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## President Gutierrez Loses Members of Coalition

by LADB Staff

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Ecuadoran President Lucio Gutierrez has completed six months in office with declining support and increasing friction with his main ally, the indigenous Movimiento Pachakutik group. Gutierrez exacerbated that friction by firing the minister of education for criticizing him. The president also lost the support of the Movimiento Popular Democratico (MPD), which prompted the resignation of another Cabinet minister.

The most recent poll by Datanalisis gave Gutierrez an approval rating of 31%. In the poll, 69% of respondents considered Gutierrez's presidency "bad or very bad," largely because of his failure to fulfill campaign promises, his inability to govern, and his tendency to choose unqualified people for appointed positions. In another poll by the firm Market, Gutierrez had a credibility rating of 36.2%. He began his term with a 57% credibility rating, which rose to 63% in February before beginning a downward slide.

### *MPD says president has moved to right*

On July 6, the MPD announced it was withdrawing from the governing coalition. The decision was made at a national party convention in Quito with 3,000 delegates. The withdrawal of the MPD, the major leftist party in the country, reduced Gutierrez's alliance to his Partido Sociedad Patriotica 21 de Enero (PSP) and the Movimiento Pachakutik.

The MPD said it was taking the action because the Gutierrez administration had decided to follow economic policies that responded to the interests of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and not the interests of the country. It also accused the administration of having formed an alliance with the Partido Social Cristiano (PSC), the major rightist party in Ecuador, and of persecuting union leaders to further its commitment to privatize state enterprises.

MPD legislator Luis Villacis said that Gutierrez "failed to promote social investment and respect for national sovereignty, or to fight against corruption. The MPD, along with many other groups that supported Gutierrez, have long called for the resignation of Minister of Economy and Finance Mauricio Pozo, whom they accuse of implementing orthodox neoliberal policies and of being tied to the traditional economic power base of the country.

The MPD's decision brought with it the resignation of all MPD officials in the administration, among them Environment Minister Edgar Isch and presidential advisor Ciro Guzman. Isch's resignation was the first Cabinet resignation explicitly for differences in economic policy. Isch said the Gutierrez administration now shows a "clear and marked tendency toward the right," both in the economy and in the "decisions and disposition of the president."

Isch was replaced by Cesar Narvaez. Pachakutik also threatens to leave after minister fired Gutierrez's other political ally, Pachakutik, the political arm of the Confederacion de Nacionalidades Indigenas de Ecuador (CONAIE), is also on the verge of breaking with the government.

On July 10, Pachakutik leader Virgilio Hernandez, who had resigned two weeks earlier as vice minister of the interior, complained publicly that Gutierrez's PSP had aligned itself with the PSC and other rightist groups.

Gutierrez responded by warning Pachakutik to stop criticizing the government. "I have been very clear with them," said Gutierrez in an interview on Ecuavisa TV. "They remain in the alliance, and I want that, but under my rules." Gutierrez said he had told the leaders of Pachakutik that no member was to publicly criticize the government and that any complaints were to be made behind closed doors.

On July 21, Gutierrez fired Education and Culture Minister Rosa Maria Torres, a Pachakutik member. Presidential press secretary Marcelo Cevallos said she was fired because she ignored the president's ban on public criticism in statements she made to Guayaquil daily El Universo. Torres had said in the El Universo interview, "If Pachakutik decides to withdraw" from the coalition government, all its ministers would leave too, "regardless of how enthusiastic" they were about their work. "The president can't ask us to leave one by one, and he knows it," said Torres. "We constitute a bloc. It was a commitment made when we accepted the posts."

Sources from the Education Ministry told Inter Press Service that an underlying reason for the minister's removal was her refusal to approve more international agreements that would add to the foreign debt without benefitting the educational system. The sources said Torres did not approve several agreements she considered contrary to the Ministry's interests, despite pressure from Gutierrez's advisers to authorize the projects.

Torres said she was complying with administration guidelines to curb Ecuador's foreign debt. The head of the Pachakutik bloc in Congress, Antonio Posso, criticized the "military authoritarianism" with which Gutierrez tries to govern. The firing of Torres came as the Union Nacional de Educadores (UNE) was threatening to resume protests because the government has failed to pay them the wage increases agreed to in June to end the teachers strike (see NotiSur, 2003-06-20). Both the union and Pachakutik were outraged at the firing of Torres, who was well-respected.

"As a legislative deputy of the Movimiento Pachakutik, I condemn this authoritarian attitude of the president, who defends mediocre ministers from his own party and calls for the resignation of one of the best and most capable ministers, Rosa Maria Torres," said Ricardo Ulcuango.

CONAIE president Leonidas Iza says Torres was restoring good education policies, and acting with transparency, honesty, professionalism, and public participation. He said all sectors of Ecuadoran society recognize her ability. Iza said that the president's decision attacks the dignity of the indigenous peoples' movement, dangerously polarizes the country's political arena, and shows an authoritarian and arrogant attitude.

On July 22, CONAIE indefinitely suspended its talks with the president, and Pachakutik said it would also break off its talks with the government aimed at resolving differences.

On July 26, the indigenous and campesinos organizations that have supported the president began a national consultation of their bases regarding the future of their relationship with the government.

### *Congreso de los Pueblos expresses indignation*

Indigenous organizations, unions, and teachers opposed to the policies of the Gutierrez administration had held a Congreso de los Pueblos in mid-July to discuss administration policies. Participants included members of the Federacion Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas, Indigenas y Negras (Fenocin), the Federacion de Indigenas Evangelicos del Ecuador (Feine), the Union Nacional de Educadores (UNE), and unions of oil and electrical workers.

A statement from the Congreso expressed "indignation" that the president "has opted to continue the same neoliberal policies that he condemned" and that he has joined the "rightist oligarchy." The statement criticized the president's subservient attitude toward US President George W. Bush and his faithful adherence to IMF policies.

Salesian priest Eduardo Delgado, coordinator of the social movements, said that Gutierrez's six months in office confirmed the fears that arose during the runoff campaign, when people began to suspect that he would back away from earlier promises.

Gutierrez increased his authoritarian image on July 30, when he sent a memo to all ministries forbidding government officials from criticizing dollarization, which was adopted in 2000 and which he says will not be reversed. The memo also said that all information published by the ministries must contain Gutierrez's picture and a statement that the information is part of the administration's program.

Meanwhile, Torres said that the way in which she was forced to resign only confirms "the authoritarian tendency, the zero tolerance to criticism, the inability to listen to diverse points of view" of Gutierrez.

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