



Special Update: Ecuador

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Upcoming Ecuadorian Elections Unpredictable

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The campaign season for the Ecuadorian national elections opened on September 3 and, by law, must end three days before ballots are cast on October 20 for positions ranging from local town councils to the congress¹ and the president of the republic. This election period is marked by both innovative initiatives as well as the long-standing practices and familiar candidates which have characterized Ecuadorian elections for decades. The elections could provide new and positive change, or may simply result in the continuation of the status quo, which, over the last few years, has consisted of a lack of national leadership and few clearly defined policies toward either national or international concerns. This year's elections also take place while Ecuador is gaining a key position within a regional dynamic that includes the Colombian civil war at its northern border, the presence of U.S. troops stationed at one of its coastal airbases where the U.S. military has established a "forward operating location" (FOL) for counternarcotics purposes, and its inclusion in the key hemispheric debate around the establishment of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). It is assumed that, more than ever before, international eyes will be focused on election outcomes in Ecuador.

As one of the leading newspapers in Ecuador editorialized in early September, the upcoming elections are taking place during a time in which Ecuador faces a "dramatic national and international economic panorama, a confused attitude toward [its] northern border and the existence of grave unresolved social issues. Add in the apparently endemic ingovernability and the absence of a timely renovation of the political class."² However, in the midst of these serious considerations, the editorial continues in a vein of optimism toward this year's elections. There are new initiatives which could bode well for, at the very least, a clean and fair process, including: strict control of campaign expenditures with legal consequences for non-compliance; the decision to implement the new "quick count" system for election results; and the presence of a newly-established civil organization, Citizen Participation (CP), which will monitor the entire election process along with the European Union, international, multi-lateral and U.S. independent monitors.

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Long-Standing Party Politics

There are eleven presidential tickets for the highest office in the country. As throughout the history of Ecuador, each ticket has two candidates – one for president and one for vice-president – with one from each of the two major regions of Ecuador, the *sierra*, or highlands, and the coast. These two regions represent different cultures, worldviews and economic interests. Any presidential ticket without a balance of representation from both of them is doomed to defeat. It should also be noted that the coast has a larger population than the *sierra* and therefore often determines election outcomes.

Out of the eleven tickets, only six are thought to have a chance of reaching the second round.³ The history of Ecuadorian politics has been characterized more by the power of political party machinery than high-profile personalities or positions held on national issues. However, this year, the presidential tickets seen as the most likely to succeed are a mix of traditional political party machines and national personalities.

There are four national parties which historically vie for power among one another. The one which has historically been the most powerful is the Christian Social Party (PSC), which has its power base on the coast. It is considered to be right-of-center, and its most powerful members mostly represent the financial elite of the country. The other powerful party with a historical base on the coast is the Roldosista Party (PRE).⁴ It is highly populist and known for its strategy of gaining support among the poor of Ecuador by establishing long-term paternalistic relationships at the “barrio” level. The Popular Democratic Party (DP) was at one time a strong centrist party whose founder, ex-president Osvaldo Hurtado, recently left it to form a new party after one of its members, Jamil Mahuad, who held the country’s presidency, was overthrown in a coup and indicted for corruption. Finally, the left-of-center Democratic Left Party (ID) has its historical base in the *sierra* and strong support among the *sierra*’s educated middle-class.

The PSC, the PRE and ID are among the six presidential tickets thought to have a chance at the second round because of their party history and established political machinery. The other three are built around individual presidential candidates.

The Candidates

There are two figures who have historically run as PSC candidates for president of Ecuador – Leon Febres Cordero (president of Ecuador from 1984 to 1988) and Jaime Nebot. Febres Cordero decided not to run for president this year on the PSC ticket for health reasons but is running for congress. Nebot is presently mayor of Guayaquil, the largest city in Ecuador, and decided not to give up his present position after two consecutive losses in past bids for the presidency. Many have said that no matter who the PSC candidate is, Febres Cordero and Nebot would still be the ones pulling the strings. The chosen PSC candidate is Xavier Neira, a 55-year-old economist and a Febres Cordero protégé. He has served numerous times in congress and was Minister of Industry under the Febres Cordero administration. As previously mentioned, the PSC has a powerful and widespread political machine with its base on the coast, the most populous region of the country. It also represents powerful economic interests. Its potential for victory lies in these two facts more than its stand on issues or the personality of its candidate.

