Latin America's Shifting Politics: Ecuador After Correea

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ECUADOR AFTER CORREA

Carlos de la Torre

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Populist presidential successions are often problematic if not catastrophic. Like other politicians whose legitimacy lies in winning free elections, populists see voting as the only legitimate path to power. Yet unlike democrats who take a more impersonal view of the chief executive's office and regard it as a temporary trust, populists tend to see their missions of freeing or saving the people as primary, and want to stay at the helm until the goal is reached. Thus populist incumbents will embrace elections, but often while seeking at the same time to tilt the electoral playing field in their own favor. Other tactics guided by the assumption that only the populist leader speaks for the people may include attempts to brush aside the separation of powers and concentrate power in the presidency; to constrain expressions of pluralism; to use the state to colonize civil society and the public sphere; and to deny opponents the benefit of normal liberal-democratic guarantees.

Until the "third wave" of democratization, populists in Latin America often left office at the point of a bayonet. The populist leaders' own authoritarian leanings were partly responsible for the frequency of military coups: Turning politics into a friend-enemy struggle *à la* Carl Schmitt while closing spaces to opponents led the less-democratic among these opponents to "knock on the barracks door" in order to solve their problems.[1] From the 1930s through the 1970s, Argentina, Brazil, Panama, and Peru lived through cycles of populist rule punctuated by military interventions, as did the topic of this essay, Ecuador. There, José María Velasco Ibarra (1893–1979) was elected president five times between the early 1930s and late 1960s, but served his full term only once. Yet as the international community began to emphasize elections as the sole legitimate way to power, coups grew

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more costly and impeachment became a more common means of ending presidencies.[2]

Populist presidents hardly felt bound by democratic norms such as term limits. The late Hugo Chávez changed Venezuela's constitution so that he could be reelected indefinitely. Without Chávez's charisma, his successor Nicolás Maduro rules a crisis-wracked country through the military; Venezuela can no longer be considered a democracy. In Peru, Alberto Fujimori's populist autocracy fell apart after his fraudulent reelection in 2000. Democracy had to be rebuilt under a caretaker president, who held fresh elections and handed over power peacefully to their winner (Alejandro Toledo) in 2001.

When the U.S.-trained economist Rafael Correa assumed the presidency of Ecuador at the beginning of 2007, one of his first moves was to engineer the writing of a new constitution. In 2015, his allies in the 137-member National Assembly amended the document to allow for his permanent reelection. When Correa saw that his popularity was in decline, he chose his lieutenants Lenín Moreno and Jorge Glas to run for president and vice-president, respectively, in the February 2017 election, throwing massive state resources behind their campaign. Correa's goal was to reclaim power for himself at the ballot box in 2021. In the meantime, he was content to let Moreno deal with economic problems while shielding Correa and his clique from charges of corruption and abuse of power.

But there was a major twist in store. Surprising friends and foes alike, Moreno broke with Correa. In August 2017, Moreno stripped Glas, a Correa loyalist, of the vice-presidency. Before year's end, Glas and several other top Correa administration officials would receive jail terms for taking bribes from Odebrecht, the Brazilian construction firm at the center of a multinational scandal. In February 2018, Moreno won a referendum that overturned indefinite reelection, while Correa watched from Belgium (he has an Ecuadorean warrant hanging over him for failing to appear to testify in a political-kidnapping case). The new president has been carrying on his efforts to remove Correa appointees from the justice system and the institutions of accountability. Meanwhile, observers are divided about Moreno's prospects for successfully moving the country away from Correa's authoritarianism.

Like other populists in Latin America and elsewhere, Correa showed populism's inclusionary face when he challenged the power of elites. Populists promise to return power to the people, and often to improve liberal democracy's deficits of representation and participation. Velasco Ibarra, like Argentina's Juan Perón, fought against electoral fraud and expanded the franchise. A new wave of radical populists such as Correa, Chávez, and Bolivia's Evo Morales used elections to replace existing elites with new hegemonic blocs. These leaders found new ways to include the poor and nonwhites in national life. Yet inclusion is not the same as democratization.

