

## Ecuador Fights for Survival - Against its Elites

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Image: Free public medical post.

*To overlook tremendous progress that Ecuador registered under the current administration, would take great determination and discipline.*

*New airports, highways, hospitals and culture centers are everywhere, and they are impressive. Cities are counting with wide sidewalks, and public parks are equipped with all sorts of playgrounds for children, some extremely innovative.*

There are public libraries in some of the parks, armed with free Wi-Fi zones. Buses and trolleybuses are running on dedicated lanes and are heavily subsidized (25 cents per ride), while Quito is planning to build its first line of metro.



Children in public park.

Government puts great emphasis on health, education and culture.

You want to check your pulse before a powerwalk in the park, or are you a single mother who wants to talk to a nutritionist? Help is always there, available. Not only at the hospitals, but in small, modern health centers. And help is always free!

While, when I used to live in this part of the world some two decades ago, most theatres were out of reach for indigenous people, now cultural institutions, including the National Theatre, are celebrating great culture of the original owners of this land. 85% of all cultural events in Ecuador are free of charge and even those that are charging some entry fee are heavily subsidized.

But above all, it is confidence and optimism on the faces of common people that is impressive. While in 1990's it was all doom and gloom, young and old people coming from once deprived neighborhoods of the cities, as well as countryside, are now smiling assertively. Once again, this is their country, and their home!

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It is great news for majority of Ecuadorian citizens – but terrible nightmare for the 'elites'.

They no longer feel unique, no longer is this country their huge, private playground and a milking cow. The 'elites' still have money and their villas, as well as servants, luxury cars and regular trips to those lands they are faithfully serving – North America and Europe.

But their status is diminishing. No longer they feel admired, no longer they are feared. Increasingly they are forced to play by rules and to respect local laws. That would be unimaginable just ten years ago. For some, this is the end of the world!

The rich, the 'elites', are sour losers. In fact, they have no idea how to accept defeat. Never before in the history of this country they actually had to. To them this is new reality, this nation ruled by the government, which is working on behalf of the people. The 'elites' feel let down, cheated, even humiliated. They have no idea how to respect democracy (rule of the people). They only know how to make decisions, and to give orders, and to loot.

This could lead to inevitable conflict, and Ecuador is not an exception. To greater or smaller extend, the same is happening in Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and even in Chile. Immediately after people vote a socialist government in, immediately after the government begins working for the majority, the elites start reacting. Their goal is clear and predictable: to discredit the administration and to reverse the course.

Attacks can be performed through 'nonviolent' means, including protests, disinformation campaign through mass media, even hunger strikes. Or they can be conducted by extremely aggressive means: economic sabotage, creation of shortages; things that extreme right wing used so successfully against the socialist government of Salvador Allende in Chile, before the 1973 military coup.

If everything else fails, 'elites' unite their forces with the military and with the West, commit treason, and attempt to overthrow legitimate left-wing government, through direct actions.

This happened on several occasions in Venezuela, and now, such violent scenario could not be excluded in Ecuador and elsewhere.

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Lately, in Ecuador, right-wing 'elites' are continuously protesting against the administration, accusing it of corruption and other ills.

The latest chapter was related to proposed progressive inheritance tax law, which would order those who own houses priced over 1 million dollars, to pay 70 percent to the state. Poor people would pay nothing, if their houses cost lesser than 35.000 dollars. Those whose dwellings are priced under US\$100.000 would still pay very little.

Rich Ecuadoreans see this as unacceptable. They began stalking government offices. They protested all over the capital. They launched tremendous propaganda campaign against the government. And they threatened to disrupt the visit of the Pope Francis, to Ecuador. Fearing huge scandal, the government postponed passing of the law. That calmed down passions for a day or two, but in no time the protesters returned to the streets of Quito.

“We will not rest until this government collapses!” A man taking his family to one of protest sites told me. Entire family dressed in black, crosses hanging on their chests.

And then again, before leaving Ecuador, I was approached by a well to do family, as I was walking towards my hotel:

“Please, our daughter is writing an essay in English... It is her homework, for her English language class... Private school, you know... She was asked to approach a foreigner, and encourage him or her to describe everything negative that is happening in this country.”

How did they know I was a foreigner? Oh yes, I was holding a novel written in English.

I patted their cute private-school daughter on the head.

“I will teach you a nice song”, I said, in Spanish.

Then I clenched my right fist and began singing “International”, loudly and clearly, in Russian.

In horror, they fled. One passer-by applauded.

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Corruption is one of the main rallying cries of the ‘elites’. They claim that the government is mismanaging the country.

They can get away with such statements only because they are controlling mass media – most of the television networks and newspapers. Otherwise, entire country would die from laughter.

