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Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa Wins Another Referendum, but by Smaller Margin

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The May 7 referendum once again pitted Ecuador's national government against the leftist social movements, this time with a positive outcome for the latter despite the administration's victory.

In numbers, the government won on all 10 referendum questions, with an average of 47.22% for the Yes position, while the No position, backed by leftist social movements and some rightist sectors, received 41% on average.

At first glance, the results show a rapid deterioration in President Rafael Correa's electoral support —dropping almost 35 points in the May consultation from the 81.7% that he obtained in the 2007 referendum on whether to convocate a constituent assembly (NotiSur, April 20, 2007), followed by 64% in the vote to approve the new Constitution. But numbers are not everything, and the No vote is what has raised the most expectations.

Win by losing
In the indigenous world, apparently contradictory concepts are common, such as "to lead by obeying," which implies that those who govern have the authority to lead but always obeying guidelines from the social bases.

Similarly, to explain the left's positive result from this referendum, the phrase "to win by losing" is used, which implies formally recognizing the loss but converting it into greater strategic achievements.

The leftist movements' principal victory is in having finally revealed the government's turn to the right and in having consolidated an ideological opposition, which may be able to gain strength to become a viable option in the 2013 presidential elections.

The urban movements that have their electoral base in the middle class, such as Montecristi Vive, led by Alberto Acosta, a former minister and former president of the Asamblea Constituyente, the Participación movement of former minister Gustavo Larrea, and Ruptura de los 25, led by Deputy María Paula Romo have succeeded in identifying themselves as the ideological base of the political project that brought Correa to the presidency.

Those movements had maintained the hope that Correa would correct his administration's political direction and return to the leftist base that characterized it in the beginning. For that reason they had been very mild in their criticisms and, at times, had defended the government even though they were expelled from the president's political circles.

The middle class that backs these movements, especially in Quito, has shown itself to be progressive in diverse political scenarios, such as in backing the indigenous movement in its various mobilizations, including those that brought down Presidents Abdalá Bucaram (1996-1997) and

In the May referendum, the difference between the Yes and No positions in Quito was just 6%, and, in the questions involving judicial reforms and media regulation, the difference was between one and three percentage points. Quito had backed the government by more than 80% in earlier consultations; now support for the president reached just 47% on average.

While the urban leftist movements were strengthened in this electoral process, it was the indigenous movement, led by the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE), that achieved the greatest gains. Despite legal harassment and the division that Correa has fomented among its bases, the movement was able to unite its diverse affiliates behind the No campaign in the referendum. The result was a No victory in 11 provinces with a majority indigenous population, implying victory in half of Ecuador's provinces.

The indigenous victory has led various leaders to speak out against the government's intention to apply judicial reforms and control the media, as was called for in six of the 10 questions presented to Ecuadoran voters.

César Umajinga, prefect of the provincial government of Cotopaxi, where the No position won by a 17-point margin, called on the government to respect the province's decision and refrain from implementing the changes there. Umajinga said that his province would use its right of resistance, given the ample margin by which the presidential proposal was defeated.

While in the highland provinces, with the exception of Pichincha, Imbabura, and Azuay, the No option won comfortably, dealing Correa a serious setback, in the Amazon region, the No win was even more significant. In five of the six Amazonian provinces, the No vote won with percentages that ranged from 56% to 62%, with victories by particularly large margins in Zamora Chinchipe and Morona Santiago, now being threatened with large-scale mining projects.

Salvador Quishpe, prefect of the provincial government of Zamora Chinchipe, touted the No win in his province as a rejection of the mining programs. "Here the people have said no to mining and we are going to make sure that decision is respected," said Quishpe in a communiqué issued by the prefecture office.

**A new base in the right's electoral niche**

The referendum results followed geographic divisions. On one side is the Ecuadoran coast, which traditionally has been the stronghold of the populist electorate, captive of rightist parties such as the Partido Social Cristiano (PSC). On the other is the highlands, with an indigenous and progressive middle-class electorate, together with the Amazon area, with a majority indigenous population. The latter has turned its back on the president, especially because of his administration's extractive focus. While this tendency was already visible in the 2009 presidential election, the May referendum has made the division clear.

On the coast, two rightist groups are in evidence, one that can be defined as political right, anchored in the past and very obstinately opposed to any changes needed by its own economic elites, and precisely that economic right, with greater interest in business and investment opportunities that the state can provide.
During Correa's political exercise, the political right has been successively neutralized and defeated; it is now splintered and without leaders who can face an electoral process. This rightist sector also opted to campaign for No, but with minimal energy, so that in the provinces where it has its electoral bases, the Yes victory was overwhelming.

The economic right has had various investment opportunities under this administration and, given its economic interest, more easily reaches political agreements, explicit or not. During the referendum campaign, the economic right decided to remain silent. Its principal leader, Guayaquil Mayor Jaime Nebot, maintained a silence that favored the penetration of the presidential messages in Guayaquil. The Yes position thus achieved a resounding victory.

The situation is similar in the remaining coastal provinces, most notably in Manabí, the province with the third-largest population, where Yes won by 20 percentage points.

Correa has decided to pay attention to the voting in these sectors while trying to win back the indigenous vote with greater social and clientelist policies.

**Definitions heading toward 2013**

The referendum has put the 2013 presidential option in the political balance. President Correa has managed to hold on to the support of a majority of voters and position himself on the Ecuadoran coast, which will lead him to carry out alliances with local leaders tied to the economic right.

The political right will have to come together and improve its capacity for internal negotiation if it wants to consolidate an alternative for the next presidential elections.

Nevertheless, it is the indigenous movement, headed by CONAIE, that has the best chance of moving forward with a reconstruction of the political and social left. This movement could emerge as a new electoral alternative for 2013, joined by the urban movements that were Correa's base and that have remained firm in their commitment to social change and have distanced themselves from the president's neoliberal and extractive policies.

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