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Ecuador's New President Breaks Ranks with Predecessor

by Luis Ángel Saavedra

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Ecuador's new president, Lenín Moreno, has made early political moves aimed at distancing himself from his predecessor, Rafael Correa (2007-2017), surprising some of the opposition and upsetting part of his own base in the Alianza País (AP) party, including the former president himself. Correa has questioned Moreno's decisions and expressed concern over the fact that new AP representatives do not seem inclined to defend his administration or the model he laid out during his 10 years as president ([NotiSur, April 21 2017](#)).

Ruling party in crisis

Even though internal friction within the AP was visible at the beginning of Moreno's candidacy, the party managed to present a united front during the election campaign. Nevertheless, party militants don't think such efforts will survive the first 100 days of the new administration, especially after Moreno named his closest advisers, the most controversial choice being Gustavo Larrea ([NotiSur, May 8, 2009](#)).

Larrea is one of the founders of Alianza País, along with Alberto Acosta. Both became Correa's political enemies after they were expelled from the party. Leftist and progressive sectors see Larrea's selection as an attempt to return to the AP's origins in a leftist ideology that is modern, ecological, and geared towards collective construction. Meanwhile, others in the party consider the new administration a betrayal of Correa, the AP's top leader, and warn that the country risks returning to a period of political upheaval in which problems are resolved by overthrowing the president. Larrea was part of that sort of history.

Correa was upset when people banned by his administration returned to government positions. He couldn't hide his anger when Moreno met with police and military leaders, gave them a vote of confidence, and offered to solve problems caused by the previous administration, such as those related to the expropriation of land owned by a social service agency of the armed forces, the Instituto de Seguridad Social de las Fuerzas Armadas (ISSFA).

The meeting ended with a decision to not form the Servicio de Protección Público (SPP), a force made up of armed civilians, independent of the military or the police, that had been authorized by a measure (the Código Orgánico de Entidades de Seguridad Ciudadana) hastily approved on May 10, during one of the final sessions of the National Assembly, in which the AP had total control. The SPP was designed to provide security for the president and top government officials. However, the military challenged its creation because it set up the possibility of armed civilian groups controlled by the president that could take action against the opposition. Moreno has put the military and the national police in charge of his security.

Meanwhile, AP militants have faced charges of corruption, and former government officials close to Correa—such as former Comptroller General Carlos Polit and former Minister of Electricity Alecksey Mosquera—have been arrested. Both Polit and Mosquera are linked to the international corruption scandal involving the Brazilian firm Odebrecht ([NotiCen, March 9, 2017](#); [NotiSur, May 26, 2017](#); [SourceMex, June 7, 2017](#)). Vice President Jorge Glas has also been implicated in the scandal,

and Moreno is being pressured to distance himself from Glas in case he ends up being part of the corruption network. Glas is Correa's man in the Moreno administration, and his fall would mean a complete rupture with Correa and his allies, resulting in a split within the AP.

A call for dialogue

In his inauguration speech, Moreno called for dialogue between all sectors. "I am everyone's president; I am indebted to all; I respect everyone," he said, speaking about the need to be part of great alliances that would allow the country to develop. Although he didn't mention it, Moreno seems to be aware that he will soon face a major economic crisis because of a bulging foreign debt, low oil prices, and the need to make major budget cuts, notably in social programs. Budget cuts will require consensus, including the cooperation of the most radical opposition, if Moreno doesn't want to have major demonstrations against his government.

Moreno's call "to a dialogue, to consensus, to reconciliation and peace" has generated suspicion within the AP. Some believe Moreno wants to build bridges with organizations that participated early on in the Correa administration but later either distanced themselves or were thrown out of the party. Others say he wants to build bridges with discordant groups. But other party members closer to Correa see his call as a disloyal distancing from the former president and as a sign of weakness.

Party militants didn't approve of Moreno's meetings with Guayaquil Mayor Jaime Nebot, leader of the right-wing Partido Social Cristiano, or with Quito Mayor Mauricio Rodas, leader of the Movimiento SUMA, which backed opposition candidate Guillermo Lasso in the recent presidential campaign. They didn't like the fact that the right approved of Moreno's initiative and emphasized the new president's differences with Correa, whom the right defines as an autocrat.

In addition, Moreno met with several business groups, reassuring them that dollarization would continue and offering better conditions for business development. "Private initiative is the engine of the economy," Moreno told businessmen. Correa couldn't remain silent, tweeting his displeasure in an ironic Twitter message about the role of the business community: "The new slogan: the private sector as the new engine of the economy."

Indigenous groups suspicious of Moreno's overtures

On several occasions, Moreno has expressed his desire that the indigenous movement join his government. Specifically, he reached out to the association of indigenous groups known as the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE), saying, "We are the same as CONAIE." He tapped one of CONAIE's most important leaders, Humberto Cholango, to be director of the Secretaría Nacional de Agua, an agency that regulates the use and distribution of water flows, which has been one of the key points of controversy between the indigenous communities and the government ([NotiSur, Jan. 30, 2015](#)). Until now, major companies in the mining, hydroelectric, and bottling industries have had priority over the needs of indigenous communities, even though the Constitution states it should be otherwise.

CONAIE set conditions on the opening of a possible dialogue with the government, demanding pardons for all the indigenous rights workers and indigenous authorities who were sentenced during the Correa government, and amnesty for all those who face judicial processes as a result of Correa's political repression. CONAIE presented a list of nearly 200 persons eligible for amnesty

and 20 who need a presidential pardon. Moreno has partly complied with the CONAIE request, pardoning seven people – six indigenous persons and one mestizo linked to the indigenous uprising of 2015. Among the cases still pending are pardons for nine indigenous persons sentenced for practicing indigenous justice in the province of Cañar and 197 requests for amnesty, although according to CONAIE, the list isn't yet complete.

Finally, on July 4, CONAIE, with a growing mobilization of its bases, presented President Moreno with a list of topics to be discussed, including bilingual education, a ban on mega mining projects, indigenous justice, and land and water laws.

Moreno surprised indigenous people when he announced he had signed an agreement allowing the CONAIE headquarters in Quito to remain in place for the next 100 years. The Correa administration had claimed the site in 2014. Moreno also announced he would return control of bilingual education to the indigenous movement.

Once again, an indignant Correa questioned these acts. "Giving the headquarters to CONAIE for 100 years is another unnecessary snub to my government," he tweeted. "The [new administration's] strategy to differentiate itself is not only disloyal, it is mediocre."

While the scenario for the dialogue with CONAIE appears ready, distrust within the indigenous sector continues, because native peoples have been betrayed more than a few times. In addition, they received no concrete responses on issues of land, mines, or the economy during their first encounter with Moreno. By the same token, friction continues within the Alianza País between those who approve of dialogue and those who are determined to stick with a government that rejects consensus and wants to maintain control of all state institutions. The failure so far to grant pardons to indigenous judges is a sign that there are still sectors in the government committed to maintaining discriminatory policies and who will try to boycott any progress that Moreno would like to make on indigenous issues.

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