Populists use basic democratic institutions such as elections, but once in power have a troubling habit of trying to tilt these in their own favor. They do not abolish the institutions of liberal democracy that allow for pluralism, yet they restrict fundamental rights such as free information and free association. They do not use the state or paramilitary groups to disappear and kill opponents, yet they paint rivals as enemies and they close institutions to the opposition. They promise more democracy, but their views of democratization are illiberal and plebiscitarian. When democratic institutions such as parties, congress, and the courts encounter crises, populists will often react by moving toward competitive authoritarianism.[3]

Populism has ambiguous implications for democratization because populism draws on two sources of legitimacy. There are elections, but there is also the cult of the messianic leader. Historian Federico Finchelstein argues that populism became a different "ism" when it accepted elections as the only legitimate means to gain power.[4] Unlike fascists with their raw disdain for all liberal-democratic institutions, populists adapted to democratic times. Yet at the same time, the populist leader's self-conception (and image in the eyes of followers) as one uniquely chosen to save or free the people leads all too easily to impatience with the normal rules of the democratic game. These might be acceptable constraints on ordinary politicians, but the immensity of the populist leader's historical task requires the brushing aside of such impediments. How can term limits and alternation in power be allowed to interfere with saving the nation? Perón wanted to rule for sixty years; Chávez and Correa each changed his country's constitution to set the stage for indefinite reelection.

Populist leaders are known for their personalism and even personality cults. Touted by themselves and their lieutenants as extraordinary figures, Perón and Chávez saw their names become synonymous with their projects of political and social transformation. Personalism might facilitate the populist leader's ascent to power, but it raises a problem for the leader as well: If so much depends on the leader's personal qualities, what will become of the leader's project once the leader steps down? The prospect of regular presidential succession is a mainstay of liberal democracy, but a minefield for populism. For a long stretch of the twentieth century, Latin America saw one populist regime after another fall prey first to political instability and then to military intervention.

Correa's Populist Rule

After the third wave of democratization began, coups often failed. Yet populists deformed democracy from within, pushing it toward the "gray zone" of hybrid regimes. A populist president may have high approval ratings and control all state institutions, but the personalist style

of rule means that the leader's movement and political projects cannot survive the leader's exit from power. Rafael Correa won the 2013 election handily. It seemed as if nothing could stop him from staying in power for as long as he pleased. His loyal followers ran the courts and all the accountability institutions, and his Alianza PAIS party dominated the Assembly. In 2015, as we have seen, that body chose by vote of a simple majority to change the constitution in order to allow Correa's indefinite reelection.

Correa may have looked like a sure bet to become president-for-life, but events intervened. The price of oil, Ecuador's key source of foreign exchange, went down. Indigenous groups, environmentalists, workers, and the middle class took to the streets. Correa saw his popularity plummet, and the indefinite-reelection plan became a rallying point for opposition. When surveys began suggesting that the 2017 election would be hard for Correa to win, he announced that he would not run. Instead, he threw the power of the state behind the candidacy of his former vice-president, Lenín Moreno. Correa tapped his existing vice-president, Jorge Glas, to serve as Moreno's running mate.

Correa had come to power at a time of crisis for Ecuador's democracy. Widespread resistance to neoliberal economic policies had helped to end three presidencies prematurely. In the decade prior to Correa's election, Ecuador had eight presidents. Promising a future of greater justice and equity, Correa declared himself the leader of a citizens' revolution that would wield ballots, not bullets, as its weapons. He charged that neoliberal elites had corrupted existing political institutions, and called for a constituent assembly to revamp them. Correa did displace old elites, consolidating his own hegemony in their place. He also made free use of the ballot. During his ten years in office, there would be eleven nationwide votes. Until 2015, his approval rating never dropped below 50 percent.[5]

Correa scrapped neoliberal policies, strengthened the state, and put it at the center of development efforts. He took advantage of high oil prices to build infrastructure and reduce poverty. His platform was to restore national sovereignty. In 1999, Ecuador had allowed the U.S. military to set up an air base for surveillance missions against the international drug trade. Correa came out against foreign basing rights, and the agreement permitting the U.S. base was allowed to lapse in 2009. That same year, he brought Ecuador into Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez's regional organization (known as ALBA). He formed closer ties with Belarus, China, Iran, and Russia. In 2012, he allowed WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to claim asylum at Ecuador's embassy in London. Correa used windfall commodity prices to increase social spending even as he refrained from reversing the dollarization of Ecuador's economy, despite having opposed this measure—adopted in 2000 to solve a financial-system crisis—during his time as a public intellectual.

