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WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN AND MAYBE WAS: Thoughts on the Alleged Coup in the “New” Ecuador

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Rafael Correa’s coming to power in 2006 as President of the Republic of Ecuador was briefly seen as the beginning of a new stage of significant changes and as holding out the promise of a “new” Ecuador. This was a desire that the citizens would uphold in May 2009 when Correa achieved reelection with over fifty per cent of the votes in the first round – thereby making a second round unnecessary – a feat that was without parallel in more than three decades. No less important, at the time, was the fact that Rafael Correa had also achieved something that none of his seven predecessors had managed: he had completed his mandate. Yet the promise of this “new” Ecuador can be questioned to the extent that some things do not seem to have changed much. Among them is the critical, unstable situation of the national economy, which is aggravated by the dwindling remittances being sent back by emigrants, the drop in crude oil prices and lack of investment in the country. Factors like the absence of clear alternatives or not enjoying access to external finance (since Ecuador defaulted on its foreign debt in 2008) forced Correa to implement such “solutions” as the Public Finance Law and the Public Service Law, the latter giving rise to the police protests on 30 September this year. The former gives him greater powers for managing the economy and swelling State debts while the latter gives him more room for manoeuvre in holding down the salaries of a large part of the public service which, paradoxically, his own government had increased.

Neither is there any change in the fact that Ecuadorian institutional stability frequently continues to be determined in the streets of the cities like the capital, and that the country has been overly dependent on the stances taken by certain groups and actors and their “unforeseeable” responses without these being properly channelled by means of democratically established procedures. Particularly noticeable is the key role – whether through action or inaction – still played by the Armed Forces. Until now, the Army has been both mere observer (in the case of Abdalá Bucaram and Lucio Gutiérrez) and ally (against Jamil Mahuad) in the series of events that put an end to the mandates of eight presidents in the ten years subsequent to 1997. On this most recent occasion, the Army’s action in coming out to

rescue Correa might be seen as an exception, always bearing in mind that its tardy response and the fissures at its core could suggest that such exceptionality might be short-lived if similar events occur in the not-too-distant future.

At the same time, no great changes are visible in the case of the bodies of representation and dialogue at the national level. For example, the Ecuadorian Parliament is still a clear paradigm of national fragmentation, of the bipolarity between Sierra (mountain) and Costa (coast), which is to say between Quito and Guayaquil, and of the local particularisms that obstruct consensus and the construction of a solid agenda working for the development of the country as a whole. On the contrary, the incumbent President is at the centre of a stage where he does not have the backing of any stable majorities or of other political forces to approve his projects. This situation plays a large part in forcing the formulation of “solutions” that, while they may be valid and legitimate, cannot muster up the minimum of necessary support and, accordingly, become new focal points of tension. The Public Service Law and the police uprising that followed it might be considered good examples of this.

Unlike other occasions, Correa’s “citizens’ revolution” continues to enjoy widespread popular support as was demonstrated when government supporters marched to the hospital where their leader was being held. Such support is partly a logical response to Correa’s efforts to deal with some of the country’s historic deficits. Increased spending on education, health and infrastructure since Correa came to power has paid very high dividends for the president. So, too, has the reduction of poverty, which today affects some 16% of the population in comparison with 40% a decade ago. Again, his government has set up special funds for financing small businesses and millions of hectares of land have been expropriated to be handed over to rural populations as part of a plan for self-sufficiency in food production. Despite these advances, citizen support is not invariable and can swiftly ebb away as a result of “specific” detonators, such as those that led to the recent police uprising.

Besides the virtues that one may directly attribute to Correa and his management of things to the present, he has also been favoured by the political environment and circumstances: the crisis affecting the traditional parties and the fact that the citizens were fed up with the host of candidatures devoid of structure and empty of programmatic content have helped his ascent. Might one consider that this set of dynamics, circumstances, political junctures and instability led to an attempted coup? The prevailing confusion makes it difficult to answer this question right now. In fact, the only people who might have an answer are its supposed instigators if, indeed, their project went beyond some kind of visceral expression of grievance. For the moment, the only thing that one can be sure of is the existence of recordings of death threats that were part and parcel of the toll of aggressions, wounded and dead left in the wake of the events and that are perhaps the tangible side of both the sudden escalation of tension and the precision of a much more complex, premeditated plot. The most sensible approach, even at the risk of being wrong, is to see the twelve hours of crisis that hit Quito in particular as being explained by a twofold set of dynamics. First, are the effects of longstanding, interrelated and as yet unresolved problems. Second, is the combination of a series of follies, miscalculations and ambiguities, ranging from erroneous interpretations of the legal framework, to the government’s lack of clarity about its initiatives, through to – perhaps the most serious of all the factors – Correa’s way of dealing with the crisis, which was as personalist as it was reckless and, in view of the results, of questionable efficacy. I imagine that we probably wouldn’t be talking about an “alleged coup”, deaths, or conspiracies if the President of the Republic had simply chosen a different course of action. Whether it really was an attempted coup or not, the events have shown that

Correa is not exempt from the tremors that come with occupying the seat of the President of Ecuador. Perhaps these twelve hours have merely been an isolated warning. Perhaps they are the visible part of unresolved structural problems that are dividing the country and that could lead to more serious episodes in the quite near future unless coherent, properly agreed-upon solutions are reached.

The question now being formulated by many analysts is whether President Correa has come out of this episode stronger or if, on the contrary, his government will keep displaying signs of weakness. Once again, perhaps the best way of responding is not to answer the question directly but to ponder whether the strength of Correa's government will depend on its ability in confronting the pending issues and reconciling interests that require action that is at once judicious and immediate. Among these are designing strategies that would make it possible to overcome excessive dependence on oil and remittances, to achieve better levels of cohesion and social equality, and to maintain the validity of democratic institutional forms as a way of managing conflicts and tensions. The horizons are clear and always have been in the "old" Ecuador. The country's most recent history bears this out. The challenge for the "new" Ecuador, just as it was for the "old" one, goes beyond a simple diagnosis of needs and goals to move into the urgency of outlining the most appropriate strategy for accomplishing them.