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Ecuadoran Politics Becoming a Circus

by *Luís Ángel Saavedra*

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Ecuadoran politics is beginning to look like a really bad circus. A jailed vice president, who has the backing of the ruling party, says he's only on vacation; a fugitive comptroller maintains that he has not resigned, while his successor makes decisions beyond the scope of his office and rules on the dismissal of the vice president; the president of the republic is removed from the leadership of his party, which is calling for the return of a former president to head the country. These are just a few of the examples what is happening on Ecuador's political stage ([NotiSur, Sept. 8, 2017](#)).

Meanwhile, the situation involving Vice President Jorge Glas gets more complicated by the day. The judicial system has found serious signs that he participated in several cases of corruption and many former supporters are turning against him. Observers point to a seismic upheaval in the movement.

The downfall of Jorge Glas

Undoubtedly, Vice President Glas made a political miscalculation by believing that he had inherited the control of the judicial system that former President Rafael Correa (2007-2017) once had. Glas believed himself to be untouchable and never imagined he'd go to prison when prosecutor Daniela Salazar, despite the threats she received, began to connect Glas with acts of corruption involving the Brazilian firm Odebrecht ([NotiSur, Feb. 24, 2017](#)).

Glas has always denied his participation in the illicit activities, even though his uncle, Ricardo Rivera, was implicated in several acts of corruption, not only related to Odebrecht, but also to petroleum contracts that Glas handled as the overseer of the country's strategic resources policy. Glas' lawyers modified his defense as the prosecutor revealed evidence that could link Glas to crimes of illicit association and embezzlement. Once his defense exhausted all legal options, Glas was jailed.

Pablo Celi, the acting comptroller who replaced the fugitive Carlos Polit, ruled that Glas was responsible, because as a member of the committee that supervises bidding for hydrocarbons (Comité de Licitación Hidrocarburífera) and as coordinating minister for strategic sectors, he had negotiated a service contract for the Singue oil field without the required certification for the exploration and exploitation of hydrocarbon deposits. According to Celi, Glas should have disqualified the proposal presented by the DGC consortium, but he approved it instead and delivered the Singue oil field to DGC. The award of the contract led to the investigation of a possible crime of embezzlement of US\$5.2 million, because the government paid a surcharge for every barrel of oil extracted from the oil field.

The new vice president

Once imprisoned, Glas was replaced by María Alejandra Vicuña. Although she became the acting vice president, Glas has maintained that the post was not vacant, as he had requested a vacation before he went to jail. The political bureau of the Alianza País party has backed Glas, going as far as filing for protective action to invalidate Vicuña's appointment. The courts rejected the bureau's bid.

Vicuña had been a faithful follower of Correa and even voted in favor of indefinite presidential reelection when the 2015 National Assembly considered that constitutional reform. Such constitutional reforms must be approved by a referendum or a constitutional assembly, but because Alianza País had absolute control of the National Assembly at the time, its members pushed the measure through.

Vicuña now presents herself as a follower of President Lenín Moreno. She now supports Moreno's call for a popular consultation in which voters would have a say on seven questions, including the revocation of the National Assembly's decision regarding indefinite presidential reelection.

The acting vice president comes from a family of politicians with ties to economic elites in the coastal province of Manabí whose economic interests revolve around the Port of Manta and its projection as Ecuador's future principal deep-sea maritime port. Vicuña's economic ties have been harshly questioned by sectors close to Correa, although these issues were never brought up when she was part of the National Assembly and a Correa supporter.

Party headed toward political death

It seems the internal split within Alianza País is no longer surmountable. National leaders have moved away from the base that turned the movement into the main political force in the country and kept Correa in power for 10 years ([NotiSur, July 14, 2017](#)).

On Oct. 31, the movement's political committees in Guayaquil stated their support for Moreno. Later that same day, the main provincial leaders, along with the national political committee, removed Moreno as head of the party. This decision was quickly rejected by party leaders such as National Assembly President José Serrano, who said the removal was out of order because Moreno had not been notified nor allowed to defend himself against the accusations used to formalize his dismissal.

For its part, the political opposition is preparing to ask the National Assembly to set the time and date for Glas' political trial and take action on his dismissal. The commission in charge of legislative affairs (Comisión de Asuntos Legislativos) had blocked a previous attempt to set this trial with five votes against. This time, five out of the seven members on the commission will likely vote in favor of the trial.

The opposition also believes that it has 40 of the 64 Alianza País votes it needs to prosecute Glas politically, which would make the vice president's formal dismissal possible. There would be 93 votes in favor of Glas' dismissal when only 89 are needed.

The fragility of Alianza País and the already-evident division between its leaders and the base puts the party's survival at risk. Two efforts are underway to strengthen new political groups to replace the once-powerful AP. Moreno hopes to consolidate his power with the support of the Democracia Sí movement led by Gustavo Larrea. In a public homage to Larrea, Moreno spoke of their long-shared militancy dating back to the 70s in the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (Leftist Revolutionary Movement, MIR). Meanwhile, Correa's former secretary of foreign affairs, Ricardo Patiño, is seeking to replace Alianza País with a movement close to Correa in which the current political bureau will participate.

At the grassroots level, Moreno seems to have the advantage. Guillermo Collaguazo, known for organizing and training popular movements, announced his support for Moreno, guaranteeing the possibility of major mobilizations backing the Ecuadoran president.

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