

Community View

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Popular movement in Ecuador rocks politics as usual

By PHILLIP BANNOWSKY • September 7, 2008

Ecuador, set to approve a new constitution Sept. 28, is bent on change. In this nation of 14 million on the western side of South America, a movement of indigenous activists and civic reformers has struggled to end political corruption and what they call "neoliberalism."

It has forced the resignations of three recent presidents and helped to elect the latest, Rafael Correa.

The question is whether these popular movements can overcome past inertia and pressure from the North to fulfill aspirations for indigenous rights, participatory democracy, and what they call "socialism in the 21st century" -- in other words, change they can believe in.

Ecuador is one of nine Latin American nations that have veered left from the U.S. orbit in the past decade. I have taught and reported from Ecuador. I wrote a novel, "The Mother Earth Inn," about an American working among the indigenous population during the Clinton years and struggling to disentangle himself from neoliberalism. I returned this summer to see if I could shed more light on that lovely patch of the empire.

Neoliberalism is classical liberal capitalism redux, characterized by rule of the market, slashed public expenditures, deregulation, privatization and no such thing as the public good. Neoliberal regimes were imposed on debt-heavy countries in Latin America by the International Monetary Fund and free-trade treaties such as the North American Free Trade Agreement. Prosperity was promised with gospel conviction, but Gross Domestic Product growth fell from 82 percent in the two pre-neoliberal decades before 1980 to just 9 percent ever since.

The results were increasing income inequality, environmental degradation, emigration, and government capitulating to the North while feeding at a rapidly diminishing public trough. Civic resistance by labor, environmental, women's,

gay, professional, religious, student and especially indigenous organizations is responding to this economic and political cesspool.

These popular forces reject guerrilla violence in neighboring Colombia and Peru. They have strengthened themselves through mobilizations and sophisticated discourse of literature and public forums since the '90s. They are the bulwarks of Rafael Correa's *Alianza Pais* party and hold the majority in the Constitutional Assembly.

The media, dominated by the oligarchs and traditional parties, are almost universally opposed to their reforms, but have been unable to undermine the consensus for change. Correa's inner circle, however, includes pragmatic technocrats and old capitalists wedded to the old model. They are willing to recalibrate the balance between market and state and compromise with indigenous Ecuadorians, but only so far. They support including in the new constitution the concept of *Pacha Mamma*, or Mother Earth, with her own rights and needs. But they reject indigenous veto power over exploitation of natural resources.

Indeed, police have come down hard on the indigenous and environmentalists who protest rainforest damming, mining and oil drilling.

And while Correa's decision to close the U.S. base in Manta and pursue economic collaboration with Venezuela's Hugo Chavez has been cheered by popular forces, environmentalists are distressed that Correa and Chavez plan to build a petrochemical factory in El Aromo, a major source of water for Manta.

Correa said this period in Latin American history is not only an "epoch of change," it is a "change of epochs."

What I saw in Ecuador was significant, but not always clearly positive. I saw job-creating public works, labor rights protected by reformed courts, banishment of transgenic seeds, and enforcement of remedies after 10 years against the Isaiás brothers, who, aided by the Congress and the courts, stole billions from the Ecuadorian people.

At the same time, Correa favors tax breaks for agribusiness and leftist members of the Constitutional Assembly who complained of being "infiltrators."

Even when agents of change like Correa are bolstered and pressured by a mass movement that brings down governments and endures beyond elections, change is elusive.

How much more elusive is change, when a transitory band gels around one quadrennial candidate, wraps hope in one ballot and promptly dissolves?

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