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Since Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa took office, the environment has been the administration's breakpoint, often resulting in the loss of important leaders of the movement that carried him to the presidency and forcing a shuffling of officials, some taking positions for which they had little aptitude. With the first government proposals, considered nationalist and leftist, social-organization activists responded, including those from various environmental sectors, attracted to being connected with governmental agencies supporting what they had worked for during their years of militancy. The activists' participation allowed the government to put together a team enviable for its links to social bases and its professional abilities. Few imagined they would witness a confrontation in which the losers would repeatedly be reviled by the president to the point of being ousted completely from the political scene. The first rupture in the environmental area occurred in June 2007, when environmentalists who had entered the government, among them activists who worked alongside Energy Minister Alberto Acosta and academics who had made environmental work their careers, principally at the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), or who had ties to environmental economist Fander Falconi, convinced the government to move forward with the Iniciativa Yasuni. This Ecuadoran government proposal would support international efforts to avoid global warming. The support would consist of not exploiting the estimated 846 million barrels of oil in the Yasuni protected area of the Ecuadoran Amazon, called Campo Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini (ITT). In return, developed countries would compensate Ecuador with half the income it would lose by not extracting the oil, calculated at US$7 billion. The Yasuni is considered to have the greatest biodiversity on the planet and would be damaged by oil exploitation. At the time the proposal was made, with the government's strong commitment to the environment, the losers were planning officials with state-owned Petroecuador, and the Iniciativa Yasuni prevailed over the development plans of the company, headed by Carlos Pareja Yanuzzeli. Pareja, who had served in the government of former President Alfredo Palacio (2005-2007) also as head of Petroecuador, moved ahead with prospecting contracts with Chinese companies in Yasuni territory. He signed an agreement of understanding with Chinese company SINOPEC for exploration and exploitation of the ITT, ignoring the law that gave the energy minister responsibility for integral planning of oil exploitation. The friction between Pareja and Acosta was evident, and Pareja finally had to leave Petroproduccion, a subsidiary of Petroecuador, when the president turned the administration of the company over to the Navy. Confrontation in the Asamblea Constituyente The environmental-policy dispute was transferred to the Asamblea Constituyente, which was charged with writing a new Constitution and which, when it began, was headed by Alberto Acosta. The tensions in the Asamblea Constituyente on environmental issues and the rights of indigenous peoples brought to the political stage lawyer Alexis Mera, the president's legal counsel and one of his most trusted advisors. Alexis Mera has no background with social movements and even less with defense of the environment. On the contrary, his prior jobs tied him to the extreme right of Guayaquil, headed at that time by former President Leon Febres Cordero (1984-1988). Mera was legal advisor to Febres Cordero and to the businesses of his powerful family, whose principal activity is agroexport and heavy-equipment import through the company Febres Cordero Ltda, owned by Francisco Febres Cordero, brother of the ex-president. Mera set out to undermine the
Progressive advances of the Constitution, particularly regarding recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples and nature. Mera also influenced the design of the legal structures that would continue to support a development model based on natural-resource extraction, an idea that goes against the "good-living" spirit that should guide the Constitution. Despite government pressure, which led to Acosta's departure as president of the Asamblea, delegates wrote a Constitution that protects nature and prohibits exploitation of natural resources in protected areas. Article 407 bans exploitation of any natural resource in protected areas and the Mandato Minero (mining mandate) returns to the state the mining concessions given to countless businesses, some illegally (see NotiSur, 08-10-10). Acosta was the first important loss for the government; he was replaced as Asamblea president by Fernando Cordero, a person with little leadership ability, faithful to Correa's orders, and easily influenced by Mera. The Constitution provided an adequate legal framework for the Iniciativa Yasuni to take shape and become a viable proposal under the leadership of Fander Falconi, who as director of the Secretaria Nacional de Planificacion y Desarrollo (SENPLADES) had conceived of a long-term plan for Ecuador to cease being an exporter of raw natural resources and base its development on protecting the environment. The Iniciativa Yasuni was the flagship project of the new development model. Falconi, who had stayed above the political fray, was thrust into the spotlight when he was nominated to be foreign minister, a government post that had had two previous occupants under Correa and in which he would have to confront the problems with Colombia following that country's bombing raid in Angostura in March 2008 (see NotiSur, 2008-03-07). Falconi was firm in his defense of national sovereignty, but his greatest dexterity was in pushing forward the Iniciativa Yasuni, and he convinced various countries to compensate Ecuador for not exploiting oil, including Germany, Hungary, and France. When everything seemed ready and an understanding had been reached to sign a fiduciary agreement for the funds from the countries adhering to the proposal, Alexis Mera once again came onto the scene, this time to contend that the trust violated national sovereignty as it would be administered by the UN Development Programme (UNDP). Since sovereignty is a sensitive issue for Correa, Mera's observations caused the president to question Falconi's negotiations and prompted his resignation as foreign minister. Falconi joined the list of those banished from the government despite being one of the architects of the movement that carried Correa to the presidency. A recycling government The most lamentable losses for the government have been the resignations of many Movimiento PAIS founders who have a large social base, such as Acosta, who has ties to the indigenous movement; Manuela Gallegos, who led urban groups in the Alianza Democratica Nacional (ADN); and Falconi, part of the national academic circle. For Manuela Gallegos, the president's habit of discrediting his old allies is unacceptable, and she called him on it, insisting that Acosta, Falconi, and she had been loyal to a political project. "Rest assured that we have not changed our direction or our vision or our commitment to the country. We have no shackles. Perhaps it would be good to analyze certain people who have come into the government for other interests," said Gallegos in resigning from Movimiento PAIS. The constant loss of key ideological and political operatives has forced the government to recycle its most supportive civil servants. Thus, the failure of those in positions to which they have been appointed does not mean their departure from the government if they are unconditional in their support for Correa; instead, when they have been questioned, they have been reassigned, sometimes to even higher-level positions. A case in point is Ricardo Patino, who had held positions in various ministries and had been in charge of political negotiations with other social sectors. Patino did not prove to be a brilliant civil servant and was even tainted by scandals such as the foreign-debt negotiations that had allegedly been damaging to the country. Nevertheless, he has always been useful to Correa and is now being rewarded by being named to replace Falconi as
foreign minister. The scattering of Movimiento PAIS political operatives is increasing and provoking a grotesque recycling of officials who leave some positions to improvise in others. But this has not made a dent in the president's impulsiveness. However, if he does not rectify his habit of getting rid of those who have worked loyally for a project of social change and question decisions that deviate from that change, he will end up alone, without a social base and flattered only by the same right that he began to vigorously fight when he became president.

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