.

If education is the field in which there have been attacks on gender for the longest time, the offensive against trans rights is the terrain on which the crusade has achieved its greatest scope and visibility since 2017. This escalation is related to the greater mobilization of anti-gender feminisms in 2018, but there are many other forces at play. For example, in Uruguay, a referendum was proposed against the new gender identity law. In Brazil, there is a clear convergence between transgender feminists and anti-gender state actors.

Last but not least, the Colombian case study criticizes the transphobic effects of the *Pico y Género* policy adopted in Bogotá to limit the movement of people early in the pandemic. This policy was not designed by anti-gender actors and the definition of the rules of limitation of circulation established clear parameters regarding gender identity, but the resulting harmful effects it had on transgender people sharply illuminate the potential for normative violence inscribed in gender binarism rooted in institutional logic and common sense. In the research project in which we have been involved since 2017, it is very clear that anti-gender hydras, with their multiple heads, prompt these deep layers of perception of sexual difference as “natural” to mobilize political energies, extend their power, and colonize states, and it is evident that this will continue to happen.

CONCLUSION

The studies that we are now publishing are a new portrait, situated in time, of the anti-gender and anti-abortion scene in Latin America. Due to the speed with which regional and global politics develop, there would certainly be much to update on the analyzed contexts since the texts have been finalized. It’s worth remembering that we started this series of studies in the midst of a pandemic context and its results are being published when a new “war of choice” is reshaping the global geopolitical landscape, with unequivocal effects on regional political and economic dynamics.

The origins and motivations of the war in Ukraine are long-standing and very complex and do not fit into schematic and simplistic readings. As numerous authors have analyzed, all the great powers are implicated, which, however, is not to say the importance of Russia’s unilateral aggression can be forgotten. It is very difficult to predict the reconfiguration that it will produce. From a regional perspective, however, it is not trivial that this tragic new geopolitical scenario unfolded when the Chilean elections, with the victory of Gabriel Boric, not only meant the first defeat of right-wing forces in Latin America but also indicated a generational renewal and new ways of thinking and acting in left politics. On the other hand, as Pablo Stefanoni has recently written, this new geopolitical disorder is also starkly illuminating the “confusionism” and the castellation of the ways of interpreting the world of those same leftists.

In this changing and paradoxical scenario, from the point of view of our field of investigation and action, it is very significant that Vladimir Putin, a key figure in this new global confusion, is an icon of toxic masculinity installed in state power. On the other hand, along with his mentor Alexander Dugin, a leading anti-gender ideologue, Putin is connected to key European players in the same field - Viktor Orbán, Marine Le Pen, and Mateo Salvini - and, not coincidentally, he received a visit from Jair Bolsonaro when the drums of war were already beating.

The war in Ukraine brightly illuminates the political and geopolitical centrality of gender and sexuality. If there were still doubts, they can't be maintained in the face of the affirmation of the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, a staunch ally of Putin, that the war is justified to contain "the globalist imposition of homosexuality." Perhaps that will cause an important part of the regional left - accused virulently by the right, over the last decade, of being mentors and promoters of "gender ideology" - to recognize that centrality, as well as the breadth and depth of the effects of sociocultural mobilizations and government policies motivated by these ideological positions in social life and institutional spheres. and to interrogate the relevance of the accusations of "divisive identitarianism" that are brandished today against the voices and movements that systematically point towards that centrality. It is also our expectation that the studies that comprise this new publication will contribute to that more incisive vision.

Good reading!

Sonia Corrêa and Magaly Pazello

Since the Spanish version of this e-book was released in March 2022, significant changes have occurred in the Latin American national political scenarios and the global landscape, such as, for example, the war in Ukraine that had just begun. While its prospects were not clear at that time, as noted in the Prologue, its anti-gender imprints were blatant.

Since then, the conflict has escalated, leaving a trail of dispossession, destruction, and death: 7.8 million refugees fled from Ukraine to Europe, the largest displacement crisis since World War II.¹ The UN estimates a death toll of 14,400 lives, of which 3,400 are civilians, many of them journalists and relief workers. Against this backdrop, Putin has repeatedly threatened to resort to nuclear weapons; meanwhile, the military-industrial complex keeps profiting as Western powers continue supplying Ukraine with “means of resistance”.

As in all wars, the impacts on women, girls, and queer people have been and continue to be severe. Putin’s anti-gender rhetoric has not relented, as illustrated by the speech he gave to justify the annexation of Ukrainian territories in late September.² At the same time, well-known figures of the European ultra-right have been using the Russian threat to argue that when tanks are at the borders, “gender” is inconsequential.³

As was also mentioned in the Prologue, the war immediately impacted a global economy that was barely starting to recover from COVID-19. Since then, it has had devastating effects on global food distribution, as well as inflation, the dollar’s exchange value, and US and European interest rates. As this postscript was being written, these

1 See <https://disasterphilanthropy.org/disasters/ukraine-humanitarian-crisis/>

2 See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/30/russia-ukraine-war-putins-annexation-speech-what-did-he-say>

3 See <https://www.vozpopuli.com/altavoz/cultura/tanques-putin-teoria-genero.html>

overlapping crises were being discussed at the G20 Meeting in Bali.⁴ In this shadowy scenario, an additional crisis is emerging: a new cycle of growing debt of less developed countries, in which, for the first time, China plays a central role. The geopolitical chessboard keeps shifting, and the directions it may take are not easy to predict.

