

# THE ECUADOR

HISTORY,  
CULTURE,  
POLITICS

# READER



CARLOS DE LA TORRE AND STEVE STRIFFLER, EDITORS

THE  
ECUADOR  
READER

HISTORY, CULTURE, POLITICS

*Edited by Carlos de la Torre and Steve Striffler*

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS *Durham and London* 2008

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Typeset in Monotype Dante by Achorn International

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data appear  
on the last printed page of this book.

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# Deinstitutionalized Democracy

*Felipe Burbano de Lara*

*Translated by Mayté Chiriboga*

*During the past three decades, Ecuador has confronted an irony that has plagued much of Latin America. The return to democracy has coincided with political chaos and economic crisis. The sociologist and well-known editorialist Felipe Burbano locates the roots of this “unstable transition” in the precariousness of democratic institutions, the civilian-military relationship, the neoliberal model, and a weakened state apparatus.*

In August 1979, Ecuador initiated the return to democracy in Latin America. Ironically, the year also marked the beginning of a long period of political instability within Ecuador. Most recently, the last three presidents elected by popular vote were removed from office before they completed the four-year presidential term. Abdalá Bucaram, leader of the Partido Roldosista Ecuatoriano (PRE), a populist party, was forced from office in February 1997, only six months after having become president. Jamil Mahuad, a popular democrat who held office for a year and a half, followed the same fate. Colonel Lucio Gutiérrez, in turn, remained in office for all of two years and two months. In each case, the downfalls were the result of a combination of social unrest, military intervention, and crisis of governability. Between August 1996 and April 2005, Ecuador had seven presidents.

Ecuadorian politics are currently in a state of “unstable transition” defined by four characteristics: (1) The idea of democracy has not been abandoned, but its definition is subject to intense dispute. Any political intervention, from a strike, to a coup, tends to be justified and legitimized as “democratic.” (2) We make use of political liberties—freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom to organize, freedom to protest—within a context of institutional precariousness. There is continuous political activity that does not find a way to resolve itself through democratic means, because of which Ecuador lives in an environment of constant conflict, protest, and social unrest. (3) The removal of Bucaram in 1997, Mahuad in 2000, and Lucio Gutiérrez in 2005,

weakened the very idea of democratic consolidation. It is an open question as to whether or not Ecuadorians will recover their trust in democracy. The institutional precariousness of democracy coincides, therefore, with an even greater uncertainty concerning the country's political future. (4) The ways in which opposition is exerted has become openly anti-institutional and destabilizing. Disagreements between the opposition and the president quickly become sufficient reasons to request his resignation or to seek his removal. This way of practicing opposition is shared by social movements and political parties alike. Elections now grant little legitimacy to those elected, hence the sudden loss of popularity among newly elected officials.

If despite this rather bleak panorama, we can still speak of a democracy it is because there is no possibility for a military government to assume power as it has in the past. Civilian-military relationships unfold within a much more complex power dynamic. The military intervention in the fall of Bucaram, Mahuad, and Gutiérrez demonstrated the military has resumed its role as dispute settlers between civilians. The three cases make evident that permanence in power ultimately depends upon the will of the military, which in turn contributes to the institutional precariousness of Ecuadorian democracy.

#### *Presidentialism, Political Parties, and Struggles for Power*

The purpose of the transition to democracy (1976–79) was to modernize the political system to allow new forms of representation. The project implicitly undertook the creation of new mechanisms of political mediation between state and society. The main innovation was to grant political parties what some analysts have termed “monopoly of representation,” a system that forces citizens to affiliate with a political party in order to participate in elections for public office. Political parties were conceived as the foundation upon which the new system of representation would rest. Under the system, political parties had to be ideological parties with an established program and clearly defined principles. They were required to be national political parties—not regional or local—for which they were forced to register candidates in a determined number of provinces. And finally, they had to be parties with a minimum electoral support—5 percent of the electoral vote.

Two ghosts from the Ecuadorian political past, populism and parties of the notables, were supposed to be exorcized. According to those who saw the party system as a prerequisite for the return to democracy, populism represented the manipulation of irrational masses by demagogues. Overcoming populism was considered to be a condition for modernizing political practices and establishing Ecuadorian presidentialism. Traditional political parties—mainly Liberal and Conservative—represent the second ghost. For progressive intel-



lectuals, the Liberal Party expressed the interests of the Guayaquileño and coastal oligarchy, while the Conservative Party represented the interests of the highland landholding aristocracy. Both groups were considered parties of notables, without any major popular support. In order to confront the ghosts of populism and political traditionalism, two new groups emerged toward the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s. These were *Democracia Cristiana* and *Izquierda Democrática*.

