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## Competitive Presidential Contest Enters Round Two in Ecuador

by Luis Ángel Saavedra

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Lenín Moreno, the candidate of Alianza País, Ecuador's ruling party, won the largest proportion of the votes —39.36%—in the first round of the country's presidential elections. But the election will go into a second round, because even though Moreno had the required 10-point lead over banker Guillermo Lasso, who garnered 28.9%, he fell short of the 40% required to win the election ([NotiSur, Jan. 22, 2016](#), and [Nov. 11, 2016](#)).

Once the results were released after a tense wait during which the National Electoral Council (Consejo Nacional Electoral, CNE) had to face tough questions from both sides, Moreno and Lasso launched efforts to gain followers by seeking the support of the losing parties. That is proving to be a difficult task for both candidates. Moreno has the stigma of being part of a government that stayed in power for 10 years with signs of authoritarianism and concentration of power. And Lasso can't shed the image of the candidate of the bankers who moved Ecuador toward financial collapse at the end of the last century.

### *Change promised*

To win adherents, the two candidates have pledged to make changes, but these are simply electoral promises. The candidates have not been able to explain how they will carry out their promises or where the proposed changes are headed.

Moreno tries to present a conciliatory image, open for dialogue. He has even offered to amend laws that are questioned, not only by the national political opposition, but also by international human rights organizations. Examples are Decree 739, which limits freedom of association, and the communications law, which has become a repressive law that attacks freedom of expression and the normal development of private media. However, Moreno is weighed down by his running mate, current Vice President Jorge Glas, one of the hard-liners of the Alianza País movement, and by the fact that José Serrano, a former interior minister and also from Alianza País, will be a member of the National Assembly. Serrano is responsible for repressive policies implemented by President Rafael Correa's government, especially against the indigenous movement. Moreno will be closely monitored by Correa loyalists in the administration and in the National Assembly who will prevent him from making concessions to the opposition or dismantling the mechanisms of control and repression already in place ([NotiSur, June 14, 2013](#)).

On the other hand, social movements are on alert because of Lasso's background. He is a bank owner with ties with previous neo-liberal government, which leads many to think his proposals for change will result in a new neoliberal period for the country. Lasso was the minister of economy under President Jamil Mahuad (1998-2000), during whose tenure the country suffered a financial crisis and was placed under a "bank holiday" that froze bank accounts and resulted in the devaluation of the deposits Ecuadorans held in the financial system. While it is true that Lasso did not participate in these decisions—he was named minister after the freeze was implemented—

he did benefit from the situation, as his own bank purchased a large part of the bank debt and the certificates of deposits at an average 40% of their value.

“If the government had had the slightest indication that I was responsible for the bank holiday and considering the control it has over the justice system, I would have been in prison a long time ago,” Lasso said, alluding to the dependence Ecuador’s judicial branch has on the executive.

Lasso says he would restructure the government, and has called for more independence for the judiciary and for government agencies such as the prosecutor’s office and the office of the comptroller, which are not adequately dealing with corruption allegations and tend to side with government interests in judicial procedures. Lasso has been the only candidate to include a large part of the indigenous agenda in his government plan, for example, requiring prior consultation for projects in indigenous territories. He also has come out in favor of eliminating mining projects located more than 2,800 meters above sea level in order to protect water sources ([NotiSur, Nov. 11, 2011](#), [Aug. 10, 2012](#), [Dec. 5, 2014](#)).

“Protecting water sources is not an issue for the right or the left; it is a question of common sense,” Lasso said. In addition, he has promised to strengthen bilingual indigenous education and restore legal status to organizations that have been shut down by the Correa administration.

Despite campaign promises from both candidates, weeks before the April 2 runoff, 19% of the voters say they are still undecided, according to the polling firm CEDATOS, thus creating an urgency for the candidates to consolidate alliances as soon as possible.

### *Indigenous movement withholds support*

At this political crossroads, the situation of indigenous organizations is complex. Any decision they make will have a political cost, according to Leonidas Iza, president of the Movimiento Indígena de Cotopaxi (Cotopaxi Indigenous Movement, MIC), one of the strongest sectors of the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador, CONAIE).

On one hand, if they decide to support Lasso, they will have to face criticism from those who will ask how indigenous people, traditionally allied with the left, can support a neoliberal banker. But the toughest questioning, according to Iza, will come from their own base: “They will tell us, their leaders, that we already supported Lucio, and he threw us out; that we already supported Correa, and he threw us out; and now we support Lasso so that he can throw us out again.” Iza was referring to Lucio Gutiérrez (2003-2005) and to Rafael Correa, who came to power in January 2007 and has maintained an agenda that violates various rights of indigenous peoples and nationalities. The indigenous movement has aligned itself with politicians who, on reaching office, reneged on pre-election agreements.

CONAIE’s position in the current race has been ambiguous. Although it continues to say that it does not want more of the same, and that it is aware that null or blank ballots do not help defeat a candidate, the organization has opted to wait until one or two weeks before the voting to make its decision public.

“We first want to raise and position our agenda and then decide who we will vote for,” Iza said. But the risk is that, in delaying, the candidates will reach a point when they no longer need the

organization's support, and CONAIE will lose the opportunity to influence the new government's agenda.

### *A future of confrontation*

Regardless of who wins, the new president will be leading a state in crisis, with low revenue due of a drop in the price of petroleum, Ecuador's main export product and the center of its economy. And he will have to begin to pay the foreign debt, especially to China, which this year alone will require disbursements of some US\$5 billion.

If Lasso wins, he will have to govern with an opposition-controlled National Assembly, where Alianza País holds 75 of the 137 seats. If Moreno wins, he will have to frame his actions in the direction set by the party, and any attempt to negotiate with the opposition will be neutralized. There have already been instances where Moreno has expressed a desire for dialogue, then following disapproval from President Correa, the candidate has been forced to rectify his statements.

The fierce contest that is taking place in the second round is an indication of the polarization afflicting the country after 10 years of Correa's leadership. Regardless of who wins, this polarization will continue after the April election, and the streets will likely be the scene of political confrontation again ([NotiSur, July 17, 2015](#)).

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