Meanwhile, in Europe, the rightward political turn of the last decade continued its course. In the first half of the year, the Hungarian electoral process confirmed Victor Orbán's grip on power and, even though Macron was re-elected, French politics continued to shift to the right. The electoral results later in the year were yet more worrying. The extreme right entered the new governing coalition in Sweden, an outcome that, as suggested by Gina Gustavsson in *The Guardian*, seems to reveal the hidden illiberalism of Swedish society.⁵ Yet more striking was the imperious Italian neo-fascist leader Georgia Meloni's rise to power, which cannot be detached from her involvement in anti-abortion and anti-gender politics during the last decade. Numerous analyses have been published that wishfully forecast a moderation of the first Italian female prime minister. Other observers such as Saviani, however, insightfully remind us that neo-fascist parties and leaders have gone to lengths, in recent decades, to detoxify and soften their image. Given that Meloni is a case in point, her political objectives should not be glossed over or minimized.⁶

In contrast, the electoral cycle that swept through the Americas since early 2022 has not been so auspicious for the ultra-right, even if its results are far from unequivocal. It began with a Costa Rican presidential election that, as predicted, resulted in a turn to the right, but neither the ultra-religious right that almost gained power in 2018 nor, as projected, the old conservative party. The winner was an ultra-neoliberal newcomer who

4 See <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/15/business/economy/world-leaders-meet-as-global-economy-faces-multiple-threats.html>

5 Here <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/sep/15/far-right-sweden-intolerance-liberalism-election-results>

6 See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2022/sep/24/giorgia-meloni-is-a-danger-to-italy-and-the-rest-of-europe-far-right>

is not, however, immune to the influences of the extreme right.⁷ The Colombian elections that followed, however, led to the victory of the first left-wing president in the country's history: Gustavo Petro. Moreover, Francia Márquez, the new vice-president, is a leader of the black women's movement, and many feminists were elected to Congress.

Then came the cold watershed of the rejection (*rechazo*) of the new Chilean Constitution. This result was surprising because, in November 2020, 80 per cent of voters had supported the reform and, in 2021, the presidential elections were won by Gabriel Boric after a contentious electoral campaign against rival Jose Antonio Kast. Furthermore, women comprised 50 per cent of the Constitutional Convention and gender equality is a guiding principle of the draft reform. The factors that resulted in the *rechazo* are multilayered. One of them is that the vote for the approval was compulsory: many more people voted in 2022 than in the 2020 referendum. Yet more significantly, the ultra-right digital misinformation campaign against the reform was very effective.⁸ Finally, as Carrasco observed, the results reveal that in Chilean society a strong desire for equality and transformation co-exists with deep strongholds of conservatism.⁹

In October, as we prepared for the release of the English translation, in Brazil, Bolsonaro, the Latino icon of ultra-right leaders, was defeated, in a fierce and murky campaign and election, by ex-president Lula. The incumbent resorted to all means possible, legal and illegal, to remain in power, such as avalanches of digital fake news, voter coercion, and vote suppression. Had these strategies been successful, Brazil would have plunged into a blatant neo-fascist regime whose effects and ramifications would undoubtedly have crossed national borders.

7 See <https://www.infobae.com/en/2022/04/04/who-is-rodrigo-chaves-the-controversial-economist-who-will-be-president-of-costa-rica>

8 See (in Portuguese) <https://www.terra.com.br/noticias/referendo-no-chile-faltou-um-dialogo-mais-amplo-sobre-nova-constituicao-leia-a-analise,f4a435d08413af473e81ec0327d52052cqq1bbhb.html>

9 For the article, see <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/latamcaribbean/2022/09/15/why-we-failed-to-approve-the-new-chilean-constitution/>. The seven countries are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Honduras, and Peru.

Lula's victory is, therefore, to be celebrated as a democratic victory and also because it was assured by the votes of those earning less than 500 USD/month, 60 per cent of women and black voters, and the large majority of the LGBTTI* and indigenous populations. Even so, in the reflections developed by myself and Juan Elman for Open Democracy, we underline that Bolsonaro's defeat should not be interpreted as the demise of ultra-right politics. Furthermore, as the conditions that favored his rapid ascent remain present across the region, we cannot lose sight of his trajectory and legacy when assessing the political tendencies of Latin America in the coming years, even if left-leaning forces are once again in power in seven countries.¹⁰

Finally, a breath of fresh air has also come from north of the Rio Grande. This is not irrelevant given that, in June 2022, the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* darkened the prospects of further expanding abortion rights in Latin America. The outcomes of the US midterm elections did not fulfil the predictions of an ultra-conservative watershed. The victories of Democrats mean control over the Senate and various governorships, hundreds of LGBTT+ officeholders, and the containment of further erosions of abortion rights. These victories were made possible by younger voters, especially, as shown by Françoise Girard, by young women and other people who gestate demanding their sexual and reproductive rights and well-being.¹¹

In conclusion, the political dynamics of 2022 - and within it, the undercurrents emanating from anti-gender politics - have been far from smooth. Even so, recent electoral processes across the Americas appear to have kept at bay the expanding de-democratizing trends of the last decade. On the other hand, the roads ahead are not smooth because the state of the world at large remains shaky and uncertain. Even so, we reach the end of 2022 with wider spaces to breathe and re-imagine futures.

