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Results from National Elections in Ecuador Trickle In

by LADB Staff

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Electoral results from Ecuador's Oct. 15 presidential and congressional elections have neared completion after long delays and counting snafus. In the vote, conservative business magnate Alvaro Noboa and leftist economist Rafael Correa emerged as the two presidential candidates who would advance to a runoff election on Nov. 26 (see NotiSur, 2006-10-20), but final tallies in the election took days to compile and the officials results on the individuals who would serve in Ecuador's 100-member legislature had still not been released Nov. 8. However, the unofficial results in the Congress most favored Noboa's Partido Renovador Institucional Accion Nacional (PRIAN) and the Partido Sociedad Patriotica (PSP) of ex-President Lucio Gutierrez (2003-2005).

Noboa leads opinion polls

The Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) announced that Noboa had bested Correa of the Alianza Pais, an organization set up by Correa for his presidential run, by four percentage points by winning 26.83% of the valid vote on Oct. 15, while Correa had 22.84%. For Noboa this meant he got 1,464,251 votes, and Correa got 1,246,333 votes. Their nearest competitor was Gilmar Gutierrez, Lucio's brother and fellow PSP member, with 950,895 votes or 17.42%. Leon Roldos of the Izquierda Democratica (ID) had 14.84% or 809,754 votes. The ID has decided to back Correa's candidacy. Cynthia Viteri of the Partido Social Cristiano (PSC) won 9.63% of the vote (525,728 votes). The remaining eight candidates each won about 2%.

The TRE said 6,617,167 Ecuadorans voted, with 315,376 blank ballots cast and 775,694 ballots nullified. The abstention rate was about 28.5%. The official tally took more than a week to complete. The final result put Noboa farther ahead of Correa than early reports had. Subsequently, opinion surveys of how Ecuadorans intend to vote in the second round have shown Noboa with a very strong lead.

The nationwide survey by Cedatos-Gallup showed Noboa, a 55-year-old billionaire, with a lead of 49% to 33% over Correa, a 43-year-old former finance minister, in the last week of October. In the survey of 5,062 people, taken Oct. 27-30, another 13% said they planned to cast blank or spoiled ballots in the runoff. Voting is obligatory in Ecuador. The remaining 5% expressed no preference.

"If the election were held now, that would be the result," Carlos Cordova, Cedatos-Gallup's president, told radio Centro. Polling firm Informe Confidencial showed Noboa leading Correa 47%-32% based on a survey of 1,300 people Oct. 28-29. The Market polling firm found Noboa had 49% compared with 30% for Correa in its Oct. 27-29 survey of 3,960 people. All the polls had margins of error of 3% points and none were paid for by an outside client.

Noboa's party to have large Congressional presence

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Should the trend favoring Noboa hold and he win the presidential runoff, he will have a significant number of allies in the Congress. The PRIAN and the PSP are the two largest groups in legislature, that result emerging after two weeks of the TSE laboriously counting and recounting votes from Ecuador’s 22 provinces. Media estimates became the main guide for people wanting to know the composition of the future legislature, since official results were in scant supply. Most major media outlets appeared to lose interest as October turned to November, with many of the news purveyors that cover the region carrying few prominent stories on the outcome of the congressional vote. Noboa and the Gutierrezes could claim a degree of victory as the television channel Teleamazonas projected on Oct. 30 that the PRIAN would be top force in the unicameral Congress with 27 deputies.

The PSP won 21 seats, meaning that, given the two parties' ideological affinity, they could form a bloc of 48. When Teleamazonas released that estimate, there had been a delay in counting votes from Esmeraldas, Guayas, Los Rios, and Manabi, meaning that the TSE had missed a deadline for completing the tally and was forced to apply for an extension. The Teleamazonas analysis said that the conservative PSC, previously the largest force in the Congress, would drop to fourth-largest group in the body with 12 seats. The coalition between the ID and the Red Etica y Democracia (ID-RED) surpassed the PSC with thirteen seats.