Correa's legitimacy was grounded in a novel use of the media to

create direct links with citizens; on technocratic arguments that he was leading Ecuador to hypermodernity; on a populist discourse that transformed political rivals into enemies; and on the redistribution of oil rents.[6] Experts in political communication had a central role in his administration, and they made ample use of television and radio to paint Correa as leading the country's modernization. Images of him touring power plants and oil refineries, opening hospitals and schools, collecting honorary degrees, and speaking at international meetings were aired constantly.

Correa's main public-relations innovation was a two-hour radio and television broadcast that he did most Saturday mornings, adding up to a total of more than five-hundred such programs over the course of his tenure. Whether hurling insults at rivals or giving PowerPoint lectures on his policies, he was setting the coming week's news agenda.

Taunts and Technocrats

This was Correa in a nutshell. The insults were part of his "us versus them" populism that painted critics as enemies, while the PowerPoint talks—like the flocks of experts around the presidency—typified the technocratic side of a chief executive with a University of Illinois doctorate in economics. Correa claimed to be leading the technical and rational transformation of Ecuador's model of development toward nanotechnology and biotechnology.

The National Secretariat of Planning and Development (SENPLADES) was in charge of public planning and investment, reform of the state apparatus, training public servants, and writing the national plan for economic, social, and cultural development. The technocrats of SENPLADES were a more interdisciplinary and eclectic group than the old neoliberal experts with their econometric models. Correa's officials liked to cite postcolonial theorists, radical democrats, unorthodox economists, and political ecologists. The goal was to build *sumak kawsay*: This Quechua term, sometimes translated as "good living," evokes the notion of a metaphysical harmony between community and cosmos. Indigenous cosmology would become a source for creating relationships among society, nature, and development not encompassed by Western thought.

Correa did more than promote himself via the airwaves. He also attacked Ecuador's privately held media, insisting that the interests of owners—not the public good—formed the press's main concern. The president and his party passed legislation to regulate media content; they applied state controls to civil society as well, asserting that existing social movements were the tools of selfish corporatist elites. His administration shut down disfavored groups and even insisted on dismantling the secretariat of bilingual education and a university run by indigenous groups.

Moves such as these brought the president into conflict with broad swaths of civil society: teachers, students, public employees, and indigenous people (who by some estimates account for about 7 percent of Ecuador's total population of 16.4 million). Correa saw indigenous and other poor Ecuadoreans not as autonomous citizens, but as beneficiaries of state redistribution. When they voiced their own views of development or democracy, they were stigmatized as "infantile" leftists or the dupes of foreign NGOs. Correa criminalized protest: More than two-hundred peasant and indigenous activists faced terrorism and sabotage charges for resisting mining or drilling, and a few received jail terms.[7]

Correa had the luck to rule during the biggest economic boom in Ecuador's history. His emphasis on the state as the engine of growth sparked a huge expansion of the public sector, which went from 25 to 43 percent of GDP in the decade after 2004.[8] Aided by Correa's repeal of transparency rules in central banking, public investment and spending rose, but private investment lagged. The poverty rate dropped from 47 to 24.5 percent between 2006 and 2014, while the middle class grew till it included slightly more than a third of all citizens.[9] Oil sales and large-scale mining fueled the expansion, while the country failed to diversify its exports.

Correa promised a better democracy, but his project was autocratic from the outset. He followed the populist playbook of concentrating power in the presidency; controlling the courts and accountability agencies; rewriting the constitution to favor centralism; attacking the media; curbing NGOs and civil society; creating top-down "grassroots" movements; criminalizing protest; and indiscriminately treating critics as enemies. After the February 2013 elections, Correa took control of all powers of the state and moved his hybrid regime in the direction of greater authoritarianism. In June 2013, his party passed a communications law that severely restricted information flows. In 2015 came the constitutional change permitting indefinite reelection, while a year after that the teachers' union and other autonomous civil society organizations were dissolved.