Sonia Corrêa

10 See <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/brazil-election-bolsonaro-far-right-movement-latin-america/>

11 See <https://mailchi.mp/0f5d55f57e22/the-us-midterms-youth-and-abortion?e=2b9dcb303d>

NEOCONSERVATIVE POLITICS AND MOBILIZATIONS IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT: THE CASE OF COSTA RICA

Gabriela Arguedas

Gustavo A. Chaves

SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE PANDEMIC

The pandemic of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that produces the disease COVID-19 has generated, since the end of 2019, a concatenation of crises that ranges from basic aspects of public health and the economy, politics, gender, ethnic-racial, and migratory issues, to the cultural industry, sports, and education. Costa Rica has not escaped these problems, and both the population and the government have had to face them in a climate particularly vitiated by the social and political polarization that the country has suffered in the last decades which has directly affected the communicative legitimacy of the central government to face the pandemic and its repercussions.

As analyzed in the first phase of this cycle of regional studies on neoconservative politics, this polarization is not a recent phenomenon in the country or in the region. Understanding what happened in the 2018 Costa Rican elections requires situating this dynamic in the long cycle of expansion and politicization of neoconservatism in the context of neoliberal entrenchment.

These elections were won, in the second round, by Carlos Alvarado of the ruling Citizen Action Party (PAC) against a neo-Pentecostal and neoliberal movement led by Fabricio Alvarado of the National Restoration Party (PRN), which had won the first round¹. As regional studies show, the result of this race was an electoral cycle that revealed deep cracks in the Costa Rican imaginary by pitting conservative sectors against progressive

1 <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL/uploads/Ebook-CostaRica%2020200203.pdf>

ones on the issue of religious beliefs. The campaign was focused on "post-material" issues in the sense that, more than the economy or unemployment, same-sex marriage was discussed as were, tangentially, abortion and religious freedom, in a confrontation of values rather than proposals.

In January 2018 (weeks before the first electoral round) the Inter-American Court published Advisory Opinion OC 24/17 on gender identity, equality, and non-discrimination of same-sex couples by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR), which had been requested previously by the Costa Rican government. As the issuance of the IACHR opinion obliged the state to ensure the right to marriage for same-sex couples, there was a strong conservative reaction that took advantage of the situation to give greater visibility to the discourse against what these sectors have called gender ideology. This narrative permeated the electoral landscape thanks to the fact that grassroots work in religious communities had been going on for several years warning about the feminist threat and "gender ideology". This expression of the culture war led to an electoral campaign and presidential and legislative elections framed around issues that generated more division than political integration and ended up facilitating more attacks against women's reproductive rights².

Carlos Alvarado's final victory can be interpreted as a vote "against" the fundamentalist option and not so much "for" the pro-government option. This was clear in the distribution of seats in the Legislative Assembly, where the PAC is only the third largest force, behind the National Liberation Party (PLN) and the PRN itself. This is important because, even before taking office, Alvarado's administration was seriously compromised in its ability to present and negotiate its own agenda in Congress. In fact, during the second half of 2018, the government was able to gauge its own weakness by attempting to pass an urgent fiscal

² Incidentally, see the essays "Religión, conservadurismo y progresismo en las elecciones del 2018: de las desigualdades socioexistenciales a las diferencias políticas y morales" by sociologist Andrey Pineda Sancho, "Restauración Nacional en las elecciones del 2018: ¿guerra de religiones en una democracia posmaterial?" by political scientist César Zúñiga, and "Las mujeres, sus derechos y sus acciones en las elecciones del 2018 en Costa Rica", by analyst and activist Ana Carcedo Cabañas, in: Rojas Bolaños, M. and Treminio Sánchez, I. (2019).

reform that lacked popular support because it was markedly regressive, which resulted in the longest general strike in the country in the last 20 years³.

When the COVID-19 pandemic finally affected Costa Rica, the leadership and communication of government authorities were already seriously compromised, and this has been one of their main challenges in the management of the pandemic. It is relevant to mention that in the development of the 2018 strike, some elements could already be identified that would become evident in the 2020 protests, in particular the similarity of certain union leaders' discourse to narratives used by religious fundamentalist groups. We will expand on this in the following sections.

THE CONTEXT OF FEMINIST, GENDER, AND SEXUAL POLITICS SINCE 2019

The election of the ruling party's Carlos Alvarado in the 2018 elections did not necessarily end the debates on issues related to sexual rights and reproductive rights, nor did it stop the reactions of religious, conservative sectors regarding the issue. However, it at least led, over time, to contain two key points of the fundamentalist neo-Pentecostal political agenda: the boycott against the recognition of same-sex marriage and, to some extent, the excessively discretionary application of therapeutic abortion.

In fact, on May 26, 2020, the deadline passed that the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice had given to the Legislative Assembly to issue a legal norm regulating civil marriage between persons of the same sex, indicating that the laws prohibiting such unions would be repealed. Congress did not pass any law on the matter, and therefore equal marriage was law from that date (DW, 2020). Since then, the civil registry has processed an average of eighty same-sex marriages per month (Hidalgo, 2020).

3 La huelga general contra la reforma fiscal en costa rica setiembre 2018, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, UCR. https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/09/20/america/1537408351_248571.html

In addition, through executive decree 42113-S, signed on December 12, 2019, the "Technical Norm for the Therapeutic Interruption of Pregnancy" was approved in the country. The approval of this technical standard is part of the friendly settlement negotiated by the parties (complainants and the Costa Rican state) in the case known as *Ana and Aurora v. Costa Rica*, in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. This case against Costa Rica for obstructing access to safe abortion was brought by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to the Inter-American Court. The Costa Rican state agreed to negotiate with the complainants to avoid another sanction, like the one imposed in the case of *Artavia Murillo v. Costa Rica*. The alternative of a negotiated solution is undoubtedly less damaging to the national image than a sanction by the IACHR Court. The approval of the technical standard was in process for more than 12 years and finally came to fruition only when the government was forced to do so because of this international judicial process⁴.

