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Ecuador

# Pouring oil on troubled heads

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**The formal purpose of their vote was to ratify the removal from office of President Abdal Bucaram in February, after massive demonstrations, and a parliamentary vote that the President was mentally unfit to hold office. But the country's elite also used the referendum campaign to re-legitimise the traditional institutions, and reduce the "constitutional" importance of the massive popular mobilisation which brought down the Bucaram regime.**

President Fabian Alarcon is the winner, but the results show that the crisis has not been resolved. The spirit of the popular mobilisation is still tangible, even if the democratic movement is on the defensive.

The radical democratic mood in the population following the February victory revealed the existence of two proposals for solving the country's crisis: the traditional, conservative strategy of little reforms which do not threaten the status quo, and a popular strategy of demands, most clearly expressed in those heady days of February.

But while the country's dominant sectors began actively re-building a wide bourgeois coalition, the popular masses, and the democratic currents, seemed to lose all orientation. The conservative strategy came centre-stage.

In early February, more than three million citizens participated in public demonstrations demanding the departure of President Bucaram. Two weeks later, a large majority of parliamentarians voted to approve the establishment candidate, Heinz Moeller, as President of the National Congress.

Only three deputies swam against the tide. [1] Rosendo Rojas, of Democracia Socialista, rejected the claim that Moeller's election "represented the culmination of the popular mandate".

This vote made it more difficult to maintain the independent popular mobilisation, and increased the dynamic towards a conservative solution to the crisis.

The parliamentary re-shuffle was more than the selection of a new establishment candidate. For the first time, the main forces of the social and political left entered into a system of co-government with the country's right-wing forces. In doing so, they disarmed themselves.

The May referendum was an important confirmation of the institutional solution to the political crisis opened when mass protest toppled Bucaram. As Hoy newspaper commented the morning after the referendum, "This result consolidates the authority of the current government, and converts the transformation which took place in February into an exceptional series of events, which cannot be taken as a precedent for any type of political manoeuvres [in the future], because those events have been co-validated in the ballot-box — the main source of democratic power."

In fact, most voters voted against their own interests, becoming the victims of left leaders who saw in the events of February nothing more than a great opportunity to win minor, ephemeral positions in the power hierarchy. All "types of political manoeuvres" will indeed take place, but the referendum has reserved this privilege for the dominant classes, giving them the right to interpret the events of February as they see fit.

The day after the referendum, Ecuador Radio reported the demands of "the business community" that Alarcon should react firmly to the strikes in the health sector and elsewhere. With the referendum over, "Alarcon should govern.

Nothing should stop him now. The country cannot continue to be paralysed."

Twenty-four hours later Ecuavisa television news hardened its own tone in reports on the health strike. The following day, most media reported favourably to Alarcon's tough economic measures to reduce the public sector deficit.

## Painting over the cracks

The system does not appreciate cracks, never mind open ruptures. When faced with an upsurge in popular self-management, and self-representation, the elite searches desperately to close all cracks in the system from above. The masses must never be allowed to participate in power in anything other than a subordinate role. Closing ranks, the country's elite took a range of measures to reform, and re-assert, traditional authority.

- Attacking parliamentary corruption, by targeting 17 deputies, (though not the most important) and beginning corruption investigations against Bucaram and some of his closest collaborators (most of whom have disappeared).
- Consolidating control of the key functions of the state. No changes to the leadership of the Armed Forces and the Police.
- Consolidation of a new, pro-government majority in the parliament, led by the Social Christian Party. Elimination of obstacles and opponents of the presentation of a united right-wing front, presenting a single candidate, as moderate as possible, and "in the spirit of February 5th".
- Preparing constitutional reforms, but from the top down only. Heinz Moeller wants no kind of constituent assembly, and nor does the government majority in parliament.
- Co-option de facto of most of the political and social left. Most of the opposition (and many former Bucaram supporters) have effectively pledged subordinate allegiance to this majority.
- Re-starting the privatisation programme, and promising a range of neo-liberal economic "adjustments". Re-opening negotiations with international bodies.

## Bucaram is not the root of the problem

The crisis in the political system didn't start with Abdal Bucaram, even though Alarcon and other of the former President's former associates would like to re-write history that way. The leprosy of Ecuadorian politics began in 1995, when vice-President Alberto Dahik fled to avoid corruption charges. Ever since then, the traditional system of authoritarian government, and an almost non-existent popular opposition was threatened. Bucaram's populist, corrupt politics was one response to this crisis. But during his brief rule, the economy did not recover from the shock it suffered under Dahik. As a result, the ambitious privatisation programme ran in to objections from within the elite, which combined with resistance from below, to block the programme.

