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Ecuadoran President's Party Dominates Election for Constitutional Assembly

by LADB Staff

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Ecuador's President Rafael Correa scored a major electoral victory on Sept. 30 when voters gave his Alianza Pais (AP) party an extremely solid majority in the Constituents Assembly elected to rewrite that nation's Constitution with more than two-thirds of voters choosing it over other parties.

The win puts Correa's new party in strong position to reshape the national government, while it constituted a sound rebuke of the traditional parties that have dominated Ecuadoran politics in recent decades. It represents a further advancement for Correa's vision of national reform and consolidates his already-broad popularity.

The main controversy now facing the nation is whether the 100-seat unicameral Congress should be dissolved once the assembly is seated. Some Congress members either allied with Correa or in favor of creating a new legislature have already resigned, while those opposed claim that the removal of the Congress would lead to a dictatorship (see NotiSur, 2007-03-16, 2007-03-30 and 2007-05-11).

Alianza Pais may have won as many as 80 of 130 seats With 95% of the vote counted on Oct. 10, the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE), Ecuador's top electoral authority, reported that the AP movement had 69.83% of the votes, meaning Correa's allies might ultimately take 80 of the 130 seats in the assembly. Ten days after the vote, the TSE had counted ballots from 35,774 of the 37,656 polling stations and the official party had accumulated 2,702,873 votes.

The Partido Sociedad Patriotica (PSP) of former President Lucio Gutierrez (2003-2005) trailed at a distant second place with 281,499 votes, or 7.27%. The PSP, according to projections on Oct. 10, would win between 15 and 17 seats. The Partido Renovador Institucional de Accion Nacional (PRIAN) led by banana magnate Alvaro Noboa took 6.50% of the vote and projections estimated that it would gain between six and seven seats.

The Partido Social Cristiano (PSC) was set to get between five and six seats in the assembly with 3.74% of the vote. The PSC dominated the Ecuadoran political scene over the past 20 years, particularly through the leadership of former President Leon Febres Cordero (1984-1988), but the fourth-place position now makes it into a marginal force.

Of the remaining national groups, only two parties surpassed the 1% mark: the Red Etica y Democracia (RED) with 2.01% and the Movimiento Popular Democratico (MPD), with 1.66%. The MPD is aligned with the government, giving the AP that much more of a boost in the assembly. 20 other national groups did not hit the 1% mark. The TSE reported that 6,648,439 voters cast ballots, with 415,571 of them casting blank ballots and 643,983 of the ballots nullified.
The group Participacion Ciudadana (PC), funded by a consortium of local media, made a quick count of a certain portion the ballots immediately after the vote. The PC count was conducted at 6,129 of the country's 37,656 voting centers. The sampling was equivalent to 82% of the votes registered at the centers.

The quick count showed that the three biggest individual vote-winners were former minister of energy Alberto Acosta, who topped the AP list of candidates and is campaigning to take the presidency of the assembly; Gilmar Gutierrez of the PSP who is the brother of former President Lucio Gutierrez (2003-2005); and the PRIAN's Noboa, who alleged fraud in the elections when his party's showing came in much lower than he had claimed it would.

Of the 130 seats, 24 were nationally voted-upon representatives and the remaining 106 represent the provinces. Early estimates said that the AP which the TSE formally listed under the name Movimiento Patria Altiva Y Soberana (MPAIS) and is also know as Acuerdo PAIS would win 14 or 15 of the 24 national seats. The PSP was trailing with 2 of the 24 national seats, according to early sampling.

The Asamblea Constituyente will be convened in November in Montecristi, in the western coastal province of Manabi. Voters overwhelmingly approved of creating an assembly for a constitutional rewrite in April of this year (see NotiSur, 2007-04-20).

The final draft of the Constitution will have to be approved by voters in a referendum and Correa has called for elections for the president and vice president to be moved up and held after that referendum, along with a vote for new legislators. He has repeatedly stated that if voters reject him, "I will go home."

**A chance to avoid deadlock similar to one in Bolivia**

Correa's big win could potentially help his government avoid the blockages experienced nearby in Bolivia in its Asamblea Constituyente. Bolivia's assembly has seen frequent deadlocks since 2005 when it was first convened. The Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) party of President Evo Morales controls just over half of the seats in the assembly, meaning that it lacks the two-thirds voting power necessary to pass changes in the draft of the Constitution.

This has left MAS initiatives in the assembly particularly vulnerable to opposition party efforts to block them, while opposition initiatives cannot get past the MAS majority (see NotiSur, 2006-08-04, 2006-12-08 and 2007-09-07).

Correa's numerical strength in Ecuador's assembly could make the Ecuadoran constitutional rewrite move much more quickly. Ecuador's assembly will require only a majority of half of the representatives plus one more, or 66 votes, to pass changes rather than two-thirds required in Bolivia, meaning the MAS stalemate scenario is unlikely to take place in Montecristi so long as the AP bloc finds consensus among its own membership. Correa said his "good friend" Morales committed "a tremendous error" in the set-up of his country's constitutional assembly.
"[Evo] fell into the trap of needing consensus with two-thirds of the assembly in order to approve constitutional reforms. Two-thirds that he does not have,” said Correa.

-- End --