"President Gustavo Noboa had greatness thrust upon him. He has risen to the occasion, bringing a measure of stability to Ecuador. However, the mere duration of democratic institutions and processes should not be mistaken for democratic consolidation. On that score, Ecuador has far to go. . . ."

Ecuador's Centrifugal Politics

SHELLEY A. MCCONNELL

On January 21, 2000, Ecuador became the first Latin American country to experience a coup in over two decades. Although careful management of the crisis helped ensure that Ecuador did not suffer an authoritarian reversal, the event interrupted the sleepy complacency surrounding democratic consolidation.

Severe economic challenges in Ecuador have combined with weak democratic institutions and social fragmentation to produce repeated government crises in recent years. Underlying this instability are structural problems, including deep geographic and ethnic cleavages that divide the nation, as well as economic dependence on oil exports whose price varies widely. These structural problems find expression through the party system and protest politics, complicating the task of forming supportive coalitions for policy and sometimes producing gridlock. Under such conditions, democratic consolidation requires careful statecraft.

President Gustavo Noboa has taken bold steps to restore Ecuador's economic viability: he has made the American dollar the Ecuadoran currency and has begun to put in place the legal framework for the privatization of key state-owned industries. Meanwhile, rising oil prices have helped pull Ecuador back from the brink. Nonetheless, strong pressures have emerged for fiscal and administrative autonomy, echoing the historical divisions between the highlands and the coast, and reframing demands for inclusion from Ecuador's substantial indigenous population. Done well, decentralization could reduce Ecuador's systemic corruption and make democracy meaningful for a skeptical public, but it runs the risk of deepening the political fragmentation that has blocked development in this small South American country.

ECUADOR'S DOUBLE DIVIDE

Ecuador's difficulty in consolidating democracy can be traced in part to the geographical and social divisions that have long haunted the country. Nestled in the mountains of Pichincha province, Quito is the political capital, but the port town of Guayaquil on the Pacific coast province of Guayas is Ecuador's business center. This geographic divide has found expression in politics through the formation of regionally based political parties that compete for the presidency. The coastal-highland divide gained further political salience from internal migration patterns that evened the population in each region, producing narrow margins of victory in presidential races.

Ecuador's fractious multiparty system imperfectly mirrors its bipolar development. Legislative coalitions are a necessity, but the rivalries among political leaders are magnified by their regional strongholds; competition is so intense that the parties have difficulty maintaining working alliances despite significant ideological and programmatic overlaps. The party list system, under which voters choose parties rather than individual candidates, makes politicians responsive to party leaders rather than the electorate. Many leaders have been more concerned about clientelism and rentier politics than the national interest, to the point where opposition parties sometimes play spoiler to undercut the governing party's success. The result has been a formal democracy in which representatives go through the motions of elections and parliamentary procedure while the citizens' daily experience with government agencies is marked by corruption, inefficiency, and alienation.

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An ethnic cleavage also divides Ecuador. The population is estimated to be at least one-fourth Amerindian (a fiercely argued statistic). Definitional disputes over who is indigenous reinforce the highland-coastal cleavage, with coastal leaders limiting their calculus to citizens living in ethnically indigenous communities scattered across Ecuador's highland provinces, and highland leaders including in their tally the indigenous people who have migrated to the city seeking work and adopting *mestizo* dress. The difference is substantial. Indigenous leaders insist Amerindians are the majority, but Guayaquil Mayor Jaime Nebot dismisses them as no more than 8 percent of Ecuador's 12.6 million inhabitants.

One issue is clear: Amerindians are among Ecuador's poorest citizens. In the past decade they have organized to demand cultural rights and increasingly have added economic demands to their agenda, making common cause with the non-indigenous poor. An indigenous party, Pachakutik—named after the Inca ruler—holds a handful of seats in the unicameral Congress, but because Amerindians have limited resources and representation in government, their political expression tends to manifest in protest rather than parliamentary debate. The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) has emerged as the largest organization of the indigenous, and pursued an effective strategy of protest politics that helped unseat President Jamil Mahuad. Other groups, including an evangelical Christian indigenous organization, claim to represent a substantial silent minority.

