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Correa and Noboa in Presidential Run-Off

by LADB Staff

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Leftist economist Rafael Correa will face off against business magnate Alvaro Noboa in a second round of presidential elections after an Oct. 15 first round eliminated eleven other candidates. The vote count, according to Ecuadoran newspapers, was the worst handled in decades, with the Brazilian company contracted to conduct the vote count failing to deliver on its commitment to provide a quick tally. The Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE), the country's top electoral authority, canceled its contract with the company and began an investigation of it. As of Oct. 18, a final result was still unavailable, although Noboa's and Correa's margins of victory were wide enough to guarantee that they would move to the runoff set for Nov. 26.

Noboa becomes surprise frontrunner

Banana magnate Noboa, Ecuador's richest businessman, surprised pollsters and election watchers when the vote count showed him with a lead of three to four percentage points. Opinion surveys prior to the election had shown him trailing Correa and other candidates like Leon Roldos and Cynthia Viteri, although later polls showed him rallying. This is Noboa's third presidential campaign. As of Oct. 18, with 87.66% of the votes counted, the TSE announced that Noboa had won 26.30% of the valid votes. Correa trailed Noboa by three points with 23.16% of the valid votes. The count at that point covered 32,018 of 36,313 polling stations and was progressing slowly.

Gilmar Gutierrez, brother of ousted President Lucio Gutierrez (2003-2005), of the Partido Sociedad Patriotica (PSP) had won 17.27% of the vote, another surprise when compared with pre-election polling, which did not count Gutierrez among the top four candidates. Leon Roldos of the Izquierda Democratica (ID) came in fourth with 15.27% of the vote, and Cynthia Viteri of the Partido Social Cristiano (PSC) followed with 9.61%. Indigenous leader Luis Macas of the Pachakutik party ran sixth with 2.23% of the votes, while the remaining candidates (see NotiSur, 2006-09-15) each won less than 2%. Voter absenteeism reached 29%. The election also covered 100 Congress members along with municipal and provincial authorities, although the results of those races were not yet available.

TSE spokesperson Patricio Torres said the body could have a complete count of all votes by Oct. 24. For a presidential candidate to have won in the first round, he or she would have needed to win a simple majority of 50% or 40% of the vote and held a 10% lead against the nearest competing candidate. Correa rose to lead in the polls in the days preceding the vote, with one survey by polling firm Cedatos showing him with 37% support, although the number of undecided voters was massive in every poll, usually outnumbering the front-runner's levels of popularity.

Fellow leftist Roldos had showed a small lead earlier in September, but his numbers fell as Correa's campaign got into full swing. Opinion polling, however, faced significant limits under Ecuador's electoral law, since after Sept. 25 it was prohibited to publish survey results within the country until after the election.

Upcoming campaign predicted to be vicious

The result of the Oct. 15 vote pits a pro-US billionaire and a leftist economist who admires Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in a campaign, argue analysts, that threatens to aggravate political instability in Ecuador, where the last three presidents have been driven from power by street protests. Noboa, 55, a banana magnate who is Ecuador's wealthiest man, and Correa, 43, an outspoken critic of US policy in Latin America, represent the Partido Renovador Institucional de Accion Nacional (PRIAN) and Alianza Pais, respectively.

Ecuadorans got a preview of the heated confrontations likely before the runoff when Correa called a TV station interviewing Noboa the night of the election and accused him of evading taxes on his 110 businesses and using child labor on his banana plantations. The two traded insults and suddenly Correa, who was on camera from his headquarters, stood up and ripped off his microphone, saying he was not willing to continue to debate with an "unprepared" person.

"Look at him run away," a gleeful Noboa said. Analysts said they expected both campaigns to be aggressive and dirty. "We're headed into a violent, hard campaign," said Jaime Duran, head of the Informe Confidencial polling firm. "Correa is a person who doesn't know how to lose, claiming there has been fraud, an absurd thing. Noboa is a temperamental person, and the ideological positions have been defined." Noboa's populist platform of low-income housing, improved health care, and the creation of a million jobs in the small impoverished nation had more appeal to voters than Correa's pledge to mount a "citizens' revolution" against the discredited political system, Duran said.