When right wing was in charge, it grabbed everything. Like in Paraguay where 2% of the population is still controlling well over 75% of land. Like in Chile, where, after Pinochet was forced to step down, his country was suffering from the greatest income disparity in South America. Like in Venezuela, where, before Hugo Chavez became the President, ‘elites’ grabbed billions, using oil deposits as collateral for insane loans that were happily supplied by the West and its institutions. Corruption and theft had been synonymous with the upper class rule, everywhere in Latin America.

It should not be forgotten that John Perkins, author of “Confessions of an Economic Hit Man”, was actually working mainly in Ecuador and Indonesia, when he was administering sex, alcohol and cash as tools to persuade local elites to take more and more unnecessary loans,

because indebted nation is easy to control from Washington or London.

Entire nations, including Ecuador, were robbed, plundered, forced into perpetual underdevelopment. By whom?! By those damned elites who are now talking about corruption in the government ranks!

Instead of being grateful that they are not facing treason trials, 'elites' in places like Ecuador are now, once again, on the offensive, selling their souls and their country to the Empire!

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In an indigenous city of Riobamba, I speak to Pablo Narvaez, director of culture, and to his wife Carina.

Pablo and Carina created impressive regional youth orchestra, not unlike those in Venezuela. But here, they did it first with almost no help, by training poor boys and girls from the villages, turning them into impressive professional musicians.

Local house of culture, under their management, is inspiring, as a building but mainly because of what it is offering: high quality art, most of it political: pigs devouring dollar bills, while poor indigenous children are watching in desperation and spite. In another room, great satirical painting demonstrates that indigenous people from Amazonia are not pure, anymore, squeezing their VAIO computers and mobile phones.

After discussing local art, we all walk to the market, where countless cheeky women serve local delicacy – suckling pigs.



Buy my pork and marry me.

"Hey!" they scream at me and at my friend Walter Bustos, who used to be part of the government, and who is still deeply involved in the 'process'. "Hey, eat my pig and then marry me!"



These are not shy, depressed indigenous women, anymore. These are confident good-hearted matrons living in the country that gave them back their dignity, and sense of humor.

Pablo, originally concert pianist and professor, is not always holding the same political line as the President of Ecuador, but they agree on many issues:

“Ideologically, I come from the left. But I do not belong to any political party. We are all human beings, and so I intuitively believe in equality. I share many believes with the government, when it comes to social inclusivity and education, as well as the infrastructure. The process is long, we all have to be patient...”

We talk about the progress that had been already made: great improvement in health, water supply, electricity, education and culture.

Riobamba has only over 200.000 people. Before Pablo and his wife came on board, the city had 50 live events annually.

“Now we arrange over 750 events per year”, says Pablo. “We utilize all infrastructure that we have here: theatres, museums, even churches.... Markets, too, as well as public squares.”



Young dancers rehearsing.

Culture and arts always form important part of the Latin American revolutions. On this continent, it is not only about ideology, ideas and hard work; it is also about heart and dreams.



Public art exhibitions.

“And what about the taxes?” I ask, before we part. I know that Carina used to work in this field. I told her, that on the way to Riobamba, we stopped in a village, where people complained even about symbolic one dollar per month taxation.

Carina smiles: “Taxes always existed. I used to help collecting them. But now they are formalizing the tax system. Here, until now, there is no ‘culture’ of paying taxes, formally...”

And this is what the right wing is using for its own political gains. Their propaganda shouts: “Let us win and you will pay nothing!” They dare to say this to the poor whom they were robbing for centuries!

Before we leave, youth orchestra is blasting old traditional Quechua tune, to celebrate our visit. It is all touching and we all feel optimistic.



Youth orchestra in Riobamba.

Pablo gives me several books of poetry published in Riobamba, his own and those of other poets. All of them are published in two languages: in Spanish and in local language - Quechua.

We drive back to Quito, part of our long journey on a perfect, new 6-lane highway.

Countryside is stunning. On the left, spectacular volcano Cotopaxi, one of the highest in the world, is hiding its snow-capped peak in the clouds. Ecuador, President Correa often says, is like a paradise on earth. It has tall mountains, stunning coastline, jungle of Amazonian basin, and Galapagos Islands, overflowing with pristine fauna and flora.

It also has natural great resources. If there is no sabotage from 'elites', if there is no intervention from the West, this country could continue flourishing under progressive, people-oriented, socialist government.

But there is sabotage, there is subversion, and there are interventions.

And all this could collapse, if not defended!

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Back in Quito, I speak to Sonya Maria Bustos and her husband Norberto Fuertes, both journalists, now working for the magnificent Ecuadorian Cultural Center.

They offer to connect me to some top government officials, including Oscar Bonillo, the secretary general of Alianza.

