President Gutierrez Overcomes Impeachment

LADB Staff

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The impeachment effort against Ecuadoran President Lucio Gutierrez suffered a reversal on Nov. 10 when his opponents could not muster enough votes in Congress to go forward with removal proceedings. Opposition party members accused the president of bribing the legislators who defected from the pro-impeachment camp, though government officials denied the accusation. While the failure of the impeachment drive quieted the tone of Ecuador's political crisis, scuffling broke out in the Congress one week later, with one deputy waving a pistol and the president's brother and others coming close to fisticuffs.

**Indicting majority falls apart**

Legislators from the right and left commenced an effort to remove President Gutierrez after Oct. 17 municipal elections resulted in a huge defeat for the former army colonel's Partido Sociedad Patriótica (PSP). The Partido Social Cristiano (PSC), Pachakutik, the Movimiento Popular Democratico (MPD), and Izquierda Democratica (ID) had accused the president of misusing campaign funds and affecting national sovereignty (see NotiSur, 2004-11-05).

The PSC accused Gutierrez of embezzlement and risking national security by requisitioning state-owned helicopters, planes, and vehicles to promote his party's candidates in last month's elections. The PSP may not have received 5% of the vote in the municipal elections, meaning it would risk being dissolved as a party. The PSC, with 25 of the 100 congressional seats, led the impeachment effort, joined by the social-democratic ID with 15 seats, the indigenous party Pachakutik (11 seats), and leftist MPD (three seats).

That coalition was able to bring together 51 votes to start a political trial against Gutierrez, and the president was soon asking the US and the Grupo de Rio composed of 18 Latin American countries to mediate in the conflict between the Ecuadoran powers. But Gutierrez managed to convince three legislators to abandon the impeachment bloc, leaving his opponents with only 48 votes, not enough to indict the president. The legislators from the PSC, ID, and Pachakutik who deserted the pro-censure commission bloc risk expulsion from their own parties. If an impeachment vote were successful, Gutierrez would be replaced until his term expires in January 2007 by Vice President Alfredo Palacio, who opposes the current government's neoliberal policies.

The Gutierrez administration said it hoped to now "liquidate" opposition attempts to try the president for misappropriation of funds during the election campaign, while opposition lawmakers insisted that the impeachment process "is not dead." "The political trial is temporarily suspended; it is not dead, nor is it buried," said ID Deputy Guillermo Landazuri.

Opposition loyalists accused Gutierrez of "buying consciences" in the parliament and called the executive branch's representatives "hombres del maletin," which in Ecuador is a description of
someone who bribes. First lady Ximena Bohorquez denied being a "dama del maletin," but she did acknowledge maintaining contact with opposition deputies.

"People do not change position or become ill two minutes before a vote," said Cintya Viteri, a PSC legislator. "This is something that the government will have to explain." Gutierrez's supporters said the change of heart was the result of effective lobbying. Energy Minister Eduardo Lopez said legislators rejected the formation of an impeachment commission "for the sake of democracy, for the sake of moving the country forward."

**Minister of government replaced before impeachment stopped**

President Gutierrez may have survived the effort to remove him, but he sacrificed his interior minister, Raul Baca, in the process. Politician and lawyer Jaime Damerval replaced Baca, a move the 64-year-old Damerval claimed allowed the executive branch to "split the opposition." "Facing these new political challenges, my mission in the Interior Ministry must be concluded," wrote Baca in a letter to Gutierrez released Nov. 9. He said it was necessary to produce a group of "political actors [in Congress] that would impede the force of those who would put our weak democracy at risk. I am obligated to leave you the liberty to reorganize your Cabinet." Baca added, "The situation that the government faces seems to require another set of strategies or people to keep up with the consolidation of stability."

**Political tensions persist**

Lawmakers, including President Gutierrez's brother, nearly came to blows on the floor of Congress, and another legislator flashed a gun during a Nov. 16 debate about new political alliances that might help the embattled president. Gilmar Gutierrez, the president's brother and fellow PSP member, and Guillermo Haro of the ID had to be restrained by security guards after an argument became overheated about the possible formation of a new coalition in the Congress to shore up President Gutierrez's administration. A few yards away, two other lawmakers also argued to the brink of fisticuffs.

Meanwhile, PSC Deputy Alfonso Harb pulled a pistol and waved it around, shouting a warning to his colleagues to keep their distance, an image that television news programs repeatedly broadcast. The drive for impeachment also coincided with a wave of strikes by teachers, health workers, and prison workers, who called for better salaries in 2005.

Gutierrez's weakness encouraged the strikers, and reports said work stoppages increased in the capital and elsewhere. Gutierrez has faced strong opposition from union groups and retirees demanding a bigger piece of the Ecuadorian pie, straining his budget plans and political capital (see NotiSur, 2004-08-06, 2004-01-30). During the leadup to the possible political trial, US Ambassador Kristie Kenney expressed support for President Gutierrez, a move that led one legislator from the MPD to call for her to leave the country.

One question that lingers even as the smoke surrounding Gutierrez's latest battle for political survival clears is who his most important allies will be. Having alienated the indigenous and left-
wing support base that originally brought him to power and enjoying no substantive help from the country's right, will the former army colonel find himself dependent on US support to bolster his standing?

Or will the beneficiaries of his "hombres de maletin," deprived of power in their own parties, join his side? During the moves to bring about Gutierrez's political trial, he called on the US to "support democracy" in Ecuador, and in the days following the end of the impeachment drive US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld attended the VI Conference of Defense Ministers in Quito, appearing with Gutierrez's Cabinet members after meeting for an hour with the president. What degree of support the US can offer Gutierrez is unclear, but one price it will clearly demand will be getting him to support military and anti-narcotics operations that the US is funding in Colombia.

Ecuadorans overwhelmingly disapprove of getting involved in Plan Colombia, the US-funded program that has been given more than US$3 billion, mostly in military aid, to fight narcotics trafficking and armed groups. Military and government leaders from the US have repeatedly sought Ecuadoran cooperation in the Colombian conflict.

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