The PRE has also had to choose a “stand-in” for its presidential candidate, as its most powerful leader, Abdala Bucaram, is presently in exile in Panama after being ousted from Ecuador’s presidency in 1996. The PRE’s presidential candidate is Abdala’s brother, Jacobo Bucaram. J. Bucaram has also served in congress, but he is principally an agricultural engineer; his background includes posts at the Agrarian University of Guayaquil and administration of state-run agricultural institutions. Also, like the PSC’s Neira, most recognize that if J. Bucaram wins, it is really his brother, Abdala, who will be the principal power behind the throne. The PRE has been said to have the most powerful political machine in the country, with its main strength lying among the majority of Ecuador’s poor residing on the coast and the populist roots the party has had in place for decades in those communities. With over sixty percent of Ecuador’s population at or below the poverty line, the PRE’s power base is an effective one – it won Abdala the presidency in 1996, and it could win it for his brother in 2002.

The candidate now leading in the polls is the same one who ran on the PRE ticket in the 1998 elections and made it to the second round that year: Alvaro Noboa.⁵ Noboa has always insisted that he actually won the 1998 election as the exit polls consistently had him in the lead. As son and heir of one of the richest men in Ecuador’s history, Noboa runs an agro-industrial empire which includes banana plantations and export companies as well as subsidiaries of such U.S. producers as Quaker Oatmeal. He and his wife have been courting the poor for the past four years by building health clinics up and down the coast that offer free medicines and services, and sponsoring construction projects such as new roofs for the homes of the poorest of the poor and other populist initiatives. After the 1998 elections, there was a hostile split between the PRE and Noboa. Abdala Bucaram, the PRE’s leader, always insisted that Noboa reached the second round based on the strength of the PRE’s political machine, while Noboa insists it was because of his political prowess. Noboa is now presenting a major challenge to the PRE’s political machinery throughout the country through the Innovative Party (PRIAN), which he founded just before the electoral period began. However, he has run into some bad press with the publication of a Human Rights Watch/Americas report on child labor and other labor abuses on Ecuador’s banana plantations. One of Noboa’s plantations, Los Alamos, was recently the scene of violent management-labor confrontations. He has fought back with TV spots showing his plantation employees testifying to how good it is to work for him and the benefits he provides to his workers.

Noboa’s campaign advisors are also bringing suit against the national Supreme Tribunal for Elections (TSE, the body in charge of the elections process) regarding campaign spending limits set for each presidential candidate. The PRIAN claims that the spending limits unfairly hamper the party’s campaign. At the same time, Noboa has led in the polls since voter surveys began, which testifies to populism’s power in Ecuador.

Unlike the PSC and the PRE, ID is actually presenting its most powerful leader, Rodrigo Borja, as its presidential candidate. This is Borja’s fifth run at the presidency (one of which he won, for 1988–1992), and he is one of the six who is clearly in the running. While ID has a strong national presence due to its long history, its power base is in the *sierra*, giving it smaller numbers than the PSC or the PRE. The 67-year-old Borja holds a doctorate of law and is known for his academic and analytical mindset. While the press and others have labeled Borja as somewhat staid and not necessarily a team player, his recognized strengths are that he ran an honest administration while president and is well-informed on national and international concerns. Although all candidates are developing or have formulated issue platforms, it is said that

Borja is one of those whose platform reflects more solid analysis and thoughtful proposals, and his name is one of the more recognized on the Andean regional level.

Another academic, and the candidate seen as Borja's most direct competition, is León Roldós. Roldós served as vice-president under Osvaldo Hurtado (1981–84). Hurtado took over the presidency (he was vice-president at the time) after Jaime Roldós, León's brother and then-president of Ecuador, was killed in a suspicious airplane crash. León Roldós is a highly respected academic recognized for his contribution to higher education during his time as rector of the Central University of Guayaquil. The 60-year-old Roldós has been a member of the Socialist party since 1988 and served in congress various times under the Socialists. An attorney who specializes in banking law, he favors continued negotiation with the International Monetary Fund, which, to some, appears somewhat contradictory to his Socialist party membership. Such paradoxes are typical of this candidate who is known to be one of the few Ecuadorian politicians who is actually open to compromise when necessary. His running mate, Dolores Padilla, is a highly respected community activist who formed national-level grassroots advocacy networks and social service organizations and is historically known as a feminist and strong progressive.