Finally, the main neo-Pentecostal party in the Legislative Assembly, *Restauración Nacional*, suffered a series of internal rifts between its president Carlos Avendaño and its former candidate Fabricio Alvarado. This resulted in a split within the party's legislative bench and the creation of a new party with deputies loyal to Fabricio Alvarado under the name *Partido Nueva República* (PNR). If the dynamics of polarization of tendencies within this movement continue, it seems difficult for them to repeat the electoral achievement of 2018 in the future. However, it is very likely that the figure of Alvarado will have influence in the election of deputies to the Legislative Assembly if he makes use, once again, of the agitation typical of religious neoconservatism. At the beginning of November 2021, one hundred days before the first electoral round of February 2022, Fabricio Alvarado was in third place in the polling with 5%, well behind the former president and current PLN candidate José María Figueres Olsen, who then had 19% of the intended vote, but not far behind Lineth Saborío of Social Christian Unity, who appeared in that survey with 8% support (Murillo, 2021).

4 <https://semanariouniversidad.com/ultima-hora/mujer-que-acuso-al-estado-mantendra-demanda-hasta-que-se-aplique-norma-de-aborto-terapeutico/> https://reproductiverights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/AN_v_Costa_Rica_Spanish.pdf

THE PANDEMIC IN COSTA RICA AND THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

The first death from COVID-19 in Costa Rica was reported on March 18, 2020, and by mid-May of that year, the number of deaths had reached a dozen. The fact that the initial infection and mortality rate was not higher can be attributed to the government's effective closure of its borders, airports, and public places such as parks, schools, and universities, as well as workplaces that could operate remotely via the Internet (telework and virtual education). However, these health measures produced negative effects in the medium term, as in other countries where control strategies were implemented to prepare the health response for what was to follow. However, the communication problems of the Ministry of Health and the governmental pandemic response commission led to the creation of overly optimistic expectations among the population.

These protests were also incited by groups that for several years had been trying to generate social instability and political polarization. These groups have been linked to neo-Pentecostal churches and political parties for several years.

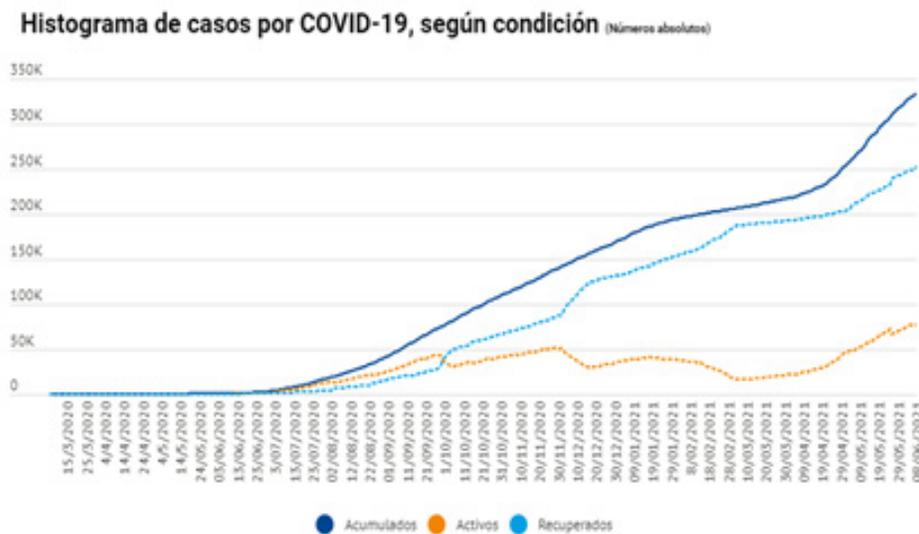
The condescending and paternalistic way in which health and government authorities communicated decisions and initial scientific information about COVID-19 led many people to believe that the emergency would last only a few months. Consequently, the mental disposition of the people after the first weeks of closure and restrictions, coupled with the country's already complex economic situation, started to become a serious political management problem for the government, which was torn between the demands of the economic elites and obligations regarding the health of the population. The government was unable to sustain for long the solidarity policy of the Protection Voucher, which was intended to help small businesses and working people who lost their jobs shortly after the restrictive measures were introduced⁵.

5 <https://semanariouniversidad.com/pais/240-860-personas-se-quedaron-sin-bono-protger-porque-se-acabo-el-dinero/>
https://iice.ucr.ac.cr/conferencia_prensa/bono%20protger.pdf

The economic crisis undoubtedly generated protests and pressure against the social distancing measures, but these protests were also instigated by groups that for several years had been trying to generate social instability and political polarization. These groups have been linked to neo-Pentecostal churches and political parties for several years.

This situation was compounded by internal divergences between the health sector and the economic sector of the government regarding the management of the pandemic. As can be seen in the graphs below, infection and death rates (which were very low until July 2020) drastically increased since then. From June 2020 through early 2021 there was a second, less controlled wave of COVID-19 cases, attributable to the relaxation of public health measures. At the beginning of June 2021, the evolution of COVID-19 cases in the country looked like this⁶:

FIGURE 1



6 The data and graphs are from official reports of the Ministry of Public Health of Costa Rica at the time of the final drafting of this report.

