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Ecuador’s Election Build-up Marked by Shifting Alliances, Few Proposals

by Luis Angel Saavedra
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Looming elections in Ecuador promise to be more of a referendum on the outgoing president, the long-serving Rafael Correa, than a contest of ideas. Opponents have formed inconceivable alliances for the sole purpose of defeating Correa’s party, Alianza PAIS (PAIS Alliance, AP), leaving aside any real analysis of the country’s social and economic issues. And none of the candidates has offered even the slightest indication of how he or she might tackle Ecuador’s aggressive foreign debt, rising unemployment figures, fiscal revenue shortfall, and other pressing problems.

Free-market conservatives talking about respect for indigenous rights and former guerrillas emphasizing the importance of adapting to the modern market are just some of the contradictions on display in this campaign season, which kicked off well in advance of the presidential and parliamentary elections to be held in February 2017.

Juan Cuvi, a former member of the subversive Alfaro Vive Carajo movement, likens the political right’s approach in this campaign to how a large truck handles a tight turn. “A tractor-trailer, when it needs to turn right on a narrow road, opens as much as it can to the left and swings right without leaving space for anyone on the corners to pass,” he says in reference to how conservatives like presidential candidate Guillermo Lasso, bent on boosting their following, have pandered to the left. The rightist Partido Social Cristiano (Social Christian Party, PSC) has also tried to woo left-wing support, in its case by calling for a non-ideological alliance to reconstruct the country’s institutional structure.

Lasso is a neo-liberal (pro-market) banker who heads the Creando Oportunidades (Creating Opportunities, CREO) party. He is polling in second place behind AP candidate Lenín Moreno. Correa, who has been in power since 2007, opted against seeking reelection.

Promises, promises
Lasso spent the past several years raising his profile by appearing in ads for Banco Guayaquil, a bank he helped found. And in an attempt to further broaden his base of support, he has reached out on various occasions to indigenous leaders, promising to help them build a plurinational state as spelled out in the Constitution of 2008, to respect the opinions of indigenous communities regarding extractive projects, and to support the establishment of a separate legal system for indigenous people (Notisur, July 15, 2016). He also promises not to expand oil extraction and thus protect indigenous territories and wilderness areas such as the Parque Nacional Yasuní in the east.

The overtures have gained the attention of historic indigenous leaders such as Auki Tituña, in the northern province of Imbabura, and Salvador Quishpe, prefect of Zamora province, in the southeast, who are calling for the indigenous movement to support Lasso’s candidacy for president against objections by the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (Ecuadoran Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities, CONAIE). CONAIE argues that Lasso’s promises are not credible given that neo-liberalism, which he supports, naturally favors extractive industries.
and the transnational capital they generate. CONAIE’s vision for a plurinational state, in contrast, diametrically opposes capital accumulation. Lasso’s pro-indigenous platform is even less credible in light of statements made by supporters such as Macarena Valarezo Fernández de Córdoba, a television host, former beauty queen, and Quito city councilor (2002-2014) who believes that only the rich are suited to govern.

“Honestly, it scares the daylights out of me,” Valarezo said when asked about the Correa presidency and the candidacies of people who don’t hail from the economic elite. “Imagine another muerto de hambre in the presidency, making their fortune in four years ... Excuse me for saying this, but it’s better to have a proven business person, someone who knows how to run a company, who we know doesn’t need to be in government to increase his wealth or become a rich man.” Muerto de hambre, literally ‘starving person,’ is an Ecuadoran slang term used by the elites to describe a poor person who has managed, somehow or other, to improve his or her socioeconomic standing.

Credible or not, Lasso’s pitch has earned him support from a large segment of the indigenous population, boosting his chances of advancing to a possible second round of voting. Should that happen, Lasso would likely form new alliances that may even give him an edge over Moreno, the current frontrunner.

Awkward alliances

The rightist PSC, headed by Guayaquil Mayor Jaime Nebot, made its own electoral play by calling on all of the country’s social and political sectors to join forces to defeat Correa, Moreno, and the AP. The proposal was initially put forth by the prefect of Azuay province, Paúl Carrasco, and his center-left Juntos Podemos (Together We Can) movement, which has strong backing in southern Ecuador. The unity call also drew support from the center-right and initially looked like it could become a legitimate force in the presidential contest, perhaps beating Lasso for a spot in the second round.

Other groups backing the movement include the center-left Avanza party, the centrist Sociedad Unida Más Acción (United Society Plus Action, SUMA) party, which controls the Quito city government, and Movimiento Concertación, which doesn’t have very much political clout but unlike the larger Juntos Podemos, has official standing as recognized by the Consejo Nacional Electoral (National Electoral Council, CNE), Ecuador’s electoral authority.

Once the unity movement came together, however, Nebot imposed Cynthia Viteri, a proven and loyal PSC veteran, as its leader and presidential candidate. The strong-arm move destroyed the tenuous alliance, which never had ideological elements to hold it together and had been formed with the understanding that decisions regarding presidential and legislative candidates would be reached by consensus. SUMA and Podemos immediately withdrew and decided to back Lasso in exchange for support in certain legislative races.

Viteri, in the meantime, insisted that all decisions regarding the electoral campaign and candidacies would come from her, leaving Avanza in limbo. The Concertación, for its part, decided to stick with Viteri, who is running third in the polls, ahead of Paco Moncayo, an ex-general representing various left-wing sectors.

Ignoring the issues

Moncayo—a former Quito mayor who rose to fame for his military exploits in the Cenepa War, which Ecuador launched against Peru in 1995 (NotiSur, Feb. 10, 1995)—leads the Acuerdo Nacional
por el Cambio (National Agreement for Change) coalition, which includes a number of left-wing factions, labor groups, indigenous sectors, and governing party dissidents. That coalition’s platform has little to distinguish it from that of the AP, and its key demands have been co-opted by the right. The group has been unable, therefore, to position itself with arguments beyond its opposition to Correa, the need to free certain state institutions from presidential control, fight corruption, be more tolerant, and not criminalize social protest.

As a presidential candidate, Moncayo has struggled to gain momentum and establish broader alliances. The first ally he found was Jimmy Jairala, the prefect of Guayas and leader of the Centro Democrático (Democratic Center, CD), which until then had supported the governing party candidate. As soon as the alliance went public, however, the CD began to disband. Several of its principal members split with Jairala and accused him of deciding on his own to back Moncayo. The CD dissidents decided to keep supporting AP, with which they already had agreements in place regarding certain legislative candidates. Either way, the CD was never in a position to supply many votes to Moncayo, who is running fourth in the polls but may have a chance still of edging past Viteri for third.

The other major presidential candidate, the AP’s Moreno, leads the polls but must contend with a fair amount of infighting over national and regional legislative races. He is also challenged by the widely held view that, as president, he would be supervised by and have to answer to Correa, whose term ends next May.

While all of the presidential candidates talk about their platform proposals and strategic alliances, none has addressed Ecuador’s bulging debt to China and other countries. Although the government has tried to downplay the problem, foreign debt now exceeds 42% of gross domestic product (GDP). The candidates haven’t offered proposals either for tackling the economic crisis, which is being caused by low oil prices and has brought public works to a halt and resulted in thousands of public-sector layoffs. Nor have they let voters know their plans for cracking down on what is perhaps the most politically sensitive problem of all: corruption.

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