

1-9-1998

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Former Ecuadoran President Abdala Bucaram Convicted of Slander In Absentia

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Ecuador

Published: 1998-01-09

On Jan. 6, Ecuador's Supreme Court sentenced former president Abdala Bucaram to two years in prison for slandering an ex-deputy and a former presidential candidate. Bucaram said he will appeal the conviction. Bucaram was tried in absentia for incidents that occurred in October 1996, during his brief tenure as president. Bucaram took office in August 1996.

Following widespread street protests and corruption charges, Congress removed him for "mental incapacity" in February 1997 and appointed Fabian Alarcon interim president. The former president is now living in Panama where he was granted political asylum (see NotiSur, 02/07/97, 03/14/97, 05/09/97). Supreme Court president Hector Romero said Bucaram broke the law when he accused former legislator Alexandra Vela and former presidential candidate Jaime Nebot of corruption.

Bucaram accused Vela of stealing classified documents concerning a 1981 plane crash that killed then president Jaime Roldos. He also charged that Nebot, while governor of the Pacific port city of Guayaquil, stole US\$5 million from a highway construction project. In addition to the prison sentence, the judge imposed token fines of four cents and five cents. Although his lawyers have filed an appeal, Bucaram said he would pay the four-cent fine for slandering Nebot because "that is exactly what Nebot's honor is worth."

Bucaram vows a comeback

Bucaram claims he is the victim of a "congressional coup" and has vowed to return to politics in Ecuador. "What is happening right now is repression because never in our history has an Ecuadoran been sentenced to two years in prison for slander," Bucaram said in an interview with the Quito newspaper El Telegrafo. He said the sentence was a political maneuver to prevent him from running again for president in the upcoming elections. "The fundamental reason for the sentence is that on Jan. 10, [the Partido Roldosista Ecuatoriano, PRE] will meet here in Panama, where they could name me their presidential candidate," said Bucaram.

Even if Bucaram were successful in overturning this conviction, he still faces numerous other charges, mostly for corruption and misuse of public funds, stemming from his six-month presidency. Ecuadoran authorities have said the former president will be arrested if he returns to the country. (Sources: Associated Press, BBC, Notimex, 01/06/97; The Miami Herald, 01/07/98)

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