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ECUADOR'S RETURN TO THE PAST

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In his 1967 novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez uses narrative repetition to emphasize the cyclical nature of history in the fictional town of Macondo and, by extension, Latin America. Characters find it difficult to learn from the past and break free of their families' behavioral pathologies, becoming trapped in fates that echo those of their ancestors. This often seems to be the case in modern-day politics as well: After the promises of reformist leaders, stability, and favorable economic conditions of the 2000s and early 2010s, Latin America seems to have returned to—or to never have actually escaped from—the volatility of its past.

In 2019, protests erupted across the region, leading to or exacerbating government fragility: In Bolivia, demonstrations against President Evo Morales broke out in response to claims of fraud in the October presidential election, resulting in Morales's forced resignation at the hands of the armed forces; in Chile, protesters voiced anger over the country's fragile social-safety net, low pensions, and police brutality, leading to the election of a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution; and in Ecuador, protests forced President Lenín Moreno to temporarily move the seat of government and restore energy subsidies. Protests in the region abated during the height of the covid-19 lockdowns but soon reappeared: In November 2020, Peruvians took to the streets to remove interim president Manuel Merino for his role in the impeachment of the previous interim president, while in Colombia, protests began in late April 2021 against a proposed fiscal reform and continued—amid violent crackdowns—even after President Iván Duque withdrew the tax plan.

The heart of Latin Americans' dissatisfaction at the dawn of a new decade reflects the gap between the promises of their democracies and the realities of rampant corruption, economic and social inequality, street crime and the world's highest homicide rates, and a lack of government responsiveness. These challenges are, alas, familiar and expose sociopolitical shortcomings that governments have long failed to resolve—despite many serious attempts to do so. Not even ambitious and popular reformers such as Morales or Lula da Silva in Brazil, who enjoyed favorable economic conditions during the commodities boom of the 2000s, were able to push their countries off their unfortunate path of weak democratic consolidation. And although some leaders offered order and stability—and an illusory break with the past—their countries' political pathologies returned once they left office.

In Ecuador, President Rafael Correa (2007–17) launched a social-democratic Citizens' Revolution that promised political, economic, and social transformation. He promulgated a new constitution to achieve an institutional and political break with the past and touted a national plan of *buen vivir* or "good living." With a strong leadership style and high public approval, peaking at 86 percent in June 2013, Correa enjoyed single-party government for part of his tenure as well as favorable economic growth, granting him a mandate to reduce party-system fragmentation and poverty while increasing state capacity. Arguably just as impressive, he survived ten years in office, more than double any other president in Ecuador's history.

Thus the loss of Correa acolyte Andrés Arauz to former banker Guillermo Lasso in the 11 April 2021 presidential runoff came as a surprise. Lasso's seemingly commanding victory—52.4 percent to 47.6 percent—defies the result of the February 7 first round: Arauz led the candidate list while Lasso, whose 2013 and 2017 bids for the presidency had failed, scraped by Yaku Pérez Guartambel to take second place by a mere thirty-thousand votes. Moreover, Lasso campaigned on a platform of tax cuts, fiscal austerity, and free trade—hardly attractive propositions for an electorate battered by the covid-19 pandemic and years of slow economic growth.

By breaking with one version of its past—*correlismo*—the electorate seems to have resigned itself to another: the neoliberalism, fiscal austerity, and coalition politics that marked Ecuador's tumultuous period from the 1980s to the early 2000s. Ecuadorian democracy today resembles the decades prior to Correa's ascension, and the challenges confronting the new government are similar to those of the past. Since the mid-2010s, economic, political, and social crises have reversed many of the gains made during the greatest economic boom in the country's history. The political-party system is weakly institutionalized and fragmented, and an inherited fiscal deficit and daunting external debt constrict Lasso's policy options. Moreover, in legislative elections held February 7, his

Creating Opportunities (CREO) party won only twelve of the 137 seats in the National Assembly, meaning that as president Lasso will have to forge legislative coalitions across the ideological spectrum to govern. If Lasso does not make substantial policy concessions, he may face opposition not only in the legislature but on the streets, as have previous Ecuadorian presidents.