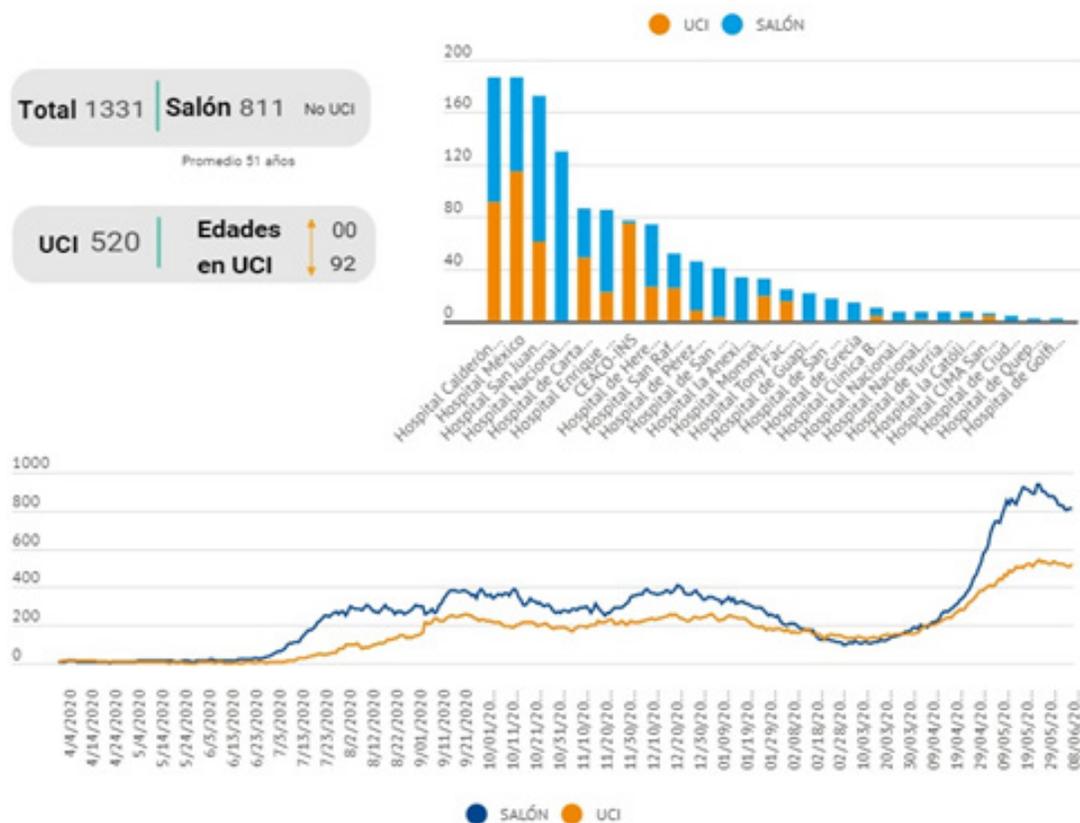
Since mid-April 2021, the country has been experiencing a third wave, attributable this time to the natural spread of the pandemic in situations where people have returned to common, family, or public spaces (although it is still mandatory to wear masks in public places and in work and educational settings), at a time when the statistical probability of contracting the disease has increased due to the increase in the R-rate. At the beginning of June 2021, the total numbers reported by the Ministry of Public Health were as follows, including deaths, after several weeks of mass vaccination:



At that time the situation in the hospitals was very serious since the pandemic has been managed by the public health system and this implied an extraordinary challenge for the limited resources of the Costa Rican Social Security Fund (CCSS):

FIGURE 2

Hospitalizaciones actuales por COVID-19, según hospital y servicio (Números absolutos)



On December 8, 2021, and after a total of 7,928 deaths, Costa Rica finally achieved the first day without deaths caused by COVID-19. Although this was a great relief for the country's medical infrastructure, the truth is that it happened just when the Omicron variant was already circulating throughout Europe and the United States, so it is difficult to predict the political and public health behavior of the country in the coming months, especially considering that Costa Rica allows foreigners to enter the territory without vaccination or a negative PCR test, which may affect the overall risk levels for new infections.

VACCINATION SITUATION

The vaccination program implemented by the country's public health system throughout the year 2021 has resulted in 64% of the population having already received two doses, and the application of the third dose is beginning in the adult population that received its second dose more than 6 months ago.

General Description of Vaccination - Costa Rica

Doses administered	Persons vaccinated with 2 doses	% of the population vaccinated with 2 doses
7 220 000	3 280 000	64,4 %

Source: Our World in Data. November 2021

The government's success in negotiating the acquisition of vaccines without relying exclusively on the COVAX mechanism is undeniable, as is the impressive work of the CCSS, which has managed to increase its capacity for severe COVID-19 patients. However, it is also essential to point out that hospital overcrowding has had negative effects on the quality of health care for patients with chronic diseases and for people who urgently needed scheduled surgeries. The most alarming and serious case is that of gynaecological-obstetric care. The quality of health services for pregnant women was drastically affected by hospital overcrowding, which contributed to an increase in situations of obstetric violence⁷ and, even worse, to a significant increase in maternal mortality.⁸

7 For more information, see the campaign to demand respect for the health rights of pregnant women launched by the Observatorio de los Derechos Reproductivos del Centro de Investigación en Estudios de la Mujer <https://www.ucr.ac.cr/noticias/2020/09/28/la-academia-demanda-una-adecuada-atencion-para-las-mujeres-embarazadas-durante-la-pandemia.html#:~:text=Seg%C3%BAn%20la%20acad%C3%A9mica%2C%20la%20Caja,las%20mujeres%20y%20adolescentes%20embarazadas%E2%80%9D>

8 <https://www.inec.cr/noticia/mortalidad-materna-se-incremento-un-259>

Finally, the mental health of the general population has also been profoundly impacted by this concatenation of crises, and as reported by the Ministry of Health itself, socioeconomic vulnerability is the main factor in psychological and emotional disturbances⁹.

EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC: GENDER VIOLENCE, MIGRANTS, UNEMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION

During the pandemic, physical and sexual violence against girls, adolescents, and women in the domestic sphere has increased¹⁰. The restriction measures have made it easier for aggressors to have more control over their victims due to several reasons, namely that girls and adolescents stay at home longer because schools and colleges went into the virtual mode, while women also spend more time at home and with fewer opportunities to talk to other people, either because they lost their jobs or because they went to virtual mode, or because they were informal workers and these activities are not viable due to the complete change in the daily dynamics during the pandemic.

[...] the reluctance of the economic elites to support the approval of a temporary solidarity tax, unemployment has been one of the adverse effects of health policies to control and prevent contagion. This situation has hit women hard.

In addition, support options for women victims of physical, emotional, sexual, or domestic violence have been limited since many support organizations depended on meeting spaces in the public sphere. For many such organizations, it is impossible to

9 <https://www.ministeriodesalud.go.cr/index.php/centro-de-prensa/noticias/746-noticias-2021/2041-vulnerabilidadsocioeconomica-incide-en-la-salud-mental-de-la-poblacion-de-costa-rica>

10 For more information, check <https://costaricamedios.cr/2020/11/25/30798/>

do the same work virtually. The digital divide clearly affects all areas of social life. For example, counselling that might have been available in a school, college, or community organization, and to which a woman could go without her aggressor knowing about it, cannot be offered in the same way through a Zoom call. Many women with limited schooling do not have a smartphone or computer, nor do they know how to use information and communication technologies¹¹.

Another sector that has been strongly affected by the consequences of the pandemic is the migrant population¹². Not only have they been especially affected by the loss of their means of subsistence (mainly informal jobs), but they have also suffered xenophobic discrimination and even the denial of access to health services¹³. After much social pressure and many public complaints, the vaccination of the migrant population (in regular and irregular conditions) improved substantially.

The lack of political will on the part of the government and the reluctance of the economic elites to support the approval of a temporary solidarity tax have worsened the impacts of unemployment, which has been one of the adverse effects of health policies for the control and prevention of contagion. This situation has hit women hard. At the present time (December 2021), the unemployment rate for women is 19.8%, while that for men is 12.2%¹⁴.

Another area deeply affected by the generalized crisis in the wake of the pandemic is public primary and secondary education. In fact, there is talk of an "educational blackout" caused by the suspension of face-to-face lessons and the switch to virtual education. Public

11 Informe OO8-CXI-2020-UINV-INAMU. Afectaciones del COVID-19 en la vida de las mujeres en Costa Rica, 2020

12 <https://www.ucr.ac.cr/noticias/2020/08/18/impacto-de-la-pandemia-covid-19-en-las-familias-inmigrantes-en-costa-rica.html>

13 Just to illustrate, we mention this case of a Nicaraguan worker who was denied the vaccine and ended up hospitalized for a month. <https://www.nacion.com/el-pais/salud/ccss-interno-por-un-mes-a-nicaraguense-contagiado/V6VJOVIM5NEHRPJ5TAYNOO5T7E/story/>

14 <https://www.larepublica.net/noticia/empleo-femenino-retrocedio-tres-decadas-por-la-covid-19-segun-estado-de-la-nacion> <https://semanariouniversidad.com/pais/problemas-estructurales-traban-la-recuperacion-del-empleo/>

schools and colleges were not prepared to make this change quickly and effectively, and the vast majority of families who depend on public primary and secondary education did not have the basic material conditions for this change. The digital divide has taken its toll on thousands of children and adolescents who have lost practically two years of education, with the consequent adverse effects on their future, possibilities for development, and quality of life¹⁵.

As in other countries, groups of pandemic denialist doctors have also emerged, attacking vaccines and public health measures. [This movement even managed to be welcomed by the Ombudsman of Inhabitants, Catalina Crespo, who is another figure of Costa Rican conservatism.

POLITICAL TENSIONS IN THE PANDEMIC

The increase in infection rates from June 2020 onwards was due to a combination of factors. The situation had become untenable for many underemployed and informal workers who were forced to contravene prevention protocols such as physical distancing and avoiding crowds to ensure their survival. On the other hand, these situations were also exploited by sectors of the most neoliberal right wing and by some anti-system groups that for months have been promoting conspiracy theories about COVID-19, vaccines, treatments, and public health measures. Their aim has been to mobilize narratives and protests of contempt for health measures and distrust of government authorities.

Several extremist groups are linked to conspiracy theories. The list includes QAnon (led in Costa Rica by a collective calling itself Patricio Villeda, working through Facebook and Telegram) and social leaders allied to religious fundamentalist sectors

15 <https://www.crhoy.com/nacionales/informe-revela-que-pais-esta-ante-peor-crisis-educativa-en-decadas/> <https://www.unicef.org/costarica/comunicados-prensa/unicef-desigualdades-y-efectos-de-la-pandemia-amenazan-a-la-ninez>

(such as Oscar Campos, now a congressional candidate, and Célamo Guido, leader of the *Movimiento Rescate Nacional*). During 2020, these forces promoted a series of protests that brought together a wide diversity of sectors whose political agenda was full of internal contradictions. Although the common denominator seemed to be the popular discontent that had been present since the approval of the fiscal reform, it was also evident that a good part of the mobilization had to do with the repudiation by religious fundamentalist and neoconservative groups of the current government. That is, the same groups that had raised the narrative of "gender ideology" in the 2018 elections are now still united on the platform of Patricio Villeda and other neo-Pentecostal leaders.