## Stability

For the elite, the "problem" with Bucaram and his government was that its excesses threatened the continued hegemony of the bourgeoisie. To restore "governability," the ruling class now wants those on the bottom to join an active consensus with those in power. The popular opposition is condemned to return to its previous virtual non-existence.

The massive Popular Consultation (referendum) was a skilful mix of questions. First came the ratification of the removal of Bucaram by the Congress, under popular pressure. Question two ratified the election of Alarcon as President, again by Congress. These questions are two sides of the same coin. Media hammered home the message that a yes vote on both questions was the only way to ensure stability, and prevent Bucaram from returning to power.

Alarcon invoked the need to send reassuring signals to foreign investors. But his main preoccupation was to strengthen his already powerful government, which is already determined both to implement the "required" neo-liberal reforms, and deal with an signs of "anarchy" from the popular masses. Not surprisingly, since Bucaram was toppled there has been a growth of partial struggles, particularly a long strike by public health sector workers.

Alarcon hoped that a yes vote in the referendum would not only legitimise him, but reduce the popular legitimacy which those who led the radical currents during the February movement still hold. In other words, the government proposed the referendum not just to weaken Bucaram, but also to weaken the left-wing coalition Pachakutik-Nuevo Pais, the only force which represents a left opposition to the new regime. Pachakutik called for a no vote on the second question.

To try to maximise popular support during this period, the Alarcon government has increased import tariffs (to the displeasure of the "international community,") and created a new Secretariat of Indian Affairs.

## Results

For the government and media of Ecuador, the poor hardly even exist. Those in power showed little interest in the 40% of citizens who did not bother voting in the referendum. Though these were the same people as marched in the streets on 5 February.

Nevertheless, the deep effects of the February mobilisation did show through.

- Over 74% of voters approved the destitution of Bucaram.
- The February movement called for a National Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution. A partial victory was achieved with the 59% support for proposal three in the referendum, which called for a National Assembly to do the same. This will provide some scope for popular mobilisation, though less than in the initial demand for a Constituent Assembly.
- A majority of voters rejected the main parties' proposal to restrict proportional representation in parliamentary elections (Question 7). This will help block the creation of a rightist political monopoly, in close collaboration with business interests.
- A majority of participants voted to include the people's right to depose their rulers in the constitution.

On the negative side, 65% ratified Alarcon's election. This has enabled the new President to present himself as the unique representative of the popular mandate of February 5th. Apart from Pachakutik, and, for their own reasons, parts of the establishment led by Vice-President Rosala Arteaga, there was little real opposition on this question.

Candidates for election to the National Assembly must be proposed by parties and political movements. This obviously represents a defeat for the social movements and citizens' groups. The right has majority control over the Supreme Electoral Tribunal. This too will ensure the continued hegemony of the major parties. Society as such still has no role in the selection of judges.

So why did most ordinary people vote the way their enemies wanted them to? Assuming that they bothered to vote at all, of course. Mainly because they had no clear alternative before them. No proposition which would have maintained the radical democracy of the February movement. As a result, when facing uncertainty and crisis, and without "their own" political organisations to act as a reference point, people vote for whoever seems to offer stability.

## The left fails to present an alternative

The left, in Pachakutik-Nuevo Pais, failed to establish a credible mass leadership, both during and after the February mobilisations. We administered our own little preoccupations, and were unable to make an overview of the interests of the whole popular movement. As a result, we contributed to the strengthening of the clientelist, reformist and parliamentarist phenomena which have dominated the opposition in Ecuador and elsewhere.

As so often before in the country's history, most of the opposition is unable to resist the offer of a government job, or a few seconds on television. This kind of outlook has enabled the regime to refresh the make-up on the face of the state. The situation is now more favourable than before for the introduction of neo-liberal policies. And the ruling classes have successfully drawn the wind from the sails of the popular movement of February.

But this government victory does not guarantee them a solution to the crisis facing the country. As before, Ecuador waits with its unsatisfied social demands, while the political class reforms itself. The struggle for a democratic rupture with this political system continues. Though the conditions for the popular cause are worsening. The immediate struggle is for a National Constituent Assembly, and against privatisation. In this struggle, we must strive for popular unity and independence of the major parties, so as to be ready when the next elections come. Those in the movement who had forgotten that we were living in a context of class struggle should wake up. The bourgeoisie in Ecuador never forgot this basic political truth.

*Based on an article by Fernando Lopez in Revuelta #2, June 1997, published by Democracia Socialista, Ecuadorian section of the Fourth International.*

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[1] Fourth International supporter Rosendo Rojas of Democracia Socialista, and two deputies from the Movimiento Popular Democrática.