Ecuador's recent political instability has stemmed from the exacerbation of its geographic and ethnic cleavages. Partisan politics with undertones of regionalism paralyze the legislature. Indigenous groups give voice to the demands of the vast rural poor and ignite protests that constrain policy options. Where these cleavages intersect, instability results.

Public disenchantment with democratic institutions has given a green light to protest politics and thinly veiled military recalibration of unbalanced presidencies. Popular protests, in part by indigenous citizens, led to a congressional ouster of populist President Abdalá Bucaram in 1996 on the grounds of incompetence, although his penchant for singing at press conferences may have mattered less than his record for graft. President Fabián Alarcón served out Bucaram's term but was similarly accused of corruption, and briefly jailed. His elected successor, President Jamil Mahuad, governed for just 18 months before being deposed in the January 2000 coup. Vice President Gustavo Noboa was then elevated to the presidency amid widespread speculation that he would not last six months.

President Noboa has surprised his critics by shoring up the deeply damaged economy and defusing the indigenous protests that triggered Mahuad's removal, but Ecuador's record of instability in the executive branch suggests the fragility of Ecuadoran democracy. Surveys suggest that nearly half of Ecuadorans want more authoritative government, and prior to the coup against Mahuad the armed forces enjoyed greater popular support than any other state institution. Ecuador's *dictablanda* or "soft dictatorship" in the 1970s did not feature the torture and disappearances common to the country's Southern Cone neighbors, and the military was quick to return power to civilians. As a result, some citizens view the armed forces as a legitimate guarantor of good governance. After cycling through four presidents in the last five years, Ecuadorans can hardly be blamed for wanting a firm hand at the helm.

ECONOMIC CHECKMATE

President Jamil Mahuad was elected in mid-1998 in a close race amid high hopes that he would restore political stability after the ouster of Bucaram and the controversial interim government of Alarcon. He began well, ending Ecuador's long border war with Peru in just six weeks. Ecuador relinquished its claim to a massive chunk of disputed territory in return for guaranteed access to Amazon River ports that were symbolic of its national identity as an Amazonian country and an outlet for trade. Mahuad would later directly link this peace to his own downfall, saying that by making peace and cutting the military budget, he incurred the wrath of the officer corps.

Mahuad then turned his attention to the beleaguered economy, which was suffering from low oil prices and the damage the weather pattern known as El Niño had caused to Pacific coast agriculture. His policy options were limited by Ecuador's \$16-billion debt that consumed over 40 percent of the country's income. Mahuad made the unpopular decision to cut subsidies for electricity and other areas, but these measures were not nearly enough to bring government expenditures in line with the budget, much less to redress structural deficiencies.

In a misguided endeavor to circumvent corruption in tax collection, Mahuad eliminated the income tax in favor of a 1 percent tax on financial transactions that could be collected by banks. The measure proved disastrous, producing capital flight of some

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$400 million in January 1999. Moreover, it soon became evident that several of Ecuador's main banks were insolvent after offering high-risk loans under lax banking regulations and that the government was being bled dry in an effort to cover depositors. To make matters worse, oil production fell 12 percent in the first quarter of 1999, and the economy shrank by 3.2 percent. Inevitably, the sucre was devalued, falling from about 8,000 to 12,000 sucres to the dollar.

In the face of this national crisis, the governing Popular Democracy (DP) party's working relationship with the opposition Social Christian Party (PSC) came unglued. The PSC refused to renegotiate the government budget to raise corporate taxes or the value-added tax (VAT) even though Ecuador's VAT was the lowest in the region at 10 percent. Instead, the PSC articulated the position of its coastal-based business constituents that the national government in Quito should cut costs by further reducing military expenditures and the government payroll that fed the DP's client base, not by taxing corporations or commerce.

The PSC's fiscal intransigence scotched President Mahuad's efforts to negotiate an IMF agreement and led him to employ one of the few instruments at his disposal to augment government income: raising gasoline prices. But Mahuad's 120 percent fuel price hike provoked a transit strike that brought the capital to a standstill. Indigenous Ecuadorans made common cause with the transportation sector, cutting off highways to the interior; Quito soon suffered from shortages and price gouging. The government retreated, restoring gasoline prices to anachronistic levels reflecting an oil wealth of yesteryear. Social peace was bought at the expense of government solvency.

