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The Pitfalls of Unity Efforts in Ecuador

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With the goal of defeating Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa, or whomever he taps as his successor for the elections in February 2017, traditional political sectors are pushing for the creation of a bloc to present a single opposition candidate (NotiSur, March 13, 2015, July 17, 2015, and Aug. 21, 2015). While the country’s history is full of examples of unification efforts made in response to a specific crisis, they have been favorable for the right, and have resulted in demobilization and persecution of forces on the left.

Everyone against Correa

The tremendous political power concentrated in President Correa and the lack of a strong leadership in other political factions has encouraged several sectors to propose a unified effort, organized outside ideological lines and with the sole objective of separating governmental functions and re-institutionalizing the country.

Azuay Provincial Prefect Paúl Carrasco, a social democrat, launched the initiative and invited representatives of the strongest sectors of the Ecuadoran right—the mayors of Quito and Guayaquil, Mauricio Rodas and Jaime Nebot, respectively—to join him in uniting against Correa. Carrasco’s proposal, which enjoys great popularity in Southern Ecuador, is that all political forces should join with the sole purpose of defeating Correa in an arena where the president controls all the power, including the electoral apparatus. Carrasco believes that no one in the opposition can win with an electoral system biased in favor of Correa and capable of committing electoral fraud to benefit the official candidate. Having a single candidate reduces the possibility of fraud by concentrating the opposition vote.

Once in power, Carrasco says, the unified opposition would proceed to modify the Constitution, eliminating the elements that allowed the current concentration of power, such as the Consejo de Participación Ciudadana (Citizen Participation Council), which is the body charged with naming all the control entities as well as the justice and electoral councils. The next step after eliminating the Consejo would be to set up new electoral colleges and new courts of justice as well as name new public officials to direct regulatory agencies such as the Contraloría General del Estado (comptroller general), the Procuraduría General (solicitor general) and the Fiscalía General (attorney general). Once the new institutions are established, new elections would be called in which the parties and political groups could compete under equal conditions, proposing forms of government in accordance with their own political views.

Carrasco’s proposal has gained momentum and additional mayors and provincial prefects have joined, even including some of Correa’s former allies, such as former Minister of Industry Ramiro González, who also once ran the Social Security Institute. González now heads the Avanza political movement, which became the country’s second political force in the February 2014 elections (NotiSur, March 14, 2014).

As in all proposals for unity, the stumbling block has been choosing a consensus candidate. Several politicians aspire to be the designated candidate, but up until now, there has been no consensus.
El Frente de Reconstrucción Nacional and other populist movements

Unity proposals aren’t new in Ecuador. Some have even managed to bring communists and conservatives together, but none has achieved the goals they were created for.

Perhaps the most unlikely group was created in 1944 to confront President Carlos Alberto Arroyo del Río (1940-1944) who, like Correa, had managed to control all branches of government. On May 28, 1944, Arroyo del Río was defeated after an armed revolt, and the Partido Liberal Radical, the Partido Conservador, the Partido Socialista, the Partido Comunista, the Vanguardia Socialista Revolucionaria and the Frente Democrático Ecuatoriano (which later became the Partido Social Cristiano, an extreme-right party) created a provisional junta to consolidate electoral freedom.

At that time, José María Velasco Ibarra (1934-1935, 1944-1947, 1952-1956, 1960-1961, and 1968-1972) was entrusted with the re-institutionalization of the country as he began the second of his five administrations. The “alliance of the friar and the communist,” as it was called, turned into a war between irreconcilable enemies, a war that the extreme right won, giving rise to a system of merciless persecution against its recent allies.

Ecuador lived another era of unity in 1984 with the creation of the Frente de Reconstrucción Nacional, which united conservatives and liberals, carrying to power León Febres Cordero (1984-1988) of the Partido Social Cristiano. Febres Cordero was characterized by the repression squadrons he implemented against political opponents and is considered responsible for many extrajudicial executions and forced disappearances still under investigation today.

Other unification episodes have become populist movements and have been taken over by the right, resulting in the worst possible alternatives for society’s most vulnerable sectors.

The Pachacutik dilemma and the indigenous movement

The indigenous movement and its political arm, the Movimiento de Unidad Plurinacional Pachacutik, find themselves in the middle of the political storm and under pressure from the media (which strongly rejects it) not to join the proposed unification (NotiSur March 13, 2009, and Oct. 12, 2012). At the same time, they face division within their support base. Several indigenous persons, including current leaders, have opted to publicly join the unification project, while others—for example, the current president of the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (Conaie)—question the possibility of an alliance with the right.

Indeed, figures such as indigenous leader Mónica Chuji and Marcelino Chumpi, the indigenous prefect of Morona Santiago in the Ecuadoran Amazon region, have reacted favorably to Carrasco’s unity proposal. Nevertheless, history weighs heavily for the leaders of the Conaie. Conaie president Jorge Herrera has raised the issue of who will control the actions of the person elected president, and who will guarantee that, once in power, the new president will comply with the agreements made.

The split within the indigenous movement sparked an embarrassing clash when, on Jan. 27, the Consejo de Gobierno de Pachacutik tried to meet with representatives of other political tendencies, including those on the right. They were interrupted by a large Conaie delegation that took control of the Pachacutik facilities. Those favoring the unity plan accused Conaie of wanting to impose
criteria not shared by all of the grassroots organizations. The shouting and the confrontation led to a walkout of the political delegations invited to the meeting.

The risk of dismantling the Constitution

One of the very serious risks posed by this unity plan is the possibility of transforming the Constitution, eliminating the progress made in terms of human rights, community rights, and environmental rights, as well as the guarantees for their protection, which for the right, including for President Correa, are “errors and novelties imposed by infantile ecologists.”

The incipient unification group proposes the first element of consensus be a call for a constitutional assembly and, although the goal is to reduce the concentration of presidential powers, nothing will prevent changing other constitutional elements, especially if the right gains a majority in the new constituent body.

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