8-21-2015

Ecuador’s President Rafael Correa Denies Discontent Despite Growing Protest Movement

Luis Ángel Saavedra

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

Recommended Citation
Ecuador’s President Rafael Correa Denies Discontent Despite Growing Protest Movement

by Luis Ángel Saavedra
Category/Department: Ecuador
Published: 2015-08-21

The main Ecuadoran social movements have challenged government controls through various protest actions, beginning with the Marcha de la Vida (march of life) organized by various indigenous and campesino sectors from Zamora Chinchipe province. They set off from the southern Amazonian province on Aug. 2. The actions continued with an indigenous uprising that began Aug. 10. The protestors then joined workers unions that had declared an indefinite strike on Aug. 13. Together, the protest actions have revealed the weakness of a government that continually loses ground on the national political scene. In addition, by denying that there is general popular discontent, the government shows its inability to establish a broad, democratic dialogue (NotiSur, July 17, 2015).

Social protest grows

This year has been difficult for the Ecuadoran government. It has had to face a decline in oil prices, the national economy’s main source of support. It has also had to overcome social protests without giving in and modifying policies that, in different ways, affect the country’s various social sectors.

To maintain its investment programs, the government has had to compensate the drop in oil prices with expensive loans and pre-sales of oil. Foreign debt reached US$30 billion and continues to grow. This development led various economists to predict a fiscal imbalance that will not be able to be resolved, causing economic elites, especially some who are connected to the state budget through contracts or consultancies, to show their disapproval. Statements from manufacturing chambers and financial sectors deepened the growing lack of confidence of social sectors, especially the middle class, which began a series of demonstrations led by representatives on the right. These protests occurred mainly in north Quito, in front of the headquarters of the ruling Alianza País. Their main demand was the elimination of the constitutional reform that would allow for indefinite presidential re-election.

Meanwhile, leftist social movements, unions, and the indigenous movement, which had lost political clout, proposed a national mobilization as a way to push for their agenda, which includes the elimination of all 16 proposed constitutional amendments. The topics the amendments cover, among other issues, include marketing of ancestral knowledge, diversification of the roles of the armed forces that would link them to controlling the citizenry, and the reduction of guarantees (such as the Acción de Protección, a legal action to protect constitutional rights) to stop protests against natural-resource-extraction megaprojects (NotiSur, Sept. 12, 2014).

Except for the proposed indefinite re-election amendment, the other constitutional amendments favor the financial-business sector and, therefore, are not on the list of demands from the banderas negras, as the protestors are called because they use a black flag to identify their protests.

The indigenous movement’s call for a national uprising and the unions’ call for a strike on Aug. 13 generated hope in all social sectors. The banderas negras no longer came out in Quito, and
the unionists began to plan actions they could do without risking their liberty under Ecuadoran legislation that now criminalizes social protest, not only for allegations of sabotage and terrorism used to arrest social leaders but also by prohibiting, among other things, blocking public services and roads, causing shortages, or what the government calls "provoking economic panic," a concept that it can apply to anything from a financial crisis to the closing of a store.

Government responds violently

The indigenous movement began its march in the area of Cóndor Mirador, a place known for social conflicts surrounding the first large-scale, open-pit mining project (NotiSur, Dec. 5, 2014). Some 500 people, led by Salvador Quishpe, prefect of the provincial government of Zamora, and Carlos Pérez, president of ECUARUNARI, the main indigenous organization of the Ecuadoran sierra, launched the march on Aug. 2 with plans to arrive in Quito on Aug. 12.

Various delegations joined in along the demonstration route, and in every city that marchers entered citizen mobilizations were organized that surpassed the organizers’ expectations. For example, in Cuenca, the main city in southern Ecuador, some 20,000 people gathered, and in Latacunga, in the central highlands region, they managed to organize more than 30,000 persons.

In contrast, all along the 800 km of the route, it was very difficult for the government to round up people to counteract the march, and it began to create a discourse with which it accused the demonstrators of planning to violently topple it. At the same time, it called on the population to defend the roads and defend their government.

The march arrived in Quito after several incidents provoked by supporters of the regime, and, on Aug. 13, beginning at 4 p.m., all the groups of demonstrators converged in a major march headed to the government palace. They were, however, strongly repressed by elite police groups.

Demonstrators filled Quito’s historic center, and the president of the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (COANIE) calculated that some 200,000 persons were mobilized. Police had to violently clear people from the San Francisco and Santo Domingo plazas because of the danger that the crowd could break police lines and reach the government palace. This is the first time since the coups of the 1990s that demonstrators filled these two plazas simultaneously.

During the police action 46 persons were injured, 28 of them indigenous people who were treated in the first-aid tent installed in Parque El Arbolito, a park where indigenous people gather. Government sources said 20 police were injured. Demonstrators, including one Shuar Indian whose trachea was broken by the point of a police baton, sustained the worst injuries.

Protests also occurred in provincial cities where main thoroughfares were blocked. In the central highlands, the interior minister led the police repression, and 10 people were detained. More than 50 people were arrested in Quito, including Salvador Quishpe and Carlos Pérez, along with a dozen indigenous people. Also arrested was the French-Brazilian journalist Manuela Picq, an Al Jazeera correspondent. Picq’s visa was cancelled and deportation proceedings against her started. Because Pérez, Quishpe, and Picq were beaten during their detention, CONAIE filed a complaint against the state for torture.

At midnight on Aug. 13, all but four of the detained indigenous persons were freed. Still in custody are 30 young people who participated in the protest, most of them members of the banderas negras.
No dialogue or negotiation

President Rafael Correa announced that the strike had failed and did not accomplish its goal, which, according to him, was to remove him from office. While indigenous organizations have decided to stay in Quito and lead new marches, the strike has taken on an indefinite character until the proposals for constitutional amendments are withdrawn and the water law that limits indigenous communities access to irrigation is rescinded.

"The base has told us that unless they get something from the government, they won’t leave," said Carlos Pérez when he announced the indigenous movement’s decision to stay in Quito and lead a new march the afternoon of Aug. 14. They expect the same number of demonstrators and the same acts of police repression since the government is not willing to negotiate and it holds firm to the idea that nothing is happening in the country. Expressions of protest, according to the government, represent a minority and are part of an international plan to tumble Latin America’s "progressive" governments.

-- End --