Fearing a run on the banks, the government froze all dollar deposits and half of all bank deposits in sucres for a year. The measure was deeply resented and would later lead to a corruption investigation of Mahuad on the grounds that he had unconstitutionally confiscated property. The PSC formally ended its flagging legislative alliance with the ruling party, forcing the government to negotiate each item of legislation with a broad array of left-wing and indigenous parties. This cobbled-together coalition introduced an emergency economic package that reinstated the income tax, eliminated the VAT and import duty exemptions, and contemplated additional taxes on luxury vehicles and corporate assets.

Briefly, through May and June of 1999, Ecuador seemed to be getting its house in order. The customs office was returned to civilian control and partially privatized, the government launched a "National Anticorruption Plan," and tax collection improved. President Mahuad announced an international audit of Ecuador's failing banks, promising to close those that could not be salvaged and thus restoring some confidence in the financial system. He also proposed legislation to facilitate privatization, and promised to dedicate the resulting revenues to social development projects.

The IMF was not impressed. Negotiations toward a $400-million agreement that would have brought additional credits totaling $1 billion foundered when the government could not piece together a congressional majority to reform the Deposit Guarantee Agency, through which the government insured all bank deposits. Political tensions ran high throughout July as, once again, government-mandated gasoline price increases sparked transport strikes that were supported by indigenous groups (and cost $20 million per day in lost production). The government called a nationwide state of emergency, but as in March, ultimately retreated by lowering and freezing gasoline prices and announcing a development fund for indigenous Ecuadorans. But these concessions did not persuade the indigenous and left-wing parties to support Mahuad's privatization plans, and Congress rejected Mahuad's proposed privatization legislation.

Some citizens view the armed forces as a legitimate guarantor of good governance.

"The unfortunate events of January 21"

With the Mahuad government in deep trouble, the IMF signed at the end of August the letter of agreement conditional on Ecuador's passage of a viable budget. The government entered protracted negotiations with Congress on a mix of tax increases, hammering out a budget based on a 12 percent VAT along with other tax increases to generate additional revenues. This proved to be too little, too late. In September, Ecuador defaulted on its $5.6 billion in Brady bonds, the first country ever to suspend payments on these United States Treasury–backed bonds, which were conceived by former Secretary of the Treasury Nicholas Brady to address Latin America's debt crisis.

The sucre continued to slide, reaching 25,000 to the dollar by Christmas; the economy shrank 7.3 percent in 1999. Since Mahuad had entered office,

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Ecuadorans had seen their income fall to one-third its previous value, and double-digit inflation had eaten into their buying power still further. The number of poor people more than doubled between 1995 and 1999, growing from 34 percent to 69 percent of the population (the number of the very poor jumped from 2.1 million in 1998 to 4.2 million in 1999). Unemployment doubled in 1999, and 60 percent of welfare recipients reported reducing the number of their daily meals.

With his popularity abysmally low, Mahuad made a last ditch effort to salvage his administration by announcing in January 2000 that Ecuador would dollarize its economy. The proposal went beyond pegging the currency to the dollar or developing a currency board similar to that used in Argentina. Ecuador would instead undertake a full substitution of its currency, using United States dollars for its bills and sucres for its coins (at an exchange rate of 25,000 sucres to the dollar). This meant that the Central Bank would have to relinquish its habit of printing money and forego an independent monetary policy in favor of a stable currency, low inflation, and—hopefully—restored investor confidence.

The proposal fueled speculative pricing and calls for Mahuad's resignation. Indigenous protesters organized by CONAIE marched on the capital, and by the time they reached the Congress building their numbers had swelled to 1,500. Soon they were joined by some 200 uniformed officers, mostly cadets from the military academy, whose presence inspired the congressional guards to surrender the building without a shot. The protesters then captured the Supreme Court building and marched on the presidential palace, which housed the executive offices and was Mahuad's home.

