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Exhausting Democracy in Ecuador

Another election looms for a country that has been in a constant state of transition for more than a decade.

BY GABRIELA PERDOMO

They've seen eight presidents in ten years; they've ousted three of them; they've elected lawmakers to accompany those failed governments time and again, only to be disappointed at the end of each term; and now they've been called to believe in the system once more on Sept. 30, when Ecuadorians are expected to elect 130 representatives for a Constituent Assembly. How much longer until people in the Andean country are fed up with the democratic system?



President Rafael Correa of Ecuador, now preparing for Constituent Assembly elections. (Photo: Ecuador President's Office)

Ecuador has had 18 constitutions in less than 180 years. Rafael Correa, a young economist educated in the United States, ran his entire presidential campaign last year on the basis of re-writing the charter once more. Correa won with 56.69 per cent of the vote in a run-off in November, and earlier this year his motion to change the country's body of law was approved in a national referendum by 82 per cent of all voters. An election to pick the writers of the new constitution—which the president has said should be the gateway to a fairer and more egalitarian society—is scheduled for the end of this month.

FRESH START

Correa belongs to a group of emerging left-leaning leaders to have won a democratic election in Latin America over the past few years. Along with his counterparts in Venezuela (Hugo Chávez) and Bolivia (Evo Morales), Correa blames poverty and social inequality in Ecuador on failed economic policies imposed by the United States and American-based international institutions like the World Bank. He also lured voters to support him by denouncing Ecuador's traditional political class, which he says has pillaged the country's rich natural resources. In order to have a better future, Correa asserts, Ecuador needs a fresh start.

None of the president's claims are easy to debunk. Ecuador is today one of the poorest nations in Latin America, with about 37 per cent of its citizens living on less than \$2 U.S. a day. A good chunk of the national economy is feeding off international funds sent home by the thousands who have fled to find better opportunities abroad. According to Transparency International's corruption perceptions index, Ecuador is also one of the most crooked nations in the world. Indigenous peoples, who represent about a quarter of the total population, are largely marginalized from mainstream society and account for most of the country's poor.

The problem is that Ecuadorians might be set for disappointment after casting a ballot this month. Correa's promises seemed weak from the beginning of his campaign, but a mix of charisma and political opportunity won him the presidency. Ten months into his mandate, his plan for Ecuador's future is not looking any clearer.

NOT EVEN STARTED

The truth is Correa's tenure has not even started. This entire year has been dedicated to promote the constitutional cause and, come October, things could turn for the worse. Correa has said he will resign if his Movement Country (MP) fails to win the majority of seats in the Assembly. According to the latest voting intention poll by Cedatos-Gallup, Correa's followers could secure more seats than any other party—at least 44—but not enough to secure the outcome of every proposal.

If the MP manages to win a majority—66 seats—the prospects of stability are also questionable. The president promised to dissolve Congress if his allies control the Constituent Assembly, which will certainly become a great challenge. Some fear Correa could be tempted to create a semi-authoritarian regime supported by the constitution's writers, echoing the on-going attempt by Morales in Bolivia and the successful amendments of Chávez in Venezuela.

There is, however, some room for hope. A decent performance in the ballot and some sane advice could convince Correa to stay in the presidency and promote a healthy debate in the new Assembly. If the ad-hoc legislative body finds good leadership, there might be a chance for the South American country to ratify a new constitution some time next year.

INSULTS, SHOUTS - AND REASONABLE IDEAS

When Correa has not been insulting what he deems as the "sold-out" media or some corrupt political baron, or yelling from the top of his lungs to advertise the introduction of a 21st century socialism in Ecuador—a concept he has so far chosen not to explain—he has expressed some reasonable policy ideas. The president wants to divide Congress in two chambers and ensure judges are appointed not in an exercise of political patronage, but through a merit-based system. Although his economic policy remains unclear, sometimes it seems Correa is willing to protect private property as long as international companies and governments renegotiate their terms of doing business with Ecuador and leave more revenues at home.

Correa has made of this ballot a passionate crusade. He might be right to say Ecuadorians deserve a fresh start—they certainly deserve better than what they have endured over the past few decades. But he should realize that a failure to deliver on leadership and statesmanship will not only represent his defeat. Voters might get tired of wasting their time in the ballot box. And that could be the worst outcome of a young economist's misadventure.

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