Opposition Figures Attacked in Congress

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Opposition Figures Attacked in Congress

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Ecuador
Published: 2005-04-01

Chaos erupted in the halls of Ecuador's Congress twice at the end of March, and at least ten political figures have been fired upon or otherwise physically attacked in recent months. The attacks have gone unpunished, and human rights groups have called for the administration of President Lucio Gutierrez to investigate them thoroughly. The congressional brawling and popular anger because of a purge in the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) has heightened the pitch of political conflict in Quito while hindering the functioning of the new court.

Ecuadoran government functions have been progressively less stable since December when Gutierrez and a government-aligned majority bloc in Congress replaced 27 of Ecuador's 31 CSJ judges in a simple majority vote that violated the nation's Constitution. Gutierrez has faced a broad political backlash for replacing the judges, with large-scale protest marches calling for his resignation and multiple international organizations condemning the move (see NotiSur, 2005-02-25).

Human rights groups want attacks on opposition investigated

In early March a coalition of ten Ecuadoran human rights groups called for the government and the attorney general's office to clear up several shooting attacks and threats against Gutierrez opponents. The regional director of the Asociacion Latinoamericana de Derechos Humanos (ALDHU), Gustavo Larrea, said that it was "suspicious" that in less than three months there had been 20 attacks on critics of the current regime. Larrea said those attacked were "social and political leaders who have expressed criticisms of the regime or are in the opposition," and he added that there might be parastatal groups involved.

Among the victims of the attacks were socialist Enrique Ayala, Quito councilor Antonio Ricaurte of the Pachakutik indigenous people's party, and businessman and head of the Camaras de la Produccion Blasco Penaherrera, as well as former government figure Patricio Acosta. In a radio interview, Ayala said that opposition forces seeking to monopolize power were also conducting violent campaigns to advance their aims, as well as Gutierrez, who, he said "exalts violence."

ALDHU's Larrea said the violent national scene was comparable to life during the administration of rightist former President Leon Febres Cordero (1984-1988), a period when there were about 300 human rights denunciations. A partial list of recent assaults include the following:

Esmeraldas Gov. Rosa Cabezas was fired on early in March by unknown assailants.

On Feb. 4, a bomb exploded in Radio Canela in Macas. The owner of the station is part of the political group Participacion Ciudadana.
A group of masked individuals assaulted ex-Vice President Leon Roldos at the Universidad Central in Quito on Jan. 26, an attack that sent Roldos to the hospital. In Cuenca, shots were fired at the home of the director of the newspaper El Tiempo, Ivan Toral Calle, in March of last year while assailants fired on Carlos Munoz of Telesistema in February of 2004. Munoz's driver died in that incident.

Those attacks followed an attempt to kill the president of the Confederacion de Nacionalidades Indigenas de Ecuador (CONAIE), Leonidas Iza, on Feb. 1, 2004. The attack left Iza's son Xavier gravely wounded.

Tear gas, brawling in Congress

Physical violence has occurred on the floor of Congress during several sessions. In the early morning hours of March 23, police fired tear gas to clear out opposition lawmakers who refused to leave after a legislative session that cut short a debate on candidates for attorney general.

Congressman Omar Quintana, president of the legislature, ordered the electricity cut off to disrupt a sit-in by about 40 lawmakers, then authorized police to move in at about 2 a.m. to force the 15 remaining legislators to abandon the building.

Ecuadoran TV broadcast images of two police firing tear gas into the darkened chamber and lawmakers rushing out through a side door. There were no injuries or arrests. Quintana abruptly ended the legislative session just as the opposition appeared on the verge of muster enough votes to block a government-backed candidate, Jorge Lopez, from consideration for attorney general. The confrontation followed a surprise decree by Gutierrez's government declaring an extended Easter holiday. But Gutierrez revoked the decree after mayors in Ecuador's principal cities responded with a call to the population to wage "civil disobedience" to protest the move.

The government decree said Wednesday and Thursday would be added to the traditional Good Friday national holiday to boost tourism, but opponents said the measure was designed to downshift the nation into holiday mode and pull attention away from political conflict. Brawling broke out on the floor a week later on March 30, with opposition and pro-government lawmakers hurling yells, insults, water, and plastic bottles at one another.

The issue again was the attorney general post, with Quintana unexpectedly ending the session that was set to deal with the vote on that position. Quintana argued that an insufficient number of deputies was present for the vote, which brought on the wrath of opposition deputies who insulted Quintana and said that 60 legislators of the 100-seat Congress were present, enough to begin the session.

Opposition legislators, who had more than enough votes ready to defeat Gutierrez's pick for attorney general, disputed the lack of quorum. Police tried to break apart the scuffling blocs. Quito daily El Comercio reported that the power was cut off and a tear gas bomb was thrown, but it was unclear who released it.
Later, in a nearby hall, opposition lawmakers held a vote where, with 58 votes in favor, they rejected the election of López for attorney general, though pro-government members said the decision was illegal. The same day, 1,000 police officers on the streets outside the Corte Superior in Quito used tear gas to break up a demonstration against the reshuffling of the CSJ. News photos showed that police officials also had to flee from the gas since they were not equipped with gas masks.

-- End --