Yet if Correa was so strong and influential, why has Ecuador regressed to its previous pathologies? As in several other countries in the region, Ecuador's crisis is a function of longstanding problems—weak channels of formal representation due to party fragmentation, conflicts between branches of government, fickle institutional rules, a commodity-dependent economy, and patrimonialism. Even powerful reformers governing in privileged circumstances become trapped by historical and political structures. They find themselves resorting to the same vices that they promised to eliminate rather than use institutions that they (and citizens) do not trust, further undermining these reformers' potential. As a result, institutional weakness persists.

As the stability and progress that Ecuador had achieved under Correa began to prove illusory, dependent as they had been on favorable circumstances mostly beyond his control, historically deep-seated pathologies reemerged and worsened toward the end of his tenure. The country returned to the dysfunction and dissatisfaction that had brought such an ambitious reformer to power in the first place. Government revenue decreased and Correa's strong leadership gave way to Moreno (2017–21) and now Lasso.

Rather than a vote of confidence, the latter's victory in the runoff reflects voters' choice of him as the least bad of two unappealing candidates. Ultimately, Arauz lost much more than Lasso won: His poor campaigning, combined with the polarizing legacy of *correísmo* and the emergence of a left-wing alternative to Correa in the form of Pérez's Pachakutik party, created the conditions for Lasso's eventual triumph.

Lasso's Low Legitimacy

Lasso's 4.8-point margin of victory in the second round of the presidential race gives the false sense of a popular mandate. Such an artificial majority can result from Ecuador's modified two-round voting system. To be elected in the first round, a candidate must earn 50 percent of the vote plus one or 40 percent with a 10 percent advantage over the runner-up. While two-round systems may provide legitimacy by ensuring that the eventual president has majority support,¹ their benefits diminish when the candidate elected in the runoff lacks sufficient political support to rule.² This is particularly problematic in cases of "outcome inversion"—when the first-round winner is defeated in the runoff—in a context of low party-system institutionalization.

Until this election, no candidate had managed to overcome a double-digit first-round deficit to win in the runoff. Arauz led a crowded first-round field of sixteen candidates with 32.7 percent of the vote, while Lasso squeezed into second place with 19.7 percent and Pérez claimed 19.4 percent. An unexpected 15.7 percent of the electorate opted for newcomer Xavier Hervas from the centrist Democratic Left party. These results marked the lowest share ever of first-round support for an eventual winner of an Ecuadorian presidential election. Although Lasso's vote count jumped from 1.83 million to 4.65 million from the first round to the runoff, his total was still less than the 4.83 million that he had earned while losing the 2017 election. Furthermore, nearly two-million people or 17.9 percent of the voters—many of them supporters of Pérez—cast null or blank votes, spurning both second-round candidates. While Lasso benefited from moving to the center in the second round and framing his candidacy as an offer of stability and consensus, factors external to his campaign as well as tactical mistakes from Arauz's campaign secured his win.

Correa's polarizing legacy. Rafael Correa was one in a long tradition of Ecuadorian populists who generated Manichean divisions in society, turning politics into a zero-sum game.³ Through a combination of personal charisma and propitious political and economic conditions, Correa reoriented politics around support for or opposition to himself. During the ten years of the Citizens' Revolution, he spoke of his supporters and the socially marginalized as *La Patria* or "The Homeland," creating a common identity. By contrast, the *No Patria* or *Antipatria* was made up of the so-called partyocracy, which included the media and the banking sector.

At the beginning of its 2021 campaign, Arauz's Union for Hope (UNES) appealed to Correa supporters with the slogan "to have a homeland again" in order to mobilize voters who valued the social spending, redistribution, infrastructure investment, and nationalist appeals of the Citizens' Revolution; who admired Correa's management of the economy; and who felt nostalgic for his brand of anti-elite authoritarianism. Thus Arauz struggled to overcome Correa's legacy, particularly in the second round: He boosted his vote share from 32.7 percent in the first round to only 47.6 percent in the runoff, while Lasso more than doubled his.

