

Hugo Chavez Gains An Ecuadorian Ally

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Ecuador's Supreme Electoral Tribunal is still counting the votes in the November 26 presidential runoff election but the results seem clear - with one-half of them tallied so far they show: the peoples' candidate, Rafael Correa, 68% and the bible-toting billionaire banana tycoon oligarch who's also the richest man in the country, Alvaro Noboa, - 32% - results consistent with two exit polls and an unofficial citizens election watchdog group, but without the completion of the suspended vote count in the Guayas province that's a Noboa stronghold that when done should raise his percent of the total but nowhere near enough to close the current electoral gap against him.

The people have spoken, and the Washington-directed election-riggers failed for the second time this month to arrange for their man to steal what the people of Ecuador voted en masse to deny them - the same way it turned out on November 7 when Nicaraguans reelected Daniel Ortega despite strong opposition to his candidacy from Washington. Again the people won, and it's a good omen for Hugo Chavez six days before Venezuelans vote on Sunday hoping to prove what the latest independent polls show - that he should win reelection impressively and get to serve another six year term as the country's president.

Ecuadorans voted for populist economist and self-styled "humanist, leftist Christian" candidate Rafael Correa who promised big changes in another Latin American country ruled up to now by and for the interests of capital and against the public welfare. Washington's choice was Alvaro Noboa who as of last night hadn't yet conceded but may have by now as Correa's lead is too great for him to overcome, barring any yet to be uncovered mass vote fraud undiscovered so far but that can't be ruled out.

Correa will face huge challenges ahead when he takes office on January 15 in a country of 13 million, over 70% of whom live in poverty and who supported a man promising to help them with the kinds of social programs Hugo Chavez instituted in Venezuela. Correa sounded a positive tone last night at his campaign headquarters as the early returns showed him to be the likely winner. He told his supporters "It won't be Rafael Correa who assumes power in January; it will be the people." He'll be Ecuador's eighth president in the last decade including three of them driven from office by mass street protests against their misrule. In Mr. Correa, Ecuadorans expect something much different, and he promised to deliver it for them.

The country's majority poor have put their faith in a man they hope can do for them what Hugo Chavez did for the people of Venezuela. Ecuador is the hemisphere's fifth largest oil producer, and Correa supporters want him to use the country's oil wealth, as Chavez has done, to bring them critically needed social services they've never had before and now hope to get.

Correa said he'll deliver a "citizens' revolution" and supports beginning it by calling for a constituent assembly to write a new constitution, a pattern similar to the one Hugo Chavez followed after his election as Venezuela's president in 1998. He called for renegotiating the country's \$16 billion foreign debt and hasn't ruled out an Argentine-style default to free up money for vitally needed social programs that include 100,000 low-cost homes, doubling the \$36 "poverty bonus" 1.2 million poor Ecuadorans receive each month and raising the minimum wage.

He also expressed strong opposition to any new "free-trade" pact with Washington on its one-way terms and affirmed his determination not to renew the lease for the US military base in Manta he said he won't allow to remain open unless the Bush administration allows his country the right to have its own in Miami - a clear sign of his contempt for George Bush he called "dimwitted" in the first electoral round.

Rafael Correa faces an uphill struggle to help his people. He'll have strong opposition in Ecuador's legislature as well as a hostile Bush administration that will do all it can to subvert him. He does have a few things in his favor, however, he can exploit to advantage - overwhelming support from his people, the nation's oil wealth giving him a measure of independence from Washington and the international lending agencies it controls and two very supportive and friendly neighbors in Hugo Chavez (he promises closer ties with) and Evo Morales in Bolivia. The ball is now in Mr. Correa's hands, and it's his move to show if he can run with it.

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