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# ‘Ecuador’s democracy is undergoing a general crisis’

## Elections under the shadow of violence: Constantin Groll on the run-off election for the presidency, criminal gangs and the environmental movement

**Ecuador’s presidential election last Sunday was overshadowed by the murder of opposition candidate Fernando Villavicencio. How did the vote go?**

Unlike what many observers had feared, the election went smoothly, with no other major incidents. The turnout of 82.26 per cent of eligible voters about equalled the previous election (voting is compulsory in Ecuador). This time, the decision to not publish any exit polls, which have often caused unrest and confusion during elections, helped keep things calm. Ecuadoreans voting in other countries apparently had serious technical problems that resulted in an unusually low number of votes cast. However, that hardly affected the overall results.

**Luisa González, the favourite for the presidency, won the most votes, but has to compete in a run-off on 15 October. What can we expect from her?**

González handily won the election with over 3.2 million votes, or 33.47 per cent of the electorate, making her the first Ecuadorean woman to get so many votes in the first round. She ran for the left-wing ‘Citizen Revolution’ (*Revolución Ciudadana*, RC), known as the party of *correísmo,* due to the continued resonance of the policies of former President Rafael Correa, who is living in exile in Belgium. González held various important positions in Correa’s governments and most recently represented the province of Manabí in the National Assembly for the RC. She is considered a loyal Correa supporter and part of the conservative camp on socio-political issues. She has not been heard criticising any mistakes made by Correa’s governments. On the contrary: González invokes the ex-president’s successes as solutions for Ecuador’s *current* problems. Her campaign slogan: *‘Ya lo*

*hicimos'* – 'We've already done that!'

Despite winning the most votes in the first round, a second-round victory for González is far from certain. That's because she was able to mobilise *correísmo* supporters but won only a few more votes than the *correíst* candidate in 2021, Andrés Arauz. Like in the past, González may not manage to convince second-round voters who are not *correísts,* and even if she does win, might lack a legislative majority. With 54 seats, the RC will be the strongest single party in the 137-strong National Assembly but will be outnumbered by many conservative parties.

**In the run-off, González will be up against banana businessman Daniel Noboa. What does he stand for and what are his chances?**

Very few analysts had expected 35-year-old Daniel Noboa to do so well, partly because the son of the wealthy businessman and five-time presidential candidate Álvaro Noboa only received a single-digit share of the vote in early polls. But just before election day, thanks to the way campaigns work and his performance in the only televised debate, Noboa was able to distinguish himself as a new, unbiased, conservative-liberal alternative to the entire political establishment. He presents himself as a clever decision-maker who is open to dialogue, can move beyond the political trench warfare of the past, avoids ideologies and wants to reform Ecuador's security and economic sectors. Noboa's chances in the second round should not be underestimated, partly because the second, third and fourth runners-up are all conservatives whose supporters will very probably vote for him.

**The third-place candidate Christian Zurita, who substituted for the murdered Villavicencio, reported receiving his own death threats. Violence against politicians has grown sharply in recent years. In light of that, who still wants to go into politics? And what does that mean for Ecuadorean democracy?**

Once more, violence in Ecuador has intensified in the last two years, especially attacks on politicians and other representatives of the state – from the judiciary to the police, as well as healthcare and school officials. This is partly because criminal organisations are diversifying their revenue sources, extorting protection money, and intimidating and bribing government officials. Added to that are the problems in Ecuador's law enforcement agencies and judicial system. Many young Ecuadoreans see no future for themselves at home. Both legal and illegal emigration has increased dramatically since the pandemic. Apart from the lack of public security, Ecuador's democracy is

undergoing a general crisis. Surveys reveal that trust in democracy and democratic institutions has been waning for years and support for authoritarian regimes is growing.

**Is there a risk of the democratic government actually being taken over by gangs? Can the drug gangs really be countered?**

Ecuador, and especially the next government, face the huge challenge of fighting organised crime. For one thing, international narcotrafficking has changed, and Ecuador is now one of the most important hubs for shipping drugs – primarily cocaine – to Europe and Asia. Since the pandemic, European drug consumption has reached new heights. The peace process in Colombia is also negatively affecting Ecuador. The FARC guerrilla that once controlled the Colombia-Ecuador border has been disbanded, and many new criminal gangs, especially drug cartels and mafia from everywhere, have emerged. It's become much easier to smuggle drugs in the border region. Finally, the eternal rivalry between the most important Mexican drug cartels, which Ecuadorean gangs depend on, is negatively affecting the situation by expanding and intensifying violent conflicts over territory and control in Ecuador.

Added to this negative international context is the fact that Ecuador has not yet recovered from the massive social and economic cuts made during the pandemic. Especially in the coastal provinces plagued by poverty and a lack of possibilities, it's easy for criminal organisations to recruit young kids and expand. Adding to the austerity politics of the governments of Lenín Moreno and Guillermo Lasso that undermined state institutions and reduced the state's presence, thus creating enormous challenges for future governments. One example is Ecuador's prisons that are now controlled by drug gangs, becoming centres of criminal networks. Despite obvious warning signs, Lasso's government also shied away from completely overhauling the state security agencies, especially the police. Such reforms will encounter resistance – although it's the security organs and justice system that are vulnerable to being corrupted by organised crime. This is why the international community must help Ecuador with a total security reform that also addresses socioeconomic issues.

**The same day as the presidential election, a referendum was held on exploring oil in the Yasuní rain forest. Nearly 60 per cent of Ecuadoreans rejected oil-field development. What is Ecuador expecting from the international community?**

The ban on oil drilling in Yasuní National Park – and that on mining in the biosphere reserve of Chocó Andino that was just approved by

residents of metropolitan Quito – are major victories, especially for the country's extra-parliamentary environmental movement. They show that a majority of the population critically views their extractivist economic model and its environmental and societal harms – and wants a change in policy.  Yasuní is where 10 per cent of the country's oil is drilled by the state company Petroecuador, although production has been declining. This fight began during Correa's presidency and continued under Lenín Moreno und Guillermo Lasso. Despite all their political differences, the three governments were committed to expanding oil production and also mining other natural resources. They did little to discuss, much less pursue, alternatives to the country's dependency on oil and mining.

For this reason, these referendum wins provide the next government with an opportunity to restart this critical debate. The international community, most especially the European Union and its member states, should do everything possible to help Ecuador transition to a post-extractivist economy and develop transparent solutions for sustainable, long-term protection of Yasuní National Park, one of the megadiverse forest areas of Ecuador and the Amazon.

*This interview was conducted by Alexander Isele.*

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