Ecuador to pick constitutional assembly

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QUITO, Ecuador --
Ecuador's leftist president is betting on his popular support to win control of a constitutional assembly on Sunday that will write a new charter for this politically volatile nation.

Rafael Correa's government is following in the footsteps of fellow South American leftist governments in Venezuela and Bolivia, whose leaders ran successful presidential campaigns promising new charters.

Opponents say Correa is plotting a power grab through the assembly. But pre-election polls show Ecuadoreans, disillusioned with their political system, were prepared to give the president's movement the greatest number of seats in the 130-member body.

Still, it was unclear if Correa could obtain the majority needed to push through all of his proposed reforms, with more than a third of voters still undecided weeks before the Sunday vote.

An odd crop of 3,200 candidates includes professional athletes and television celebrities. It could take up to a month to reach a final tally because of the complexity of the ballot.

Correa, 44, a former economy minister and an ally of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, says the assembly is necessary to eliminate the power of traditional political parties, which he blames for the country's instability and corruption. Correa is Ecuador's eighth president in a decade.

Ecuadoreans bought the strong, if vague, sales pitch as an overwhelming 82 percent voted in favor of the assembly in April.

Correa says the assembly will reform the discredited political system and overcome social inequality, paving the way for socialism, but he has not detailed his plans.

Half of Ecuador's population lives in poverty, and millions have emigrated over the past decade in search of opportunity. "The country has no time to lose," he said in a recent television interview. "I seek a profound change in this country."

Correa steamrolled over his foes to push through the election of an assembly that will have the power to dismiss any elected official. His insistence on that power for the assembly plunged the country into a legal crisis that resulted in the firing of more than half of the legislature.

Correa is expected to call for the closure of Congress if he wins control of the assembly, replacing it with a parliamentary commission until a legislature is elected under a new charter.

Quito-based political analyst Ana Maria Correa, no relation to the president, said the president's government "has a certain moral superiority, the idea that they are finally heading a revolution that has been proposed for more than 30 years."

"At times, this revolutionary logic is leaving procedures, rules, the law by the wayside," she said.

Correa's foes warn the president is power-hungry, and point to his proposal to increase consecutive presidential term limits to two terms of four years instead of a single term.

"Every leader who yearns for absolute power disguises it or hides his intentions with a savior's message, with a populist message to attract support," said Blasco Penaherrera, a former vice president and assembly candidate for the right-wing Social Christian Party.

Penaherrera says Correa is seeking to "win a concentration of power in the same way as Lt. Col. Chavez," in reference to the Venezuelan president.

Chavez, whom Correa calls a friend, recently proposed a new set of constitutional changes that would allow him to be re-elected indefinitely.

Correa has said he will not seek to abolish limits on his re-election, vowing he has no interest in perpetuating his power as part of sweeping constitutional reforms.