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Municipal elections left Ecuadoran President Lucio Gutierrez in his weakest political position yet, with his party losing races across the country, opposition members calling for his resignation, and preparations beginning for a political trial against him for misuse of campaign funds. Oct. 17 municipal elections led to big losses for Gutierrez's center-left Partido Sociedad Patriotica (PSP) and further hurt the political status of the former army colonel, exposing him to an impeachment move led by the congressional right.

Gutierrez says he won't resign after big defeat

Of 219 mayoralties at stake in the Oct. 17 contest, the PSP only managed to take in some 30 victories, and the 22 governorships went mostly to opposition parties. The disappointing finish led Gutierrez's political opponents to call him incompetent. Opposition political parties from the right to the left called on Gutierrez to step down or for a new presidential election to be moved forward.

"With their votes, the Ecuadoran people converted these elections into a civic referendum where they have buried the national government," said Leon Febres Cordero, leader of the right-wing Partido Social Cristiano (PSC). Gutierrez rejected calls for his resignation, saying, "There are many more things left to be done, I can't be satisfied. But I believe we have advanced in some respects....To those who think I should resign, I answer with my work."

Regarding the suggestion that presidential elections be moved forward, he called it "a totally preposterous thing. I don't know why some people believe they have the right to suggest something like that. It would be much more positive if those people brought up potential solutions for the country's problems."

Opposition forces have not yet gathered sufficient votes in Congress to move up presidential elections. While Gutierrez would not concede his office, he did say he was ready to face up to mistakes and make corrections, the first of which would be "an airing out of the Cabinet at the end of the year. It is beneficial to strengthen certain sectors where I believe there was no advancement this year." He didn't give further details on the Cabinet changes he would make, however. He asserted that he had managed to stabilize the economy and reduce the nation's massive foreign debt. "We have practically entered the international capital markets, which is essential for the country and its productive sector," he said.

Congress starts political trial against Gutierrez

Gutierrez's unwillingness to resign his office spurred opposition efforts to bring him to political trial. Led by the PSC, the parliament's main force, Congress voted in late October to impeach Gutierrez on charges of misusing campaign funds. "The colonel does have someone who will politically try
him and it will be the Social-Christian bloc," said PSC Deputy Alfonso Harb. "It is a unanimous position" within the PSC's legislative ranks, said Harb.

The PSC, with 25 of the 100 seats in the unicameral Congreso Nacional, brought in the additional 25 votes necessary to bring Gutierrez up for impeachment. The Constitution states that the president can only be removed from office with a two-thirds vote, or 67 deputies of the legislature, in favor. The number of legislators willing to join the ranks voting for impeachment has fluctuated and observers currently do not foresee that number reaching the necessary two-thirds.

But representatives of the Pachakutik indigenous peoples' party said they had evidence of criminal activity by the president and joined in the impeachment effort, along with the Izquierda Democratica (ID) and the Movimiento Popular Democratico (MPD). Opponents say they have already gathered 60 votes in favor of impeachment.

PSC allegations include that Gutierrez misused his position as president to benefit candidates of his PSP party during the provincial elections. "The issue, evidently, is misappropriation of state funds in the electoral campaign, which is more than sufficient cause in Article 130 of the Constitution," said Harb. That article establishes that the president and vice president can only be impeached for the commission of crimes against state security, graft, bribery, misappropriation, and illicit enrichment.

Analysts speaking to the Washington-based Inter-American Dialogue said that there was not enough momentum to successfully impeach Gutierrez but that it would perpetuate political paralysis in the country.

"While the impeachment effort is unlikely to succeed in the end, the question that remains is how steep a price the opposition will extract from Gutierrez in exchange for backing off," said Luis Organes, an executive at J.P. Morgan Chase & Co. Gutierrez suspended planned trips to meet with business leaders in New York and the Rio Group summit in Rio de Janeiro in the first days of November. His spokesman said the president would be reviewing documents to present to parliament. It seemed probable, however, that he would be spending his time on defense preparations for his imminent trial before Congress.

**Ministers decry "threat" to Ecuadoran democracy, economy**

Gutierrez's political strength has waned ever since he alienated groups that helped bring him to power in 2003 (see NotiSur, 2004-01-30). Foreign Minister Patricio Zuquilandia, who did attend the Rio Group summit, called on the group to form a dialogue commission with Gutierrez's opponents to contain "the destabilizing process that the government is suffering. Ecuadoran democracy is in serious risk." Zuquilandia said such a "mechanism" would consist of a commission of foreign ministers and representatives from the Organization of American States (OAS). "Its work would be to go to Ecuador and dialogue with all social sectors to convince them that it is necessary to bring tranquility and stability to the country," he said.

Economy Minister Mauricio Yepez claimed that the national economy would experience serious difficulties if the censure process against Gutierrez went through. The minister said Ecuador "might
lose credibility before other countries" and credits that had been offered to reactivate the Ecuadoran economy could be lost. Yepez said the image of political fragility could cause international financial groups to exclude the country from support programs.

Yepez insisted that the country needed Congress to approve laws that would allow structural changes, above all in the electric, telecommunications, and petroleum industries. He said that "there are no majority parties" in Ecuador to direct national policy, but rather "large minorities" which ally to serve their own interests and are "hurtfully affecting governability.

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