This coalition was also joined by emerging actors allied to *Restauración Nacional* who gained visibility in the media through effective actions such as protests in front of the Presidential House with a conspiratorial narrative against public health measures, which even went to the extreme of denying the existence of COVID-19. These groups reproduce the discourse of other groups espousing conspiracy theories in the US and Europe, which in turn are also strongly linked to religious-political organizations.

As in other countries, groups of pandemic denialist doctors have also emerged, attacking vaccines and public health measures. In Costa Rica, the physician Jimena Campos, close to figures of *Restauración Nacional*, has become the spokesperson and leader of these extremist groups. This movement even managed to be welcomed by the ombudsman, Catalina Crespo, who is another Costa Rican conservative figure.

However, despite all these media and political efforts, by the end of 2021, it is possible to confirm the wide acceptance of the vaccination regimen among the general population of the country. Even so, the cases in the Huetar Caribe and Huetar Norte regions, where around 25% of the population remains reluctant to be vaccinated, are still worrying. It should be noted that these regions also show an electoral behavior that reveals a deep penetration by neo-Pentecostal religious groups, which suggests a link between this type of ideology and high-risk behaviors regarding the pandemic.

La vacuna contra La COVID es segura y no hay razón para preocuparse - actitud según RIPSS
-Porcentajes, columna-

Actitud	RIPSS						
	Brunca	Central Norte	Central Sur	Chorotega	Huetar Caribe	Huetar Norte	Pacífico Central
De acuerdo y totalmente de acuerdo	58	58	69	59	58	63	65
Ni de acuerdo ni desacuerdo	24	19	17	30	17	14	18
En desacuerdo y totalmente en desacuerdo	19	22	13	11	25	23	18
<i>n</i>	59	232	458	71	83	35	62

Source: Conocimientos, actitudes y prácticas en Costa Rica sobre la vacunación y la vacuna contra la COVID-19.
CID-Gallup, OPS y UNICEF. September, 2021. p. 35

While this denialist pressure exerted by citizens and important economic groups in the country was growing (Arrieta, 2020), there was an apparent communication divergence between the minister of health, Dr. Daniel Salas, and President Carlos Alvarado. While the former put the country's health interests first, the latter increasingly seemed to be guided by these political pressures. Above all, it is essential to recognize that these mobilizations would not have had such an effect if the government had made sufficient efforts to provide financial support during longer confinement periods¹⁶.

The political conflict generated by the pandemic between the public interest in health and the private interest in the economy makes perfect sense within a larger dynamic that has developed in the country since the 1980s. Indeed, the structural adjustments and the redesign of the state in those years, which were followed by privatization and market opening policies in the following decades, have generated a perennial debate about the public role of the state – since Costa Rica still maintains a series of services and institutions of the social rule of law – and the private power of the market, that is, between public institutionality and private freedom. The pandemic once again illuminated a series of antagonisms that reveal the deep social and economic divisions in the country.

16 The government opted to use the CCSS hospitals and clinics as a buffer. A commentary by Gabriela Arguedas on the disastrous consequences of this decision can be found here: <https://delfino.cr/2020/03/covid19-la-avaricia-y-arrogancia-de-unos-destrozara-la-salud-mental-de-todo-el-personal-sanitario>

With a Gini index of 48, by 2019, Costa Rica faced the global COVID-19 crisis as one of the most unequal countries in Latin America (World Bank, 2019). However, very early in the pandemic, the editor of the opinion page of the newspaper *La Nación*, Guiselly Mora, published an article with economists collaborating with her outlet Eli Feinzaig (former presidential candidate for the Progressive Liberal Party), Dennis Meléndez, Luis Mesalles, and Thelmo Vargas (former Minister of Economy), in which they argued that:

[...] the state should be supportive and strongly reduce its expenses (temporarily close institutions that do not satisfy a social purpose, reduce working hours and their respective remunerations, cut overtime, eliminate superfluous expenses, etc. The reduction of expenses should serve to help the private sector and lower the cost of living for those who work in large or small companies, as well as in state institutions [...]). (Mora et al, 2020).

This proposal seemed to be less concerned with dealing with the pandemic than with taking advantage of it to push a neoliberal agenda (reduction of public employment, flexibilization of working hours and of social and tax burdens), in the name of a supposed mantra of "social solidarity". As David Díaz-Arias and Luis Adrián Mora Rodríguez pointed out in their public response to the article:

Solidarity would be, for example, to significantly reduce usurious interest rates and not to support generalized impoverishment due to debt. Solidarity would be, for example, to demand the repatriation of Costa Rican capital protected in tax havens. (Díaz and Rodríguez, 2020).

These types of exchanges in the public debate show very different agendas and opposite ways of understanding the country's economic problems in the conditions of the pandemic. This explains why the government's image and authority have been questioned

in the midst of the tensions caused by the crisis¹⁷. It is a fact, for example, that the tourism industry was strongly affected by the closure of borders and airports and that the restriction of movement of nationals and the reduction of their family incomes made it impossible for local tourism to make up for the shortfall.