I refuse. Next time, yes, but during this visit I want to travel and see with my own eyes; I want to hear directly what people of Ecuador have to say.

Sonya is sad:



“Because of ‘elites’, country is now unstable, despite the fact that so many things changed for better! No more hospitals full of poor children! Do you remember – before, sick people were everywhere! New hospitals are growing all over the country. But some very rich people are trying to get into the government – to infiltrate it.... In order to stop the progress.”



For these children Ecuador should not be allowed to fall.

She pauses. We are both lost in thoughts. Then she continues:

“Now rich people get out of their Hummers in order to protest. 8 years of great progress, but they are still protesting. They have no shame... People like Guillermo Lasso, who has definitely some sort of contract with the United States...”

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My friend Tamara Pearson, an Australian journalist who spent many years living in and covering Venezuela, is now working for TeleSUR in Quito. Like myself, she is impressed by developments in Ecuador, under Correa:

“If you ask people in Ecuador: in Quito, in the big and small towns around it, how they feel about the current government, almost all of them are positive – in stark contrast to the people in Honduras and Guatemala, for example. Often the first thing they’ll mention is the roads: a lot of infrastructure has been improved, and roads mean a lot to so many communities, many of them indigenous, that were cut off and isolated with only harsh dirt roads, often broken up by landslides from the constant rain, to connect them to larger towns and to food and gas supplies. Though there is much still to do, poverty has decreased, corruption has notably decreased, and people feel that things are decent, dignified, and stable and want that to continue. Most remember the greedy presidents of the past who lied and stole, and unlike Correa, did not speak Quechua, and don’t want to return to those days. Like Chavez, Correa has his weekly show (though on Saturdays here – in Venezuela it was on Sunday mornings). The show goes for hours, and Correa discusses issues and provides information on what the government is doing. A summary is given in Quechua at the end. Though there is much less of a push towards political participation here than in Venezuela –



I'd say almost none – its clear that this is a government that puts people first, the poor majority first, and Correa at least prioritizes informing people of what the government is doing, – something the Australian government for example, doesn't even bother to do."

But many others, including Walter Bustos, worry about the future. Walter worries that President Correa does not have the military covering his back. He also worries that dollarization of Ecuadorean economy could prove to be a weak point for political resistance against the West. He worries that many young people are turning into technocrats, and that, at the end, as long as they keep their good jobs, they wouldn't care for whom they are working, for Correa or for someone else.

His friend Paola Pabon, Assembly member representing Pichincha, worries as well. She supports President Correa, and she sees him as a great regional leader, but she also admits that Ecuadorian revolution is fragile, and that there is lack of unity between the government and the military.

Both agree that the US is behind the recent protests.

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At the end of my work in Ecuador, I fly to Cuenca, to that beautiful colonial city, and from there I hire a car and drive to the hard of Cañari land, to Ingapirca, where massive Inca castle still dominates gentle landscape, and where old Inca and pre-Inca road systems are still connecting villages and towns.

Miguel, a local comrade, is travelling with me. He also translates when we enter deep villages that are lost at the bottom of valleys, or are hugging steep green hills.

"Spaniards robbed everyone here," I am told. "They took everything. They destroyed castles and settlements. Then capitalism took the rest."

"People were forced into Christianity", I say. "They were ruined by Christianity. Do they really still believe in it?"

I am told that Christianity is just a ritual, for the majority here. People do not attach much importance to it, anymore. Their lives go on, and their original culture is once again prevailing.

Near Ingapirca I am witnessing people celebrating The Inti Raymi, "Festival of the Sun", dating back to Inca Empire.



Inti Raymi near Ingapirca.

I am told about determined government drinking water projects and schemes, and about improvements in both health and education. Most of the people here, as well as around Riobamba, are benefiting from those revolutionary changes.

But many are not able to formulate their support for Correa. They take recent developments for granted.

And Correa and his men and women are not very good at propaganda, or with mobilizing the people, definitely not as good as President Chavez used to be in Venezuela.

Here, the revolution is gentle and shy, as is the accent of Cañari people near Cuenca.

And there lies the danger.

Ecuadorean 'elites' are not gentle at all. Their arrogance, greed and selfishness are ready to smash all achievements of the revolution. Their message is clear: to hell with Ecuadorian people, especially those who are poor, as long as we can keep our villas, Hummers and our kids in those private schools!

Just recently, President Correa warned that the plan of destabilizing the government is being put in action.

Leaders of the "opposition" will wait until arrival of Pope Francis, or perhaps they will wait bit longer, until his departure from Ecuador. Then they will hit. And they will hit hard. The mayor of Quito leads the anti-government forces in the capital.

The government should not follow the path of President Allende. It has to counter-attack, before it is too late! Treason is serious crime in all societies. And treason is exactly what Ecuadorean elites are now committing!

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