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Ecuadoran Legislators Debate Reforms; Economic Measures Draw Protests

by LADB Staff

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Ecuador's National Assembly has begun deliberations expected to lead to liberal economic reforms, and it has set the timeline for presidential elections. Meanwhile, demonstrations continue against recent economic decrees by interim President Fabian Alarcon, with labor threatening a general strike. Following the referendum last May supporting holding a National Assembly, the 70-delegate body was convened in late December with limited powers to reform the Constitution. On Jan. 8, however, it declared itself a "constituent" assembly, rather than a "constitutional" assembly, assuming broader powers. It also ratified the terms of Interim President Alarcon and the sitting congressional deputies.

The majority in the Assembly the center-right Democracia Popular (DP), the rightist Partido Social Cristiano (PSC), and the governing Frente Radical Alfarista (FRA) has won two important victories: electing former president Osvaldo Hurtado Larrea president of the Assembly and approving the procedure by which a measure is passed with the approval of half plus one of the delegates. Hurtado said that, in declaring the Assembly constituent, the body proposes to pass "sweeping political reforms in a democratic atmosphere," and he discounted possible clashes with Congress regarding competing functions. He said the Assembly would not usurp congressional authority, nor did he expect Congress to interfere in constitutional questions.

Delegates authorize hefty salaries

Assembly decisions quickly turned controversial, however, when delegates voted themselves monthly salaries of US\$5,000, despite a prior plea from Alarcon for fiscal austerity. Hurtado said delegates who live in Quito would receive slightly less because their expenses are less. Hurtado defended the salaries, saying many delegates had left their jobs to dedicate four months to reforming the Constitution. He also pointed out that the budget for the Assembly had been reduced to US\$4.4 million from the US\$13.3 million projected earlier. He said the budget reduction demonstrates a commitment by the delegates to save the country unnecessary expense.

Critics called the salaries excessive in a country with significant economic woes, including mounting damages from the El Nino weather phenomenon. More than 60% of Ecuadorans live below the poverty line, and angry citizens have demonstrated recently against the US\$13 per month raise in the minimum wage that went into effect Jan. 1, which they consider inadequate. Presidential elections set On Jan. 13, the Assembly approved the electoral calendar, pushing back the date for convoking presidential elections from Jan. 17 to March 1. Registration of candidates will be open until March 30. The first round of general elections was set for May 31, with the runoff on July 12.

The general elections will be the third time in a year that Ecuadorans will go to the polls. In a referendum in May 1997, voters ratified Alarcon as interim president and approved holding a National Assembly. In November, they elected Assembly delegates (see NotiSur, 05/30/97 and

12/12/97). Three people have announced their candidacy for the presidency: former president Abdala Bucaram of the Partido Roldosista Ecuatoriano (PRE), who was recently tried in absentia and sentenced to two years in prison for slander (see NotiSur, 01/09/97); Carlos Solorzano, former president of the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ); and independent candidate Jacinto Velazquez.

Other possible candidates include journalist Freddy Ehlers, Social Christian Jaime Nebot, and Gen. Paco Moncayo, the head of the armed forces, who recently announced his retirement effective Feb. 27. Labor calls for increased opposition to economic policies As pre-campaign activities intensify, protests led by students and organized labor have escalated. The Frente Unitario de Trabajadores (FUT), the major labor organization in the country, has called for ongoing demonstrations to protest gasoline-price increases of between 6% and 10% and a 40% increase in public transportation fares decreed by Alarcon last December.

FUT has vowed even bigger protests unless the Alarcon administration rolls back the increases. It says the demonstrations will culminate in a general strike on Feb. 5. FUT president Wilson Becerra said Alarcon has betrayed his commitment to not implement economic adjustments that adversely affect the people. Becerra also accused Alarcon of continuing the corrupt and dishonest practices of his predecessor.

The Catholic Church hierarchy also asked Alarcon not to impose new economic measures and suggested that he approve some social compensations to avoid more demonstrations and potentially violent clashes. One person has been injured and many students have been arrested during the recent demonstrations. On Jan. 8, FUT broke off negotiations begun with the administration when Finance Minister Marco Flores said he would oppose any increase in the monthly minimum wage of US\$155. The basic basket of consumer goods and services is estimated at about US\$393 per month. [Sources: CNN, Notimex, 01/08/98; El Telegrafo (Ecuador), 01/12/98; Spanish news service EFE, 01/07/98, 01/08/98, 01/12/98, 01/13/98; Hoy (Ecuador), 01/14/98]

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