The armed forces informed President Mahuad they could no longer guarantee his safety, and escorted him from the presidential palace to an air base where he stood his ground, refusing either to leave the country or resign. Meanwhile, a triumvirate consisting of an indigenous leader, Antonio Vargas, an armed forces representative, Colonel Lucio Gutiérrez, and a former Supreme Court magistrate, Carlos Solórzano, held power. In an effort to unify its forces and gain control of the situation, the military replaced Gutiérrez with a top officer loyal to the institution, General Carlos Mendoza. Hours later, under intense international pressure, Mendoza abandoned the junta, signaling the military's withdrawal of support and precipitating the coup government's collapse. Vice President Gustavo Noboa was sworn in as president before the military high command, and the Congress met in Guayaquil to dismiss Mahuad on the grounds that he had abandoned his office.

Making grace of necessity, former President Mahuad encouraged his supporters to recognize Gustavo Noboa as president. The international community, which would have been forced to impose economic sanctions on impoverished Ecuador had a military government come to power, breathed a collective sigh of relief; the nations of the Western Hemisphere greeted Noboa's presidency as a constitutional succession rather than an interruption of democratic governance that would have required invocation of OAS resolution 1080, which calls for an emergency meeting of OAS foreign ministers if an irregular interruption of democratic governance occurs. Ecuadorans rapidly revised their discourse, denying that a coup had in fact taken place and referring simply to "the unfortunate events of January 21." Although some military leaders would lose their jobs, an amnesty dispensed with any deeper repercussions. Overall, the armed forces lost prestige, but some Ecuadorans credited the military with sacrificing senior officers to reunify its forces and remove an unacceptable indigenous rebel leadership. Few lamented President Mahuad's premature departure since many thought he had become increasingly ineffective. Democracy promises fair process but not good government; Ecuadorans suffering from *desencanto* or "disenchantment" with democracy reversed the principle and let the ends justify the means.

GETTING THE ECONOMY BACK ON TRACK

Gustavo Noboa did not fit the caudillo profile of the man on horseback arriving to save the nation in its hour of need. A former university professor rather than a professional politician, Noboa was personable and avuncular. He was less beholden to the DP and its funders than Mahuad, and he was perceived as honest. Moreover, he was from Guayaquil, and although he could not count on the support of the PSC, his coastal origins brought him communications channels and a measure of tolerance.

In a bold decision, Noboa declared he would proceed with dollarization and privatization. CONAIE remained opposed to these policies and gave him six months to respond to its demands to end privatization and dollarization or face renewed protests. The prospects looked grim.

Yet within months Noboa had succeeded where Mahuad had failed, constructing a temporary leg-

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islative alliance to pass omnibus legislation to enable privatization. In April the government signed a three-year agreement with the IMF to release $2 billion in credits. In return, the government pledged to reform the tax system and social security and improve labor flexibility. In addition, government representatives began visiting indigenous communities to better understand their needs and develop a response, bypassing indigenous leaders in Quito who had suspended dialogue with the new administration.

When the government raised fuel prices in June, the expected protests never materialized, in contrast to President Mahuad's experience the previous year. In part this was because the increases had a progressive design, forcing owners of private luxury vehicles to bear the largest increases while keeping diesel-fuel price increases small and holding cooking-gas prices steady. Strategic considerations may also have helped. The government voluntarily raised prices ahead of the IMF schedule, catching potential protesters unprepared.

In August, partisan politics again paralyzed the legislative process, this time in a dispute over who would lead Congress. An agreement had been struck by which a PSC deputy would succeed Juan José Pons, the DP president of the Congress who had held that post since Mahuad's election. With the succession, the DP accepted the PSC's right to lead the legislature, but rejected its candidate for the post. What ensued was a feud that split Congress, with the coastal PSC and several highland parties recognizing separate legislative bodies. The dispute did not break down cleanly along geographic lines, however, since smaller parties on the coast conspired with those in the highlands to work the situation to their advantage, which eventually allowed a solution to emerge.

The crisis continued for weeks as the clock ticked on key items of legislation that had been introduced into the legislature, including a bill that would put in place needed elements to proceed with privatization of the telephone and electric companies. Without legislative action bills become law by default but then lack legitimacy, which only leads to judicial appeals. President Noboa was pressured to intervene to help settle the dispute, a prickly prospect he abandoned after early overtures were rebuffed. Eventually the costs of not meeting grew high enough that deputies on both sides cut their losses and returned to Congress under the leadership of a virtual unknown, Hugo Quevedo, who served despite a Supreme Court case appealing his election. The deputies promptly set about remedying the privatization legislation's defects. In a marked shift from the Mahuad period, partisan politics in the legislature had not derailed Noboa's presidency or the controversial items on his agenda.