"Many people who were going to vote for Correa wanted a different society, but not a leftist society. When Correa spoke of Evo Morales [Bolivia's leftist president], of Chavez, I think he scared his voters." Noboa, meanwhile, gained support by being the only candidate to openly confront Correa, Duran said. "Noboa was the only one who presented himself as an ideological adversary of Correa. He said, 'I don't believe in what you believe.'"

Simon Pachano, a political scientist in Quito, said Correa's proposals were based on "intangibles political reforms, nationalism, sovereignty" and lacked the appeal of Noboa's more concrete proposals of cheap housing and jobs. Noboa has tapped into a long tradition of populism in Ecuador. With a Bible under his arm and frequent references to God in his speeches, Catholic Noboa campaigned from the steamy Pacific coast to the Andes and eastward to the Amazon jungle, handing out computers, medicine, and money. "Ecuadorans want to eat. They don't want these political speeches of blah-blah-blah," Noboa said in a candidates' debate. "They want jobs, housing, they want health coverage, they want education. That's why the other candidates don't have the popular support I do."

Correa's front-running campaign scared investors who dumped Ecuadoran bonds fearing a leftist alliance with Venezuela, Cuba, and Bolivia. Correa, who has a doctorate in economics from the University of Illinois, is new to politics, having served just 106 days as finance minister under interim President Alfredo Palacio, who replaced Lucio Gutierrez following street protests in

April 2005 (see NotiSur, 2005-08-26). Correa has said he opposes a free-trade pact with the US (see NotiSur, 2006-06-02) and would not renew in 2009 an agreement that allows the US to use an Ecuadoran military base in Manta for drug-surveillance flights. He also vowed to renegotiate contracts with oil companies to secure more profits for his country's coffers. Although a relatively small producer, Ecuador's 535,000 barrels per day account for 43% of the national budget.

"I almost chose Correa, but his politics frighten me; they will just bring further problems," said Alfredo Montenegro, 49, as he pressed wet plaster into a mould at his restoration studio in central Quito. "He will be around six months, a year at the most. That's the last thing Ecuador needs." Montenegro voted for Roldos, who said that a government by his top competitors would end within a year. Correa has pledged to examine foreign companies' contracts and seek popular support to dissolve Congress which he has called a "sewer" and replace it with a constituent assembly in a similar way as Chavez did in Venezuela. Congress is an extremely unpopular branch of Ecuador's government.

"[Correa's] a very astute and serious guy, but will have a lot of opposition," said Mark Weisbrot, co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) in Washington. "If he can manage the distribution of wealth in Ecuador, he's in with a chance." "Those who want democracy, employment, and housing will vote for Alvaro Noboa," Noboa, who in 1996 was appointed president of Ecuador's monetary board, said during post-election celebrations in Guayaquil. The son of one of Ecuador's richest plantation owners, Noboa made his money in real estate before taking control of his father's company after a nine-year legal battle with his sisters. He now controls more than 100 companies including banana exporter Corporation Noboa in Guayaquil, banks, tropical-fruit farms, and coffee plantations.

"I'm a laborer, and Noboa just makes more sense to workers," said Pedro Borja, 31, who works in a bread factory in Quito. "He promises to create jobs and that might be helpful to me some day." Top traditional left-wing party lines up behind Correa The ID, Roldos' party, officially announced that it was lining up behind Correa's candidacy on Oct. 18. This could bring Roldos' more than 730,000 votes into Correa's camp, and a more united left might have better luck at the polls. Correa's Alianza Pais is a new political organization rising with the help of popular disgust with established political sectors, yet the machinery of traditional parties could buoy Correa's chances. Leftist-baiting will be a central component of Noboa's efforts to discredit his opponent. Correa describes himself as "a man of the left, not a Marxist left but rather a Christian left."

Noboa, with his ostentatious carrying of the Bible on the campaign trail and frequent references to God in campaign speeches, will try to sell his Christian image as being more authentic than Correa's. One question that will play a key role in the upcoming campaign is whether Noboa can play on Chavez-phobia as Alan Garcia did to win Peru's presidential election in June (see NotiSur, 2006-06-16). In that race, Garcia portrayed his opponent Ollanta Humala as overly beholden to Venezuela's president, riding the theme to a strong victory. Since then, Venezuela-Peru relations have been very poor, while Garcia has traveled to Washington, DC, to strengthen ties with US President George W. Bush. However, Noboa and Correa, unlike Garcia and Humala, represent ideologically polar opposites, while the most pro-business candidate in Peru's recent election, Lourdes Flores, did not get past the first round.

