

In Ecuadoran Vote, Rhetoric Gives Way To Popular Pledges

Runoff Today Pits Banana Tycoon, Leftist

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QUITO, Ecuador, Nov. 25 -- No matter who wins Ecuador's presidential election on Sunday, many outside the country will view it as a decision between dueling political stereotypes: Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's dream of a unified region liberated from U.S. influence, or that of free-market backers embracing a globalized economy.

For most who will actually make the choice, it's nothing of the sort.

Public opinion polls show leftist economist Rafael Correa and banana tycoon Alvaro Noboa locked in a near dead heat, and in recent weeks broad ideological rhetoric has given way to specific promises of concrete and cash. Each candidate has tried to one-up the other with vows of massive government housing projects, new jobs and low-interest loans.

In a country where no president has served a full term in more than a decade, voters want to see some tangible results from their next leader, and it matters little what overarching political philosophy stands behind his pledges.

The campaign since last month's first-round election has been bitterly divisive, with repeated allegations of electoral fraud, increasing the possibility that either candidate would face a rough honeymoon. Throw in serious doubts about the pre-election promises -- some are simply unfeasible, according to analysts -- and many fear that the election will do little to ease Ecuador's chronic political instability.

"It doesn't matter which of the two candidates wins, Ecuador will have a weak president, at the mercy of the Congress and facing difficulties of governability," said Adrián Bonilla, director of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences in Quito.

In last month's election, Noboa got 26.8 percent of the vote to edge out Correa by four percentage points. The latest polls give Correa a slight edge, though few political observers put much faith in them; the same polls had predicted that Correa would finish ahead of Noboa in the first round.

Correa, 43, a charismatic economist who received his doctorate at the University of Illinois, spent the early stages of his campaign promising to kill a proposed free-trade agreement with the United States, close a U.S. military base used for anti-drug operations and default on the nation's foreign debt so that social spending could be increased. He has also vowed to revamp Ecuador's political system by disbanding Congress and convening a constituent assembly in its place.

But after the first round, Correa retooled his campaign to focus on specific domestic spending programs, such as housing grants and microcredits for the poor. Though he has never backed away from his belief that globalization works against small countries like Ecuador, he spoke little of his broad economic theories or of his more controversial plans, such as the constituent assembly.

"I think he got some people a little nervous in Ecuador, which is why he didn't do as well in the first round as many expected," said Michael Shifter, an analyst with Inter-American Dialogue, a policy forum in Washington. "Now he's trying to moderate and tone down his rhetoric. I suspect this also reflects a realization that some of these proposals just aren't going to be politically palatable, both in Ecuador and internationally."

Unlike Chávez, whom he considers a friend, Correa would not have the benefit of plentiful oil revenue to help underwrite his policy initiatives. And while some of his proposals are similar to those of Bolivian President Evo Morales, Correa has neither the popular support that gave Morales a comfortable first-round election victory last year nor a political party to back him in Congress. Correa's proposed constituent assembly thus could be difficult to achieve.

"If he takes it to the people and gets popular backing for an assembly, then Congress won't be a problem," said Orazio J. Bellettini, executive director of Faro Group, a political policy group in Quito that promotes governmental transparency. "But the second scenario is that the people don't support it overwhelmingly, and then he would face a very strong crisis, standing on his own with no Congress members."

Difficulties with Congress have contributed to the early downfalls of several Ecuadoran presidents, including Lucio Gutiérrez, who was ousted last year after the legislature accused him of abandoning his post.

Correa paints Noboa -- Ecuador's richest man -- as the face of an oligarchy that he says has corrupted the highest reaches of government. Noboa owns more than 110 businesses, including one of the world's largest banana exporting companies, which he inherited from his father. Correa has repeatedly told his followers to suspect fraud if Noboa wins on Sunday.

"There is no place for indecision," Correa said at a rally Friday. "The decision is between being patriotic or becoming the plantation of the richest and most conceited heir in this country."

Noboa, 56, is an old-fashioned populist who dropped to his knees during stump speeches, holding a Bible in his hands and saying he was sent by God to help rid the world of communism. He tells voters that God gave him riches to share with them, often passing out T-shirts, wheelchairs and other gifts at public appearances. He favors free trade and says he will work to encourage foreign investment, but the cornerstones of his campaign are promises of more jobs and government housing. He has vowed to build 300,000 homes each year, or 1.2 million over a four-year term -- a huge number, considering there were 6.6 million voters in the first-round election.

"In my 15 years of working with him, I know that no one cares more about this country and no one has more to lose if the country collapses than does Alvaro," said Bernardo Manzano, director general of the Noboa company that exports millions of Bonita brand bananas to markets all over the world.

But those strong business ties to the country's economy are a source of worry for his detractors, who argue that they could easily produce conflicts of interest.

Already, the lines between his businesses and his political party and campaign are barely distinguishable. As Manzano toured one of Noboa's plantations this week, he consulted his BlackBerry to check results of the latest poll, which he had commissioned himself.

Noboa's business history has also forced him to defend himself against allegations of exploitation. In 2002, a Human Rights Watch report stated that Noboa employed child laborers on some of his banana plantations. Later that year, a conflict with workers led to a violent standoff and contributed to Noboa's lingering reputation for being hard on organized labor. Manzano said the company no longer employs children, offering as evidence reports from local and international inspectors, copies of which he keeps at hand in his office.

"See? No child labor," he said, flipping through pages of recent reports. "They keep coming back, and coming back, and not finding anything. All of the accusations are just part of a very dirty political campaign."