

## **Ecuador, popular and indigenous uprisings under the Correa government**

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When Rafael Vicente Correa Delgado assumed the presidency of Ecuador on January 15, 2007, he became the eighth president of the small South American country in ten years. He campaigned on the promise of calling a constituent assembly

to write a new and more inclusive constitution. This would be Ecuador's twentieth constitution since becoming an independent republic in 1830, replacing the current constitution that was only drafted a decade earlier in 1998. Social movements repeatedly called for a new constitution in order to remake the country's social, political, and economic landscape.

Observers questioned whether Correa could complete his four-year term, especially since no government had survived a full term in more than a decade. Three of those presidents had been removed through massive street protests. The young and charismatic economist and college professor first gained national attention during a short stint as finance minister under his predecessor, President Alfredo Palacio. Correa has a PhD in economics from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and wrote a dissertation attacking the Washington Consensus of neoliberal free-market reform, dominated by US imperialism. As minister, he advocated poverty reduction programs and closer relations with Hugo Chavez's left-populist government in Venezuela. When after four months Correa resigned under pressure from the United States, he enjoyed the highest approval ratings of any official in the administration.

Once out of Palacio's government, Correa was commonly put forward as a prospective candidate in the 2006 presidential elections. Correa ran on a nationalistic economic platform, criticizing foreign oil corporations for extracting the majority of petroleum rents from Ecuador, and condemned neoliberal economic policies, including free trade agreements with the US.

Correa's candidacy raised questions among social movement activists on who to support for president. Particularly for the strong and well-organized indigenous movements instrumental in toppling presidents over the previous decade, Correa was a controversial and divisive choice. A devout Catholic, he worked for a year in a Salesian Catholic mission in Zumbahua, Cotopaxi, and spoke the indigenous Kichwa language. But he was not an indigenous, nor was he involved in organizing indigenous movements. In particular, the indigenous political party Pachakutik mistrusted Correa and others outside of their movement. In 2003 indigenous activists allied with the populist presidency of Lucio Gutiérrez who, once elected to office, neglected his former allies in favor of the elite. Even more

damaging, he divided the indigenous networks through providing patronage to supporters, deeply dividing indigenous movements in Ecuador. Activists feared that Correa would have a similar impact.

Leading up to the 2006 elections, Correa and Pachakutik discussed forming an alliance. Some observers dreamed of a shared ticket between Correa and Luis Macas, a celebrated indigenous leader. Indigenous activists wanted an indigenous president, but Correa refused to consider running as vice president. While activists questioned whether Correa was ideologically committed to Pachakutik's center-left agenda, he was elected with the indigenous organization's support. He promised supporters a radical restructuring of government as a solution to problems of social exclusion and economic injustice. Even militant indigenous activists cheered Correa's victory, embracing his triumph as a blow against neoliberalism and hoping that it would create a stronger democracy.

Correa's first act as president was an executive decree calling for a referendum on whether to convene a constituent assembly to write a new constitution. Even though three-fourths of the population favored a new constitution, changing government structures went against the institutional interests of the established political parties. To gain congressional approval for a constituent assembly, he engaged in delicate negotiations with the same political parties in Congress he had denounced as part of the corrupt political establishment.

Correa won an April 15, 2007 referendum to hold an assembly by an overwhelming margin, with more than 80 percent of the electorate approving the measure. The referendum won in great measure due to the support of indigenous popular movements. In September 30, 2007 elections for assembly seats, Correa consolidated control by winning a majority of seats in the assembly, assuring meaningful changes in a new constitution. While the victories were major personal triumphs for Correa, social movements were marginalized from the formal political changes sweeping the country. From the perspective of social movements, the consolidation of power in the hands of a strong and seemingly egotistical executive meant that they would lose space to press their own agendas.

The constituent assembly began its work on drafting the country's twentieth constitution

on November 29, 2007. The assembly had six months to draft the constitution, with a possibility of extending its mandate by two more months. The new constitution would be submitted to a public referendum. If approved, Correa would call for congressional and presidential elections under the new constitution.

In tune with the goals of the executive branch, one of the constituent assembly's first acts was to declare the national congress, commonly perceived as being corrupt and inefficient, as in indefinite recess until the new constitution was drafted. The assembly then assumed full legislative powers. The traditional political parties controlling the congress complained that their concerns would be marginalized in the new assembly, and denounced the move as unconstitutional. The assembly asserted that it acted within its mandate, and represented the popular sovereignty of the Ecuadorian people.

The constituent assembly provided a critical juncture for indigenous activists longing for a constituent assembly to create a more inclusionary and participatory political system. Since a 1990 indigenous uprising, activists complained that the current constitution benefitted the dominant sectors of society to the exclusion of the popular majority. A primary and constant demand was to rewrite the first article of Ecuador's constitution to declare the "plurinational" nature of the country, recognizing 14 indigenous nationalities and acknowledging that their systems of life, education, and economy were uniquely different from the dominant white society. As a nationality, indigenous peoples would have their own territory, language, history, and culture. Correa had a historic opportunity to decolonize the country's political structures.

Despite his leftist credentials and broad popular support, some social movement activists were concerned that the young charismatic Correa was occupying spaces that they had previously held. This was a citizens' revolution, Correa declared, not one built by social movements. His "citizen's revolution" marginalized social movements that for the past two decades led powerful protests against neoliberal economic policies. Organized social movements often took more radical positions than Correa.

Activists found themselves walking a fine line between defending the assembly from conservative attacks and pressing it to take more radical positions. Returning to their traditional tactics,

indigenous movements mobilized their bases in street demonstrations to defend the assembly while at the same time pushing for greater recognition of their needs.

SEE ALSO: Ecuador, Indigenous and Popular Struggles; Ecuador, Left and Popular Movements, 1940s to Present; Ecuador, Protest and Revolution

#### References and Suggested Readings

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