Faced with Broad Protests, Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa Retreats

Luis Ángel Saavedra

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

Recommended Citation
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/14348

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.
Faced with Broad Protests, Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa Retreats

by Luis Ángel Saavedra

Category/Department: Ecuador

Published: 2015-07-17

For the first time in his eight years as president of Ecuador, Rafael Correa has backed down and withdrawn two bills that had motivated protests unprecedented during his administration. Protests even occurred on the eve of Pope Francis’ visit to Ecuador at the beginning of July.

In response, Correa issued a call for a comprehensive national dialogue but banned sectors he calls the extreme left while allowing the business sector and the right to participate.

Correa loses popular support

What had been coming for several months finally occurred in June: Correa lost his popular support on the streets.

Street demonstrations, referendums, and electoral processes had become the driving force behind the Ecuadoran leader’s popularity. However, this began to change after the most recent local elections in February 2014, and now the political landscape is adverse for the president (NotiSur, March 13, 2015). Stacking up against Correa are sectors on the left, including the indigenous movement, unions, and environmental and women’s groups, as well as sectors on the right exemplified by traditional parties and leaders such as banker Guillermo Lasso or Guayaquil Mayor Jaime Nebot.

Ecuadoran leftist organizations had not been able to mobilize significant numbers until Sept. 17, 2014, and the mobilization on May 1 was significant in the numbers of protestors (NotiSur, May 22, 2015). Unions and the indigenous movement tried to capitalize on this success, calling for a national strike and holding new demonstrations that no longer had the impact of previous ones. Even so, their call for a national strike remains in place although leaders have not yet managed to make clear the purpose of their struggle. They have expressed their opposition on a multiplicity of government policy issues in a way that, more than a political agenda, looks like a list of complaints.

Meanwhile, the right had not played a leading role. It had organized weak demonstrations in opposition to Correa’s presidential re-election proposal and had not taken into account other issues that concern the left. Correa unexpectedly helped boost support for demonstrations by sectors on the right when he sent two bills to the Asamblea Nacional (NA) that affected economic interests of the elites: taxes on inheritance and on capital gains, which the government proposed as a way of redistributing wealth.

These two proposed laws have not been up for debate to understand whether they would affect the majority of the population or whether they truly are about wealth redistribution. However, the right managed to position them as an attack on the Ecuadoran family and on entrepreneurship—positions that helped mobilize people in major Ecuadoran cities under the slogan of "Get out, Correa, Get out" (Fuera Correa, Fuera).
The right thus took leadership of the opposition to the Correa administration, even when the indigenous movement and the unions tried to take over that leadership with a march set prior to Pope Francis’ arrival in Ecuador. That turned out to be too weak a call since all social protest had coalesced under the banner of opposition to the inheritance and capital-gains taxes, leaving aside the bulky agenda of the social movements.

**A dialogue between friends**

The magnitude of the social mobilizations forced the president to modify specific aspects of the bills presented, but that did not pacify the people. Finally, he withdrew the two bills and invited opposition sectors to dialogue—a dialogue, said Correa, that would be "to debate what kind of a country we want."

All political sectors prudently accepted the call for dialogue since the government’s credibility had dropped drastically, settling at 36% according to polling firms close to the government and at 40% according to other polls. In any case, the government's credibility has dropped an average of 19 percentage points since the protests began.

Despite this call for dialogue, protests didn’t abate, but they have changed tone as people began to talk about the agenda that had been proposed by the social movements, especially the constitutional amendments, ownership of ancestral knowledge, oil exploitation in the Parque Nacional Yasuní (NotiSur, Sept. 27, 2013, and March 14, 2014), and the decline of women’s rights, among other issues.

Correa’s reaction was to limit the dialogue and frame it in what he considers processes of wealth redistribution. In addition, he defined the actors for this dialogue, excluding leftist sectors that he insisted on calling childish ecologists and rock-throwers.

Sectors close to the government have taken this call as an opportunity to reorganize their forces and take back their previous capacity to mobilize, especially when opposition demonstrators were on the verge of taking control of the government plaza the evening of July 2.

"We should be so well-organized that we could fill the Plaza Grande in 30 minutes," said Correa at the same time he acknowledged his supporters hadn’t had a sufficient number to defend their leader that night.

Pope Francis arrived in Ecuador on July 5, but this didn’t calm tempers. The chant, "Fuera Correa, Fuera," could be heard in the religious gatherings and along the pope’s travel route in Quito and Guayaquil.

**Proposal to move election dates ahead**

The papal visit has ended, and demonstrations have returned to the streets. The agenda of the right is very clear: they want to force the 2017 presidential election to be held sooner because if elections were to be held early the only candidate with any possibility of success would be Guillermo Lasso, the Guayaquil banker who has managed to consolidate a political space for Ecuadoran elites, especially those from his region (NotiSur, March 13, 2015).

Meanwhile, in Quito the person who has stood out during the protests is Deputy Andrés Páez, who belongs to the same group as Lasso and who could channel voting in the capital toward the proposal of the right.
As for the social movements, whose most visible strengths are the unions and the indigenous movements, by not having a clear political agenda, they are not in any condition to negotiate a place of power nor do they have a leader with national prominence. The numerous names mentioned as possible presidential candidates are of people who have not managed to project themselves beyond their provinces, such as Salvador Quishpe, in the Amazonian province of Zamora Chinchipe, or Paúl Carrasco, in the southern province of Azuay (NotiSur, March 13, 2015).

In this scenario, social protests can become a new springboard to allow the right to reorganize and return to power. That carries a social cost that can’t yet be estimated, since their first task would be to dismember social projects implemented during this government and dismantle the income system that to some degree has functioned during the same period and forced the elites to pay taxes for the first time. In other issues, such as the resource-extraction policy and social controls, the right fully concurs with Correa and would maintain those policies.

The left would not have any real participation in a government that could follow Correa if elections were to be held early.

-- End --