

## Ecuador's President Calls for Socialist Latin America

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From On January 15, Ecuador's new president, Rafael Correa Delgado, was sworn in, promising to build "socialism of the 21st century" to overcome the poverty and instability of the small Andean country.

The previous day, Correa attended an indigenous inauguration ceremony in Zumbahua, the small Andean town where he did volunteer social work in his twenties. The presidents of Venezuela and Bolivia — Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales — were present as special guests.

Correa, a 43-year-old economist, used his inauguration to call for a "citizens' revolution", using wealth to meet social and environmental needs, rather than maintaining the current "perverse system" that has led to over 60% of Ecuador's 13 million people living in poverty and forced more than 3 million to emigrate in search of jobs.

"The long night of neoliberalism is coming to an end", said Correa, "A sovereign, dignified, just and socialist Latin America is beginning to rise."

In a speech laced with the indigenous language Quichua and references to revolutionary figures Simon Bolivar and Che Guevara, Correa called for Latin American integration on the basis of cooperation and complementarity, and called on governments to create regional legislation to protect workers' rights.

Correa's radical program for change has already begun. On January 16, Ecuador signed an energy agreement with Venezuela. Venezuela will refine Ecuadorian crude oil, and invest in developing new refineries there. Ecuador, despite being one of Latin America's largest oil exporters, currently has to import fuel at unfavourable prices.

Correa has also promised to renegotiate contracts with foreign oil companies, in order to free up money for spending on health, education, the environment and housing. The potential benefits for Ecuador are enormous: the oil company Oxy had its contracts cancelled a year ago, and the government has since made US\$1.1 billion from those oilfields alone.

Another priority for Correa is Ecuador's foreign debt, estimated in November last year at over 25% of the country's GDP. Correa has suggested that at least part of the debt may be illegal, and is planning to renegotiate, or possibly default on it. He has also called for an international debt tribunal to prevent the exploitation of debt-ridden countries and has threatened to cut ties with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

On January 17, agriculture minister Carlos Valejo declared the government's intention to redistribute idle arable land. Ecuador's vulnerable agricultural sector was a key issue in

mass protests last year against a proposed free-trade agreement with the US. Correa is firmly opposed to such an FTA, preferring to focus on national development and Latin American integration.

The most important part of the new president's platform for change is the promise to convoke a Constituent Assembly to rewrite the constitution to allow the recall of elected officials and greater participation by social movements and community sectors in government, weakening the traditional party system and making his reforms possible.

Correa, whose Alianza PAIS party ran no candidates for the Congress, faces a hostile legislature. His opponents in Congress, which is almost universally regarded to be run by a corrupt and inept "partyocracy", formed a bloc of 76 out of 100 law-makers to oppose Correa's reforms.

Correa threatened to call mass protests and to use his executive powers to bypass the Congress, but on January 12, the second largest party in Congress, the Patriotic Society Party (PSP), led by ex-president Lucio Gutierrez (who was overthrown in 2005), changed sides on the issue, giving Correa a temporary majority.

This was not before Gutierrez had expelled his own wife and another member of Congress from the PSP for supporting Correa's proposal. Neither Correa nor many of the social movements, such as the indigenous federatation CONAIE, trust Gutierrez and the about-face is widely seen as proof of the corruption of the current political system.

Assuming it is approved, there will now be a referendum on March 18 to endorse the initiative, and a Constituent Assembly of 87 members will be elected soon after from provincial, national and immigrant sectors of the population. The assembly will have 180 days to rewrite the constitution.

The task facing Correa is a challenging one. Previous governments that have promised reforms along similar lines have been unable or unwilling to carry them out, making only small reforms in the hope of placating big business and the people alike. In response, mass popular mobilisations, especially by the indigenous movements, have led to the overthrow of the last three elected presidents.

The hope is that Correa has broken the mould. "We're not talking about little reforms, about making things less bad", he said during his inauguration. "Latin America isn't living an era of changes", he explained. "It's living a change of eras."

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