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Luis Ángel Saavedra

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Others Join Ecuador’s Workers in Labor Day Protest
by Luis Ángel Saavedra
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The traditional May 1 workers' march in Ecuador took on a special hue this year since workers weren't the only participants. Joining them were diverse sectors such as hikers associations, women’s organizations, housing cooperatives, retirees, and even-financial sector groups. While opposition to presidential policy united them all, President Rafael Correa still maintains a 54% approval rating (NotiSur, June 10, 2011, and March 14, 2014).

Workers’ march defends social security
Ecuadorans hoped to see greater participation in the May 1 march than at the demonstration social movements organized last March 19 when protestors in eight cities expressed their displeasure with the Correa administration’s political direction.

The government, meanwhile, promoted a boycott aimed at reducing public participation in the workers’ march through an aggressive media campaign in which it publicized its work in favor of workers and announced its own march, which supported, according to Correa, true workers who belong to union federations aligned with the government.

The final score was a workers’ march that was twice as big as the government’s Quito march, but this time workers were accompanied by family members and other organizations that had never before participated in May 1 marches. Also noticeable were emerging political movements such as Vientos del Pueblo, which includes students and cultural-worker unions. Workers' marches were held in 14 Ecuadoran cities. Opposition to the government was not the only thing that brought them out; most signs and chants of the marchers referred to the defense of Ecuador’s social security system.

Social security in Ecuador has been considered political and economic spoils with the neoliberal policies of previous governments attempting to privatize it and put it in the hands of economic elites. They also tried to dismember the system and allow the state to only administer retirement pensions while medical services and unemployment funds would pass into private hands. Since the 1990s, attempts have been made to make those changes, but the attempts have been stopped by the mobilization of workers and retirees.

In the new Ley de Justicia Laboral approved by the Asamblea Nacional (NA) April 14 to replace the previous work code, the state’s contribution to pension funds of the Instituto Ecuatoriano de Seguridad Social (IESS) was eliminated, jeopardizing the existence of this institution and the possibility of pension support in the medium term.

To justify elimination of state support, equivalent to 40% of the annual retirement-fund budget, Correa said the IESS has a surplus and did not need the government funds. This has been denied by retiree associations and by former IESS administrators including one of the most recent administrators under Correa, economist Ramiro González. A leader of the Movimiento Avanza, a Correa ally, and former minister of industry and productivity under Correa, González left office and questioned the government’s decision to eliminate its IESS contribution.
Defense of the IESS became the top reason for social groups to join labor unions at their May 1 march. It also influenced the Parlamento Laboral, a group that had been close to the government, to decide against participating in either the march organized by the government or the one organized by the workers and to instead create its own demonstration. They held their event in front of the Corte Constitutional. This group also called for restitution of the 40% state contribution to the IESS pension fund.

The success of the march organized by labor and its superiority to the one organized by the government led labor leaders to call for a national strike planned for May 20.

**Government holds countermarch**

The government and Alianza País had to concentrate all their resources to build a significant march in Quito that would allow a show of strength. In other cities, the presence of government loyalist presence was virtually nonexistent.

From the early morning, hundreds of buses brought government supporters from the provinces to Quito, converging on the Plaza de Santo Domingo for a festival of artists with the presence of key government officials and members of the Asamblea Nacional. The use of public transport to take government supporters to the capital left some small cities without bus service, according to reports from Otavalo, Latacunga, Muisne, San Lorenzo, and several other places.

The government’s main argument to discredit the workers’ march was precisely the presence of nonlabor groups, which Correa labeled groups on the right, for example, the physician’s union or associations of immigrants or associations of families of missing persons. Correa also accused the workers of being politicized and playing into the hands of parties of the right that are now gearing up for the 2017 elections.

Moreover, Correa focused his speech on investment in road infrastructure, as well as renovation of judicial, health, and education infrastructures. Finally, he claimed that bringing homemakers under the labor law was as an act of justice because it established an obligation to belong to the IESS and gave them the right to retire. What he didn’t say was how their incorporation into the social security system would be financed, especially now that the government contribution to the IESS has ended.

That investment has allowed Correa to maintain his high level of popularity, close to 54%, according to the firm CEDATOS. Nevertheless, his popularity is no longer reflected in the social mobilizations people joined every time he needed popular support for his political program.

**Election outlook in flux**

Following the May 1 marches, surprisingly Correa is saying that he is in "the final stretch of his administration." He also said the same thing at the meeting of the AN members where it was decided that Gabriela Rivadeneira would continue to lead the Asamblea for the next two years.

These addresses, which move away from his proposal of a constitutional amendment to allow indefinite re-election, suggest he has abandoned his plan to seek a third term in 2017, probably passing the torch to Lenin Moreno, vice president during Correa’s first term, who has the approval of social circles that no longer support Correa.

Correa’s decision could also respond to the major social movement that political groups have achieved demanding that the issue of indefinite re-election be decided by a referendum and not
by the AN. Although it is also possible that these speeches are deliberately aimed at breaking up demonstrations opposed to indefinite re-election and thus reducing pressure on the AN, which could then approve the amendment without major delays and allow Correa to seek a new mandate. His 54% approval rating is no small thing, although it is not clear how this figure was determined in a society so polarized as Ecuadoran society is now.

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