

The Latin American Problem with Vice Presidents

By Arturo C. Porzecanski, October 20, 2025

Important and weighty issues are being debated across Latin America today, such as how to prevent a slide into narco-trafficking-related lawlessness and how to modernize public educational systems critical to future employment and productivity growth. Many bold leaders promising radical reforms have been elected around the region with a spectrum of ideological differences. But there is one curious feature many have in common from Argentina to Costa Rica: troublesome vice presidents.

President Javier Milei was elected in a landslide in 2023 by pledging to take a chainsaw to Argentina's chronic budget deficits and burdensome rules and regulations. Given very limited representation in Congress and no governorships in his column, it has been a deeply challenging promise to fulfill, though the upcoming midterm legislative elections might improve matters. Milei has recently reached for a vital financial and political lifeline from President Donald Trump in Washington, and both have excoriated the Argentine opposition for trying to thwart badly needed structural reforms. Yet, Milei has often reserved his harshest insults for his own deputy, Vice President Victoria Villarruel, calling her a "traitor" given her ineffectual management of legislative priorities as President of the Senate. Both have since traded insults and become political enemies.

While Argentina's constitution doesn't give Milei the option of removing his vice president should he want to, Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa's nasty conflict with his elected vice president Veronica Abad led to her dismissal last March. They had a falling out after their inauguration, she was appointed ambassador to Israel, and when the time approached for her to return and assume the vice presidency while Noboa ran for reelection, as constitutionally mandated, he suspended Abad from her post and appointed interim replacements. He won reelection this past April with a new running mate, María José Pinto.

Pedro Castillo, the inexperienced populist leader elected president of Peru in 2021, faced political turmoil and upheaval from the moment he won the election. He made increasingly erratic and risky decisions to consolidate his power, culminating in an attempt to dissolve the national legislature and rule by decree. It led to his impeachment, removal from office and imprisonment. Vice President Dina Boluarte came into office with Castillo promising she would resign if he was ever impeached, but in what their political party called a betrayal, she capitulated with his removal and assumed the presidency. By October 10, Boluarte's approval rating had fallen to 3% and she, too, was impeached. So much for the promises they made together as a team in 2021.

President Rodrigo Chaves cannot run for re-election next year in Costa Rica, but he is struggling to keep his outsider political project going through ruling-party candidate Laura Fernández. Chaves was elected as a conservative anti-establishment populist with a harsh attitude towards media criticism, but his vice president is drawing fire not for disloyalty, but over accusations of incompetence.

Vice President Mary Munive, who also serves as Health Minister, has bungled several issues under her purview and raised the hackles of friends and opponents alike. She issued a solid-waste management decree that the mayors of big municipalities said was impossible to comply with, especially without the needed funding, infrastructure or time. Though a deal with key municipalities was recently reached, this was a needlessly messy conflict for Chaves' government due to a lack of technical expertise and poor coordination at Munive's ministry.

Meanwhile, Munive's mismanagement of Costa Rica's right to abortions threatened to cause a rift between the ruling party and religious conservatives. While Chaves had promised to put the relevant section of the Penal Code under review aiming to narrow access to abortions, Munive defended the existing terms against any changes by the Constitutional Court and refused to placate the evangelical and Catholic groups that Chaves had courted. Last week, Chaves announced he was overriding Munive and tightening the terms via a new decree, with his vice president noticeably absent.

Chaves is in a far better position than Milei to nudge his vice president out of office and probably would not have to go to the lengths that Noboa went. But there is a lesson in all of this. Those aspiring to be new leaders in the next Latin American election cycle should put a lot more effort into selecting a running mate that is experienced, loyal, tested and competent to be their partner in office and the potential heir of their political project. Otherwise, their ambitious goals may be thwarted by "friendly fire" and other mishaps they surely can do without.

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