The opposition consisted of a broad coalition of anti-Correa voters, including conservatives, centrists, and disaffected leftists. These voters feared a return to authoritarian tactics, recalling Correa's attacks on opponents and the media, abuses of authority, and contempt for constitutional safeguards. Critics of his economic management, those spurred by corruption allegations against Correa appointees, and socially and economically privileged groups threatened by Arauz's proposed reforms also joined the opposition. A source of unlikely support came from the

indigenous movement and environmental groups, whose protests the Correa government had harshly repressed, and against whom the government had applied draconian antiterrorist legislation.

Pérez and the ecological left. Pérez, a vocal environmentalist and activist, presented a left-wing alternative to *correísmo* and has been the public face of resistance to the former president's authoritarianism. Pérez represents a significant part of Ecuador's indigenous movement, which clashed with Correa over his resource-extraction policies and other environmental issues. In October 2019, Pérez participated in demonstrations against Moreno's package of austerity measures aimed at reducing the fiscal deficit. Pérez's campaign, rooted in environmentalism and opposition to Correa's corruption and authoritarian leanings, drew voters who might otherwise have been persuaded to vote for Arauz.

Despite comparatively little publicity leading up to the elections, Pachakutik performed unexpectedly well at the polls in 2021. Campaigning by bicycle, Pérez made a strong showing in indigenous and impoverished rural areas and won almost all the highland and Amazonian provinces. Although he was initially in second place, a slow review of disputed ballots eventually pushed Lasso ahead. Pérez claimed electoral fraud and, unwilling to support either runoff candidate, encouraged his supporters to cast a principled null vote or an "ideological null." They responded, casting the highest share in Ecuador's history. Although the aggregate null vote was 16.2 percent, it was lower in coastal areas and higher in the rest of the country. The null vote even outperformed Arauz in five central-highland provinces.

In the runoff, Pérez voters were more likely to cast votes for Lasso or the null option than for Arauz's *correísmo*. Analysis of the difference in vote share for Arauz, Lasso, and the null vote from the first to the second round suggests that Pérez's departure from the race increased support for Lasso and the null option but had no discernible effect on Arauz's share of the vote. This finding underscores that Correa, even out of office, remains a polarizing figure on the left. The strength of the null vote also reflects broad discontent with both candidates and the political system in general.

Campaign strategies. The Arauz campaign failed to modify its message for the runoff, a fateful choice that neither broadened its electoral base nor appealed to centrist voters. Instead, UNES maintained a brusque, polarizing tone and attacked Lasso as the unpopular successor of the current president, Moreno—even though Moreno was Correa's handpicked heir. What is more, the campaign team could not convince voters that Arauz would manage the economy well: He remained tied to the prospect of abandoning the U.S. dollar in favor of adopting a national currency, a worry for many voters, and he did not enjoy strong relations with the business sector.

The surprise nomination of Arauz, a 36-year-old who had never run for office and whose merits included his university studies and career as a minister in the Correa government, ended up weakening UNES. He lacked Correa's charisma and leadership abilities. His narrative, focused on presenting himself as a modest member of the middle class, fell apart when it became widely known that he had studied at an exclusive private school, attended college in the United States, and gotten his first job at the Central Bank of Ecuador. UNES realized too late its overdependence on Correa. The political and economic stagnation that had set in after Correa's departure from office made a return to *correísmo* unattractive to voters.