Roldós also has the support of some centrist movements, and even some right-of-center organizations. Running as an independent, he entered the race late and changed the left-of-center dynamic as the Socialist party switched its support from another candidate to Roldós. Other left-of-center movements, such as the New Country Movement, also shifted their support to Roldós once he entered the race. Although he is not running with an established political party, he is seen as having a good chance of getting to the second round because of his name recognition, the respect he has built over the years as both university rector and congressman and the important fact that he is from the coast.

In April of this year, many Ecuadorian progressives attempted to pull the left-of-center together at the national level and unite behind a single presidential candidate. Roldós was not yet running, and the options behind which a left-of-center coalition could unite were Antonio Vargas (a member of the indigenous community from the Amazonia region), Rodrigo Borja of the ID, and Lucio Gutiérrez (the ex-military colonel who, along with Antonio Vargas, was part of the "triumvirate" that overthrew the Mahuad presidency in 2001). Borja showed no willingness to have his party support any candidate but himself, and this unwillingness to consider other options for a left-of-center ticket alienated him and his party from the process. In the end, the unions, the most radical political party (MPD, the Democratic Political Movement), the indigenous political party Pachakutik, and the Socialist party, as well as other leftist political movements, threw their weight behind Gutiérrez. (However, as mentioned before, the Socialists and a few other left-of-center groups switched to the Roldós ticket once he entered the race.)

Gutiérrez represents a long history of Ecuadorian society's relationship with one branch of the military, the army. Ecuadorian military history, since the time of freedom fighter Eloy Alfaro, includes the fact that under military governments several civil reforms were put into place, such as the separation of church and state and the establishment of laws enabling more citizen participation. Although the Ecuadorian military is not without incidents of the abuse of power, it has never acquired a reputation for repression as have other militaries throughout South America – especially in reference to military leaders of lower rank (the upper echelon of the Ecuadorian military does not hold the same popular respect). According to Patricio Pazmiño of the Center for Economic and Social Rights, Gutiérrez is the repository for this image of the military

as empowering civil society and fighting corruption.⁶ His role in the January 2001 coup provides him hero status for many left-leaning, anti-establishment movements. The 45-year-old civil engineer taught geopolitics in the military university and had an extremely successful athletic career in the military pentathlon before being forced out of the military for his involvement in the coup of 2001. Although many recognize that he could make the second round due to the community-based support he is receiving from the unions, the indigenous and other progressive movements, many have also expressed concern that a leader with a military mindset is not what the country needs in the midst of the international complexities Ecuador now faces. In rebuttal, Gutiérrez points to such military rulers as Eloy Alfaro and Simón Bolívar when questioned regarding the administrative and governing abilities of the military.

Campaign Issues?

The complex and important issues being faced by Ecuador almost seem beside the point in the present elections. The problem, as stated in an editorial in Quito's main newspaper, is that all of the candidates are offering the same platitudes regarding the issues of corruption, economic productivity and unemployment.⁷ (Transparency International has categorized Ecuador as the second most corrupt nation in Latin America, up from third place in the previous report.⁸) However, none of the candidates say *how* they are going to end corruption, *how* they will increase economic productivity nor *how* they will provide more employment. The editorial goes on to lament that the majority of candidates appear to support the continuation of the status quo. Both Gutiérrez and Vargas (the indigenous candidate) talk about changing the system, but only Gutiérrez has provided any details such as his proposal to limit congress to only twenty-eight representatives, all of whom would be required to graduate from a leadership and policy institute that would be developed under his administration.⁹

According to Fredy Rivera of the Quito branch of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO), making campaign comments on U.S. policy in the region, such as U.S. troop presence in Manta and Plan Colombia to the north, appears to be largely taboo.¹⁰ It seems that the candidates do not want to paint themselves into a corner regarding U.S.-Ecuadorian relations, in the event they actually win the presidency. Recently, León Roldos stated that, although his administration would participate in the war on drugs, he would not permit confusion between the war on drugs and the insurgency in Colombia. He also states that he would not close the northern border but would guarantee security and development through updated technology.¹¹ What most of the other candidates are saying about the border is that they will protect the borders without involving themselves in the Colombian conflict. According to Rivera, border security has become a local issue for border communities. Therefore, candidates' comments regarding the northern border focus more on community concerns than political platforms regarding the development of Ecuadorian international policy as it relates to the United States and regional dynamics. Almost all have said that the treaty signed with the United States for the use of the Manta base should be reviewed, but only to ensure that what is stipulated is in the best interests of Ecuador. No candidate has yet called the treaty into question.

