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Signs of a Right-Wing “Restoration” in South America?

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Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa believes that right-wing forces are launching a "conservative restoration" in South America, a coordinated effort to regain power and, unless the left is willing to fight back, put an end to the cycle of progressive governments that has taken hold there in recent years.

In an interview published July 21 in the Brazilian daily Folha de São Paulo, Correa—the first South American president to face a coup attempt (on Sept. 30, 2010) since Venezuela's Hugo Chávez in April 2002 (NotiSur, April 19, 2002, and Oct. 15, 2010)—urged his fellow leftists to "be very alert, because the national and international right has overcome the initial shock caused by the arrival of our governments and now has a clearly articulated [plan]." He said the political right in Ecuador, for example, "is in constant contact with its counterparts in Venezuela and the US, which is generously financing these supposedly nongovernmental organizations that were created and paid to fight us."

Correa cited the Pacific Alliance (Alianza del Pacífico, AP), a trade bloc representing Chile, Peru, Colombia, and Mexico, as another strategy by which conservative forces are trying to undermine South America’s progressive governments. Such alliances, he claims, challenge regional unity. "We must not get confused or fool ourselves," the Ecuadoran president said. "Latin American integration with an independent, sovereign, and dignified vision is something the US worries about. That’s why the right, the continent’s elites, have launched a conservative restoration to block the integrationist and progressive processes. [They have come up with things] such as the Alianza del Pacífico, which is pure neoliberalism, to challenge the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR)."

Reflecting out loud, Correa recalled how "in the dead of the neoliberal night, in 1999, a new cycle began in Latin America" with the election of the late Venezuelan President Chávez (1999-2013). Chávez died last year while still in office (NotiSur, April 5, 2013). "Afterward came [Presidents] Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Brazil), Evo Morales (Bolivia), Michelle Bachelet (Chile), Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (Argentina), Tabaré Vázquez (Uruguay), and Ecuador’s Revolución Ciudadana," he said. "Who could have imagined in the 1990s, when South America was governed by neoliberalists such as [Presidents] Alberto Fujimori (Peru), Fernando Collor de Mello (Brazil), and Carlos Menem (Argentina), that these progressives would rise to power? It was an epic change. But as we’ve said, and I’ll repeat it now: the right has gotten over the shock that we provoked because of the neoliberal debacle and a conservative restoration is now underway."

Correa went on to say, "We’re all victims of our own successes," and he cited the example of Brazil, where it has been shown that progressive policies led to a reduction in poverty. Despite the improvements, Brazilian protestors—starting in June 2013 and especially in the lead-up to the recent World Cup soccer tournament—took to the streets demanding even more changes, asking for better transportation services, better hospitals, more schools (NotiSur, July 12, 2013, and Aug. 23, 2013). "There’s a new middle class that wants more and more," the Ecuadoran president said.
The importance of "communicating well"

Another Ecuadoran, Galo Mora Witt, an anthropologist, musician, and former secretary-general of Alianza País, Ecuador's governing party, also backs the "conservative restoration" theory but has gone even further than President Correa, for whom he used to serve as an advisor, in spelling out what the left should do to counter the emerging challenge. Mora Witt, who recently toured the region, believes the key for South America’s progressive governments is communication.

"Children who were eight years old when Correa came to power don’t remember anything else. They only know us. They have no one to compare us to, and so naturally they demand more, as does the middle class that has emerged in Brazil thanks to the governments of the Partido dos Trabalhadores [led first by Lula (2003-2010) and now by President Dilma Rousseff]," Mora Witt explained in a July 31 interview with the Argentine daily Página 12. "Those are the people we need to captivate with the idea of creating a different kind of country, one that’s just. This is a day-to-day revolution. We face constant risks. There is a pack from the north stalking us, because one who loses an oil contract is willing to hire an assassin to kill us."

The former government advisor emphasized the importance of "knowing how to communicate, which means communicating well." To accomplish that, he explained, governments must undertake "policy actions on behalf of the masses, the poor, the neglected. Those groups need to know who is fighting for them because, for decades, the subjugation of the poor has been the breeding ground for fascist corporatism." As an example, Mora Witt pointed to the right-wing Ecuadoran ex-President Abdalá Bucaram (NotiSur, July 12, 1996), who was president for just six months between 1996 and 1997 and channeled "built-up resentment among the poor" by saying things like, "If you can’t change anything, at least go and scratch up a powerful person’s Mercedes Benz."