Political Pathologies

Correa's left-wing Citizens' Revolution dulled but did not eliminate Ecuador's longstanding political dysfunction. Rather, the transformations of state institutions, policy, and relations between social and political actors that the movement instituted were not consolidated.⁴ This was the consequence of inefficiency as well as the centralization and personalization of decision making under one man—Correa.⁵ Thus the political stability that marked his long tenure was less a lasting product of his policies than it was a side effect of his model of personalistic, populist, and authoritarian leadership, not to mention his broad electoral support.⁶ Since his successors were poorly equipped to continue his grand project, Ecuador's political morass reappeared.⁷

Weak channels of representation. Ecuador's chronically weak party system has been a consistent impediment to democratic representation. Since returning to civilian rule in 1978–79, Ecuador has suffered high levels of volatility as poorly institutionalized parties have proven unable to sustain electoral support over an extended period—most parties only last a handful of elections before they disappear.⁸ The party system is one of the most fragmented in the world: During each of the elections held from 1979 to 2007, between six and eleven parties earned votes, of which between four and eight qualified for seats in the legislature. Predictably, Ecuadorians have never had a high opinion of political parties: Confidence in them remained in the single digits from 2000 to Correa's ascension in 2007. It increased to 34 percent by 2011, before dropping to 18 percent by 2018.⁹

Despite high party turnover in the legislature, voters lack clear institutional channels of representation. Between 1979 and 1998, four parties accounted for about three-quarters of the vote: the Social Christian Party (PSC), the Ecuadorian Roldosist Party, the Democratic Left (ID), and Popular Democracy.¹⁰ These parties were, however, weakly rooted in society, as voters frequently switched allegiances. Party popularity

depended to a great degree on the presidential candidate and not necessarily on a left-right, programmatic platform. Beginning in 2002, other electoral machines that were only meant to bring their leaders to power lacked clear policy goals and emerged to siphon votes from the mainstream parties. One of the few strongly rooted, programmatic parties to emerge was the left-wing Pachakutik, founded in 1995 as the political arm of Ecuador's largest indigenous political organization.

The party system during Correa's tenure was one typical of countries dominated by populists, with a single hegemonic party competing against many small ones. During his first presidential campaign in 2006, Correa vilified what he called the partyocracy and aimed not only to defeat the mainstream parties but to eliminate them. These parties' power shrank during Correa's tenure, and elections increasingly came to revolve around support for and opposition to his government. In the 2013 legislative elections, Correa's Alianza PAIS (AP) won 100 seats (73 percent of the total), marking the first time that a party had earned a legislative majority in Ecuador's post-transition history. The remaining 37 seats in the National Assembly were divided among ten parties, including CREO. Led by Lasso, the party positioned itself as the primary counterpoint to AP, despite only holding eleven seats and lacking any proposals beyond radical opposition to Correa.

The biggest threat to AP hegemony was internal. Although the AP candidate, Moreno, won the presidency, and the party secured 74 legislative seats (54 percent of the total) in the 2017 elections, success concealed a split within AP that gave way to a public feud between the pro-Correa and pro-Moreno wings of the party as well as the breakdown of the AP bench. This falling-out stemmed in part from Moreno's support for corruption investigations of Correa allies. The defection of Correa supporters to a newly created party, also called the Citizens' Revolution, in 2018 left Moreno with just 45 Assembly seats, obliging him to govern through voting alliances with ideological rivals as presidents did throughout much of the period between 1979 and 2006. AP, meanwhile, disintegrated, since its electoral and political machinery had been built from the state and its resources.

After Correa, the party system fragmented again. The PSC and Pachakutik remain relatively programmatic, while a plethora of other parties—such as Arauz's UNES and Lasso's CREO—serve as electoral vehicles for their leaders. The 2021 composition of the legislature does not favor President Lasso. Beyond real questions of legitimacy, presidents elected in a runoff without legislative majorities are more likely to confront governability crises.¹¹ In the February elections, the party of the first-round victor ended up with the largest legislative bloc: UNES controls 49 seats, followed by Pachakutik (27), ID (18), PSC (18), and CREO (12). The remaining 13 went to smaller parties that earned no more than two seats. Lasso will have to form fragile coalitions with par-

ties across the ideological spectrum in order to legislate and pursue his right-wing agenda.

