IPS

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# Moreno the Mediator

## Ecuador's new socialist president will need to unite a nation marked by angry divisions

*On Sunday 2nd April, the left-winger Lenin Moreno was elected president of Ecuador, bucking a shift rightwards in Latin America. But as Anja Minnaert, director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Quito, explains, he will need to win over both political opponents and a disillusioned electorate if he wants to make an impact in the country of 16 million.*

**Lenin Moreno has been declared the winner of Ecuador's presidential election, but his conservative rival was hot on his heels. What does the close result tell us?**

The election saw the socialist Lenin Moreno, of the ruling Alianza Pais party, winning with just over 51 percent of the vote. Meanwhile, his conservative challenger, Guillermo Lasso, secured 49 percent. Moreno's razor-thin margin of victory reflects just how politically polarised the country is, with supporters of the leftist 'Citizens' Revolution' (Revolución Cuidadana) on one side and a disparate opposition hungry for political change on the other. Although the various parties on the right campaigned separately during the first round of the election, they were able to unite behind Lasso in the final round.

The elections marked a new era, following a decade of rule under President Rafael Correa and his Citizens' Revolution. Until the beginning of their third term in office, Alianza Pais enjoyed high approval ratings, inextricably linked to the country's economic success and the promise of better social mobility. But the economic crisis that began in 2014 – plus a decline in state revenues due to an oil price slump – revealed sharp discrepancies between the expectations of ordinary Ecuadorians and what the government could actually deliver. Correa's confrontational way of governing also caused a number of left-wing parties and social movements to withdraw their support. So Guillermo Lasso's high poll ratings have less to do with his neo-liberal views, and more to do with the fact that much of the population wants change at the top.

Even after the elections, we're witnessing a country that's divided. The defeated Lasso, for instance, is refusing to recognise the result of the election and has called for a recount. Meanwhile, his supporters are holding demonstrations in the capital, Quito, and in other cities.

**What were the main issues in the candidates' election campaigns?**

The election campaign was hugely polarised, and characterised by attempts by both candidates to defame the other. In this charged atmosphere, actual manifesto commitments seemed to take a back seat. As ruling party's candidate, Lenin Moreno emphasised the successes of the Citizens' Revolution over the past decade, and promised continuity, and a partial expansion of current social and educational policy. He said he wanted to take Ecuador further down the path of socialism and protect it from neo-liberalism. As well as this, Moreno spoke of transforming the culture of politics, and said he was open to political dialogue. Clearly he wanted to draw a line under his predecessor's style of politics.

One of the socialists' key strategies was to portray Moreno as someone who supported the most disadvantaged in society. However, his election campaign came across as highly choreographed, with little space created for actual dialogue.

Moreno's opponent Guillermo Lasso, on the other hand, promised change, and a radical rejection of the character and politics of the Citizens' Revolution. For Lasso, democracy means maximising freedoms for businesses and individuals. As a former banker and businessman, his manifesto focused on economic and fiscal policy. He proposed classic neo-liberal remedies to tackle the economic crisis: austerity, lower taxes, smaller government and greater participation of the private sector.

**What will change in Ecuador now Moreno's been declared president?**

If Moreno sticks to his pre-election promises, we can expect to see greater engagement with those he disagrees with. On election night, Moreno said he wanted to govern "for all" Ecuadorians. He will need to, because unlike their previous term, Alianza Pais have only a simple majority in parliament, and not the two-thirds majority they need to pass a number of laws. So they'll need to negotiate with other political forces.

Moreno is facing a number of additional challenges. His country is in the midst of an economic crisis; it owes money to lenders such as China; and it hasn't managed over the past decade to overcome its dependence on non-renewable resources. So he'll need to prove he can both manage the economic crisis and hold on to the social gains of the

Citizens' Revolution at the same time. The President will also need to go after corrupt politicians – even in his own ranks – it he's to retain the people's trust in him and his government.

**How will the election result affect Latin America as a whole?**

After a decade of progressive governments, Latin America is seeing a significant shift to the right. In countries such as Brazil and Argentina, conservative governments have resumed power. So the victory of the left-wing Citizens' Revolution in Ecuador is symbolically important for progressives. However, the Citizens' Revolution no longer enjoys the same political influence as it did over the last decade. The election's laid open a crisis in political representation, and many citizens feel increasingly frustrated with political parties and institutions.

**How would you assess the Correa era?**

Lenin Moreno's election as president brings a decade of rule under the charismatic Rafael and dominant Correa to an end. In 2006, Correa came to office as a political outsider, supported by the Alianza Pais movement, and following years of political, economic and social crises in Ecuador. His victory was largely a vote for stability and social justice. Indeed, the Citizens' Revolution movement put in place a number of reforms aimed at reducing inequality and bolstering the state's ability to act. At the same time, in its early years the government rejected a neo-liberal, market oriented model of development, favouring what it called '21st century socialism'.

After a decade of the Citizens' Revolution, the results are mixed. Currently, Ecuador is neither a haven of socialism, nor has it become an authoritarian state, as it's often unfairly portrayed. The movement can count big successes in expanding social, health and educational provision. Compared to other left-wing regimes in the region, Ecuador's put an emphasis on structural reform, rather than transfers. Social democrats can be pleased with initiatives such as a gradual increase in the minimum wage, an expansionary wage policy and increased social security provision. Nonetheless, there needs to be more work on social inclusion for Ecuador's poorest, which would result in a lower poverty rate and less social injustice. The government needs to be more efficient, especially when it comes to the quality of public administration, and citizens need to understand their political rights.

There's a dark side to Rafael Correa's time in office too. He is divisive and confrontational. Civil liberties have been curtailed, especially for NGOs and the media. Because of this, a number of civil society

organisations jumped ship a while ago and supported Guillermo Lasso in the latest elections. Civil society has come out of the Correa administration weakened and divided.

**What will happen to Julian Assange now?**

Moreno's election win is good news for the Wikileaks founder, Julian Assange, who's spent years holed up in Ecuador's London embassy to avoid facing sexual assault charges in Sweden. Lasso had announced he'd give Assange 30 days to move out, should he win. Shortly after hearing the election result, Assange hit back with a tongue-in-cheek tweet, demanding Lasso leave Ecuador within 30 days, "with or without his tax haven millions".

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