Painting a biased picture

In his interview with Folha de São Paulo, President Correa spoke at length about the influence the press has on politics in the region. Beyond the "subtle political tasks" they carry out, media outlets also promote and amplify minor and major episodes with the goal of presenting governments "that were democratically elected and are democratic" as being authoritarian, he said.

The Ecuadoran president’s comments coincided with a pair of bomb attacks July 22 in Chile on July 22. The bombs, which targeted two completely dissimilar places—a Catholic church and a day-care center—tried to sow chaos in the normally peaceful country. They appear to be part of a campaign that continued on Sept. 8, when a major explosion occurred in the shopping gallery of a Santiago subway station.

That same day, in Brazil, the opposition presidential candidates announced that, if they win the Oct. 5 election, they will turn the current government’s foreign policy—which is basically a strategy of regional integration—on its head, shift sharply to the right, and, in addition to pushing for Brazil’s inclusion in the Pacific Alliance, tighten relations with the US. "What they announced, in reality, is that they will break with the consensus policy in South America, which has prioritized integration among all else," wrote analyst Dario Pignotti of the Italian news agency ANSA.

In Uruguay, in the meantime, the democratically elected government is being presented as authoritarian because it denied political asylum to three people who entered its consular offices in
Brasilia, the Brazilian capital, claiming falsely that they were being persecuted by the democratic government of President Rousseff.

And in Argentina, on Sept. 5, Héctor Méndez, the president of the powerful business association Unión Industrial Argentina (UIA), compared the democratic government of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner to the bloody dictatorship that controlled the country between 1976 and 1983 and disappeared 30,000 people. Méndez’s outburst was prompted by the Ley de Abastecimiento (supply law), which the Fernández de Kirchner administration is hoping to reinstall. Media outlets gave the UIA president’s statements top billing without any kind of commentary or warning regarding the gravity of the claims. Méndez also said, "There is no democracy here, and the government reminds us the dictatorship and its worst practices."

In their eagerness to discredit the constitutional government, the media also generously reproduced—and failed to condemn—statements by a former president of the Banco Central, Javier González Fraga, who advised putting "an early end to the government."

**Time to rein in the press?**

Just as Brazilian diplomat Samuel Pinheiro Guimarães, who served at the time as general high representative for the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR), sharply criticized new channels when presenting, in 2012, his theory about "neogolpismo latinoamericano" (the new brand of Latin American coups), Correa now points to media outlets as the ideological factories fueling the conservative restoration (NotiSur, Sept. 7, 2012).

Using his experiences in Ecuador as a point of reference, Correa explained in his Folha de São Paulo interview how media power has been transformed into political power. "Our adversary in Ecuador isn’t the political right but its media outlets. The situation is the same for all the South American nations led by progressive presidents," he said. "They paint us as being authoritarian governments that pursue patriotic journalists whose only desire is to tall the truth. That’s just not the case."

Correa went on to say, "We’re having to deal every day with manipulation by certain media outlets controlled by the oligarchy. Without any democratic legitimacy, they want to impose a political agenda. They want to bring down the governments, which are democratic. They slander. They manipulate. The societies of the Americas must defend themselves against this, because what I’m saying here about Ecuador is also happening, in exactly the same way, in many of the region’s countries."

The press, Correa insists, has come to play a decisive role in society, one that goes beyond just promoting actions that destabilize the region’s progressive democratic governments. "The media has always been in the habit of lying, of misinforming the public in our countries. Their behavior is anti-democratic," he said.

"Political platforms won elections, but [the media] is what governed, legislated, and judged, taking the place of the three pillars of the state: the executive, legislative, and judicial branches," the Ecuadoran president added. "Now the party’s over. When it’s convenient, the press calls itself the ‘fourth estate.’ Like the other branches, therefore, it ought to be regulated by society, by laws. Imagine what the financial sector would do without regulation? What politics would be like without oversight, or even religious groups if there were no controls? What would happen if suddenly a religion came along that allowed human sacrifice? We need to get past these taboos. Why is the media the only estate that can’t be touched?"