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13 Candidates Running in Election

by LADB Staff

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Ecuador's political sectors are vying for attention in the hope of gaining popular backing in time for the Oct. 15 presidential election. The Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) and the Tribunal Constitucional (TC) have certified thirteen candidates for the ballot, but none has anything close to majority support among opinion-poll respondents. A candidate must win a majority to gain the presidency, so a runoff between the top two vote-getters appears a near certainty. But there is a potential for variation in the outcome: one August poll showed that 65% of potential voters were still undecided regarding whom they would support, while other polls showed even higher levels of indecision.

Leon Roldos leads polls with 24% to 26%

The top candidate, according to opinion polls, is socialist Leon Roldos of the Izquierda Democratica (ID), with something like a quarter of potential voters. Private polling firm Cedatos estimated his popularity at 24% in early September, while Informe Confidencial had it at 26% in a late August poll commissioned by Quito newspaper El Comercio. Roldos is an ex-vice president and veteran of prior presidential races (see NotiSur, 2002-10-25) whose brother Jaime held the presidency from 1979 until 1981 when he died in a plane crash.

The Cedatos survey gave second place to Cinthya Viteri with 17%. The right-wing candidate of the Partido Social Cristiano (PSC) is a former deputy in the Congress. Anti-establishment economist Rafael Correa is in third place, said Cedatos, with 12%. He is running under the banner of the Alianza Pais.

Multimillionaire businessman Alvaro Noboa of the Partido Renovador Institucional de Accion Nacional (PRIAN) had about 9% of intended voters' support. Noboa has name recognition among voters, having lost to Lucio Gutierrez (2003-2005) in a runoff in the last presidential election and to Jamil Mahuad (1998-2000) in 1998 (see NotiSur, 1998-06-05, 1998-07-24, 2002-12-06 and 2003-01-17). Several other candidates also have single-digit support at this point. Indigenous leader Luis Macas of the Pachakutik party, who led protests against a trade agreement with the US, also shows low poll numbers at this point.

On Sept. 6, the TC approved a thirteenth candidate for official inclusion on the ballot, Marcelo Larrea, a supporter of the Bolivarian project of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and member of the Alianza Tercera Republica. The TC, which can supersede TSE decisions, also certified Gilmar Gutierrez's candidacy, reversing a prior TSE ruling. Gutierrez is the brother of ousted President Lucio Gutierrez, and polls show him with about 7% support. In addition to electing a president to a four-year term, 100 congressional deputies and provincial and local authorities will be decided on Oct. 15.

Celebrity candidates

The president of Ecuador's Congress chided the nation's political parties on Aug. 15 for nominating celebrity candidates, including a former beauty queen, to run in the October elections. "Why are they presenting as candidates dancers, TV show presenters, people who aren't prepared to serve in the national Congress?" Wilfredo Lucero said on Universal radio. "Then there are complaints about the legislature," Lucero added. Political parties "should know how to pick their candidates." Celebrity candidates are common in Ecuador, known for its unstable, scandal-prone politics, where polls consistently put congressional-approval ratings in the single digits, making it possibly the only institution less popular than the executive branch.

Among the congressional candidates in the Oct. 15 voting is Luzmila Nicolalde, host of a TV variety show. Nicolalde is running for the Partido Sociedad Patriotica (PSP) party of ex-President Gutierrez. Conservative PSC candidates include past beauty pageant winner Macarena Valarezo. Candidates for the populist Roldosista party (Partido Roldosista Ecuatoriano, PRE) of ousted ex-President Abdala Bucaram (1996-1997) include his daughter-in-law Gabriela Pazmino, a well-known TV presenter, comic actor Andres Pelaccini, and former national soccer squad goalie Carlos Morales. A record number of fifteen presidential candidates sought approval from electoral authorities, but a few failed to fulfill the conditions set by the TSE for inclusion on official ballots.

Adrian Bonilla of the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) said, "This explosion of candidacies shows how deep the deterioration of institutionality and weakening of [political] parties is." Personality and campaign marketing, say analysts like Bonilla, will play a major role in winning the race.

Correa's popularity rises without political machine

Rafael Correa's lift in poll numbers caught the eye of some Ecuadoran political analysts who remarked that his star is rising without the assistance of a traditional political machine to organize support. Alianza Pais does not share the historic political roots that groups like the ID, PRE, and PSC maintain. Correa was a star among "forajidos," or outlaw protestors, who led demonstrations that brought Gutierrez's presidency to an end in April 2005. The protestors, disgusted with all of the established political sectors in the Congress and presidency, embraced Correa's populist economic ideas (see NotiSur, 2005-08-26 and 2005-08-05).

The admirer of Hugo Chavez seeks to de-dollarize the Ecuadoran monetary system, leave behind traditional free-trade economic models, and nationalize the lucrative oil industry as Bolivian President Evo Morales has done with his nation's natural-gas sector (see NotiSur, 2006-05-12). Polls reported in El Comercio have shown Correa's support increasing, with a significant minority of the upper class planning to vote for him and increasing numbers of poorer, popular classes warming to his candidacy, although other top candidates currently surpass him among both the rich and poor. The higher-income brackets have mostly decided for whom they will vote, while the mass of undecided voters are mostly among the numerous low-income sectors, making them the true prize for vote-seekers.

