

Political Risk Update: November 25, 2020

- **Guatemala:** Serious protests follow spending cuts in new budget stitution
 - **Indonesia:** Government will handle key Islamist group cautiously
 - **Moldova:** New president must deal with a parliament that opposes reform
 - **India:** Modi's hope of using tech for development needs legislative underpinning
 - **Russia:** Web censorship bill may be unenforceable but sends signal
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Guatemala: Serious protests follow spending cuts in new budget

Event: Protesters set fire to Guatemala's Congress building on November 21 amid major demonstrations over the approval of a controversial budget.

Outlook: After a year of relative calm during COVID-19 restrictions, protests at public spending cuts in health and education look set to soar. Increased hardship due to the pandemic and a tough hurricane season will compound existing grievances, while corruption suspicions will strengthen the protests.

Analysis

Lawmakers are accused of having negotiated the upcoming budget of 12.9 billion US dollars in secret, approving it before dawn on November 18 as much of the country grappled with the impact of Hurricane Iota. The budget reportedly cut health, education and justice spending while scrapping 25 million dollars of anti-malnutrition funding. While the malnutrition funding has since been restored, critics claim the budget prioritises ministries and infrastructure projects that are susceptible to corruption. The latest protests,

which erupted in several cities on November 21, are the largest yet under President Alejandro Giammattei, who has been in office for less than a year. Vice-President Guillermo Castillo has joined calls for Giammattei's resignation, offering his own but saying he will not go alone. He has also proposed vetoing the budget. Giammattei is yet to respond publicly to such calls, instead stressing his intention to discuss budget modifications.



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Indonesia: Government will handle key Islamist group cautiously

Event: On November 20, police spoke to the governor of West Java province, Ridwan Kamil, about an alleged violation of coronavirus-related social distancing protocols during a mass gathering of the right-wing Islamic Defenders Front (FPI).

Outlook: Large crowds have turned out to welcome back the group's leader, Muhammad Rizieq Shihab, who fled the country in 2017. The authorities will be keen to underline that they are trying to safeguard public health rather than crack down on the group, with the government of President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo remaining wary of alienating conservative Muslims.

Analysis

FPI supporters have attended events in Jakarta and West Java's Megamendung district following the return of Rizieq from Saudi Arabia on November 10. He had fled Indonesia in mid-2017 after being charged with criminal offences, although the charges were subsequently dropped. The police have also spoken to Jakarta's governor, Anies Baswedan, about the recent FPI gatherings in the city. The FPI backed Baswedan in the Jakarta gubernatorial election in early 2017, leading major demonstrations in his support in the lead-up to the poll. Although the large Islamist rallies that were widely anticipated ahead of the 2019 presidential election did not materialise, the return of Rizieq raises the possibility of large gatherings once again, despite the situation with COVID-19. The main target would be Jokowi, who is currently facing protests over a new bill to encourage jobs that unions and other groups see as reducing the rights of workers.

Moldova: New president must deal with a parliament that opposes reform

Event: Political engagement by Moldovans abroad and a successful campaign strategy for the second stage of the presidential election helped opposition candidate Maia Sandu win the November 15 run-off.

Outlook: Maia Sandu can capitalise on popular and Western backing but lacks the institutional support to make reforms happen. Equipped with a large popular mandate but few real powers, Sandu must first formulate realistic domestic reform and foreign policy priorities.

Analysis

With Sandu adding more than 450,000 votes to her first-round score, incumbent President Igor Dodon grudgingly conceded defeat, after which Russia as well as the EU offered congratulations. However, Moldovan presidents wield limited executive powers and so she must find ways of cooperating with a parliament that is still allied with her predecessor. Her position was strengthened by the collapse of the ruling coalition's majority on

November 19 but it will be a challenge to translate the size of her victory over Dodon and the extent of her external backing into domestic policy achievements.

India: Modi's hope of using tech for development needs legislative underpinning

Event: On November 19, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that his government sees technology as the prime solution for India's vast development gaps in areas such as health and education and public administration challenges such as processing land titles.

Outlook: Indian technology arouses fewer of the geopolitical concerns that increasingly surround China's tech sector. However, there is a gap between Delhi's rhetoric and reality: for example, India still lacks robust data privacy and cybersecurity laws that are critical to boosting digital trust. The government also has yet to reform regulations on anticompetitive risks in the sector.

Analysis

Modi highlighted India's ability to produce affordable and reliable technology for use domestically and, potentially, overseas. His statement will be welcomed especially by Reliance, which under the umbrella of Jio Platforms is leveraging its dominance in the Indian telecommunications market and in consumer and wholesale retail to expand into India's booming digital economy. The firm claims to have developed 5G technology indigenously, is working with foreign partners such as Google and Facebook, and has already driven down the price of data plans for internet connectivity. India is well-positioned to capitalise on technological transformation as its vast development needs incentivise government action, while its large domestic market has spurred business innovation and risk-taking.

Russia: Web censorship bill may be unenforceable but sends signal

Event: A bill submitted to parliament on November 19 would allow state watchdog Roskomnadzor to block foreign social media platforms if they tag posts by Russian state media as problematic.

Outlook: The bill is a reactive, retaliatory initiative couched in the language of free speech and it reflects Moscow's concern about social media firms tightening their regulation of propaganda. If passed, it could be used to threaten social media giants when Moscow feels particularly offended, although systematically implementing access restrictions may be beyond Roskomnadzor's capacity at present.

Analysis

The bill's authors cite action taken by Twitter, Facebook and YouTube against Russia Today television, the RIA Novosti news agency and other state media others, calling it "censorship". Such foreign platforms will be placed on a Roskomnadzor watchlist as "complicit in violating fundamental human rights and freedom." Any "discrimination" against Russian state-run media or institutions would result in a warning and then fines and full or partial access restrictions in Russia. Similar threats have proved unsuccessful before, notably Roskomnadzor's inability follow through on a pledge to ban the Telegram messaging app, but the bill represents current sentiment. On November 23, Roskomnadzor began a new case against Google for failing to remove banned content from its search engine.

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Company Address

51 Lime Street, London, EC3M 7DQ, United Kingdom

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