To this must be added the economic links of tourism with transportation and food. For example, several industries have also been strongly affected in the cities due to the closing of schools and offices. This reduction in employment meant – as already mentioned – a reduction in family income, which in turn meant a reduction in tax revenues for a government already seriously compromised by exceptional expenditures on health and social coverage during the crisis. All in all, at the beginning of the crisis it was estimated that the country's economy would shrink by 3.6% during the remainder of 2020 (Flores-Estrada Pimentel, 2020).

The Nueva República deputy Jonathan Prendas presented, then, the inclusion of the “right to conscientious objection” in two projects processed in the Government and Administration Commission.

CONSERVATIVE FORCES IN THE PANDEMIC

In an article for Open Democracy, Claire Provost (2020) warned about the clear conservative tendencies that the management of the pandemic would have on issues such as migration, xenophobia, and women's rights, precisely because COVID-19 had forced many countries to adopt and even naturalize policies that have traditionally been part of the agendas of the extreme right.

¹⁷ Some reflections on this contrast of perspectives, published by Gabriela Arguedas: Conversaciones en aislamiento. "Esta crisis civilizatoria demuestra que la lógica valor = precio es absurda y dogmática" in Teorética https://teoretica.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2004_BuchEdEs02_Conversaciones_GArguedas_NViera_PJRamirez.pdf . In a pandemic there are no easy decisions: <https://www.pressreader.com/costa-rica/la-nacion-costa-rica/20201230/282003265042610>

Also, in Costa Rica, these forces have moved in the pandemic context, but in a rather peculiar way. Since 2019, the conservative agenda of the parties of a religious leaning has had to be modified since both equal marriage and the technical norm for the therapeutic interruption of pregnancy had become a reality. Their new strategy has been to introduce the issue of "conscientious objection" in national legislation, especially in laws governing health services and family matters.

It is significant that this was done during the extraordinary sessions of the Legislative Assembly for the period December 2020-July 2021, that is, in the midst of the health crisis. The Nueva República deputy Jonathan Prendas presented, then, the inclusion of the "right to conscientious objection" in two projects processed in the Government and Administration Commission. This proposal aims to limit the repercussions of same-sex marriage and the technical norm of therapeutic abortion and appeals to the "right to religious freedom", which would prevent the government from forcing citizens to perform acts that go against their moral or religious beliefs (Díaz Zeledón, 2020). It is widely known that the mechanism he proposes will not guarantee the individual exercise of conscientious objection, but rather aims to generate massive movements of civil disobedience.

That said, in Costa Rica it is necessary to underline the close alliance between the neo-Pentecostal parties, which offer, through their churches, an extensive infrastructure close to the electorate with leaders of the economic right wing of the country who have exploited the crisis to promote their neoliberal agenda. This alliance is, to a large extent, what explains the impact of the protests against the distancing policies that made the government yield. This group of conservative forces has sustained continuous criticism of the executive branch due to the economic consequences of the crisis.

In other words, in the context of the pandemic, the impact of neoconservatism and the right-wing has been mainly economic since the governmental challenges generated by the pandemic have forced the government to yield to the pressures of business groups in economic matters to the point that there have even been objections from the economic right wing to accepting a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to face the crisis since in these sectors the loan is seen as a debt that must be repaid with taxes.

In fact, the anti-tax narrative has been the main rhetorical weapon of the economic right, which has even managed to consolidate movements with a strong media presence such as the Bloque Patriótico Pacifista (Patriotic Pacifist Bloc) and Despierta Costa Rica (Wake Up Costa Rica). These anti-tax groups are pernicious in the context of extreme public indebtedness in the face of a crisis, but they have been the instrument of media penetration of these groups.

Finally, it is possible to hypothesize that these effects will have an impact on the presidential elections of February 2022 because they favor the consolidation of a different type of political conservatism. The political situation we have considered for this essay closes, for the moment, with the triumph of former president José María Figueres Olsen (1994-1998) in the convention of the National Liberation Party (PLN), which made him the first name to be seriously considered as an option for the 2022 elections.

Figueres is a former president strongly criticized for the aggressive policies of economic liberalization and dismantling of the state undertaken during his government in the 1990s, in addition to being involved in a corruption scandal related to the entry into the national market of the firm ALCATEL. However, in the current pandemic context and in view of the perceived inability of a young president like Carlos Alvarado and a relatively new party like PAC to manage the crisis, the electoral trends in the country seem to point to the resurgence of old leadership, like Figueres, and even of local caudillos.

For the electorate this would be a way of "playing it safe", but it also means a way of resisting the political, economic, cultural, and other changes that the country has experienced in recent years. The main theme of Figueres's pre-candidacy is economic revival, aimed at a government that, undoubtedly, will continue to be affected by the tension between the public and the private, health and the economy.

Figueres's historical and political weight could assure him a place in the second round of elections in April 2021. So far there are no clear signs that his campaign discourse is turning towards positions that could ingratiate him with the neoconservative political-

religious sectors. As mentioned, Figueres's core program seems to be an economic revival, and it is unlikely that his campaign will seek to rekindle the ideological tensions of the last campaign. However, it should be clear that not mentioning an issue in the campaign does not imply that it will not be included in the platform's proposals.

In any case, it is possible that the unresolved human rights issues for women and the sexually diverse population will not progress or, even worse, will regress significantly in the midst of a deeply polarized climate that favors all-or-nothing positions during the electoral campaign. Furthermore, we reiterate that, in the Costa Rican case, even more important than the presidential election is the composition of the legislature, and due to the enormous electoral choice (of which a majority is more inclined towards traditionalist or unprogressive positions) it is impossible to foresee how social discontent will be expressed when it comes to electing representatives.

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