Indigenous protest politics also failed to materialize. By the time six months had passed and CONAIE called a protest, turnout was low, suggesting the social dynamics behind the coup had changed. Indigenous citizens still had unmet demands, but the communities had gained the government's attention and also won a substantial number of mayoral positions in local elections. Prospects for resolving their problems without mass action were improved. Indigenous citizens were also distrustful of the military after its perceived betrayal of the coup government, and knew that street politics was unlikely to succeed without the military's tacit support. The structure of opportunities shapes social movements, and in Ecuador those opportunities had shifted. Internal cohesion also affects whether such movements prosper, and CONAIE's leaders have not always agreed among themselves. In September electoral authorities revealed that CONAIE had submitted numerous falsified signatures in its bid to force a nationwide referendum on whether to proceed with privatization and dollarization, and whether to support autonomy for the provinces. Together with the poor turnout for the strike, this scandal left Vargas discredited, and CONAIE opted to reorganize its leadership.

Meanwhile, the economic crisis was less acute. Although the annual inflation rate for 2000 topped 90 percent, it was headed in the right direction, falling from 14.3 percent in January to 1.4 percent in August; this especially helped the indigenous, since they were disproportionately poor. By the time dollarization was completed on September 9, 2000, the number of Quito residents who approved had risen to 55 percent, and business confidence levels were rising apace. With oil prices up from an average $11 a barrel in 1998 to $25 in 2000, the economy was expected to register positive growth. Tensions between Ecuador's rival regions have tended to lessen during times of plenty, and oil wealth may buy social peace for the short term, although congressional leaders fear that the 2001 budget estimate of $20 a barrel may be high and accuse the government of overestimating the receipts from domestic fuel sales (oil receipts are expected to provide nearly half of all state revenues in 2001).

Ecuador is not yet out of the economic woods. Congress remains hostile to the government and

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claims that President Noboa's 2001 budget is out of balance and will result in significant shortfalls. Congress is also unwilling to go along with President Noboa's pledge to the IMF that Ecuador will raise the VAT once again to 15 percent, and executive-legislative gridlock looms over this issue. In December the constitutional tribunal delivered Noboa a major setback, ruling that a large number of articles in the proposed privatization law were unconstitutional.

Structural problems such as oil dependence are often worsened by politics. Political and personal rivalries and corruption delayed construction of a heavy crude-oil pipeline for nine years. It remains the best hope for the country, but the Noboa government's efforts to evaluate proposals for the pipeline have run into trouble with the withdrawal of one of the two bidders, who claimed the rules of the game had changed in midstream. Such incidents are read within the context of highly publicized past cases in which foreign investors found their contracts reinterpreted by Ecuadoran courts. Foreign investors are uncertain that the rule of law applies in Ecuador. In the end, the lack of democratic consolidation limits investment, and therefore restricts the growth and employment Ecuador badly needs.

CENTRIFUGAL POLITICS

One recent proposal for breaking the cycle of partisanship and political paralysis is to increase fiscal and administrative autonomy for the provinces. The hope is that decentralization will turn Ecuador's ethnic and geographic divisions into an asset by allowing the administration of government services closer to home, thereby empowering local citizenry to detect corruption and incompetence and hold provincial leaders accountable. But will autonomy reformulate politics to reduce the tensions around those cleavages, or will it simply fragment the nation beyond repair?

Just two days after the coup, the province of Guayas held a nonbinding referendum on autonomy, meaning fiscal and administrative decentralization. Citizens voted overwhelmingly to retain half of local taxes in the province. The vote signaled the coast's growing frustration with Quito's administration. That it was more than a referendum on the Mahuad presidency is evident from the timing: the referendum went forward after the coup.

