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Re-Election of Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa Brings Uncertainty, Hope

by LADB Staff

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Ecuador is in need of some complex decisions, but one decision has now been made at the ballot box with the April 26 re-election of President Rafael Correa for a second term. Correa received 51% of the first-round vote, eliminating the need for a runoff. Nevertheless, while this decision apparently had a definite political direction, there may not be sufficient support to implement it.

Since Ecuador's return to democracy in 1979, elections have been marked by the people's desire for social change, consistently expressed through the election of candidates whose social discourse outlined programs proposed by leftist parties since the middle of the last century. This tendency to use leftist discourse to win elections was intensified in the campaigns of the last three presidents prior to Correa, who were then ousted for not fulfilling their campaign promises.

This includes former President Lucio Gutierrez (2003-2005) who ran against Correa in this election. Gutierrez misled the Ecuadoran social movements and leftist parties, including the indigenous movement. He made alliances with these groups by promising a progressive government program and then betrayed them when he took power (see NotiSur, 2003-06-20, 2004-01-30, 2005-04-22).

Gutierrez's campaign rhetoric at the time was no different from the rhetoric Correa uses now. However, the fulfillment of campaign promises has been different. Correa has implemented programs that particularly benefit marginalized social sectors, which won him re-election, even though implementation of some programs, such as those dealing with the environment, has had serious limitations.

Correa won the presidential election in 2006; he won the referendum to hold a constituent assembly; he won the elections for constituent-assembly delegates; and he won the referendum to approve the new Constitution. However, in the last election, the number of votes he received dropped sharply. Although he obtained 51% of the vote, that was less than he received in the assembly-delegate election.

Correa concerns both left and right

Part of the decline in the number of votes can be attributed to a government's natural tendency to gradually lose public support, but a significant part can be attributed to the distrust generated both in sectors of the right and in the most radical sectors of the left. What the right sees coming with Correa is a government that will expand a system of private-property confiscations, under the socialist formula, while what the left sees coming is an avalanche of mining and oil-extraction concessions that will damage the environment, especially indigenous communities.

Addressing the issue of socialism, Correa said, after learning that he won, that he would radicalize and accelerate construction of 21st century socialism. "Rather than change course, [our intention is

to] expand the changes that we have begun, making them more radical, more rapid. To definitively advance toward 21st century socialism," said the president in his first press conference with foreign journalists.

And regarding confiscations, Minister Coordinator of Policy Ricardo Patino announced a first program of land redistribution, using the large extensions of agricultural land seized from bankers who have not paid their debts to the government and who were responsible for the massive failure of the financial system in 1999 (see NotiSur, 2001-07-27).

Beyond what was covered in the announcement, nothing indicates any move to confiscate the means of production. On the contrary, Correa has shown that he favors strengthening private production and continuing with dollarization, although he has also said he would look for ways to create a Latin American currency.

"I don't defend dollarization, I defend the Ecuadoran people, and if dollarization collapses it will be a tremendous blow for the people. That's why we will maintain dollarization. But, hopefully we can move toward a regional currency. It would be the best thing that could happen to Latin America, and we will work for that with the other governments in the region," said the president.

The left interpreted a Correa victory and his tendency to not look for consensus with other political forces as threatening new confrontations with social bases that do not agree with continuing the model of resource extraction and monetary accumulation, even when some social-compensation programs are implemented. Thus, Correa's vote could not be attributed to assembly candidates, who were elected on the same time.

Groups see need for government oversight

The conviction that society, through its representatives, must supervise the exercise of power characterized the vote for assembly representatives, making it an institution of major importance. Although the presidential figure is strong, the social conviction was also strong regarding the need to set limits and controls on power.

The concept of oversight has been established as the principal argument of the forces of the political right, who have proclaimed themselves the guardians of democracy in the face of abuse of power; and the forces of the left portray themselves as guardians of the political project of social transformation that the government would be on the verge of betraying if it continued the same economic model based on resource extraction.

Preliminary results indicate the governing Movimiento Pais will have the largest number of legislators but not an absolute majority in the Asamblea Nacional (AN), and, without it, the government will be forced to negotiate. Although Correa has ruled out negotiating with the right, the question is whether he will negotiate as equals with a conglomerate of small blocs, which could form a leftist coalition, or with an important number of local movements that also won assembly seats.

The fragmentation of political discourse and the lack of credibility of traditional parties favored the emergence of small local movements in which old political bosses have inserted themselves, now without the weight of a national party structure and without the need to respond to party discipline. These local movements' presence in the assembly could threaten even the government's intentions, because they have allowed local political bosses, generally conservative, to keep the possibility of staying involved in institutions of political power.

These local movements can become government watchdogs or join the presidential course of action, depending on the political ability of Correa's team. Perhaps that is why the president has called on Gustavo Larrea to again be part of his team. Larrea had extensive experience in political negotiating as minister of government and minister of security. He had to step down to defend himself against accusations that he had ties to the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC).

If local movements cannot be controlled, the alternative would be to look for cooperation with the left, which would have to be done with agreements on governing and democratization of power, that is, with clear agreement on the government model to follow and ceding decision-making space to the new allies.

This could become an opportunity to remake the alliances and the outlines of government put forth at the beginning of the 2006 electoral campaign. It could also be an opportunity for the indigenous movement to increase its political involvement. This possible alliance would also strengthen the capacity of parties such as the Movimiento Popular Democrático and the Partido Socialista, which have not been able to emerge from the government's shadow or to have any significant participation in it. It all depends on Rafael Correa.

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