

Masses push Ecuador down the path of Venezuela and Bolivia

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Ecuador is to hold a national referendum on whether the country should have a constitutional assembly (CA) to carry out far-reaching economic and social reforms. The decision was passed 57 to 1 with 42 MPs not voting. Right-wing MPs absented themselves in an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the vote. With this vote Ecuador has joined with Bolivia and Venezuela in going down the road of challenging the rich bosses and their backers in Washington.

However, groups have criticised President Rafael Correa for failing to use his powers and announce the convening CA rather than go through negotiations with the right-wing for a referendum.

Leader of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), Luis Macas, said: "We say to the president that he has to retake what the people want: a Constituent Assembly fully empowered. The government and the acting social movements are aware, so far, of the need for a change."

At the end of January, only two weeks into Correa's term of office, 5,000 people rallied in favour of a CA while a smaller number broke through police lines into the national assembly forcing MPs to flee. These same MPs had just put up their salaries by \$1,000.

CONAIE had backed their demand for CA with the threat of a national uprising. Other parties involved came from a wide spectrum including the Popular Democratic Movement (linked to the Communist Party), which said that the protests "expressed the people's demand for a referendum to establish a constituent assembly", and the Alianza party, which supports Correa and stated that: "We have launched a process of mobilisation until Congress respects the Ecuadorian people's demand for change and decides to call a referendum."

Other political groups recognised that it was not just a question of getting a CA but also what it would be able to do. Mesías Tatamuez, a trade union leader linked to the Socialist Party, said that the protests were about "opening a broader dialogue" between social organisations and the government in order to defeat the right. Various indigenous bodies and social organisations have formed the National Front for the Plurinational Constituent Assembly that aims to stand a united platform for elections for the CA. Luis Macas (from CONAIE) said: "It is essential to discuss issues that what must be considered by the constituent assembly and must be in the new constitution, like the defence of sovereignty, the nationalisation of natural resources, the defence of biodiversity, and the agrarian revolution."

It is obvious that for the poor, workers, peasants and indigenous people the CA is the weapon that can be used to enact far-reaching social change within society. They have been demonstrating in favour of it for two weeks, they elected Correa because of his promise for one. They have been fighting neo liberal residents since 2000, and now they want to take the offensive against the economic measures that have been enacted over the last 7 years.

But to do the deal with the right, Correa had to make concessions to former president Lucio Gutierrez and his supporters. Massed protests forced Gutierrez out, so much so he is banned from politics. But part of Correa's deal was to allow Gutierrez to stand for the CA whilst also putting his supporters back into positions of power.

Gutierrez: a populist warning

Currently in Latin America, progressive forces look to populist leaders such as Chávez and Morales who support nationalisations and land reforms, and condemn United States interference in the continent. Lucio Gutierrez was once of their ilk.

Mass demonstrations in 2000 had resulted in armed peasants occupying the capital, Quito. Many soldiers sent to attack the demonstrations and defend the presidential palace deserted and joined the demonstrations. Strikes in the oil industry and amongst teachers and students added to the growing revolutionary dynamic. *Parlamento Populares* were established across the country, as embryonic organs of dual power, however they lacked a revolutionary leadership and a clear perspective for revolutionary change.

However the resignation of the president, and the installation of the vice president Noboa, Ecuador's richest man, backed by the military took the wind out of the movement. However his rule was far from stable. The political conditions were ripe for a popular leader identified with the mass movement to rise to power, as is so often the case in Latin America, he came from the military.

Gutierrez was an army colonel who came to power on the back of mass protests in 2000-2 against neo liberalism. When taking office in early 2003 after defeating Noboa, he said to his mass of followers that he would be an 'Ecuadorian Chávez'. He was supported by a range of parties and groups such as January 21 Patriotic Society Party (named after the 2000 protests) the Movement for Popular Democracy (MPD); and Pachakutik, an indigenous political party.

His promises turned to ashes within 10 days when he flew to Washington to sign up to more free trade (the *Tratado de Libre Comercio* deal, or TLC), agreed to IMF demands and allowed the Colombian military into Ecuador to hunt down guerrillas. He broke with his supporters within three months and allied himself with the Party of Social Christians.

After voting Gutierrez in on an anti neoliberal ticket, the masses once again took to the streets. This culminated in a quarter of a million marching in February 2005 against his corrupt rule and the attacks on health care and living standards. Gutierrez responded with violence and more corruption: he sacked the supreme court for supposed bias to the Party of Social Christians (who he had now fallen out with), with backing from Noboa's party and sent the army and police to disperse the demonstrations. Oppositionists were beaten and in a few cases killed. Most of his support disappeared except for the MPD which, after abandoning him in 2004, re-entered government in 2005. Gutierrez fled in April of that year after a week of mass protests.

He was replaced by Alfredo Palacio who tried to implement the US TLC free-trade agreement in early 2006, a political act that again mobilised the masses into huge protests that paralysed the country.

It was these three years of protests that brought Correa to power with 53% of the vote, compared to Noboa's 43%. For the workers and poor his promise to break with the Washington consensus was enough for them to support him.

So far this century, Ecuador has seen revolutionary and pre-revolutionary crises that have brought tens of

thousands on the streets, ousted presidents, fragmented and weakened bourgeois parties and stopped neoliberalism in its tracks. Now the tasks are for the masses to build their own popular organisations and party and fight for power.

The tasks in Ecuador

Many of the people who voted for Correa want him to follow the road of Venezuela and Bolivia: land reform, nationalisations and measures to improve the lives the working classes, rural workers and urban poor.

But as the example of Gutierrez shows populist leaders can turn on their supporters, bowing down to the IMF and US very quickly when pressure is brought to bear on them by the imperialists.

The CA should be used to carry out far-reaching reforms of Ecuadorean society. The workers and peasants should set up committees to elect delegates to the CA and control them ? platforms are already being formed and the workers need to intervene into them and use the debates around the CA elections to build workers? platforms. They should demand that Correa carries out nationalisations of industry, refuse to pay the debts (during the election he suggested a moratorium on debt repayments, but he has already agreed to pay one instalment) and give land to the peasants. These measures should also be central to any economic proposals of the CA.

These tasks are key to developing the mass protests into a movement that can be used to challenge capitalism itself. The workers and youth can force the issue by leading the way in land and factory occupations, demanding that the government nationalise the important sectors of the economy.

Permanent revolution was a political programme outlined by Leon Trotsky that identified the tasks of the working class in the colonial and semi colonial world. The working class must fight for and carry out democratic tasks such as equality and full rights for all ethnic groups and national independence. But these measures are entwined with social and economic tasks such as the expropriation of capitalist private property and the introduction of socialist planning.

This means that the workers must no longer rely on the strong man or a host of small and ineffectual bourgeois or radical parties but build its own political party, supported by the peasants, and carry out a socialist revolution to overthrow the capitalists. As long as capitalism exists in Ecuador and is defended by the army and police the type of radical change that is so desperately needed will be held back, or it will develop too slowly, confined by the government to the realm of ?what is possible?. In reality this means what is acceptable to the capitalist class and the maintenance of their system of exploitation.

? Convene the constituent assembly

? No payment of the foreign debt

? For a massive programme of nationalisations without compensation

? Workers and youth, build a revolutionary party that fights for socialism

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