Finally, Adrián Bonilla, director of the international studies program at FLACSO, echoed the concerns expressed above by the editorial team of *El Comercio* – that the campaign of 2002 is offering no new proposals. “The 2002 elections [are] not a comparison of proposals but a confrontation of tones of voices, regional accents and manners of dress – all around the same agenda reiterated by all candidates until boredom sets in – ‘corruption, employment and security’ – a

litany which loses all meaning with its constant repetition.”¹² Bonilla thinks it highly improbable that the tactics of the present campaign, characterized by nothing more than images, will change significantly before the October 20 vote. However, he insists that, if there is a second round of voting, the final candidates should seriously debate the key issues affecting Ecuador and present relevant ideas, programs and proposals.

New Initiatives of the 2002 Elections

The establishment of Citizen Participation (CP) began in early spring of this year and was based on similar initiatives throughout Latin America, such as *Transparencia* in Peru. Directed by Cesar Montufar, a respected policy analyst and academic from the Andean Simon Bolivar University, CP receives funding from the National Democratic Institute (NDI, a Democratic Party initiative), USAID and the European Union. Its tasks include:

- aid in updating the national voter registry;
- development of a written “electoral commitment,” covering moral, ethical and legal practices within election campaigns, to be signed by candidates and media outlets as well as distributed to the electorate;
- monitoring of campaign spending and candidates’ utilization of the media;
- help in carrying out a “quick count” (see below); and
- monitoring of the election process, from voting through the count.

CP’s accomplishments have surprised and impressed many in Ecuador. While it took three election cycles before a similar initiative in Argentina gained legitimacy in the eyes of both candidates and the public, CP has already achieved a public, media-covered signing of the “electoral commitment” by all but two of the presidential candidates, has over four thousand youth volunteers working on campaign and election monitoring throughout the country and has signed working agreements with the TSE and national media outlets covering both television and the written press. The “electoral commitment” covers such areas as ethical campaign practices, respect for opposing candidates as well as the electorate, and respect for final election results. Many analysts, however, are cautious regarding how strongly such a commitment will actually influence the ethical quality of campaigns throughout the country and question the sincerity of the candidates in signing it.

The presence of CP has created optimism and some new confidence in the election process in Ecuador, stemming partly from the fact that there is an external, apolitical body working in cooperation with the TSE (the TSE is made up of representatives designated by each political party in an attempt to exclude party favoritism from TSE’s implementation of its duties). Confidence is also buoyed by the fact that CP will have observers at every voting station to document such key events as prompt arrival of voting materials, the opening and closing times of the voting areas as well as any undue influence of local parties during the actual voting process. This type of monitoring has not been done in the past. CP will also undertake its own quick count at each voting station. The quick count is a statistical analysis of a certain percentage of votes already cast compared to the number of potential votes, representing a realistic reflection of the final vote count.¹³ CP will present the national results of its quick count only once, at the end of the voting day.

TSE will carry out its own quick count but will be using a different methodology than that of CP. CP is being trained by NDI staff from the United States, while TSE is using a method developed in Colombia. Because both CP and TSE will implement a quick count in addition to the final official count, TSE will most likely *not* allow public exit polls. Because exit polls are based on verbal indications of votes and are not a count of the votes themselves, they risk being politically skewed and not necessarily representative of actual votes. The 1998 runoff between Noboa and Mahuad was mired in controversy because the exit polls directly contradicted the final vote count. However, the Ecuadorian media is pressuring for the right to announce exit polls as part of their election coverage.

How Will the Dynamics Play Out?

Fragmentation of movements and political parties is one of the most notable characteristics of this year's elections. According to Rivera, the presence of Alvaro Noboa has splintered the populist vote, a historically powerful vote belonging to the PRE.¹⁴ Such fragmentation, says Pazmiño, could benefit the PSC, with its power base also on the coast and guaranteed to receive the vote from the majority of the economic elite of Ecuador.¹⁵ In other words, the conservative and historical coastal vote is fairly unpredictable at this point, although Noboa continues to lead in the latest polls.

