

Flash Report

on Ecuador: Correa's "Citizens' Revolution"

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 The University of British Columbia
www.blogs.ubc.ca/andeandemocracy



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Executive Summary

Rafael Correa's victory in the April 26 general elections paves the way for the implementation of his proposed "citizens' revolution." With almost 52 percent of the vote in his favor, Correa is in a position to accelerate the changes already initiated by his government. The President has successfully exploited the weakening of Ecuador's traditional party system, and his victory signals a reconfiguration of the already fragmented party system. A constitution approved by referendum in 2008 is being implemented in an attempt to institutionalize a more participatory democracy. The new constitution concentrates power in the executive branch, however, and critics fear that this could erode mechanisms of horizontal accountability and unleash authoritarian tendencies from the executive. The challenge for Ecuador's emerging new democratic order will be to reconcile participation with representation.

Background

By Jason Tockman

Incumbent President of Ecuador, Rafael Correa, captured almost 52 percent of the votes in the April 26, 2009 general election. His victory reflects popular support, as well as the electorate's repudiation of traditional political parties. Lacking solid bonds with society, Ecuador's parties are widely perceived as corrupt, inefficient, and unresponsive.¹ In choosing to retain Correa for four more years, Ecuadorians have opted for a measure of political stability in a country accustomed to interrupted presidencies. They have also rewarded Correa for delivering his major promise: a new political constitution.

In his 2006 presidential campaign, Correa pledged to convene a Constituent Assembly to reform the country's constitution. He quickly delivered, and the assembly drafted Ecuador's twentieth constitution. This new charter was later approved by 64 percent of voters in a popular referendum. It includes provisions that expand social and economic rights, and it seeks to include traditionally marginalized groups into the

Table 1. Presidential Elections Results (2009)

Political Party or Movement*	Candidate	Percentage	Votes Obtained
AP	Rafael Correa	51.99%	3,585,337
PSP	Lucio Gutiérrez	28.24%	1,947,255
PRIAN	Álvaro Noboa	11.40%	786,355
RED/MIPD	Martha Roldós	4.33%	298,700
MTM	Carlos Sagnay	1.57%	108,212
MTF	Melba Jácome	1.35%	93,210
MITS	Diego Delgado	0.63%	43,391
MIJS	Carlos González	0.49%	38,811

Table 1. Presidential Elections Results (2009)

* AP=Alianza País; PSP=Partido Sociedad Patriótica; PRIAN=Partido Renovador Institucional Acción Nacional; RED/MIPD=Red Ética y Democrática/Movimiento Independiente Polo Democrático; MTM=Movimiento Triunfo Mil; MTF=Movimiento Tierra Fértil; MITS=Movimiento de Integración y Transformación Social; MIJS=Movimiento Independiente Justo y Solidario.

Blank votes: 533,265; Null votes: 495,887

Source: Ecuador's CNE, elaborated by Santiago Basabe Serrano.

political order. It also increases state control over the economy, particularly in social services, energy and natural resources. The new constitution centralizes power in the executive and allows presidents to run for two consecutive four-year terms.

However, Correa's decision to convene a constituent assembly stirred polarizing debates. In early 2007, this contention played out in bitter confrontation between the president and opposition parties. Correa emerged victorious in March 2007, when the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) stripped 57 oppositional Members of Congress of their seats. In April 2007, 82 percent of Ecuadorian voters endorsed the president's plan to convene a Constituent Assembly.² The assembly, dominated by Correa's party and other forces aligned with it, dissolved the Congress and assumed full lawmaking powers.³

Throughout this process, it became clear that Correa's approach to governance continued in line with his 2006 presidential campaign. As a political outsider, Correa used personal charisma and media savvy to "disorient,

As a political outsider, Correa used personal charisma and media savvy to "disorient, demoralize and disorganize political opponents."⁴

demoralize and disorganize political opponents."⁴ In office, his presidential style has been plebiscitary, both in terms of Correa's use of referenda to institute major reforms, and his unmediated appeals to an ill-defined pueblo ("the people") in order to bypass institutions.