The Pachakutik indigenous party was projected to win seven seats, while the Partido Roldoista Ecuatoriano (PRE), directed by ex-President Abdala Bucaram (1996-1997) from his exile in Panama, won a mere six seats. The Movimiento Popular Democratico (MPD) will have three, according to Teleamazonas, and the Union Democratica Cristiana (UDC) will have two. The remaining nine seats were set to go to other small political movements. These numbers may change somewhat as various political leaders in different provinces have complained to the TSE about fraud and the electoral authority is investigating the claims, delaying the release of an official count.

The results mean, however, that the traditional left will have limited power in the legislative branch, even if Correa manages a comeback at the ballot box. If Noboa wins and works out an alliance with the PSP, he could command a near majority in the Congress. The absence of governability is one of the major perennial concerns in Ecuadorian politics, and the Congress is an extremely unpopular branch of government. Whether Noboa and a friendly Congress would be able to turn that around is a key question for Ecuador-watchers at this moment.

In the elections for the Parlamento Andino, held concurrently with the presidential and legislative elections, the PRIAN won two of the five seats. Prianistas Wilson Sanchez and Freddy Colon Giler will occupy the posts. Former Foreign Trade Minister Ivonne Baki of the PSP won another seat, while Wilma Salgado of Correa's Alianza Pais won the fourth seat. The fifth went to Marcelo Dotti of the PSC. The Parlamento Andino is the legislative arm of the Comunidad Andina de Naciones (CAN), composed of Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru with Chile as a recently-enrolled associate member.

**PRE supports Noboa, PSP won’t declare officially**
The PRE has lined up behind Noboa's campaign, further fortifying his lead and organizational base. Jimmy Jairala, PRE director in the coastal province of Guayas and deputy-elect, announced that his party's support for Noboa was not total. His party, he said on Nov. 6, "presents its support in the second round for...Alvaro Noboa Ponton, with an exception in the [southern] province of El Oro." He said the exception of El Oro had to do with "special circumstances that have to do with agricultural issues," leading PRE officials in that region to call for support of Correa. El Oro is one of the largest banana producers in Ecuador, and Noboa is among the most important magnates in the banana sector. A key question now is which candidate the PSP will support.

The party of the brothers Gutierrez has yet to define its preference between Noboa and Correa, with PSP spokesperson Fidel Araujo saying on Nov. 4, "What we will do is support the proposals that respond to the needs of the people and not to the demagogic offers that have, until now, been revealed by different candidates." The two finalist candidates have continued campaigning in different parts of the country, promoting offers to construct housing and improve the education system, among other promises.

Correa promises not to sign a free-trade agreement (FTA) with the US under the conditions that have been negotiated, while Noboa has said the deal will help the country. For the deal to be signed, the US would have to reopen talks. The US shut down negotiations after an Ecuadoran government decision terminated a contract with US-based Occidental Petroleum Corporation for an unauthorized sale of an oil field (see NotiSur, 2006-06-02). Top official of vote-counting firm E-Vote arrested, released The failure of Brazilian vote-counting firm E-Vote to provide a "quick count" in the time it was contracted to do so led to the arrest of its representative in Ecuador.

On Oct. 31, police arrested Santiago Murray, whom the media had previously reported to be the legal representative for E-Vote, although he claimed to be a mere spokesperson. His lawyer said that Murray had nothing to do with the failures that led to the company not sending count results to the TSE, as its contract specified. The TSE has sought indemnification from the company, and prosecutors seek to hold its officials responsible for the failed count. Social movements close to Alianza Pais have accused Murray of having links to Organization of American States (OAS) mission chief Rafael Bielsa. They accuse Bielsa, former foreign relations minister for Argentina, of conspiring with Murray and causing various "irregularities" in the electoral process. They want Bielsa to withdraw before the second round. The failure of E-Vote to provide a quick count in the hours after polls closed on Oct. 15 led to a serious public lack of confidence in the election and contributed to the long delays in getting results for the congressional vote. Courts have ordered Bielsa to appear before them, but he has so far declined.

OAS officials say Bielsa has left the country and will come back before the second round, although he is "available" to answer concerns about the electoral process. Murray was released the day after his arrest, going straight to the hospital with an excessively rapid heartbeat. A judge later revoked the order for his arrest and his lawyer said Murray would remain in the country to face the courts once he left the hospital.

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