Political scientists differ on precisely how to categorize Correa's regime, but they all agree that under his rule Ecuador experienced a slow death of democracy.[10] Accountability and the separation of powers were blunted, the electoral playing field was tilted, the freedoms of information and association were restricted, and the legal system was turned into an instrument for punishing critics and favoring cronies. Under Correa, corruption became widespread. The combination of an unprecedented economic boom, centralized presidential control over all accountability institutions, and a restricted media had a dire effect on public integrity. When the Panama Papers and Odebrecht scandals erupted, the Correa government's response was dismissal and cover-up.

The opposition feared that Moreno, as Correa's handpicked successor, would only continue the policy of trying to hide wrongdoing.

The 2018 Referendum

Moreno fell just short of 40 percent in the first round of the 2017 presidential election. Failure to clear that threshold required him to enter a runoff against the second-place finisher, banker Guillermo Lasso, whom Correa had defeated in 2013. Lasso had the support of the right, the business community, and some leftist parties and social movements that wanted to end Correa's autocracy. The campaign did not occur on a level field. Correa used all his powers to boost his favored candidates into office. Moreno won the runoff with 51.2 percent. Lasso charged fraud, albeit with no proof in hand, while his followers took to the streets demanding a recount.

Everyone believed that Moreno would be Correa's loyal puppet. There was shock when the new president broke with his mentor, asserted control over the ruling party, and began dismantling Correa's autocratic grip on the institutions of justice and accountability. A signal victory came on 4 February 2018, when Moreno decisively won a seven-question constitutional referendum that he had begun discussing the previous September. In the vote's key result, a 64 percent majority reversed indefinite presidential reelection in favor of the old two-term limit. Correa has thus been barred from ever running again for the presidency. In the future, especially if Moreno's administration happens to fall from grace, the courts might conceivably challenge the referendum by ruling some of the questions illegal. The abolition of indefinite reelection drew such strong support, however, that any attempt to reverse the voters' decision in this matter by judicial means would surely pose great political dangers and difficulties for the courts.

In a second major result, voters agreed to the naming of a new, temporary Council of Citizens' Participation and Social Control (CCPSC) that would evaluate all the officials running Ecuador's accountability institutions. The 2008 Constitution had created the CCPSC in order to ensure transparency and give citizens another voice in governance. In practice, the seven-member body was stacked with Correa appointees, who in turn named the comptroller-general, the attorney-general, the human-rights ombudsman, and the members of the National Electoral Council. Moreno was empowered by the referendum result to name a transitional CCPSC from lists of nominees submitted by civil society groups. In 2019, popular elections will produce a permanent CCPSC. In the meantime, the temporary council has moved swiftly by naming a new ombudsman and attorney-general and turning over the membership of the Judiciary Council and the National Electoral Council.

With Correa's cronies thus swept out along with the ex-president's

plans for an electoral comeback, investigations of the Odebrecht affair and other scandals could at last proceed. Former vice-president Glas is now serving a six-year jail term for taking US$13.5 million in bribes from the Brazilian construction firm. The former head of the state oil company is also in prison, though the former comptroller-general (who holds dual Ecuadorean and U.S. citizenship) fled to Miami to avoid facing corruption charges in Ecuador.

Correa himself is no longer immune from justice. A former police officer who led a botched 2012 attempt to kidnap opposition politician Fernando Balda while the latter was in Colombia has told of receiving $60,000 in state intelligence funds and of speaking personally with Correa about the abduction plan. An Ecuadorean court ordered Correa to appear so that he could offer evidence in the case, but the ex-president chose to remain in Belgium (his wife's native country). In early July 2018, judicial authorities in Ecuador ordered Correa's arrest due to his failure to testify, and asked Interpol to issue a "red notice" on him to its members. This is the first abuse-of-power charge against Correa. Others will likely follow.