Conflict between the executive and legislature. Significant interbranch conflict dates to at least the mid-twentieth century.¹² Congressional opposition to the executive in the early 1960s, far from the standard formality it was taken to be, contributed to the erosion of then-President José María Velasco Ibarra's grip on power.¹³ Interbranch relations remained tense throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as Ecuador muddled through successive minority governments and presidential crises. Tensions fell when AP dominated the legislature from 2009 to 2017, as Correa enjoyed a governing majority and high public approval. His departure from office, however, ushered in a return to past levels of interbranch conflict.

Ecuadorian executives have been politically weak despite enjoying an institutional structure that strengthens the presidency relative to the legislature—a result of parties' shallow roots and weak linkages to the president and the public.¹⁴ Executives often face hostile legislatures—only AP has ever held a majority—and must build coalitions through the distribution of pork and other perks, including political and judicial appointments. This encourages politicians to perceive public resources solely as a means to power and leads to a particularistic and patrimonial view of the state. Officeholders exploit their positions to extract public resources for themselves or their cronies.

AP, which Correa founded in 2006, did not present legislative candidates in that year's polls, a risky move since it guaranteed that Correa, who was running for president, would lack the legislature's backing. But by not belonging to an established party, Correa avoided being beholden to a political machine or business interests and kept the presidency's power and state resources for his own purposes.¹⁵ Moreover, he had accumulated fewer favors or pork-barrel demands that he needed to grant in the next elections in 2009, in which his party obtained a near-majority of the seats in the legislature. This outcome reduced interbranch conflict, and Correa also avoided confrontation with the legislature due to his popularity and frequent use of plebiscites.¹⁶ This structure of vertical legitimation and approval reflected a crisis of political representation—few trusted political parties, governance was poor, and the legislature had a bad public image—as well as Correa's conviction that his decisions were a direct manifestation of the will of the people and thus above institutions and norms.

Permanent political reforms. Since Ecuador's founding, its political class and citizens have viewed the country's institutional design as a root cause of its political problems. Thus, in moments of crisis, elites have generally sought institutional and constitutional changes to alter

the formal rules of the game. Since independence from Spain in 1820, Ecuador has had twenty constitutions and myriad electoral rules. In a sense, the country has incorporated constituent assemblies as a kind of

restart button whenever its operating system crashes.

Although Correa proclaimed that the new constitution would endure for three-hundred years, it was modified 23 times in nine years to correct errors and alter citizens' rights, among other things.

This has been especially true since Ecuador's democratic transition. After the legislative removal of Abdalá Bucaram in 1997, interim president Fabián Alarcón convoked a constituent assembly to curry favor with voters. The resulting 1998 Constitution, however, lasted fewer than ten years, and only with numerous substantial reforms. In 2007, voters gave Correa a mandate to refound the country's institutions, prompting him to call yet

another constituent assembly. As in Venezuela in 1999 and Bolivia in 2009, these assemblies and their work marked symbolic breaks with the past and served as manifestations of the popular will to overcome political and economic inequality and to propose a new role for the state in the economy. Likewise, the plebiscites held to ratify the constitution legitimized the presidents' political projects and ambitions.

Although Correa proclaimed that the new constitution would endure for three-hundred years, it was modified 23 times in nine years to correct errors and alter citizens' rights, among other things. These reforms reflected a recurring practice in Ecuador's political trajectory: the modification of the rules to fit the needs of a particular government. AP's unparalleled electoral success in 2013 allowed it to pursue constitutional reforms, including the removal of term limits on the presidency and other offices. The Moreno administration used this same strategy of reform and institutional change to shift the country's balance of power and guarantee a political base.¹⁷ With the purpose of "de-Correaizing" the state, Moreno used the presidency's unilateral powers to make sweeping changes to government personnel and to the competencies of some state agencies. In early 2018, he held a referendum and popular consultation to help consolidate support for his political project, changing the rules once again.