In November 2008, in accordance with the newly approved constitution, the National Electoral Commission



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(CNE) announced that elections for the president, National Assembly, provincial prefects and mayors would be held in April 2009. President Correa's position in national polls consistently hovered around 50 percent, with the remainder of support divided among a fragmented field of candidates, none of which individually surpassed 20 percent.

While Correa won a decisive victory in the April elections, his party, Alianza País (AP), did not achieve an absolute majority in the National Assembly. Although it did become a predominant force in the legislature, Correa and AP

to the government. Having lost the MPD as a potential ally (and having alienated other progressive forces), Correa and AP will have to negotiate alliances with a handful of atomized left-wing parties in order to avoid legislative gridlock. The questions will be how, and with whom.

Election Results: Analysis and Implications

By Santiago Basabe Serrano
(translated by Santiago Anria)

Correa's victory in the April 26 general elections paves the way for the implementation of his proposed "citizens' revolution." What does this mean for Ecuador's precarious democracy?

A president elected in the first round, and a new conception of democracy

Correa's popular support is unprecedented since Ecuador's return to democracy in 1979. According to the CNE, Correa received the support of 51.99 of those who voted. This was enough to guarantee his re-election in the first round, as the Constitution establishes that a second round is not required if a candidate exceeds 40 percent of the vote and also defeats the nearest challenger by at least 10 points. The closest rivals – for-

mer president Lucio Gutiérrez, and banana magnate Álvaro Noboa – obtained 28.24 and 11.40 percent of the votes respectively.

On January 15, 2007, President Correa assumed office for the first time. However, the new constitution establishes that his first mandate will begin in August 2009. Given that the new constitution allows one presidential re-election, and assuming for the sake of argument that voter preferences remain constant, Correa could hypothetically add up to ten consecutive years in office.

While Correa's victory signals a reconfiguration of the already fragmented party system, it also represents a new way of understanding Ecuadorian democracy. In the first place, although the traditional parties retain a degree of representation in the Congress, AP's preponderance suggests that small parties may soon evaporate. A potential consequence of this process could be the configuration of a party system around a hegemonic actor. In the second place, Correa's successive electoral victories can be understood as an expression of growing popular acceptance of a more participatory democratic regime. According to this conception of democracy, increasing popular participation — for example, through referenda — is more important and has more legitimacy than simply the periodic election of representatives.

In sum, Correa's landslide victory can be explained through the existence of a dysfunctional party system, the atomization of the opposition (which is incapable of representing the demands and interests of the populace), and Correa's credibility based on delivering the new constitution. The sum of these elements – together with



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Correa's anti-systemic discourse, his confrontational stance toward the media, and his promise of a more centralized economic model – has shaped the electoral success of the so-called "citizens' revolution."

Correa's victory, however, did not translate into a majority in the 124-seat congress. Although the ruling AP gained 59 seats – which ensures predominance within congress – the party will need to negotiate with small left-wing forces to avoid legislative gridlock. These forces include: the Maoist Movimiento Popular Democrático (MPD), the populist Partido Roldosista Ecuatoriano (PRE), the social-democrat Izquierda Democrática (ID), and the indigenous-backed Movimiento Pachacutik (PCK).

Negotiating alliances may not be easy. But even if Correa fails to negotiate legislative agreements with smaller parties, this would not necessarily lead to a stalemate. The new constitution has altered the executive-legislative balance of forces in ways that further concentrate power in the hands of the president. Failing to stitch up a majority in congress, Correa could rule by presidential decree, and rely more on ap-

peals to the ballot-box to reach his policy objectives.

AP performed well sub-nationally, where it won several provincial governments and mayoralties. It did well in the provinces of Pichincha and Azuay (home of two of the most important Ecuadorian cities, Quito and Cuenca, respectively). Notwithstanding its success in those provinces and cities, AP found it difficult to penetrate in the province of Guayas and in the city of Guayaquil (Ecuador's most populous and economically active center). These difficulties constitute a pressing challenge for the Correa-led ruling movement. It should be noted that Jaime Nebot and his center-right Social Christian Party won the mayoralty of Guayaquil, as well as the provincial government of Guayas.

