

Ecuador swears in 21 alternate lawmakers

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QUITO, Ecuador --Ecuador's constitutional crisis took a new twist as alternate lawmakers were escorted into Congress under the cover of darkness Tuesday and sworn in to replace some of the legislators fired by the country's highest electoral court.

The 21 alternate lawmakers were shuttled to the congressional building before dawn as hundreds of national police stood watch, allowing the 100-seat legislature to begin a session with a quorum for the first time in two weeks.

The crisis deepened in early March when a majority of congressmen voted to oust the president of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal for approving President Rafael Correa's version of an April 15 referendum plan on the need for a new constitution. The tribunal responded by dismissing 57 lawmakers, accusing them of trying to block the referendum.

Correa, a leftist whose party holds no seats in Congress, is pushing for a new charter to limit the power of traditional political parties, which he blames for the country's corruption and political instability. Ecuador has had eight presidents in the last decade.

Correa has acknowledged that administration officials met with possible alternate congressmen to encourage them to take up the dismissed legislators' posts, but it is unclear what affect they will have on Correa's influence in Congress. The alternate lawmakers belong to the three major opposition parties.

Congress president Jorge Cevallos said the installation of the lawmakers was intended to "overcome the political crisis."

But he criticized the alternates for sneaking into Congress before dawn. "This is not a good start," Cevallos said. "They should come in through the front door. No one has any reason to hide."

The fired congressmen condemned the alternates as traitors.

"They have betrayed their political party," said Alfonso Harb, an ousted Social Christian lawmaker, referring to three alternates from his party. "We don't recognize the legitimacy of today's session."

Although the 21 alternates allow for a quorum in Congress, many congressional decisions need a two-thirds majority - or 67 votes - to pass. That means if the

remaining 36 empty seats are not filled, Congress may not be able to pass important legislation.

Cevallos said he hopes to have those alternates installed by next week.

Alvaro Noboa, the billionaire banana baron defeated in November's presidential election runoff, accused Correa of offering the alternate lawmakers money or other favors to get them to take up their posts in Congress, which Correa has called "a sewer of corruption."

Noboa said it was an example of the "the system of the briefcase man" at work, Ecuadorean slang for political bribes.

Correa's administration has denied bribing the alternate lawmakers.