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**Ecuadoran Coup: A Dilemma To Be Revealed**

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The events of Sept. 30 are topics for analysis in Ecuador's political circles. Analysts debate whether there was a conspiracy to overthrow President Rafael Correa, even to kill him, or whether it was merely a police uprising stemming from mounting discontent and the disdain heaped on them in recent months, and which, during the course of the day, took on dramatic overtones provoked by the president and his security detail.

President Correa has clearly established a system of governance based on intransigence and imposing laws that, in his view, are necessary to further the socialist process. Thus, the president has imposed various laws, at times bypassing the Asamblea Nacional (AN).

Because of this imposition of laws, some of which contradict the Constitution approved in 2008 by the Ecuadoran people, the government has met opposition from various social sectors that have mobilized against him, despite harsh police repression and charges of sabotage and treason against the principal leaders of grassroots organizations.

**New laws, new conflicts**

After the Constitution, which was written in Montecristi, was approved in a referendum in 2008, the Comisión Legislativa of the Asamblea Constituyente, and later the AN, needed to pass a series of laws to bring the national body of laws into conformity with the new Constitution.

The legislative process did not have the necessary consensus of the social sectors, so laws such as the water law (Ley de Aguas) could not be passed because of opposition from social movements, particularly the indigenous movement. Other laws, such as the mining law (Ley de Minas), were successfully implemented despite allegations of their unconstitutionality by environmental and human rights agencies.

The new laws to put the constitutional precepts into practice must also regulate public administration, education, territorial organization, and oversight of the financial system. The drafting of these laws also moved forward without consultation with the relevant associations and social sectors, provoking uncertainty and indignation.

Falling within this scenario was the public service law (Ley de Servicio Público), which triggered the police uprising. It sought to regulate the chaotic system of salary bonuses for public servants, where perks abound for privileged groups, such as those in the oil sector, social security, telecommunications, and the governmental financial-oversight system, while other sectors have to accept measly recognitions for their years of service, such as the bonds given members of the Policía Nacional for each five years of service. The AN's solution for this chaos was to eliminate all bonuses, awards, decorations, Christmas baskets, and other public-sector privileges.

The AN also had to deal with the government's imposing its particular criteria regarding some laws. The versions of the laws approved by the AN were vetoed or modified by the executive, and the Asamblea did not use its authority to insist on the approval of the entire body of laws or to override
the executive veto. Instead, it let the laws take effect by what is called "operation of law" (ministerio de la ley). Under operation of law, a law or an amendment proposed by the executive takes effect when the time allotted for the AN to debate it expires. Such are the cases of the territorial law (Ley de Ordenamiento Territorial), which affects indigenous peoples, the higher-education law (Ley de Educación Superior), which affects universities, and the public-service law.

Not only were the benefits that could have resulted from approving any of the laws muddied because of the failure to socialize and explain their scope, but the process also cast doubt on their legitimacy by implementing them through operation of law.

**Police manipulated?**

The theory of an attempted coup and conspiracy to assassinate the president is based on the fact that the rebellious police had not even read the law and their actions came in response to rumors.

While the Ley de Servicio Público does away with some police privileges such as the bonds for years of service and the medals and decorations that had economic benefits attached, this annulment was general and affected all privileges in all public-administration sectors and could not have set off the wave of violence on Sept. 30.

The protest had actually been planned since mid-September, and it is not credible that no one in the government, not even members of police or military intelligence, had warned of the generalized discontent within the police ranks and especially that no one had warned that certain police leaders were in dialogue with members of the political opposition. The intelligence contingent attached to the Ministerio del Interior disappeared from its post one day before the revolt.

The Policía Nacional had shown signs of irritation for many months, since they had been seriously discredited by the series of human rights violations revealed by the Comisión de la Verdad, an agency created by the government to investigate such violations during the past 20 years.

The July 2010 visit of UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions Philip Alston intensified the discontent within police ranks, since his report also found the police guilty of extrajudicial executions, disappearances, and negligence in investigating numerous assassinations that were considered "settling scores."