The entire return to democracy and, later, the dynamics of the democracy itself were marked by tension between traditional and populist organizations and the alleged modern political parties. These embodied two moments of Ecuadorian political history—the past and the present, the old and the new—facing each other during the moment of transition. Ecuador's presidentialist system was based on the principle of "power separation" between the Executive and Congress. The struggle between political parties aggravated all the defects that are usually attributed to presidentialism. Theoretically conceived as a mechanism of checks and balances, "separation of power" in practice translated into a "power struggle." The struggle led to stagnation and deterioration of the political system, and consequently, blocked the process of making and defining public policy. Once combined, immobility and blocking systematically deteriorated the political system's capacity to respond to society's problems. Instead of turning into an arena where social groups processed their conflicts and disagreements, the Ecuadorian presidential system added more conflict to the general scenario of the country.

"Power struggle" cannot be explained outside the political party regime that has operated since the return to democracy. What we have now is a "polarized pluralism" characterized by four to six political parties competing in an election, with the possibility of drawing alliances and sufficient strength to exert political blackmail (*leverage*). The process is "polarized" because of the ideological-symbolic distance between political parties, in addition to the strong personal rivalry between their leaders. This phenomenon leads to a permanent social and political fragmentation and limits the possibility of achieving alliances in Congress in order to form majorities.

Take, for example, the number of political parties and groups with some degree of representation in Congress. Between 1979 and 1997, the groups with parliamentary representation fluctuated between ten and fourteen. Within the context of such fragmentation, power struggle is manifested by the constant strife between the government and the opposition in order to attain parliamentary majorities. Building a majority in the Ecuadorian Congress is exhausting; it requires the participation of between four and ten different groups. Worse yet, it has been repeated every year from 1979 to 1999. The negotiations inside the political system destroy the capacity for public

management of the state since it generally implies a redistribution of the state's power in quotas.

It has not been possible to maintain public policies over time, because they have succumbed to the wavering of precarious and short-lived parliamentary agreements. The precariousness of these alliances is reflected in the instability of the ministers. The first government after the return to democracy (1979–84) had fifty-three ministers who had an average time in office of less than a year. In subsequent periods, the number of ministers with less than a year in office fluctuated from a low of thirty to a high of forty. The most critical areas have been departments overseeing economy and energy; heads roll at an average of six months.

### *Democracy and Dependency*

For Ecuador, the 1982 foreign debt crisis set the stage for the transition to neoliberalism. In 1982 the democratic government was shaken by a series of general strikes, convoked by the United Workers Front (*Frente Unitario de los Trabajadores*), which struck against the adopted economic measures (i.e., devaluation of local currency, fuel price increases, and the reduction of subsidies). These strikes began what would eventually become a relatively permanent conflict throughout the 1980s between those who defended state support for local industry (the import substitution model) and social services, and those who embraced neoliberal reforms.

As a result, the 1984 elections, the second since the democratic return, marked a decisive moment in the transition process. An alliance between traditional political parties—the National Reconstruction Front (*Frente de Reconstrucción Nacional*)—headed by León Febres Cordero, leader of the Social Christians, won the election, embraced neoliberalism, and inaugurated a long period of social and political upheaval. Since 1984, Ecuador has lived under a permanent confrontation between attempts to impose the neoliberal model and the struggle to defend the old developmentalist model. Although the country has made significant advances in many aspects of the neoliberal agenda—such as opening the Ecuadorian market, loosening industrial protection, liberalizing markets, privatizing several sectors previously owned by the state, eliminating of subsidies—there are still substantial reforms pending. The incomplete nature of structural adjustment is a product of political disagreements in Ecuador, including the labor movement of the 1980s, the state employee's union throughout the entire period, and the indigenous movement during the 1990s. At times, the military even joined this “resistance block” against neoliberalism.

During two consecutive decades, lack of consensus and constant bickering helped contribute to the disastrous performance of the economy. The percentage of the population without access to a basic food basket—according to World Bank calculations—shifted from 34 percent in 1995, to 69 percent in 1999, and to 75 percent in 2003. If according to the Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, the 1980s was a “lost decade” for Latin America, for Ecuador the 1990s and early 2000s constituted more of the same.

### *State Reforms*

The weakness of the presidential system has been aggravated by a general weakness of the state as an integrating element of society. Until 1995, the instability was contained by a state supported by oil revenues. Behind the power struggle, the frailty of the political system, and of democracy itself, there still appeared to be a robust state. Ultimately, however, the state machinery—subject to the exhausting pressure of neoliberalism, public spending cuts, and diminishing bureaucracy—has been weakened. Today, we find ourselves with a state that lacks clearly defined public policies or the capacity to implement them. The once prosperous Ecuadorian oil state has become a weakened apparatus without any capacity for political representation and or economic development.

The erosion of the state as a field for political negotiation, as a place for precarious balances, has left a generalized feeling of threat and exclusion, risk and pessimism, which has turned the political field into a setting for violent and anguished struggle for recognition. Today, no social sector finds a clear and safe space for representation within the state, making it virtually impossible to formulate and implement rational public policies.



Indigenbus uprising, 1992. (Photo by Lucía Chiriboga, courtesy of Taller Visual)