Some analysts believe that the left-of-center was fragmented, perhaps fatally, when the effort to unite behind one candidate failed miserably. The centrist and left-of-center vote is now split among Gutiérrez, Roldós and Borja, with ex-president Osvaldo Hurtado siphoning off votes from that sector as well.¹⁶ The indigenous communities, which have in the past united behind one candidate, are also divided. Antonio Vargas, the indigenous candidate, has been rejected by the leadership of both the national indigenous federation, CONAIE, as well as its political arm, Pachakutik. Their vote is mostly split between Borja and Gutiérrez. Vargas is running on the ticket of the political organization of the evangelical Christian indigenous community, Amauta Jatari, and has the support of CONFENIAE, the Amazonian indigenous federation (also a member of CONAIE), which interprets the non-support of Vargas by CONAIE and Pachakutik as a rejection of the indigenous nations of the Amazonian region by the *sierra's* indigenous community.

Rivera suggests that the elections will most likely be won on the local level, where political machines like the PRE, or personality cults like Noboa's, are strongest.¹⁷ It is also where both the PRE and Noboa have spent the most money. The Noboa campaign has been distributing free medical care and medicines along with other giveaways for the past four years; the PRE is now offering door-to-door coupons which, if taken to their local headquarters in Esmeraldas, can be exchanged for four pounds of rice, two pounds of sugar, cooking oil, beans and pasta.¹⁸ The PRE and Noboa are not alone in implementing these kinds of campaign tactics on the local level. Such campaign spending is *not* included within the spending limits set out by law. It would be next to impossible to differentiate fairly between community projects and charity and political campaigning. At the same time, when over sixty percent of the population lives in poverty, this kind of campaign spending is what could determine the winner.

As Cesar Montufar has noted, the percentage of undecided voters registered by the polls is unusually high.¹⁹ The campaign began with eighty-six percent of the voters undecided as of September 4. By September 15, the undecided vote was still a high (in comparison with other

election processes) twenty-seven percent. With such a large percentage of the electorate undecided, this election is highly unpredictable across the board. Political analysts have all agreed on the fact that, although the faces and parties are familiar, many important dynamics in this election are different from those of previous races. Even so, at this point, there is no indication that any of the candidates would advocate a significant shift in policy concerning the drug war or Plan Colombia.

Again, these elections could mark a much-needed change in the leadership of Ecuador or continue with a typically unstable political establishment which lacks both the confidence and the support of the Ecuadorian people. The final outcome is uncomfortably unclear.

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Notes

¹ “Congress” in this document refers to the Ecuadorian Congress.

² Editorial, *El Comercio*, 2 Sept. 2002.

³ Ecuador, like most Latin American countries, holds a second round of elections for the two top vote-getting candidates if no candidate receives forty percent or more of the vote.

⁴ The Roldosista Party (PRE) was named for President Jaime Roldós, killed in a suspicious plane crash in 1981. Jaime Roldós was married to a Bucaram, a member of the coastal political family who founded PRE using the Roldós name. Under the auspices of the Rodolsista Party (PRE), Abdala Bucaram won the presidency in 1996 and was then ousted that same year. The son of Jaime Roldós, Santiago, and Jaime’s brother and current presidential candidate, León, both abhor the Roldosista Party and their stripe of politics. Santiago Roldós has made it clear on several occasions that he finds it painful that the Bucaram political family uses his father’s name for their party.

⁵ Not to be confused with the current president of Ecuador, *Gustavo Noboa*. They are not related.

⁶ Interview with author 3 Sept. 2002.

⁷ *El Comercio*, 7 Sept. 2002.

⁸ See <http://www.transparency.org/cpi/2002/cpi2002.en.html>

⁹ Gutiérrez has not detailed how he will get around the constitutional requirements for a certain percentage of representation from each province.

¹⁰ Interview with author, 26 Sept. 2002.

¹¹ *El Comercio*, 3 Oct. 2002.

¹² Bonilla, Adrián, “Programas y/o Sonrisas”, *Vistazo*, No. 842, 19 Sept. 2002, 13.

¹³ Ecuador requires by law that all citizens vote (although a citizen is allowed to vote null) and all Ecuadorians have a voting card which is marked at the time of voting and can be requested when applying for a job or other important public transactions. This is how the potential number of votes is known.

¹⁴ Interview with author, 2 Sept. 2002.

¹⁵ Interview with author, 3 Sept. 2002.

¹⁶ Osvaldo Hurtado’s new party, *Solidarity Patria*, is said to have no chance of making it to the second round, but its presence in the elections is an attempt to position itself within national politics with an eye toward the 2006 elections.

¹⁷ Interview with author, 2 Sept. 2002.

¹⁸ “El PRE regala víveres; el MPD ofrece medicinas,” *El Comercio*, 18 Sept. 2002.

¹⁹ Interview with author, 11 Sept. 2002.