First Electoral Setback For Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa

Luis Ángel Saavedra

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
First Electoral Setback For Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa

by Luis Ángel Saavedra
Category/Department: Ecuador
Published: 2014-03-14

President Rafael Correa’s Alianza País (AP) stumbled in recent local elections, falling in a number of strategic provinces and municipalities to emergent conservative and social democratic forces. The losses included Quito, the capital, which could serve as the springboard for a new opposition bloc. The government also lost all but one of Ecuador’s Amazonian provinces and may be forced to change its tune regarding resource extraction, which the elected prefectures in those areas are likely to oppose.

An anti-Correa vote

The Quito mayoral result was a particularly tough blow for the Correa administration, whose preferred candidate, incumbent Augusto Barrera, lost the Feb. 23 election to conservative challenger Mauricio Rodas. The loss was all the more galling considering Barrera’s relatively strong track record as mayor. Among other things, he oversaw completion of several large-scale infrastructure projects, including the city’s new Aeropuerto Internacional Mariscal Sucre, which opened in February 2013.

In the days leading up to the election, the Correa government—aware that Barrera was trailing in the polls—pulled out all the stops, even resorting to populist tactics such as lowering traffic fines and eliminating toll fares. It also recommended, in the end, that people annul their votes. "If people are unhappy with Barrera, it's better to annul their votes than to give them to the enemy," the president said.

Correa penned a public letter inviting his followers to vote for Barrera and warning that a victory for Rodas could lead to the kind of instability currently being experienced in Venezuela. The president’s plea failed to resonate. Not only that, but some insist Correa is to blame for what happened in Quito.

An open letter that circulated recently on social-media networks highlighted several cases of what residents in the capital saw as abuses of power by the Correa administration. Examples include the repression of environmentalists who protested the president’s decision to allow oil drilling in Parque Nacional Yasuní (NotiSur, Sept. 27, 2013); Correa’s badmouthing of singer-songwriter Jaime Guevara, who is popular even among backers of the government; and the case of political cartoonist Bonil, who was prosecuted for a drawing that showed police raiding the home of an opponent of the Correa regime.

"Quito is and will continue to be a thermometer for the country. If [the government] doesn’t turn down the heat, the soup is going to burn," the letter, originally published on the blog El Churo Comunicación, read.

Echoing the arguments in Correa’s letter, the government’s female Cabinet members—together with the Alianza’s female members of the Asamblea Nacional (AN)—issued their own public missive, in this case directed specifically at Quito’s women voters. A number of local women’s
groups took issue with the overture. They responded in a joint statement by criticizing the
government’s female contingent for quietly accepting various administration decisions—such as
Correa’s refusal to loosen Ecuador’s hyperstrict laws regarding abortion, which is off limits even to
rape victims—that have rolled back women’s rights. "Where were you?" the letter’s authors ask.

The women’s groups went on to say that, in protest of the government’s discriminatory policies,
they would not be voting for Barerra. "We’ve been witness to their complicit silence, silence that
contributes nothing to the well-being of women," their statement read. "For that reason we, the
women of Quito … respond to your call with a clear ‘No.’ No to chauvinism, no to misogyny,
wherever it may appear!"

"We can speak for ourselves"
Besides losing Quito, the government ceded control of several other major cities as well, including
Manta, home to the second-most-important port; Cuenca, the country’s third-largest city; and
Ibarra, the biggest city in northern Ecuador. All three had been led by members of the AP. The
governing coalition also lost many of the country’s key provincial elections. In the Amazon area, the
government won just one of five provincial contests, a result that will no doubt spell trouble for its
pro-extraction policies.

President Correa admitted afterward that taking a national-campaign approach to the sectional
elections was a mistake. For many candidates, receiving direct support from the central government
proved to be more of a curse than a blessing as local citizens rejected what they perceived as outside
interference.

Prior to the elections, the president, vice president, and top government ministers crisscrossed the
country in support of various local candidates, who were pictured alongside the president in all their
election propaganda. In some cases, candidates made liberal use of the president’s image even if
they weren’t officially authorized to do so.

"In the Azuay, we can speak for ourselves. We don’t like outsiders coming here and telling us
what to say," was the campaign slogan used by Paúl Carrasco, the prefect-elect for the south-
central province of Azuay. Carrasco’s message—which appears to have worked—was that his rival
candidates lacked their own individual identity.

Similar slogans appeared throughout the country, particularly in areas most critical of Ecuador’s
"bipolarity," a term used to describe how most of the country’s wealth and power are concentrated
in just two cities: Quito, the administrative capital, and Guayaquil, the country’s leading port.

A Trojan horse?
For the political right, the elections offered a chance to make up lost ground. In addition to retaining
control of Guayaquil, a far-right stronghold, it also won elections in several other major cities
(including Quito) thanks to the new movement Sociedad Unida Más Acción (SUMA), which
combines elements of the traditional right with various social-democratic groups. In contrast, the
movement Creando Oportunidades (CREO), another conservative electoral coalition, barely made a
splash.

Another big surprise coming out of the elections was the success of the movement Avanza, led
by Ramiro González, the government’s industry minister. Avanza won 38 mayoralities and two
provincial prefectures, nearly matching the AP, which won 42 mayorships and nine prefectures. Avanza allied itself with various political parties and local movements, choosing its partners more for their chances of success than for their political ideology. As such it forged pacts with CREO, headed by Guayaquil banker Guillermo Lasso, with left-wing groups, and with the indigenous movement—all at the same time.

Once the results were in, González reiterated his support of the president but lashed out at the AP’s national directorate, accusing them of bad faith in their dealings with Avanza. "My agreement is with the president, not with Alianza País," he said.

González managed to ruffle feathers on the local level as well by promising that the mayors and prefects who were elected in partnership with this movement would be at the president’s disposition.

Many of those local officials do not share the Avanza leader’s sense of obligation. A case in point is Movimiento Unidad Pluricultural Pachakutik (MUPP), an indigenous political movement that won the mayorship in Cayambe, in the northern province of Pichincha. Pachakutik and the mayor-elect, Guillermo Churuchumbi, ran in alliance with Avanza but are sharply opposed to President Correa on the issue of natural-resource extraction on indigenous lands. Pachakutik also objects to the government’s heavy-handed treatment of civil-society organizations (NotiSur, Aug. 16, 2013).

The situation is similar in Cotacachi and Otavalo, in the province of Imbabura, where Avanza-aligned indigenous groups also won the elections. What remains to be seen is how closely—if at all—these elected officials will toe González’s line, particularly if it puts them at odds with their local allies.

Past examples of these kinds of alliances suggest that, unless Avanza’s more leftist factions and local social groups establish a more individual identity, they risk being absorbed by the movement’s government-aligned mainstream.

The pro-government Partido Socialista-Frente Amplio (PS-FA), in the meantime, has called for the establishment of a new leftist bloc, which would link Avanza, AP, and the socialists, but leave out the indigenous movement and the Movimiento Popular Democrático (MPD), which represents teachers, campesinos, and some labor unions.

The socialists also said they would seek a constitutional reform allowing President Correa to seek yet another term in office since, in their opinion, there is no leader in Ecuador who can replace him. Correa’s current term, his third in succession since winning the presidency in 2006, runs until 2017 (NotiSur, Dec. 8, 2006, and March 15, 2013). The PS-FA announcement comes just as Ramiro González, boosted by the local election results, has begun speaking openly about his own presidential ambitions.

-- End --