

Ecuador's President Embraces Bolivarianism

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Hugo Chavez Frias gained an Ecuadoran ally last November when voters rejected Washington's choice and the country's richest man and elected Raphael Correa its President by an impressive margin. Correa is a populist economist and self-styled "humanist, leftist Christian" promising big changes for another Latin American country long ruled by and for the elite and against the interests of ordinary people Ecuador abounds in whose voices finally spoke and prevailed.

Correa took office January 15 in a country of 13 million, over 70% of whom live in poverty. They voted for a man promising social democratic change and the same kinds of benefits Venezuelans now have under Hugo Chavez they too now have a chance to get. Correa is the country's 8th president in the last decade including three previous ones driven from office by mass street protest opposition against their misrule and public neglect.

Correa campaigned on a promise of change including using the country's oil revenue for critically needed social services Ecuadoreans never before had. He promised a "citizens' revolution" and to be an "instrument of change" beginning by drafting a new Constitution in a Constituent Assembly he hopes will be authorized by popular referendum following the same pattern Hugo Chavez chose in 1999 following his first election as Venezuela's President in December, 1998.

Ecuador's majority right wing Christian Democratic Union (UDC) party tried stopping him but overwhelming popular support for it finally got enough members in it to go along. The vote came February 13 and won out 54 - 1 with two abstentions in the nation's single-seat legislature. Most opposition deputies walked out before the vote when it was apparent they'd face defeat.

Following the vote, Ecuador's Supreme Electoral Council (TSE) set April 15 for the referendum vote that's virtually certain to pass as popular support for its purpose runs around 77%. After passage, as expected, voters in June or July will select 130 delegates to the Constituent Assembly that should begin meeting in August or September. It then will have six to eight months to write a new Constitution that would go before voters to be ratified, and if it changes the Congress or presidency would require new elections be held for legislators and the nation's highest office.

If things go as planned, Ecuador is now poised to change its method of governance the same way Venezuela did it eight years ago. Raphael Correa promised it, and he's now moving ahead to give his people the same kind of 21st century socialism Venezuelans now have and embrace. Ecuadoreans want it too and now have their best chance ever to get it under a leader working for them just as Chavez does for Venezuelans with overwhelming

approval.

Correa is confident of success and told his people on February 17 on his weekly radio program he'll resign if his supporters don't win a majority of seats in the Constituent Assembly. He said he'd rather go than "warm the bench and be just another of the bunch of traitors and impostors we've had in the presidency...." That's not likely as long-denied Ecuadoreans overwhelming support their new President and the process of change he's now poised to deliver for them the same way Hugo Chavez did in Venezuela that works.

It's one more step left in Latin America but just a small one on a continent long under Washington's ominous shadow watching events closely and not about to let its control slip away without resisting. Any leader trying knows the threat, but those willing to risk it are the ones to watch. Hopefully others in the region and beyond will join them, and they have a courageous model in Hugo Chavez who defied the odds and continues moving ahead boldly after eight successful years. If Chavez can do it, why not others if they'll try. The more who do, the stronger the process for real social change becomes that with luck could be unstoppable. What a glorious impossible dream, but even those kinds come true.

Correa intends a further challenge to US hegemony by following through on another campaign promise to close the major US military base at Manta when the 10 year treaty authorizing it expires in 2009. Doing it won't make Pentagon top brass happy as it's their largest base on South America's Pacific coast and one costing many millions to build. It's certain they'll try getting Correa to reconsider and won't go light on the pressure doing it. But as of now Minister of Foreign Relations Maria Fernanda Espinosa stated her country's position: "Equador is a sovereign nation, we do not need foreign troops in our country (and they likely will have to go)."

Correa also plans a new relationship with US-dominated international lending agencies following through on his campaign to renegotiate the country's \$16 billion foreign debt and hasn't ruled out an Argentine-style default to free up revenue for vitally needed social programs including 100,000 low-cost homes, raising the minimum wage, and doubling the small "poverty bonus" 1.2 million poor Ecuadorans get each month. For now, Correa opted to make a scheduled \$135 million debt payment to foreign bond holders while pursuing his greater aim to renegotiate the whole debt and annul the odious part of it resulting from previous governments' corrupt dealings it profited from at the peoples' expense.

Correa is also negotiating bilateral trade and other economic deals with Hugo Chavez and Bolivia's Evo Morales based at least in part on Venezuela's Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas or ALBA model. It's the mirror-opposite of FTAA or NAFTA-type one-way pacts sucking wealth from developing states agreeing to them. Instead it's based on sound principles of complementarity, solidarity and cooperation to achieve comprehensive integration among Latin American nations agreeing to them and being willing to work together toward developing their "social state" in contrast to US-type deals being all for its corporate giants and the privileged.

These are the early bold steps of a courageous new leader promising and now proceeding to follow in the footsteps of the example Hugo Chavez set. He's off to a fast start on a road sure to have promise and perils but with great potential payoff for his people if he can persevere and succeed. He's showing he intends to try.

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