

Exit polls show Ecuador's Correa has wide lead

If presidential runoff results hold up, making leftist economist Rafael Correa the winner, the U.S. would be dealt a blow in its free-trade plans for the region.

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QUITO - Three exit polls showed Ph.D economist Rafael Correa defeated billionaire businessman Alvaro Noboa in Sunday's runoff for president. If the results hold, it would be another startling setback for U.S. free-trade policies in the region and another victory for Latin America's leftist politicians.

Official results were not yet available, but the 43-year-old Correa and virtually every local media organization took the polls to indicate a surprising victory for a man who has never been elected to a public office here and was behind in these same polls up until the last few days of the second round of the elections.

"We've begun to recuperate the country," Correa told his followers and the media in a packed Dann Carlton Hotel in Quito. "This isn't the end of the job, this is the beginning."

For his part, Noboa, who won the first round of elections on Oct. 15, refused to concede. One exit poll showed Noboa in the lead, and Noboa claimed Correa's campaign rigged the other exit polls.

"I've won," Noboa told local television repeatedly on Sunday night.

But the three polls came up with such similar results that it may be hard for even one of Latin America's richest men to reverse the tendency.

COMMANDING LEAD

Citizen Participate, Cedatos-Gallup and Market all showed Correa with a commanding 57 to 43 lead. Official results were expected to begin trickling in at 11 p.m., and the Supreme Electoral Tribunal said it would announce the winner sometime this week.

Correa's triumph is a victory for Latin American leftist politicians that have paralyzed United States' efforts to implement free-trade agreements in the

region. The United States has signed agreements with countries from Central America, as well as Colombia and Peru.

But from Venezuela's Hugo Chávez to Brazil's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, numerous nations have sought to create their own trading bloc outside the United States' sphere of influence.

Correa has expressed admiration for Chávez's social vision and has stated categorically that his country will not sign a free-trade agreement with the United States -- an incredible reversal since the United States and Ecuador were very close to hammering out the final details of a complicated bilateral agreement earlier this year.

Correa, who obtained his Ph.D from the University of Illinois, has also said he will "renegotiate" the country's estimated \$10 billion foreign debt, something that has given Wall Street the jitters and is sure to shake the bond market this week.

In addition, Correa has indicated he will not sign a renewal of a lease giving the U.S. government use of a military facility in Manta, Ecuador, which the United States uses for anti-drug missions and surveillance.

Still, it's not clear if Correa is as radical as Chávez, who is confiscating private property, or more of a moderate leftist like Lula, who has become a darling of foreign investors and stabilized his once-unpredictable economy.

SOFTENED TONE

In round two of the elections, Correa softened his tone on other sensitive issues such as possibly reversing the country's move to the dollar in 1999 -- which Correa says he will not -- and oil policy. More than half of Ecuador's 520,000 barrels-a-day in production comes from foreign companies that Correa says are gouging the nation's natural resources for a minimal cost. Correa claims he will push for a change in the country's hydrocarbon law, but he and his team have also indicated that this push would be governed by negotiation rather than by decree.

SKEPTICS SPEAK

Not everyone is convinced that round-two Correa is the Correa they have inherited. While finance minister last year, Correa defied the World Bank and

lost his job. In the first round, Correa also took on a Chávez-like bravado, insulting President Bush.

"I don't know who will be president of Ecuador: The Rafael Correa of the first round or the Rafael Correa of the second round," said Magdalena Barreiro, Correa's longtime colleague in the economics department at the prestigious San Francisco University where Correa taught for years. "I believe we'll get more in the Rafael of the first than the second round."

Domestically, Correa is facing the daunting task of governing a country that has ousted three presidents in the last decade, and facing up to a Congress that Correa has himself categorized as corrupt and useless.

Correa says he wants a constitutional assembly to reform the country's Congress and other institutions, a gambit that may have won him some votes on Sunday but may be risky in the post-electoral environment.

Current president Alfredo Palacio proposed a similar assembly but dropped it just as quickly. Former President Lucio Gutierrez also took on Congress.

He was ousted last year after a controversial vote by the legislative body.

What's more, Noboa's party has 28 of 100 seats in Congress, more than any other political party; Correa has no representatives. Correa has no representatives in Congress.