

## **ECUADOR'S 'CIVIC REVOLUTION' BEFORE ITS STRESS TEST. RAFAEL CORREA'S POLITICAL PROJECT BETWEEN PRETENTION AND REALITY**

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52 percent of the electorate confirmed Rafael Correa as Ecuador's head of state on April 26th this year. The losers of the presidential elections in the Andean state are Lucio Gutiérrez of the Partido Sociedad Patriótica (PSP) at 28.2 and Alvaro Noboa of the Partido Renovador Institucional Acción Nacional (PRIAN) at 11.4 percent. Charges of electoral fraud as well as technical errors have so far delayed the announcement of the composition of the future Asamblea Nacional in Quito.

Mr Correa has clearly missed his target, which was to secure an absolute majority for his PAIS movement which would have enabled him to pursue his 'political project' with greater force. Nevertheless, the 58 seats he won in the 124-member Asamblea Nacional constitute a relative majority. Lagging far behind, the PSP won 19 seats, the PSC eleven, the PRIAN eight, the MDP and Mmun five each, Pachacutik four, the PRE three, the ID two, and the CN one, while a number of other movements now have a total of eight mandates.

In the capital, Quito, the MPAIS candidate Augusto Barrera won at 43 percent; in Guayaquil, Jaime Nebot of the PSC won a resounding victory at 68 percent, and in Cuenca, the ruling party brought home 50 percent of the vote. Mr Correa, whose approval rating is down to 41 percent across the country, must have been disappointed by the result of the election, all the more so as the popularity of the opposition as a whole is exactly the same as his. Having categorically ruled out cooperation with the opposition before the election, the head of state will probably seek to enter into a dialogue with Mr Nebot and/or others now.

Even before he was first elected in 2006, Mr Correa had promised many things. He let it be known that he was striving to re-establish the country from the ground up, liberate it from political nepotism, fight against corruption at all levels, and take energetic steps against the 'rotten political class' and its most prominent representatives, the parties themselves. His PAIS movement was intended to replace the existing system by a new, albeit still featureless configuration which some hoped would reveal itself as a solidary economy while others feared that it would be a rehash of communist command economy. Be that as it may, nothing happened in the two years of the president's first term of office.

A glance at Ecuador's recent political past may help us to understand the Correa phenomenon. Having called itself democratic since the end of military

rule in 1979, the country's development was turbulent, marked by socio-political and economic incompetence and corruption. Instead of establishing themselves as programmatic and ideological forces, the parties turned themselves into tools that were used by caudillos to attain power. After all, the Ecuadorians still yearn for a strong leader as much as ever, although – or maybe because – their hopes were disappointed every time, and the term of many a president ended when he fled or was driven out of the country. Examples include Jamil Mahuad, who wanted to dollarize the country and froze all savings up to a total of one thousand dollars; Gustavo Noboa, who did stabilize the national economy to a certain extent; and Lucio Gutiérrez, whose downfall was brought about by his autocratic style of government.

Rafael Correa fits easily into a well-known pattern. With his abundance of charisma and public appeal, he embodies the archetype of the Latin American caudillo only too well. He promised to make a fresh political start and fight poverty resolutely. The latter promise was especially effective because none of the previous governments had seriously attempted to establish a sustainable social policy, while all had confirmed the public in their suspicion that self-interest ranked higher in the minds of politicians than commitment to the common good. Traditional politics has failed. More than that, it paved the way for Mr Correa, enabling him to sell himself to people who hungered for change as 'God's own messenger' and to present himself and his political model as a credible alternative to the traditional quagmire of corruption and shattered illusions.

Mr Correa had promised a new constitution in his election campaign of 2006. When it did arrive in April 2008 as the country's 20th constitution, it was far from being the breakthrough that it was claimed to be. The text includes a number of essential legal, political, and economic passages that are open to interpretation and harbour great conflict potential. The task of interpreting and applying the substance of each article is left to the president who is, moreover, empowered to dissolve parliament and lay down the guidelines of financial policy. Furthermore, the members of the Constitutional Court, the country's highest court of appeal, are appointed by the president. While the court can quash the president's first attempt at dissolution, it has to bow to the second one. All that is certainly no sign of that civic participation Mr Correa was and is always talking about. On the contrary, presidentialism is being consolidated more and more.

The only positive aspects of the new constitution, if any, are decentralization and the reinforcement of civil society. Its approach to these two aspects is positive, yet it is to be feared that neither the new constitution nor the core of the 'Correa project' can do anything to improve the lives of the Ecuadorian people. On the other hand, it appears certain that social and legal conflicts in the country will grow more intense. Nor is any reinforcement of democracy

evident in the constitution, which was approved by 64 percent of the electorate late in September last year. Rather, it is to be expected that civil liberties will be curtailed and power centralized further.

Disregarding all his promises, Mr Correa acts the strong man and plays the Caudillo, criticising his ministers in public, enhancing his mass appeal by entering into disputes with neighbouring countries, advancing the country's internal division, playing on the traditional prejudices between the regions, and hectoring against democratic institutions that are weak in the first place. The latter especially have laid themselves wide open to attack: after all, they did not succeed in the course of three decades in emplacing democracy as a system of compromise and replacing a political culture in which all players aim to destroy their political opponents instead of integrating them in the process of compromise. So far, Rafael Correa has done no good. Today, Ecuador's society is more polarized than ever before.

The movement created by the president to support himself is quite heterogeneous not only in personal but also in ideological terms. The membership of the Movimiento PAIS is by no means homogenous, although one might suppose it to be. The perspective of acquiring and defending power for themselves was the bond that kept them together so far. However, it is increasingly suspected that the movement is nothing much more than a club established to vote for an individual politician. The most powerful association of indigenous people, CONAIE, parted from Mr Correa one year ago, enraged by the fact that the indigenes working in the mining districts were given neither a say nor a vote in matters that concern them.

To be sure, the Movimiento PAIS may be seen as a political party as Mr Correa cannot do without it because his policy needs the unconditional support of a widespread force. However, this is exactly where the president has revealed himself as a charlatan once again, for he had previously announced his intention to break with the traditional party system and open the door to direct civic participation.

The political project of Ecuador's current president is about personal power and not about modernizing the country's political system. So far, Mr Correa has survived all tricky situations. The Ecuadorian people still want to credit the promises of salvation made by the strong man of Quito, although they are growing more sceptical. Rafael Correa has succeeded in cementing his power base, not least by his political rhetoric against the allegedly 'counter-revolutionary forces of the oligarchy' whose only aim was to deprive the people of the civic revolution they deserved.

Once upon a time, this civic revolution was built on the belief in a participative democracy which would, if possible, extend the right of participation and

franchise to all Ecuadorians. Yet the idea seems to be growing in peoples' minds that the democracy promised them by their own president some time ago ends at the walls of the palace that is inhabited by that self-same president.

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