

Ecuador Congress OK's referendum on constitutional assembly

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QUITO - (AP) -- Congress on Tuesday approved a national referendum on whether to call a constitutional assembly, bowing to demands by new leftist President Rafael Correa.

Correa, who took office Jan. 15, is calling for an assembly to rewrite Ecuador's Constitution in an effort limit the power of traditional political parties, which he blames for problems in this poverty wracked nation. Ecuador has had seven presidents in the last decade.

The referendum initiative was approved 57-1 in the 100-member Congress.

Most opposition congressmen abandoned the session before the vote in protest, calling the measure unconstitutional.

The country's highest electoral court has ruled lawmakers must decide whether to hold the referendum, which critics say is an attempt by Correa to consolidate power in the presidency.

Nearly 1,000 people gathered outside Congress, including dozens of highland Indians in traditional clothing, to shout support for the referendum and pressure Congress to approve it.

Correa's backers stormed the building last month to pressure Congress to hold the vote, forcing a suspension of the session.

On Monday, 300 protesters who gathered outside Congress also demanded that the assembly be granted broad powers including the ability to dissolve Congress.

Earlier this month, Correa's government denied any plans to dissolve Congress, which the president has called a "sewer of corruption." He has rejected accusations of authoritarianism.