Both US officials and Chavez apparently wary of tilting the race with ill-advised comments have been studiously silent about Correa, who called Bush a "tremendously dimwitted" president in September. Correa also wants to cut ties to international lending institutions, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and has threatened a moratorium on foreign-debt payments unless foreign bondholders agree to lower Ecuador's burdensome debt service by half. Maria Teresa Romero, a professor of international studies at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, said Correa is "less dangerous" than Humala, a former army officer under criminal investigation for alleged human rights abuses in Peru. "But just like him, he has radical ideas and would radically change the face of Ecuador," she said.

University of Illinois economics professor Werner Baer, a Brazil specialist who was on the committee that approved Correa's doctorate, told the Associated Press that his former pupil's anti-US spiel was probably a ploy to get votes. "I doubt that he would be virulently anti-American like Chavez," Baer said, predicting Correa would likely follow the more moderate lead of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil. Correa has been largely ignored by neighboring governments. But he did raise hackles in Colombia when he said of that country's main rebel group, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), "I am not going to call them terrorists. I believe they are guerrillas." Correa later said his remarks "in absolutely no way imply sympathy for that group."

Headline writers across the Americas seized on Correa's statement that the FARC were not "terrorists," leaving out of their headlines the part of his statement that called them a guerrilla force. The semantic distinction between terrorist and guerrilla is a standard one news outlets make daily without creating international tensions. In almost all Latin American newspapers, the convention is to describe the FARC, along with the smaller Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN), as left-wing rebels or guerrillas. The frequently-repeated headline "Correa doesn't think FARC are terrorists" or some variation of that phrase may have had a strong negative impact on the public's perception of Correa.

Without mentioning Correa by name, Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe on Oct. 7 asked Colombia's Ecuadoran neighbors to "understand that what we have in Colombia is not an insurgency with a noble cause, but terrorism financed by coca," the raw material for cocaine.

Correa opposes getting Ecuador involved in the US-backed Plan Colombia operation to eradicate drugs and fight rebel groups, which is a popular stance in Ecuador. Correa insists that he won first round Correa has claimed irregularities in the voting process, complaining he has been robbed of votes that would have given him a first-round victory, although he presented no proof. Noboa said Correa was a sore loser. "The people have given this kid such a whipping that he is acting like a spoiled brat. They've told him to take a hike," Noboa said, calling Correa a communist and "a friend of Chavez, a friend of Cuba."

The head of Ecuador's electoral commission defended his organization on Oct. 17 against allegations that the breakdown of an electronic vote-counting system in the balloting amounted to fraud. Correa alleged the Oct. 15 computer crash was not a technical failure but part of a scheme to cost him votes. "Things should not be confused nor distorted in an unhealthy or ill-intentioned way. There has been no intention of fraud in the TSE," the organization's president, Xavier Cazar, told Radio Universal.

On Oct. 15, a computerized "quick count" of paper ballots showed Noboa taking a surprising 4-point lead over Correa, spurring Correa and his supporters to cry fraud. The electoral tribunal pulled the plug on the US\$5.2 million contract it had with the Brazilian company E-Vote, hired to carry out the quick count, after its computer system crashed with some 30% of ballots still uncounted. "There was a technical failure in the transmission of preliminary electoral results by the company E-Vote and its people have acknowledged and assumed responsibility for it," Cazar said. But Correa has maintained that fraud occurred.

"They are committing a fraud against us," Correa told Channel 8 television on Oct 16, insisting he had won the election. An election observer mission from the Organization of American States (OAS) disagreed. "In this stage there aren't any accusations or evidence of fraud," OAS mission chief Rafael Bielsa told reporters. El Universo reported that it was the first time in 27 years that the vote had ended without a result available soon after polls closed. Prosecutors began looking at E-Vote's performance after the breakdown in the "quick count."

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