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President of Ecuador's Constituent Assembly Resigns Over Rift with Correa

by LADB Staff

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The president of Ecuador's Asamblea Constituyente resigned in June in a dispute with President Rafael Correa's Alianza Pais (AP) party. Alberto Acosta and the AP, of which he is a member, disagreed on the timeframe for drafting a new Constitution for Ecuador, with Correa criticizing the supposed slowness of the process under Acosta's leadership. Correa criticizes delay in drafting Constitution Correa had been critical of the speed at which the assembly was putting together a constitutional draft in the weeks leading up to Acosta's June 23 resignation announcement.

Spanish news service EFE quoted the president as saying the assembly was spending too much time and effort gathering opinions and prolonging debates. "Alberto is very democratic, and I am as well, but he believes that democracy means listening to the whole world, and that can be a trap to delay us, for example, in taking action in the assembly."

Correa said it is "another thing for them [opposition assembly members] to be able to sit down and lose time debating for debate's sake, confusing that with democracy. It is another thing to believe that [assembly leaders] must allow their enemies to impose their agenda."

Acosta received the most votes of any candidate in the balloting to name the delegates to the Asamblea Constituyente on Sept. 30, 2007, and was unanimously elected president of the body Nov. 29, when the group met for the first time (see NotiSur, 2007-10-12).

The newly formed and extremely popular AP dominated the assembly, with its candidates winning 80 of the 130 seats. Acosta's resignation came as a surprise to press outlets covering Ecuadorian politics.

Dispute over timeframe

Correa said on June 28 that the resignation "hurt a lot" but was inevitable given the need to comply with the established timeframe to put the new Constitution together. The assembly is legally required to finish drafting the Constitution by July 26 if the draft is to go to a popular referendum in September.

Correa said in his weekly radio show that Acosta had said it was not possible to meet the deadline. Correa said that, despite that, he insisted on meeting the deadline and urged the completion of work by that date. The president said Acosta asked for 48 hours to reflect on whether he would continue and, after that, he decided to resign and pass the job to another person.

The assembly, meeting in its headquarters at Montecristi, 250 km southwest of Quito, elected a new president on June 25, naming AP member and assembly vice president Fernando Cordero. "I prefer
to remain faithful to my principles, even if my resignation cannot be properly understood," said Acosta amid applause as he read out his letter of resignation before the plenary assembly. He said he would not leave the assembly or his party and would continue as an assembly delegate with the AP.

Correa insisted in his radio program that the country would have a "historic Constitution" by July 26 and said his administration would give the opposition "a thrashing" in the referendum.

Opposition critical

Opposition assembly member Gilmar Gutierrez of the Partido Sociedad Patriotica (PSP) called on official party members to "not comply with the [president's] orders in silence" and "not permit the president to have a servile [assembly] president."

Correa, said opposition assembly member Pablo Lucio Paredes of the Movimiento Ciudadano Independiente Futuro Ya (MFY) on Ecuavisa television, "sees his poll rating falling and wants to have a Constitution quickly and go rapidly to a referendum and he, illegally, wants to use his time as president to promote the 'yes' vote."

Professor Teodoro Bustamante of the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLASCO) in Ecuador said he thought the assembly "would not be able to have a good Constitution in the time established."

Correa allies downplayed the controversy, with Augusto Barrera, coordinator between the president and the assembly, saying on Teleamazonas, "Let's dedramatize this situation a little, it is not the end of the world nor is it the end of the assembly."

But prior government allies had concerns as well. The Confederacion de Nacionalidades Indigenas del Ecuador (CONAIE), the country's largest indigenous-peoples organization, said in a press release that it was "profoundly worried for the future of the new Constitution," given the Acosta resignation.

The group said Acosta had been "successful, democratic, pluralistic and participatory" since the installation of the assembly. The group said Acosta's departure was a "product of the permanent pressure and excessive interference by the executive branch, which has not respected the full powers and autonomy" of the assembly. CONAIE also called on Correa "to be consistent with his speeches and campaign positions." It said it might withdraw its members from the assembly after conducting an analysis of its activities.

Assembly member protests by sewing lips

On June 27, assembly member Rafael Esteves of the PSP carried out a protest on the floor of the assembly's meeting hall when he tried to sew his lips together, saying the AP leadership was denying his right to speak. "I am going to sew my lips together, democracy does not exist here," said Esteves. "I do not have a voice."
Other assembly members physically struggled with him to prevent the self-mutilation, while others called on him to stop "this show." Esteves left the hall, closed himself in his car, and sewed a stitch in his lips, according to images shown on Ecuadoran television. Esteves' protest gave handy imagery to protests by the minority opposition, which has attacked what it calls the "dictatorial attitudes" of the AP and alleged interference by President Correa.

On June 25, some 30 assembly members from the opposition left the meeting hall while deliberations were in session, protesting the formation of the body's directorial commission. On June 28, the assembly's press secretary, Orlando Perez, denounced opposition assembly member Leonardo Viteri of the Partido Social Cristiano (PSC), telling Cordero that Viteri had threatened him while they were in the assembly building. Cordero characterized the constant suspension of meeting sessions by opposition protests as a "boycott" designed to damage the assembly's image.

Diana Leon, an assembly member who separated herself from the AP, told Teleamazonas television, "We always will say jointly what we believe is wrong. It is a [multi-party] bloc that wants democracy to be respected, we are not with the dictatorship of Mr. Cordero." Opposition efforts to block progress on implementing a new Constitution have so far been successful in nearby Bolivia, which is also led by a leftist majority (see NotiSur, 2007-12-14, 2008-05-16).

But the opposition in Bolivia controls a much larger percentage of the Asamblea Constituyente, with Bolivian President Evo Morales' Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) barely controlling a majority of seats in that body. The Bolivian opposition was able to prolong the drafting process, disrupt many meetings, and the country's top electoral court ultimately disallowed the delivery at least in the near-term of the draft to voters for a popular referendum earlier this year.

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