The government, through the Ministerio de Justicia y Derechos Humanos, responded to the two reports by deciding to reopen some cases, considered the most important, and those that involved special forces of the Policía Nacional.

Mid-level officers and police began to break the chain of command with their superiors, whom they accused of not defending them in the face of the generalized accusations.

The discontent was evident and became an auspicious scenario for the conspiracy; the Ley de Servicio Público was only the straw that broke the camel's back.

Likewise, the same discontent existed among the ranks of some military branches, such as a unit of the Fuerza Aérea Ecuatoriana (FAE), which took over the Quito airport the morning of Sept. 30. In this case, the advance planning was evident, since the military personnel came out with printed protest signs, giving credence to the government's theory of a conspiracy, which did not succeed because of the social mobilization backing the president, despite brutal police repression.

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Government errors and a dose of his own medicine

Political and logistical errors exacerbated the armed confrontation between police and military on the night of Sept. 30, which cost the lives of four people and left another 274 injured. Five more died in Guayaquil in clashes between demonstrators supporting the government and the Policía Nacional.

The government was used to giving the police carte blanche to repress the social mobilizations that occurred every time an unconstitutional law was passed. After each social mobilization, where these sectors were subjected to severe police repression, demonstrators also had to cope with a government that had become accustomed to responding by trying the principal leaders of grassroots, indigenous, and campesino organizations, and even university student organizations, on charges of sabotage and terrorism. Police repression and judicial harassment became the government's best weapons to discourage mobilizations.

To reduce the costs of the repressive actions and to find autonomy to carry out social control, the Ecuadoran police had their own munitions sources, such as the GASEPOL factory, which produces tear gas. In addition, the Policía Nacional can requisition munitions from the Santa Bárbara military factory, which produces lethal and nonlethal weapons for crowd control, such as pellets, shotgun shells, and other anti-riot weapons. Thus, the indiscriminate use of such weapons in repressive police actions is common and has led to a toll of many wounded. The Sept. 30 police revolt was no exception, since the police made a show of their abundant supply of weapons and tear gas, and even the president was hit with a dose of pepper spray that was thrown in his face.

Correa was undoubtedly unaware of the situation that had been brewing in recent months, and he believed he could resolve the conflict personally by going to the Regimiento Quito, the focal point of the police protest, to dialogue with the agitated and armed police. This was undeniably a critical error by the intelligence systems, and even worse, at the moment the president was hit, his security team committed another, more serious, logistical error. Instead of pulling him out of the center of the conflict, they opted to take him to a police hospital adjacent to the scene of the confrontation. This allowed the president to essentially be kidnapped for more than 10 hours and, as a consequence, required the armed rescue operation that confronted police and military. In addition to the deaths and injuries, the episode resulted in a deep fissure between the two armed organizations.

Was it a coup, or wasn't it?

In his first speech after being freed, the president seemed defiant and stressed his valor in not dialoguing with the rebellious police, whom he promised to punish. However, five days later, police and military pay raises were announced, deepening the mystery of why the government did not negotiate to avoid the confrontation, especially if, as the government insists, the pay raise was planned even before the police revolt. A timely announcement along these lines could have calmed tempers and avoided the confrontation.

While there are enough elements to make the case that there was a conspiracy to overthrow the president and that it failed because of Correa's firmness, the backing of the military, and the mobilization of a people who still believe in the citizen revolution, there are also elements that lead to the opposite conclusion: that the police uprising was only a protest stemming from their
discontent and that the president's defiance and the errors of his security force led to his kidnapping and the consolidation of an attempted coup.

But a mystery remains regarding the actions by the FAE group who took over the Quito airport. Whose orders were they following? Is it possible that a new coup attempt is being plotted within the ranks of the military?

Another possibility is that the purpose of the military rescue was to show what a president who confuses firmness with arrogance, valor with recklessness, and imposition with dialogue is capable of. In that case, the rescue is a warning to those who might be thinking about a new coup attempt.

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