

Ecuador's Leftist Front-Runner

Radical Rhetoric of Presidential Bid Seen in Part as Posturing

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QUITO, Ecuador, Oct. 14 -- In his unlikely race to power, Rafael Correa is as anti-establishment as any politician on a continent where populists have surged by spewing invective against market reforms and the Bush administration. The leftist economist has called President Bush "tremendously dimwitted," threatened to default on Ecuador's foreign debt and promised to tighten ties with President Hugo Chávez, the Venezuelan firebrand, an alliance that sends shivers through foreign oil companies here.

But as Ecuadorans prepare for a presidential election on Sunday with ramifications far beyond this tiny country, it remains unclear if Correa, the front-runner among a dozen candidates, would be a strident nationalist in the mold of Chávez or a center-left pragmatist like Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who has mixed market orthodoxy with far-reaching social programs.

Trained in Belgium and at the University of Illinois, Correa, 43, is a former finance minister and university professor. His associates and some influential business executives who oppose him say he is a brilliant thinker who, though deeply concerned about the poor, is unlikely to follow the same path as Chávez. Yet, in a deft campaign in which he has hammered the much-reviled political class, Correa has cast himself as such a radical that Wall Street has winced with every point he has risen in the polls.

"It is hard to say who he is," said Ramiro Noriega, a literature professor at the University of San Francisco in Quito, where Correa taught until his political career took off.

"My impression is that Rafael at this stage, in these last few weeks, is the candidate, using a discourse to meet the electoral needs," said Noriega, who often spoke about politics with Correa and considers him a friend. "And it's hard to say how much of this is part of his earlier discourse."

If he wins, the Correa who emerges will be watched closely by the Bush administration, which is locked in an ideological battle against Chávez. The Venezuelan leader has opposed the United States on nearly every initiative in Latin America, and he counts [Cuba](#) and [Bolivia](#) as close allies.

Chávez is now counting on wins by Correa and, in next month's presidential election in Nicaragua, former guerrilla leader Daniel Ortega. But Magdalena Barreiro, a former finance minister who, although she admires him, has concerns about a Correa presidency, said Correa has grand plans of his own.

"Rafael will not be happy being president of Ecuador; he wants to be a Latin American leader," said Barreiro, who was a vice minister for finance under Correa before serving briefly as finance minister. "The relationship with Chávez is symbiotic. Chávez needs another foothold in Latin America, and Rafael needs Chávez to help him project his leadership in Latin America."

American officials have remained quiet about their preference for a candidate here; anti-American sentiment runs high, and officials have been careful to avoid a backlash. But a win by a leftist with ties to Chávez -- particularly in a country where American oil companies have significant investments -- would be a setback for Washington.

"Hugo Chávez is a friend of mine," Correa told a group of foreign reporters on Thursday.

"We have always said we are part of the trend that is cutting throughout Latin America," he added. "We are looking for a united Latin America that can confront a globalization that is inhumane and cruel."

In the campaign, Correa has lashed out against "corrupt mafias" and those multinational companies he contends have made Ecuador one of Latin America's most poverty-stricken and politically unstable countries. Beating his belt against the roof of a car -- his slogan is "*dale correa*," or, roughly translated, "beat with a belt," a wordplay on his last name, which means belt -- he promises to thrash them and the old political guard. Under his government, he says, a constituent assembly would rewrite the constitution, which could dissolve the National Congress.

"The belt is coming for all those political classes," Correa warned Thursday night, closing out his campaign as a cold drizzle fell.

Correa asserts that he wants to have good relations with Washington. But he said his government would not renew a lease, set to expire in 2009, that the United States has to run the Manta military base. He also said that his government would not negotiate a free-trade agreement with the United States, unlike Ecuador's neighbors. He said he would renegotiate existing contracts with foreign oil companies and did not rule out defaulting on Ecuador's \$10 billion debt if social needs outweigh the country's servicing obligations. His advisers have warned that a Correa government would be tough on foreign companies and multilateral lenders.

"Here, the rule of law and the constitution are constantly being broken by the mafias and some transnational companies," the candidate said. "The transnationals of the north will have to obey the law."

Correa has 31 percent support, leading his nearest rival, banana tycoon Alvaro Noboa, by 6 points, a Cedatos Gallup poll showed on Saturday. To win in the first round, Correa needs to garner 40 percent of valid votes, which means blank or voided ballots will be excluded, while finishing at least 10 points ahead of the nearest rival. A second round, if needed, would take place Nov. 26.

Correa's meteoric rise -- a month ago he was in third place -- is attributed largely to widespread disgust with traditional politicians and disillusionment with market reforms that failed to deliver prosperity. Tall, boyishly handsome and gifted as a speaker, Correa represents a sharp contrast with Noboa, who gives wheelchairs and cash to poor supporters, and the third-place candidate, León Roldós, a longtime politician and former vice president with little magnetism.

"He's the Robin Hood who is selling hope," said Blasco Peñaherrera, who is president of the Quito Chamber of Commerce and has spoken at length with Correa about economics. "That's why Rafael Correa is the front-runner and why he may win the election on Sunday."

Correa's sister, Pierina Correa, said her brother grew up in a modest home in the coastal city of Guayaquil. Their mother worked as a manager in a supermarket chain to raise four children, one of whom drowned. Many of Correa's political ideals were shaped in the Catholic schools and universities he attended. He also worked in poor Indian villages in his youth.

At the University of Illinois, where he earned a doctorate, he was an exceptional student not afraid to challenge the prevailing economic orthodoxy, recalled Werner Baer, an economics professor who was on a committee that approved Correa's doctorate.

"He was concerned, like any person with a heart, about the distribution of income," Baer said, noting that Correa's thesis dealt with the impact of globalization on development and poverty. "He was always critically disposed to judging the 'Washington consensus,' free trade, lower barriers and how the markets worked."

In politics, Correa quickly made a name for himself as a finance minister under President Alfredo Palacio, declaring that an oil fund used to service debt would instead go for social programs. He also established ties to Chávez and lashed out at the World Bank -- actions that prompted Palacio to force him out after just 106 days.

His conduct in the Palacio government and pronouncements as a candidate have struck fear in people like Nena Hurtado, a businesswoman. "If he wins, I'll pack my bags and go to the United States," she said.

Others, like Barreiro, expressing a desire for someone to clean up Ecuador's scandal-plagued political system, say that Correa could be a fine president if his more moderate side prevails.

"Rafael has the capacity to do very good, if he matures," she said. "He has qualities that no other candidate has."