Lenín's *Perestroika*

President Moreno has broken with Correa's "us versus them" style by opening dialogues with the indigenous and labor movements, the private media, and the business community. He has pledged to rework Correa's two most autocratic measures, the communications law of June 2013 and a presidential decree from the same month regulating NGOs. Moreno has dropped the practice of Saturday-morning presidential television appearances, and has refrained from abusing the national broadcasts that he is legally required to make. The media climate in Ecuador is now freer, and Moreno has called for a dialogue with journalists, media owners, and civil society in order to guide revision of the communications law. The National Assembly is discussing legal changes to do away with the concept of "media lynching" (found in Article 26 of the 2013 law) as well as the agency (known as Supercom) that Correa used to regulate media content and impose economic sanctions on journalists and media owners.

Moreno has changed Correa's rules for civil society monitoring, loosening controls on NGOs and granting amnesty to some of the indigenous and peasant activists accused of terrorism and sabotage. The new president has let the Indigenous Nationalities Confederation have its offices back. His administration has returned the management of bilingual education to indigenous organizations and pledged to reopen the indigenous university that Correa closed.

Early in his tenure, Moreno loudly complained about the large foreign debt that Correa had left behind. In May 2018, Moreno named businessman Richard Martínez as economy and finance minister, signaling the

reversal of Correa's state-oriented macroeconomic policies. In addition to dropping his predecessor's approach of using debt to finance public investment for the sake of growth, Moreno has exposed Correa's mismanagement of public funds by revealing Ecuador as the site of more than six-hundred publicly funded infrastructure projects that have yet to be completed.

By shedding light on corruption and inefficiency under the previous administration, Moreno has shattered the myth of Correa and his acolytes as honest, efficient experts who were leading Ecuador onto the bright, sunlit uplands of hypermodernity. Instead, Correa and his entourage appear to have been irresponsible stewards who squandered public funds to serve their own self-promoting agenda. The list of "white elephants" includes a new oil refinery that was never built and an existing refinery that should have been repaired but never was. It also features several unfinished hydroelectric projects as well as unused computers in brand-new schools and advanced medical equipment now gathering dust in hospital basements.[11] Instead of using the commodity bonanza efficiently to transform the economy's productive capacity, Correa frittered away the boom's proceeds while exploiting state funds for electoral purposes and using corruption to cement his clique's loyalty.

In Ecuador, unlike in Argentina and Chile, the right has not displaced the left through elections. In the Assembly, Alianza PAIS remains the majority party. Moreno aims to transform it into a non-*caudillista* party of the democratic left. Many of Correa's close collaborators have switched their loyalties to the new president, as have most of the local powerbrokers who win votes via clientelistic trading of resources for electoral support. Correa is gone after all, and to the extent that there is still a pork barrel, Moreno controls access to it.

Moreno's position is thus both strong and weak. He occupies the potent and highly centralized presidency that Correa built, but his hold on Correa's personalist party is purely instrumental, and he lacks the trust of the right and the business community. Rightist politicians such as Lasso and Guayaquil mayor Jaime Nebot backed Moreno in the February constitutional referendum only to abandon him the day after it was won. They want a total overhaul of Correa's economic policies, while Moreno has vowed that he will not adopt neoliberal adjustment policies or slash social spending. But he does aim to establish trade deals with the United States and the countries of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The right also dreams of reversing Correa's foreign policy and hopes that Moreno will fully rid the government of Correa's former collaborators. Moreno seeks to retain a leftist identity while engaging in dialogue with—and offering concessions to—both the right and the left. The right could use the opening of the political system and the end of confrontation to build stronger political parties.

Social movements, meanwhile, now have a chance to regroup and regain strength after ten years of cooptation and repression. So far, Moreno's policies of dialogue and compromise with social movements have worked. At the same time that he has continued to open the country to mining operations, he has allowed indigenous organizations to enjoy more of the autonomy that Correa took away. As of this writing in August 2018, social movements have not taken to the streets in protest. Moreno's challenge will be to manage conflicts democratically, with no resort to Correa-style repression.