Economic Ills

Prior to Correa, Ecuador's neoliberal policies resulted in the bankruptcy of the financial system and the adoption of the U.S. dollar in 2000.¹⁸ Economic crises and structural adjustments bore a high social cost: As a condition of receiving loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the government increased fuel and utility prices, elimi-

nated subsidies, cut expenditures, and reduced the size of the state by firing public employees, causing a great deal of pushback from labor organizations, the indigenous movement, and the middle class. Meanwhile, political actors failed to meet social demands, disaffecting the public. Between 1997 and 2005, periodic political crises, intense social mobilizations, and popular protests led to the removal of three elected presidents: Abdalá Bucaram in 1997, Jamil Mahuad in 2000, and Lucio Gutiérrez in 2005.

Breaking with its immediate predecessors, the Correa administration implemented policies that emphasized the role of the state in the economy and increased public expenditures.¹⁹ Driven by historically high oil prices and revenues, central-government spending jumped from an average of 16 percent of GDP between 2000 and 2006 to 23.5 percent between 2007 and 2017.²⁰ The government renegotiated oil contracts to increase the percentage of profits that Ecuador received from exports, thereby boosting tax revenues. Per capita GDP rose and poverty fell thanks to the government's redistributive policies. Moreover, the share of capital expenditures grew as the Correa administration made large investments in infrastructure, such as roads, hydroelectric plants, schools, and health facilities.

To finance this, the average annual deficit jumped to 3.5 percent of GDP between 2007 and 2017.²¹ Since dollarization precluded the possibility of seigniorage to remedy these gaps, the Correa government increased domestic and foreign borrowing. Total foreign debt jumped from US\$10.5 billion in 2007 to \$31.5 billion in 2017 and reached \$40 billion by 2020, while domestic debt grew fourfold.²² The sources of foreign borrowing shifted as well. After the government defaulted on \$3.2 billion in 2008—the eighth default in Ecuador's history and the fourth since its return to democracy—many foreign lenders became reluctant to extend new loans, pushing the country to borrow from China under more onerous conditions. Inflated public spending increased the debt and a fall in oil prices in the mid-2010s boosted it more.

Moreno's government—laboring under a \$12 billion fiscal deficit that equaled about a third of the national budget—changed course almost immediately after he assumed power. Moreno drew closer to the business sector, while taking an increasingly liberal turn on economic issues. Like previous presidents, he committed to an agreement with the IMF and a process of renegotiating debt-repayment terms with bondholders. As a part of this deal, the government prioritized the payment of maturities to create confidence among investors and above all to avoid the closure of financial markets. One of the central points of the agreement was the elimination of fuel subsidies, which Moreno implemented via decree on 1 October 2019. This provoked outrage and social unrest, forcing the government to withdraw the decree and the so-called Economic Growth Law that contained the reforms.

Ecuador continues to suffer the same economic ills and to apply the same old solutions. The debt remains country's most serious problem, as it was in the 1980s and 1990s.²³ Ecuador owes more than \$40 billion, as well as an additional \$17 billion in internal debt to the pension and the financial systems. In addition, pending payments in coming years reach \$8 to \$9 billion annually, representing between 25 and 30 percent of the state's income. Nominal GDP contracted by 7.8 percent in 2020 due to the pandemic response, increasing the debt's weight on the economy. Sadly, Ecuador is once again suffering a debt crisis without a productive model upon which to relaunch the system. It needs foreign bailout money, and the growth in unemployment puts at risk three decades of poverty reduction.

Weak Rule of Law and Patrimonialism

Ecuadorian politics has often been transactional: The behavior of many politicians shows that they view politics not as a mechanism to govern but as a means to appropriate public resources for their own benefit. These "extractive elites" siphon resources from the people and often support institutions and policies inimical to sustained economic growth.²⁴ This is exacerbated by a weakly institutionalized and patrimonial state, in which authority largely rests with a sole leader who uses the state to mix public and personal interests. The rule of law and governance, in turn, suffer as corruption pervades not only through surcharges and commissions but through beneficial rulemaking.

