

Latin left's latest victory: Ecuador

But apparent victor Rafael Correa is unlikely to become as radical or isolationist as some have painted him.

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QUITO, ECUADOR – The apparent victory of Rafael Correa - a left-leaning economist and friend of Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez - in Ecuador's presidential runoff election Sunday is the latest triumph for leftist governments in Latin America.

"Hopefully, we will get much, much closer to Mr. Chávez," Mr. Correa said after declaring victory Sunday night.

At press time, three exit polls, a quick count, and official results from more than half of the ballots showed Correa with close to 60 percent of the vote.

The election, which pitted Correa against billionaire banana tycoon Alvaro Noboa, was watched closely in the US. Correa had promised to disregard a free trade agreement with the US and close down a US military base in the country. Correa's win means Ecuador joins Chile, Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Nicaragua, and Venezuela on the list of countries that have also elected leftist presidents in recent years.

But Eduardo Gamarra, a Latin American expert at Florida International University, says that while Correa will forge closer relations with Latin America's leftist leaders, he is unlikely to become as radical or isolationist as his opponents have painted him. "[Ecuador's] relationship with Chávez will be stronger, the relationship with Evo Morales [Bolivia's leftist leader] will be stronger," Mr. Gamarra says. "But these countries have gone too far on the side of democracy and the economic side to turn back. Ecuador cannot think of closing its doors."

Correa says he will not rule out stronger ties to leftist leaders, but that their influence will be limited. "Chávez is my personal friend, but in my house, my friends aren't in charge, I am. And in Ecuador, it will be Ecuadorians in charge."

He reiterated he would not restart negotiations for a free trade agreement with the US and that Ecuador could rejoin the Organization of Petroleum

Exporting Countries (OPEC). He plans to call a constituent assembly to get rid of what he refers to as "political mafias" that he says have ruled the country at the expense of the majority. After Venezuela, Ecuador is ranked the most corrupt country in South America by the international watchdog group Transparency International.

A 'new face'

Many are attracted to Correa as a new face. He is an economics professor who served just briefly as finance minister last year, and supporters say he has the willingness and ability to change the status quo, which has not served the poor well. According to the World Bank, the richest 10 percent of the population receives three times the income of the poorest 50 percent.

"Correa is a new person. He has no relation with any political party," says college student Andrés Pavon. "With Noboa it'd be more of the same."

But not all agree that Correa's brand of change is best for the country. "His ideas are new, he wants change. But not in a good way," says Fernando Santos, a law professor at Las Americas University in Quito. "He is a clean person, but on the wrong track."

During the campaign, Correa's critics painted him as a danger to the economic viability of the country. "Noboa is a businessman who believes in free thought and free trade," says Federico Perez, a top adviser for Noboa and a congressman-elect, as he multitasks on three cellphones in his office in Quito. "Correa is worse than a socialist, maybe even a communist."

Toned down rhetoric helped Correa win

Correa had been expected to win in the first round of voting on Oct. 15, but instead came in second to Noboa. Since then Correa toned down his rhetoric to attract those who were scared off by his threats to default on the nation's debt or get rid of dollarization. "His bark is worse than his bite," says Gianfranco Bertozzi, a Latin American strategist at Lehman Brothers Holdings Inc in New York, who adds that Wall Street was much more anxious about a Correa win during the first round when his anticapitalist rhetoric flowed more freely. "[In the first round] Correa was sort of overly confident, in a way arrogant. He inspired a lot of mistrust in the electorate - one that is interested in change, but not interested in conflict at every angle."

Still, many voted for Correa because he promised a new economic model and social order for Ecuador and the region. "Not having a free trade agreement with the US doesn't scare me," says Diego Arias, a taxi driver in Quito. "If we unite here in South America we can be a big power. We have a lot of oil."

But Correa will not find it easy to govern a fractious and volatile Ecuador, say analysts. Three Ecuadorean leaders have been ousted by street protests in the past decade - a result of not just inequality but factionalism in the government, says Adrian Bonilla, a political analyst at the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences in Quito. That has made it hard to push through reforms.

"We are going to have the same scenario," Mr. Bonilla says, "because the structural causes of instability ... have not changed."