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Protests for President Gutierrez's Resignation

by LADB Staff
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Political opposition to Ecuadoran President Lucio Gutierrez flexed its street muscle on Feb. 16 with a mass march in Quito. Marchers, responding primarily to the president's purge of the Corte Suprema (see NotiSur, 2005-01-07), called for Gutierrez's resignation, while a smaller counter-march rallied to his support. Each side accused the other of representing anti-democratic principles, though Gutierrez appeared to lose ground the following week when he had to replace his interior minister after differences between the two boiled over.

Smaller counter-march supports president

Quito daily Hoy said the number in the streets rallying against the president was 150,000, while Spanish news service EFE said that some 40,000 anti-Gutierrez protesters gathered in the Plaza de la Iglesia de San Francisco, in Quito's historic downtown. Unofficial estimates numbered the crowd at 70,000. EFE said Gutierrez brought together 20,000 sympathizers in the Plaza de la Independencia. Protesters accused Gutierrez of acting like a dictator and chanted, "Lucio, Out." Many protesters carried placards that read, "Down with the Dictatorship."

Quito Mayor Paco Moncayo, a possible candidate in next year's presidential election from the Izquierda Democratica (ID) party, demanded Gutierrez appoint an independent judiciary to replace the 27 out of 31 Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) judges sacked by a pro-government congressional majority in December. "The people of Ecuador do not want judges who are affiliated with anyone," Moncayo said in a speech to the protesters. Gutierrez said the ousted judges were controlled by the opposition Partido Social Cristiano (PSC). Last month, he proposed a referendum to restructure the CSJ, reduce congressional powers, and increase his executive authority.

The beleaguered president's supporters gathered to applaud his controversial policies. Gutierrez decried his opponents as being "arrogant" and out of touch with the people. Gutierrez stood on the presidential palace balcony waving an Ecuadoran flag, and, in his speech, he portrayed himself as a crusader against corrupt oligarchs. "Over there is the march of the arrogant," he said, referring to the protest a few blocks away. About 6,000 riot police provided a buffer between the two rallies.

UN investigators to look at court shuffle The UN's special rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, Leandro Despouy, called on the Gutierrez government to allow him to visit the Andean nation in February. The government had proposed Despouy schedule his visit for May.

The legal advisor to President Gutierrez said the government would cooperate with the UN investigators looking into the dismissal of the CSJ justices. "They do not need authorization to come to the country. This is a state of democracy and rule of law," Carlos Larrea said.
The UN official said the dismissal of the justices "appeared to constitute grave interference by the executive and legislative into the judicial sphere." Gutierrez says their dismissal is allowed under the country's Constitution.

**Gutierrez disapproval at 62.5%, says one survey**

A poll by the firm Informe Confidencial found that Gutierrez had a 62% disapproval rating in Quito and a 65% disapproval rating in Guayaquil. In the capital, 36% of people approved of the work Gutierrez has done in his 25 months in office, while 33% in Guayaquil approved. The poll was carried out on Jan. 12 and polled 400 people of lower, middle, and upper classes. It had a 5% margin of error. The survey also found that "78% of Ecuadorans prefer living in a democracy, but 58% are not satisfied with its performance." Still, Gutierrez has seen his approval rating increase, according to the Associated Press, with polls earlier this month showing support by nearly 35% of the country compared to just 16% during much of 2004.

Interior Minister Jaime Damerval resigns Interior Minister Jaime Damerval resigned amid simmering tensions regarding government efforts to overhaul the CSJ. Damerval said the sacking of the judges had led to a crisis that had to be resolved. Gutierrez wants a referendum on the shake-up, but Damerval had called for a commission to choose new judges. Damerval, who had spent less than four months in office, was the fourth interior minister to resign since Gutierrez came to power two years ago.

The week before his resignation, Damerval floated the idea of creating a commission to designate the CSJ judges, instead of asking Ecuadorans to vote on a referendum for a constitutional amendment. However, the scheme appealed more to opposition supporters than to the government. In his resignation letter, Damerval defended the plan, saying it was "urgent to resolve the crisis in the judiciary." "I proposed a legal reform that would take effect immediately, because the consultation that you devised to this end could take a year, which is categorically unsuitable," Damerval wrote.

While Gutierrez has called for a referendum, the president and his supporters in Congress are also trying to maintain the appointees named to the CSJ to replace the sacked justices, while opposition factions seek to reinstate the ousted judges. This is in addition to the struggles surrounding the referendum, which Gutierrez would have to formally propose and Congress would have to approve before it could go to the voters.

**Medical workers stage strike**

The week after the protests against Gutierrez, 25,000 doctors from state hospitals started an indefinite strike to demand higher wages and back pay they said was owed them. The doctors restricted their work in the country's 1,668 public hospitals and clinics to emergency rooms, which remained open.

"The measure is irreversible and will go on for an indefinite period," Luis Sanchez, president of the Ecuadoran Medical Federation, told Channel 4 television Feb. 21. "One cannot live on this starvation
salary that has been relegated to the Ecuadoran physician." He said a doctor just entering the system earns a minimum of US$400 a month and that a physician with the highest seniority takes in a monthly maximum of US$850.

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