

## **POLITICAL SHOWDOWN IN ECUADOR**

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QUITO, Ecuador --

Ecuador's popular president tightened his hold over all branches of government Tuesday, sending police to prevent the return of opposition lawmakers as his tentative majority in Congress dismissed all nine members of the nation's highest court.

The Constitutional Tribunal on Monday ordered the reinstatement of opposition lawmakers who had tried to block a constitutional referendum.

An overwhelming 82 percent of voters last week approved the election of a special assembly to write a new constitution that leftist President Rafael Correa hopes will reduce the power of political parties.

Correa scorned the tribunal's authority, surrounding Congress with police officers Tuesday to prevent the ousted lawmakers from returning, and some of their replacements were among the 52 sitting members of the 100-member body who voted to fire the judges, arguing that their terms had expired in January.

If the ousted lawmakers retake their seats, Congress will return to opposition hands. They were meeting to plot their next move. But given that Correa now controls the courts, the legislature and the executive branch, that appears increasingly unlikely.

Tuesday's developments were a stunning advance for a political outsider who took office on Jan. 15 without a single member of his own party in Congress.

"We are living in a magical moment in Ecuador's history with the awakening of a people who have said 'enough,'" Correa said at the presidential palace Tuesday night in a speech marking his 100th day in office.

With "so much popular support, we're certain that we can have a very important presence in the assembly," Correa said.

Many Ecuadoreans are fed up with political corruption and incompetence, and share Correa's view that the current political structure is designed to benefit parties rather than people. Correa has nearly 70 percent support in the polls, and several smaller parties have allied with him since he took office.

Ecuador's constitution gives Congress the power to name the tribunal's judges, and their dismissal appears to consolidate Correa's control over the last remaining branches of government that checked his power.

Some 300 police and dozens of demonstrators surrounded Congress to keep the reinstated legislators from entering, and Correa warned that if any of the dismissed lawmakers tried to enter by force, "it will be necessary to send them to prison."

One of the opposition congressmen, Alfredo Serrano, said they decided not to enter Congress Tuesday, fearing for their safety.

Correa's position also is supported by Ecuador's top electoral court, which fired the lawmakers in March and says that it - not the Constitutional Tribunal - has the final say on electoral matters. That court's president warned that the six constitutional tribunal judges who voted to reinstate the ousted congressmen could be charged with abusing their authority.

"It is not a matter of disrespecting their decision but they should respect ... the constitution and the laws," said the electoral court's president, Jorge Acosta. "Just because they are the highest constitutional authority does not mean they can disregard the mandates of the constitution and the law."

Amid the chaos Tuesday, the electoral court announced that the 130 constituent assembly members will be elected Sept. 30. Candidates will begin a six-week campaign in mid-August.