Deepening the "Citizens' Revolution"?

By Santiago Basabe Serrano
(translated by Santiago Anria)

After the presidential results were made available, Correa announced his intention to deepen, radicalize, and accelerate the changes already initiated by his government. Considering his statements and trajectory, it is possible to outline some of the

political and economic strategies that Correa may follow in his next term. On the political front, the spaces for dialogue and cooperation with actors in the opposition seem to be diminishing. Although AP's ruling bloc will need some additional votes to gain legislative majorities, the possibilities of building mid- to long-term alliances with other forces may involve higher transaction costs than exchanging patronage resources as dictated by the conjuncture. It follows that Correa's confrontational logic will not necessarily be modified, as arguments against this logic do not outweigh its benefits.

Nonetheless, due to the relative absence of solid party structures and the exhaustion of the anti-media discourse, Correa's confrontational strategy needs to rapidly identify new actors that guarantee its credibility and endurance. For instance, the recent conflict with Colombia and the alleged interference of American influence in the Ecuadorian national intelligence service stand as key events in the construction of potential confrontational references. In this context, the discourse against "imperialism and its allies" provides legitimacy in two different directions: it legitimizes both the socialist model that Correa and other regional leaders seek to promote, and the institutional changes that are part of their regional project.

On the economic front, the government's vision of assigning a key role to the state for economic planning and the necessity of generating clienteles where AP is not hegemonic, sit uncomfortably with the dollarized economic regime. The reasons for retaining the US dollar have to do with the high price of oil, which remained high until last year's third trimester,

Correa's Mining Law Collides with Constitution's Promise of Participation

By Jason Tockman

In late 2008, enjoying an approval rating of 70 percent and a considerable lead in the presidential campaign, Correa decided to undertake the controversial reform of the country's mining laws. His goal was to grant large-scale open pit mining concessions on millions of hectares. But the law drew strong criticism from groups who made up Correa's base of support, due in part to the lack of public debate permitted for an issue of great importance to many of Ecuador's social movements.⁵ Notwithstanding criticisms, Correa rushed the mining law through Ecuador's transitional legislative commission (called the "Congresillo" or "little Congress"), which approved it in January 2009.

Indigenous confederations, environmental groups and many local communities that would be negatively affected by the new mining law quickly mobilized. They accused Correa of embracing the type of neoliberal policies against which he had campaigned. Thousands of Ecuadorians joined marches, roadblocks, and hunger strikes across the country, including a national "Day of Mobilization for Life" on January 20. Correa's government responded by characterizing protest groups as "fundamentalist" members of an "infantile left."

With instructions from the executive, the police arrested community activists, and fired teargas and bullets, leaving dozens injured.⁶ The Ministry of Health retracted the legal status of the prominent environmental group Acción Ecológica, which many interpreted as retaliation for the role it had played in the protests; however, its status was restored after the intervention of international supporters. Nonetheless, the government's response to civil protest suggests that the social inclusion gains enshrined in the new constitution remain vulnerable as long as the organs of the state are not committed to their implementation.

The confrontations over the mining law have precipitated a growing and possibly irreconcilable rupture in relations between the president and important social actors. For example, Humberto Cholango, president of Confederation of the Peoples of the Kichua Nation of Ecuador (ECUARUNARI), criticized the government as "anti-democratic." He also accused Correa and the Congresillo of "closing off dialogue, denying a national debate, and rushing through the approval of the mining law, which promotes a model based on the sacking of natural (extractive) resources and that favors the transnational companies" in violation of the new constitution.⁷

and not the government's preference. But Correa's high-levels of public spending during his first two years, the decline in oil prices, and the effects of the world economic crisis may result in an exchange-rate policy change in the short- to mid-term.

Finally, AP's occupation of substantial spaces of power nationally and sub-nationally should lead to four years of stability and the consolidation of Correa's political project. However, this claim contrasts with the executive's tendency toward plebiscitary democracy. Hav-

ing proved to be a beneficial resource, it seems likely that we can expect to see more appeals to the ballot-box before 2013.

