Ecuador’s Government Tries to Silence Opposition

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Experiencing a decline in its approval ratings, the Ecuadoran government is trying to silence opposition voices, both by using the judicial system to harass political opponents and by allowing government supporters to physically assault those who question official policy. A case in point is what happened to Deputy Lourdes Tibán, an indigenous representative who was attacked near the National Assembly and has been subject to various other instances of harassment.

The popularity of President Rafael Correa has dropped in each of the past two years. According to the polling firm Cedatos, he began 2016 with a 41% approval rating for his administration and a 35% credibility rating. The president himself has had to acknowledge his popularity has dropped, despite his claim that he has a 58% approval rating, which he supports with a poll taken by Opinión Pública Ecuador, a firm close to government leadership (NotiSur, Aug. 21, 2015).

Whatever the true figure, for the first time, Correa’s popularity is in free fall. To this, add the fact that his political movement, Alianza País, no longer enjoys a preferential electoral index guaranteeing its continuity in power. According to Cedatos, 58% of the country’s population said they did not want Correa’s re-election and only 30% said they would be inclined to vote for a candidate from the ruling party, such as the current vice president, Jorge Glas. According to the Cedatos poll, 32% favor the candidate on the right, banker Guillermo Lasso, while on the left, there’s no sign of a strong candidate able to compete in the presidential elections set for the last quarter of 2017.

Persecution of indigenous authorities

As his popularity drops, Correa has intensified his attack on the opposition, calling it a beneficiary of the past. He does not differentiate between his political opponents on the left, which include the indigenous movement, and those on the right, who defend the interests of the oligarchy.

Without a doubt, indigenous sectors have been attacked most. Week after week, Correa insults indigenous leaders during his so-called “Saturday chat,” a radio and television space in which, more than updating the public on his administration, Correa spends time denigrating opponents and frequently giving guidelines for action to other branches of the government, including the judicial system and the national police. During his Dec. 5 “chat,” for example, in the wake of popular protests against 18 proposed constitutional amendments, including one regarding presidential re-election, Correa asked Interior Minister José Serrano why Salvador Quishpe, an indigenous mayor from Zamora, hadn’t been arrested. Quishpe was one of the leaders of the protests (NotiSur, Jan. 27, 2012).

Although Quishpe had evaded detention during the protests, he wasn’t able to escape a beating by National Police officers. Carlos Pérez, president of Ecuarunari, an organization of indigenous communities in the Ecuadoran highlands, was similarly attacked.
Four physical attacks

The indigenous Deputy Tibán has suffered systematic aggression on the part of government supporters, according to a long chronology of events filed with a complaint to the attorney general’s office. Tibán lists four physical attacks. In one, individuals close to Deputy María José Carrión, of the ruling party, were identified as the aggressors. Tibán also reported two burglaries of her home in which unidentified persons rifled through her belongings but didn’t steal anything, suggesting that these break-ins were politically motivated. In addition, Tibán denounced the harassment of her family, specifically her husband and her brother.

The attorney general has dismissed the accusations, saying there hadn’t been any criminal activity, and instead opened the way for Deputy Carrión to file a criminal complaint against Tibán, whom Carrión accuses of slander.

Tibán is the third of the indigenous deputies to go on trial. The first was Kléver Jiménez, who was accused of slander, sentenced to a year in prison and stripped of his legislative position. The second was Pepe Acacho, sentenced to 12 years in prison for terrorism for calling for the 2009 protests against the Water Resources Act proposed by the government. Acacho is awaiting the final resolution of his case in the Corte Nacional de Justicia.

Now it is Tibán’s turn. Not trusting the judicial system and assuming she would be found guilty, she decided to request precautionary measures from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) even though she knows that Correa pays no attention to IACHR resolutions. As demonstrated by the case against Jiménez, the president does not recognize the organization’s jurisdiction—Ecuador did not accept the precautionary measures the IACHR granted in an effort to protect Jiménez from an arbitrary judicial system.

Junior officials follow model of intolerance

The arrogance of those in the top levels of government is emulated by lower-level national officials as well as by local authorities who back Correa. They file criminal charges against citizens who dare to denounce corruption or simply question local policies. Jeannine Cruz, for example, is a councilwoman in the city of Loja who was sentenced to 30 days in jail and fined 25% of the minimum salary for tweeting criticism of that city’s mayor, José Bolívar Castillo, and questioning an emergency measure in Loja’s drinking water master plan. The emergency decree allows the mayor to award contracts for public works projects without competitive bidding. Castillo said that he had filed the criminal complaint because he considered the criticism affected his honor.

Previously, Castillo had won a case against the Quito newspaper Diario la Hora, which he accused of not publishing an article about his administrative report. On that occasion, Castillo argued that his report was a newsworthy event and that, by not publishing anything about it, the paper had engaged in censorship.

Something similar happened with Sebastian Cevallos, a political analyst in Cuenca who used his Twitter account to criticize the alleged hiring of relatives of the former labor minister, Carlos Marx Carrasco, for positions at several public institutions. Carrasco threatened to file a complaint, but it was Paula Francisca Rodas, Carrasco’s niece by marriage, who filed one. Cevallos was sentenced to 15 days in jail, even though he argued that his messages were documented and that all of the officials named were related to Carrasco.
All of these attempts to control the opposition, far from shoring up the government’s approval ratings, are causing them to fall. Nevertheless, the government insists on using the judicial system to harass opposition leaders and ignores allegations about the assaults, which are becoming commonplace in Ecuador’s political life.

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