

Toward a 'citizen's revolution': President Correa's 21st-Century socialism

By
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On Sept. 30, elections were held in Ecuador to elect the people who will draft a new Constitution. The Alianza País organization, led by President Rafael Correa Delgado, won more than 70 percent of the votes; the runner-up received barely 7 percent. It was an overwhelming triumph, something never before seen in the history of Ecuador.

With 80 of the 130 representatives, Alianza País will have an absolute majority in the Constituent Assembly. With that advantage, the chief of state will be able to "refound the republic" and initiate a model of development that will break away from neoliberalism.

Economist
Alberto Acosta, former Minister of Energy and future president of the Assembly, says that Alianza País began to toddle in August 2005 "without being enlightened." The party "fed from the struggles and efforts of many social and political sectors. It was not the exclusive creation of Correa, who had just resigned from the Ministry of the Economy."

In the November 2006 elections, Correa was elected president. In January 2007, the economist and lecturer took office. "We went from being specialists in protests to introduce proposals. With the presidency came the duty to build," Acosta says.

And the foundations for that construction will be "21st-Century socialism." It is a type of socialism that, according to Acosta, "it is not the socialism that had rooted its responses in manuals. We don't start from dogmatic visions. If we write a manual, it will be for the purpose of changing its pages every time we need to. It will be corrected constantly, because we do not believe in a definitive truth. Our task will be a permanent construction of democracy. That's how 21st-Century socialism must be constructed."

In his simple office in Carondelet Palace, the colonial building that is the seat of government, President Correa explains what 21st-Century socialism is, "when applied to the particularities of Ecuador."

"We favor a citizen's revolution, with a radical, profound and swift change in the political, social and economic structures," he

says. "This country's political institutionality has run out of steam. A Congress that, according to polls, has a 3-percent credibility rating, is not representative. The groups that still call themselves 'political parties' are only feudal, caudillist organizations without the slightest ideology.

"This country cannot continue to live within the economic standards of the past 20 years, caused by the policies imposed by Washington, which have been disastrous for Ecuador and Latin America. Among other effects, in our country those policies have translated into more than 2 million émigrés in recent years," the president says. And he goes on.

"I couldn't care less how the government of the United States, the Europeans or any other country view our changes. I care even less what the transnational corporations think. What's important to me are the Ecuadorean people, the rulers and owners of this country. I hope that no nation, no matter how powerful, will try to dictate what policies we must follow.

"Nor shall we accept that the Colombian government continue to fumigate forests along our border, because that is noxious for our citizens, plants, animals and water. And don't try to draw us into the fratricidal internal conflict afflicting that sister nation. We refuse to get involved in that problem, but if we can in any way help to solve it, we'll be ready.

"We have said clearly that the Plan Colombia, a strategy devised by Bogotá and Washington, is militaristic and violent; that it has been incapable of ending the war. We are the recipients of the negative effects of that plan, beginning with the large number of Colombians who are obliged to seek refuge in our territory.

"I continue. To advance that citizen's revolution, we need a 21st-Century socialism. Many people told us to call it 'humanism.' We said no, because we are not impressed by that word. It is through socialism that we shall seek justice, equity, a productive economy that generates jobs.

"Our project is called that because it coincides with the scientific socialism of Marx and Engels. For example, here, the people must rule, not the market. The market must be a good servant, not the master. The human being can no longer be treated as just another tool for production, for the purpose of accumulating capital.

"The

market economy has emphasized the creation of merchandise and its value. It cares not for the needs of the human being, or the price to be paid for the environment, etc.

"The importance of collective action is another point of coincidence with classic socialism. We must overcome the fallacy of individualism as an engine of society, where, by an act of magic, [the capitalists] turned selfishness into a slogan of social virtue and competition as a way of life.

"That's how they forced us to compete, even among the nations of the so-called Third World. That's absurd. It forced us to cheapen our export products, but to do so we had to lower the working conditions, accept labor flexibilization, reduce wages, etc. So, who came up the winner? The so-called First World: foreign capital.

"We differ from classical socialism. For example, today it is very difficult to talk about the nationalization of all the means of production. But we do have to democratize them. Yet, it is necessary to nationalize the means of production that are strategic to the nation's economy and therefore must not fall into private hands.

"One of the worst mistakes of classical socialism is that it was not very different from the concept of development espoused by capitalism. It offered us a faster, more equitable road, but that road reached the same concept of industrial development and increased production. Look at the competition between the Soviet Union and the United States, as to who produced more.

"However, it gave us a different alternative for sustainable development that considered other dimensions, such as articulation with nature. That's one of the challenges of 21st-Century socialism: to submit a different proposal for development.

"Another difference will surely shock several traditional socialists. We must talk about principles, not about models. In this, classic socialism was overbearing and arrogant. It always sent us to look at such-and-such a page in our search for truths and solutions. It gave us a catechism. And that's a grave error.

"We must adapt to the situations of each country, without pre-established models. I say this as an academician. I believe that any attempt to pigeon-hole within simplistic laws processes as complex as the advancement of society is bound to fail.

"We have the great advantage and obligation to build as we advance," Correa concludes. "We cannot allow a resurgence of indisputable definitions or dogmas. We must not lose the essence of our strength -- creativity."

Hernando

Calvo Ospina, a special correspondent for the monthly Le Monde Diplomatique, conducted this and other interviews. Based on them, the magazine this month will publish a wide-ranging report on the political situation in Ecuador. It will be available in the various international editions of Le Monde Diplomatique:

<http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/int/>