Other provinces have since followed suit, notably the coastal provinces of El Oro, Manabí, and Los Ríos. The remaining coastal province, Esmeraldas, is divided on the autonomy issue and hesitant to call a referendum. The choice it makes will matter in part because Esmeraldas is home to Ecuador's refineries and the port facility through which oil is exported. The idea of autonomy was also popular among some indigenous peoples in the highlands, since they are more likely to exert influence on provincial governments than on the national level. A referendum went forward in the province of Sucumbíos, which borders Colombia and carries special salience for the military due to fears that the massive American aid package offered to Colombia will result in spillover of the guerrilla war onto Ecuadoran soil (in December, two bombing attacks on Ecuador's oil pipeline in Sucumbíos killed 15 people and caused the loss of 3,000 barrels of oil; the attacks were variously blamed on Colombian guerrillas or paramilitary groups, though some suspect dissident Ecuadoran military forces). Thus autonomy expresses both the geographic and the ethnic cleavages that have shaped Ecuador's politics.

Autonomy will require constitutional reform through a referendum, and the government is debating whether to hold a "national consultation" in 2001. CONAM, the state modernization agency, has drafted an autonomy law drawing on the Spanish model, and the bill is expected to come under final debate in the spring. Whether and how autonomy will be implemented remains a question for the future. Key issues include the role of the central government in redistributing wealth from richer to poorer provinces, and the capacity of provincial governments to supply services that are currently the national government's responsibility. The autonomy law must deal with administrative and fiscal autonomy, and also implies reform of the electoral law, since the president currently appoints provincial governors. Other issues include redistribution of taxes and whether legislative powers must also be granted to the provinces. The voluntary basis of autonomy implies that some provinces may prefer to retain their current relationship with the central government, leading to a mixed system whose implementation could be highly complex.

Past efforts have foundered, but there is reason to suppose that this time the pressures for autonomy will prevail. The military government that came to power through a coup in 1972 solidified the centralized state. That government compressed local taxes and the oil boom profits into a single fund to be redistributed by the national government. But subsequent development has disrupted

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traditional migration patterns from the highlands to the coast, building provincial identities and self-sufficiency and linking provinces directly to the international economy while weakening interregional communication and trade. At the same time corruption has mushroomed, so that the centralized system designed to protect poor provinces and forge a nation instead lines the pockets of the political class. Without ever having arrived at an understanding of itself as a nation, Ecuador now proposes to transform that weakness into a strength by celebrating provincial identities and harnessing local initiative for development. One fact that has not changed is that the military's approval of autonomy plans will be required. Officers continue to adhere to a role as guardians of the state and are likely to balk at any proposal they believe might fracture the nation-state.

Decentralization could improve accountability and disempower the special interests that benefit from clientelist linkages, ironically rescuing the national interest from obscurity by limiting the central government's scope of authority to such fields as national security, foreign policy, and management of the national debt. For the moment, only Guayas and Pichincha are economically viable, and 80 percent of the nation's wealth lies in the hands of the 29 percent of the population living in the cities of Guayaquil and Quito. But the renewed flow of oil revenues may provide the surplus required to supersede their rivalry and permit a recrafting of the old territorial pact that centered on these cities' dual hegemony.

Partisan motives reflective of geographic and ethnic cleavages may serve in this instance to reconfigure political competition in productive ways. Reforms designed to empower the provinces could in fact break down the bipolar geographic and ethnic cleavages that have framed Ecuadoran politics by taking the focus off the *blanco mestizo* government in Quito. Electoral reforms could refocus party politics on local prizes, deemphasizing the presidency. Local administrators will have to bear the blame if they fail to deliver services that have been devolved to the provincial level. And momentarily, at least, petrodollars could grease the system, eliminating the tough choices that invite legislative gridlock.

All this might make democratic consolidation a more plausible scenario, but still one that will require thoughtful political management amid deep structural constraints. The actions of individual citizens, including astute politicians, can build democracy—even where conditions make it seem improbable. President Gustavo Noboa had greatness thrust upon him. He has risen to the occasion, bringing a measure of stability to Ecuador. However, the mere duration of democratic institutions and processes should not be mistaken for democratic consolidation. On that score, Ecuador has far to go, and the president will need enlightened allies to help Ecuadorans envision themselves as one nation as they modernize and restructure the state. ■

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