Ecuadoran Voters Overwhelmingly Support Creation of New Constitution

LADB Staff

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

Recommended Citation
Ecuadoran Voters Overwhelmingly Support Creation of New Constitution

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Ecuador
Published: 2007-04-20

Ecuadoran voters decided on April 15 that they wanted to form a Constituent Assembly to write a new constitution, handing President Rafael Correa a significant electoral victory. More than 80% of voters supported the popular referendum to reform the national Magna Carta, last revised in a similar process in 1998 (see NotiSur, 1997-12-12 and 1998-05-22).

An institutional crisis preceded the popular referendum, pitting a majority of the Congress against the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE), the nation's top electoral authority. Congressmembers attacked the TSE for approving the referendum with President Correa's revisions to its text, leading to a set of mutual impeachments (see NotiSur, 2007-03-30).

Historic triumph for Correa
The results of the vote handed Correa a "historic triumph," in the words of Guayaquil newspaper El Universo, with a record 5.3 million votes in favor of the Constituent Assembly. The TSE reported that, with 99.1% of the polling stations counted (36,537 of 36,873), the Yes vote had gathered 81.7% or 5,317,698 votes against 12.5% or 810,274 votes for No.

The TSE said blank ballots counted for 0.8% (50,678 votes) and 5.1% (330,128) of the ballots were nullified. Absenteeism was 28.6%, a little lower than the traditional 30% abstention rate. About 9.2 million Ecuadorans were called on to vote in the popular referendum.

The TSE said it was the first time that such a high number of votes had been cast in either an electoral vote or a plebiscite. Correa celebrated the landslide victory in the referendum on overhauling the political system, saying the country had "said yes to the future." He had campaigned heavily for the assembly.

Correa has said reform of the country's political system was essential. Delegates to he assembly at the center of the vote will be elected within three months and have six months to draft the constitution. The document would then be put to a second referendum in the second half of 2008. Correa said, "Fear has been left behind. The future was at stake, the country was at stake, and Ecuadorans have said yes to that future." He told supporters in Guayaquil, "We still have many battles to win."

Correa has railed against corruption in the country's political system, labeling Congress "a sewer." Opinion polls frequently back his view. Correa responded to the referendum with an announcement on April 15 that Ecuador had repaid its final debt to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). He said he would no longer deal with the IMF, adding, "We don't want to hear anything more from that international bureaucracy."
"The country has changed definitively," Correa said. "Economically we're going to overcome this disastrous neoliberal model." The president also warned he would kick out the representative of the World Bank in Ecuador if the government received, as he put it, pressure from the organization.

**Critics: first step toward dictatorship**

But many of Correa's critics have accused him of trying to increase his power and follow Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, who has brought in controversial reforms in Venezuela, although voters have continually back him and his supporters. Former Ecuador President Oswaldo Hurtado (1981-1984) said of the referendum, "It's not a project for a better democracy. It's a project to accumulate power. All dictators always have had constitutions made to fit them."

After the TSE stripped 57 of Congress' 100 members of their "political rights" and threw them out of office (see NotiSur, 2007-03-16), opposition figures accused Correa of acting illegally to usurp the Congress. The Congress swore in alternate members to replace the ones who had been ousted, although the 57 removed members say they would continue meeting as the country's legitimate, elected representatives.

Chavez was quick to congratulate Correa after the referendum, saying, "That is how Latin America is moving forward, from victory to victory, from triumph to triumph." Correa has said he wants to depoliticize the courts and decentralize the state. Suspended lawmaker Alfonso Harb said that opposition lawmakers expect the president to use the national assembly to dissolve Congress and set about redesigning the country's bureaucracies and courts. "Ecuador's left has just taken an enormous step toward seizing complete power," he said in a phone interview from Quito.

Benjamin Ortiz, who runs a Quito think tank, calls Correa intolerant and authoritarian. "Without the checks and balances of institutions, he could reach the extreme of turning into a dictator," said Ortiz. To Correa, "a critic is not someone who is mistaken. He's an imbecile, a sellout, a lackey." Correa, who called Hurtado a political cadaver and offered to give him "a Christian burial," defended his rhetoric in a television interview. "What I do is respond straight out, with the energy, the passion, the vehemence that characterize me," he said.

Voters appear to respond to that demeanor, having handed him two very large electoral victories within months of each other. Correa enjoys a 70% approval rating in a country long plagued by political instability and poverty. Removal of Congress controversy Congress, which Correa has labeled "a sewer of corruption," has dismissed three presidents in the last decade, violating impeachment proceedings in the process.

"We have a presidential system in theory but in practice who runs things in this country is Congress. That can't be," Miguel Macias, a constitutional expert, said. A central controversy that is likely to persist is the assembly's power over the sitting Congress, composed mostly of opposition parties.

Before the referendum, on April 5, Correa apparently backed off his demand that the assembly be all powerful, which had sparked the reaction from lawmakers, who said that "it cannot dissolve" Congress. "What it can do is limit Congress' functions while the assembly is in session," Correa told...
Canal 8 television from Brazil, apparently softening his earlier position. He had vowed to reduce the power of the "political mafia" he said runs the country.

In February, Congress approved Correa's referendum plan with the condition that the Constituent Assembly not be able to dissolve the legislature. But the TSE later approved Correa's request that the assembly have unlimited powers, including the ability to fire legislators and even the president.

The politically unstable Andean nation was then plunged into legal chaos when Congress fired the president of the electoral court that ruled in favor of Correa's version and the court responded by firing the 57 lawmakers it accused of interfering in the referendum. Legal experts have said both the legislators' firing of the court president and the tribunal's retaliation were on shaky constitutional ground.

**Investors warm to Correa somewhat**

Ecuador's bonds rose to their highest value in more than four months the week before the referendum as some concern abated that Correa would default on the government's US$10 billion in foreign debt.

The president and finance minister threatened to halt payments on some foreign debt to increase social spending before changing course and making interest payments on schedule in February. "Ecuador needs to calm waters or foreign investment is going to start drying up," said Mark Turner, Latin America equities analyst with Hallgarten and Company in Lima. "The country has attractive energy and mining prospects that they will be able to sell to foreign investors in the immediate future." Ecuador's bond rating fell to the world's worst after Correa's win.

-- End --