Stories abound, for example, of the cultivation of party adherents and votes through clientelism in Ecuador's most populous city, Guayaquil,²⁵ as well as legislative vote-buying by its former mayor, coastal *caudillo* and onetime favorite for the presidency Assad Bucaram.²⁶ Since the mid-1990s, six of the country's seven presidents have been the targets of judicial investigations after leaving office, with four facing judicial proceedings on corruption charges.²⁷ Corruption has also manifested itself in the politicization of the judiciary—and more recently in the judicialization of politics as political actors have sought immunity from charges or the prosecution of opponents. Consequently, the courts have suffered high judicial turnover and interference from almost all presidential administrations. Frustration with these different forms of corruption and patrimonialism helped to propel Correa into the presidency.

Yet Correa's administration did little to address these issues and instead opted to spend freely with little government oversight during the oil boom, creating a breeding ground for scandal.²⁸ Correa also made a public and concerted effort to intervene in the judiciary. Nevertheless, a number of high-ranking AP politicians have been convicted of corruption: Vice-President Jorge Glas, a Correa ally, was sentenced to six years in prison and impeached in late 2017 for taking \$13.5 million

in bribes from Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht. In 2020, a court found Correa, Glas, and more than a dozen other former officials guilty of bribery, illicit association, and influence-peddling in a controversial corruption case dubbed *Sobornos 2012–2016* or “Bribes.” The court sentenced Correa *in absentia* to eight years in prison and banned him from politics for twenty-five years. Since 2017, he has been in exile in Belgium.

Despite Moreno’s anticorruption rhetoric and the arrest and prosecution of ex-officials allied to Correa, state capture persisted as political actors sought to benefit themselves and their cronies. In 2019, the attorney-general’s office opened an ongoing investigation into Moreno, his brother Edwin, and three others in the so-called INA Papers scandal.

Condemned to Repeat History?

Ecuador’s social, political, and economic weaknesses are mutually reinforcing. Social and economic demands on politicians are often at odds, forcing them to choose between increasing spending and the government’s solvency. Unable to pursue countercyclical spending during economic booms and busts, the government—already hamstrung by instability in the party system and presidency—has had difficulty pursuing lasting structural change. Economic hardship exacerbates the highly transactional and patrimonial nature of the political system and weakens the party system as lawmakers switch their political allegiances and votes based on whichever political broker can offer more. Political unresponsiveness, economic troubles, and entrenched corruption have disaffected voters, making them more willing to punish politicians and even the system itself. Turmoil seems to have undermined Ecuadorians’ support for democracy, which fell from 66.7 percent in 2014 to 54.4 percent in 2019, a trend that is mirrored in several other Latin-American states. Satisfaction with how democracy works in Ecuador, peaking at 68.8 percent in 2014, has once again become a minority position, as it was before Correa took office.²⁹

This suggests that while some political pathologies vanished from view during the Citizens’ Revolution, they did not fundamentally change and lingered as latent threats. Vast economic resources, political reforms, and a strong, ambitious, and charismatic leader are not sufficient to disrupt institutional and political inertia. Even as a reformer, Correa intensified institutional instability and patrimonialism. Under the Moreno government, Ecuador’s pathologies reemerged salient as ever and ready to challenge Lasso.

While not most Ecuadorians’ first choice to lead the country, Lasso now occupies Carondelet Palace. Limited political and economic resources handicap his efforts to address urgent problems, including the pandemic, that would sorely challenge even an experienced leader.

Lasso has never previously held public office and lacks a majority in the legislature. A successful businessman, he may be yet another political leader who mistakenly believes that he can replicate his corporate exploits in politics. Yet without a team with public-sector know-how, inexperienced politicians often end up absorbed by the pathologies of a political system that make their weaknesses more acute. From a historical perspective, there is no evidence to suggest that Lasso will succeed where previous presidents have failed.

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