As for Correa, he and his acolytes claim that he is a victim of a right-wing conspiracy that is using the legal system to punish leftist politicians all over Latin America. Such claims may resonate with certain sectors of the international left, but in Ecuador it is hard to deny the rampant corruption and abuses of power in which Correa and his circle indulged. Will the ex-president find a way to reinvent himself and resurrect his political career? In March 2018, he began hosting a Spanish-language talk show called *Conversando con Correa* on RT, the television network funded by Vladimir's Putin's Russian government. Correa has interviewed Noam Chomsky as well as former Latin American presidents Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Luíz Inácio Lula da Silva, and Dilma Rousseff, among others.

Correa's political future depends on how he deals with accusations that he abused his powers. If he returns to Ecuador, he might end up serving a few years in jail, but could also find a new political career as a self-styled martyr to "rightist conspirators." If he chooses to evade justice, his political career will likely be over.

What Comes After Populism?

The uncertainties that hedge about any populist succession highlight the importance of leaders' actions. Populism is best understood as a strategy for gaining power and governing by treating political life as the site of a struggle between two irreconcilable camps. Populists aim to break all existing political institutions—condemned as shutting out the people in order to serve elites—for the sake of building new institutions that will include those once excluded. Populists use polarizing rhetoric that seeks to transform democratic rivals into enemies. Populism is an extreme form of personalist politics. When seeking office, it often works to promote a single politician as uniquely embodying the promise of change and renewal. Once office is gained, the tendencies to concentrate power in the hands of that politician (typically the president) and to ascribe to that politician "redeemer" status pose obvious dangers to both democratic contestation and the democratic transfer of power.

Populism's two-sided approach to legitimation—its democratic credentials won by dint of treating elections as the sole legitimate path

to power, and its undemocratic habit of treating the leader as beyond norms and institutions—produces an ambivalence regarding democracy. When out of power, populists vow to include the excluded and to remedy the defects of really existing democracies. Once in office, Latin American populists have indeed included the once excluded. Yet these same populists have also used methods that erode democracy and can even end it (if civil society, democratic institutions, and democratic organs of representation are weak). Populism unchecked tends toward the establishment of competitive authoritarianism.

As much as populists like to talk as if one leader speaks for everyone, they cannot manufacture a homogenous people.

Coupmakers kill democracy with a sword; populists use slower and less decisive tactics. They incrementally restrict basic freedoms, use the law to punish critics, concentrate power in the presidency, colonize the state, restrict the right to information, criminalize protest, built top-down movements, and deny space to civil society. Yet populists often do not and cannot abolish democracy completely. They leave some spaces in which oppositionists, journalists, and citizens can ask questions and voice dissent, albeit often at high personal risk. As much as populists like to talk as if one leader speaks for everyone, they cannot manufacture a homogenous people. Portions of civil and political society, the media, universities, and social movements may retain enough initiative to keep democracy from being totally submerged.

What comes after populism? That is uncertain. In the case of Venezuela, a curdled populism has congealed into something harder. President Nicolás Maduro has kept his seat by abolishing democracy and using cronyism, armed repression, and widespread corruption to hold his coalition together.[12] Yet populist autocrats can be giants with feet of clay—their control appears undisputed only until it is tested and crumbles, as did the rule of Peru's Alberto Fujimori in 2000. When populists are unable to transform democracy into competitive authoritarianism, an electoral defeat and subsequent peaceful handover of power are possible. That is what happened in Argentina after the Néstor and Cristina Kirchner presidencies.

In Ecuador, where the populist coalition disintegrated, we see another path to life after populism. President Moreno is unwinding Correa's competitive authoritarian regime in hopes of crafting a more secure electoral democracy. Moreno's government is not at war with the media, is letting civil society groups function without fear of repression, and has been working to depoliticize the institutions of justice and accountability. The rule of law is returning, and Correa and his acolytes have good reasons to be afraid of more accusations of abuse of power

and corruption. Key tests will arrive with the electoral processes that are coming up. The voting for local officials and a new control council in 2019 and the presidential balloting set for 2021 will show whether Moreno respects the ethic of the level playing field and is prepared to respect the rights of the opposition and the need for elections to be fair.

NOTES

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