The State of Democracy

By Santiago Anria and Maxwell A. Cameron

Contemporary Ecuadorian democracy may be assessed in terms of three dimensions of democracy: elections, constitutions, and citizenship. In an electoral democracy, elections are based on universal suffrage; they are free and clean; citizens can vote and have equal opportunities to run for office; and elected public officials assume office. In Ecuador, the April 26 electoral process was itself deemed free and fair by observing missions, including an institution of the European Union (EU). The results of the elections, moreover, reflected tendencies found through public opinion polls conducted prior to the electoral process. (As of late June 2009, Ecuador's CNE has failed to release the final breakdown of the new congress).

In a constitutional democracy, the executive abides by the legal and constitutional order and

respects the competence and jurisdiction of the other branches of government; the legislature legislates in the public interest, is accountable to the public and other branches, and holds other branches accountable; and the judiciary is independent and impartial. Ecuador's new constitution enjoys public legitimacy as it was passed by a referendum. The new constitution concentrates power in the executive branch, and critics fear that this could erode mechanisms of horizontal accountability and eliminate constraints on the authoritarian tendencies of the executive. This is particularly worrisome considering that AP failed, by a narrow margin, to win a majority in congress, and the president will need to either negotiate with smaller forces or rule by increased use of presidential decree authority. Additionally, due to the delay in the CNE's final tally, public trust in this institution of control may decline.

In a citizens' democracy, the most fundamental civil, political, and socio-economic

rights of citizenship are respected and protected by the state. Ecuador's new constitution places a strong emphasis on a broad array of rights, especially those pertaining to participation. For example, it creates a new body, the Council of Citizen Participation and Social Control (CPCCS), designed to foster civil society participation. This body will have sweeping powers to appoint key officials such as the Attorney General, the Comptroller General, the Human Rights Ombudsman, the CNE, superintendents, and the Board of the Judiciary. These are appointments previously made by the legislature, with the participation of political parties. Under the new constitution, political parties will have less control over these appointments. Whether this new body will empower civil society or simply reinforce executive dominance in Ecuadorian politics will depend on how the new system is implemented.

¹ As of 2006, the two Ecuadorian institutions that elicited the lowest levels of confidence among citizens were political parties and the Congress, calculated in one study at 15.1 and 16.7 percent, respectively; see Mitchell A. Seligson, Juan C. Donoso, Daniel Moreno, Diana Orcés, and Vivian Schwarz-Blum, "Democracy Audit: Ecuador 2006," (Quito, Ecuador: CEDATOS Editions, July 2006).

² Pablo Ospina Peralta, "Ecuador: Entresijos de una Encrucijada," *Nueva Sociedad* 213 (2008), 4-16.

³ Catherine M. Conaghan, "Ecuador: Correa's Plebiscitary Presidency," *Journal of Democracy* 19:2 (2008), 46-60.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Raúl Zibechi, "Ecuador: The Logic of Development Clashes with Movements," Americas Program Report (Washington, DC: Center for International Policy, March 17, 2009), Internet, <http://americas.irc-online.org/am/5965> (Date accessed: March 28, 2009).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Humberto Cholango, "Movilización Nacional por la Defensa de la Vida y la Pacha Mama," Confederación de los Pueblos de Nacionalidad Kichua del Ecuador, January 20, 2009, Internet, http://www.ecuarunari.org/es/noticias/no_20090120.html (Date accessed: March 29, 2009).

SUGGESTED FORMAT FOR CITING THIS DOCUMENT:

Santiago Basabe Serrano, Jason Tockman, Santiago Anria and Maxwell A. Cameron
"Flash Report on Ecuador: Correa's "Citizens' Revolution" Vancouver, Canada: Andean Democracy Research Network, Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions, The University of British Columbia, June 2009.

The Andean Democracy Research Network is an initiative of researchers and civil society organizations in the Andes under the auspices of Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions at UBC, with the support of International IDEA, the Andean Commission of Jurists, and the Carter Center. Generous funding for the Andean Democracy Research Network was provided by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade's Glyn Berry Program for Peace and Security. The authors are solely responsible for the views of expressed in this report, as well as any errors of fact or interpretation.