Correa's opponents, especially Noboa, are trying to break down his popularity with tactics that succeeded in Peru earlier this year, where President Alan Garcia successfully campaigned against nationalist Ollanta Humala by portraying him as a pawn for Venezuela's Chavez (see NotiSur, 2006-06-16). If Correa makes it to the second round, anti-Chavez rhetoric will likely be a central theme in his opponent's speeches and publicity.

Correa rejects accusations that he is financed by Venezuela and that such tactics will slow him down, saying, "The arrogance and limitations of our elites paint us like this, but if I was a friend of [US President George W.] Bush, they would have already chosen me as man of the year. But I am a friend of Chavez, who put the Venezuelan oligarchy in its place. In any case, they do us a favor when they us emphasize our friendship because Hugo Chavez enjoys 80% popularity in Ecuador." Courting the poor Ecuador's poor are used to hearing big promises during election time, and many interviewed in the press expressed cynicism about what the election would bring.

Martha Panama, a 19-year-old member of the indigenous community of Otavalo, told the Telesur network, "Poverty is not an important issue except at campaign time." Panama said she was seeking work to supplement her husband's meager income from construction work, but, "I have not been able to get work. It is difficult because they see me with my younger [of two] child and they don't want to give me anything."

Candidates will be trying to appeal to individuals like Panama, even if it frightens international investors and impacts markets where they trade. For example, during a debate in Guayaquil Aug. 22, Roldos said that he would use the cash from the interest payments to fund social programs, causing Ecuadoran dollar bonds to fall on emerging debt markets.

"We have a situation in which Roldos makes a statement purely for domestic consumption, which of course is not welcomed by foreign investors interests are not aligned," said Roberto Sanchez-Dahl, who manages US\$500 million of emerging-market bonds for Federated Investment Management in Pittsburgh. "We have been cautious given the fragmentation of the political landscape and low chance of stable consensus after the election."

"The electoral outlook remains complicated and unclear, but we have some cause for concern given leftist Rafael Correa's slight momentum in the polls and front-runner Leon Roldos' continued commitment to the idea of ceasing debt payments," said Whitney Kane Gomez, Latin America strategist with Morgan Stanley in New York, in a report Aug. 23. Voter apathy pervasive Polls show that indecisive voters are an overwhelming majority, as much as 60% to 70% of potential voters. Voting is compulsory in Ecuador, so blank votes often reflect protest against bad candidates or a failure by the candidates to convince the electorate. Analysts expect the number of undecided voters to decline to somewhere between 40% and 50% immediately before the vote.

The Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos (INEC) points to a 43% poverty rate among Ecuador's 9.2 million qualified voters as a major factor in the inability to attract positive public response. INEC director Marcos Quintero says indigence, or extreme poverty, hits almost 10% of the total population. "While in the urban sector there is some 30% poverty and 3.7% indigence levels, in rural areas it is 69.2% of the population in poverty and 22.5% indigence," he said.

President Alfredo Palacio eyes World Health Organization job

President Alfredo Palacio, a physician who came to power from the vice presidency after mass protests forced the ouster of President Gutierrez (see NotiSur, 2005-04-22 and 2005-04-29), is seeking to win the general directorship of the World Health Organization (WHO). The UN organization will elect a new head in a November session, with the winner of the vote taking office in January 2007. El Comercio reported in September that Palacio had secured four votes from the 34-member executive council that will name the new director, with at least two of the pro-Palacio votes coming from other South American countries.

Restarting US trade talks will be up to next president Officials in the Palacio administration have made it clear that stalled free-trade negotiations with the US will be the next president's problem. When a government decision threw US oil company Occidental Petroleum Corporation out of the country in June, the US government suspended talks with Ecuador (see NotiSur, 2006-06-02). This will put Ecuador at a competitive disadvantage relative to its neighbors Peru and Colombia, which have finished free-trade agreements (FTAs) with the US, allowing them greater access to the lucrative northern market if and when the US Congress ratifies them.

Foreign Trade Minister Tomas Peribonio said on Sept. 12 that "there is not much left to do" on talks between the two countries and that it will be up to the next government to take up the remaining work when it takes office in January 2007. The three Andean countries originally began negotiating a deal with the US together, but the contract-terminating judgment against Occidental and reforms to Ecuador's hydrocarbons law removed Ecuador from Washington's good graces, meaning talks have "been blocked" according to Peribonio.

President Palacio, said Peribonio, has been promoting negotiations with Central America, Mexico, the European Union (EU), and has been seeking the extension of US trade preferences to Andean countries, set to expire in December (see NotiSur, 2006-06-23). Palacio has been pursuing these alternatives since the US suspended FTA talks. Palacio has also worked to include Ecuador in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC).

Venezuela had also sought to sign agreements with Ecuador to make the small country a part of Hugo Chavez's Alternativa Bolivariana para las Americas (ALBA), which aims at integrating Latin American nations in opposition to neoliberal or free-trade models. Caracas' terms did not ultimately fit with Quito's self-perceived interests, however, and Ecuador rejected the terms it was presented.

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