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Ecuador: The Continuing Challenge of Democratic Consolidation and Civil-Military Relations

Strategic Insights, Volume V, Issue 2 (February 2006)

by [Thomas C. Bruneau](#)[1]

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Introduction

Each country of the Andean Region—Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela—faces its own particular set of challenges and problems. There is, however, a common set of challenges which include consolidating and deepening democratic institutions and practice, the cultivation or transit of illegal drugs, uncontrolled spaces inviting establishment of terrorist networks, and problematic relations between the armed forces and civilian government. While Ecuador is the smallest of these five countries, it embodies all of the region's problems.

In this short essay, I will center the discussion of these problems around a focus on civil-military relations as both a cause and effect of other issues and challenges. Although Ecuador transitioned from military to civilian rule in 1979 after eight years of military governments, because of both the legacy of previous military rule and ongoing political instability, the military is periodically drawn into the maelstrom of politics. However, the institution remains unable to reform key structures, including the National Security Council, the peak intelligence organizations, and various other structures and legal processes, nor can it be utilized effectively against the regional, non-traditional, threats of illegal drugs and terrorism.

Regionalism and Political Paralysis

Much of the political history of independent Ecuador can be explained by reference to the dynamic that originates in the political bargain arising from the need to balance the competing economic and political interests of the coast and the sierra. From colonial times, the competition and conflict between the coast, centered in Guayaquil, and the capital of the later independent republic, Quito, resulted in a set of economic and political compromises and understandings that has ultimately resulted in the weakening of the capacity of the central government to govern.[2]

This is manifested in all realms, from economic arrangements, local and regional governmental structures, and a political party system that is regionally based and operates on regional dynamics. The result of this set of understandings and arrangements has been a tendency towards political paralysis.

For example, the four major political parties are split half and half between the coast and the sierra, and from this core basis the remaining political parties are equally disaggregated. This lack of integration follows through in the central political institutions, to include the executive and the judiciary, with the result that barring agreement or consensus, demanding a very high level of negotiations, they do not function effectively. Indeed, based on the demands of ongoing negotiations, virtually all aspects of government, running through the judiciary and the executive, are highly politicized.

With the coming into production of the oil fields in the Amazon region in the early 1970s, the problems, if anything, became more serious. While on the one hand the dramatic increase in funds becoming available allowed the government in Quito to expand in size and penetration. But, it also allowed the central government to go into serious debt on the basis of overoptimistic expectations of the influx of resources. Thus, paradoxically the increased resources didn't strengthen the national government, but instead—ironically, and consistent with the previous institutional arrangements—weakened it. And, the government in Quito, unwilling and probably unable to respond due to its need for resources, has so far rejected the demands for increased autonomy and resources for the two Amazon provinces of Sucumbios and Orellana, thereby resulting in escalating demands for autonomy and even violence. The disturbances in the oil-producing region in August 2005 caused a loss of \$84 million just for Petroecuador.[3]

Due in large part to the political bargain keeping the central state weak, and aggravated by foreign indebtedness exacerbated by rising expectations over petroleum wealth, Ecuador suffered an extremely serious economic “meltdown” in 1999—causing serious social and political disruption. The banking system was intervened by the government, bank accounts were frozen, and large sectors of the population were seriously hurt. If there weren't already enough economic reason to leave, following this economic disaster a very large number of people—500,000 or four percent of the population—had already left five years ago, mainly to Spain and the United States, with the pace if anything increasing since then.[4]

The political outcome was also serious in that President Jamil Mahuad, having taken office as president in August 1998, was forced to resign in January 2000. The election of Mahuad had followed 18 months of an interim government under Fabian Alarcon, as the then-elected president, Abdala Bucaram, was removed by the congress in February 1997—a mere six months after his election. It was alleged when removing him that he was both mentally unfit and had misappropriated \$90 million of public funds.[5]

Impediments to Democratic Consolidation

The political transition from military to civilian rule in 1979 has yet to result in democratic consolidation. If—as the general consensus in comparative politics understands political consolidation as the acceptance of the democratic institutions and process as “the only game in town”—this is clearly not the case for Ecuador. By observing the behavior of the elite and talking with some of them, it is clear to me that they have not embraced democracy, and vast majority of the population are apathetic.[6] As can be seen in [Table 1](#), between the transition in 1979 and 2005, three democratically elected presidents concluded their terms of office, Jaime Roldos died accidentally, and three presidents were forced out of office. President Mahuad's resignation in January 2000 during the economic meltdown was in response to the catalytic events combining an insurrection by indigenous peoples and an attempted coup by a sector of the armed forces.

Table 1: Ecuador Governments, 1979-2001

Period	President	Acceded to office through	Departure from Office
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Aug 79-May 81	Jaime Roldos	Election	Accidental death
May 81-Aug 84	Oswaldo Hurtado	Vice President, assumed office	Term concluded
Aug 84-Aug 88	Leon Febres Cordero		Term concluded
Aug 88-Aug 92	Rodrigo Borja	Election	Term concluded
Aug 92-Aug 96	Sixto Duran Ballen	Election	Term concluded
Aug 96-Feb 97	Abdala Bucaram	Election	Removed by Congress
Feb 97-Aug 98	Fabian Alarcon	Designation by Congress	Term concluded
Aug 98-Jan 00	Jamil Mahuad	Election	Resigned
Jan 00-present	Gustavo Noboa	Vice President, assumed office	

One of those involved in the coup attempt was Colonel Lucio Gutierrez, who later founded his own political party and was democratically elected president in late 2002, and assumed office on January 15, 2003. President Gutierrez was elected on a leftist platform, with support from the lower classes and indigenous voters, but without the support of any of the four traditional parties. His personal party, the PSP, lost the support of the Pachakutik indigenous party in August 2003, leaving it with only 6 seats in the 100 member congress. By November 2004 he had formed a new coalition with support from his old political enemies, Bucaram's Roldosista Party (PRE), even allowing the exiled Abdala Bucaran to return to Ecuador, and Alvaro Noboa's National Action Institutional Renewal Party (PRIAN), which necessitated very serious compromises alienating other sectors of the population.

In seeking to secure an extremely tenuous and contradictory political base, in the late Fall of 2004 President Gutierrez dissolved the Supreme Court in direct violation of the Constitution, and other judicial and executive bodies, and then staffed them with his political cronies. He also generally utilized the state, its structures and resources, for personal gain and for the benefit of friends and relatives. Thus, rather than seeking to consolidate the democracy which brought him into power, despite his previous involvement in the coup attempt in January 2000, he accelerated its continuing decomposition and deconsolidation.

At that time, in early 2005, in response to this deconsolidation and shameless abuse of power and corruption, there emerged a whole new phenomenon in Ecuador. The emergence of the "forajidas", or bandits, as President Gutierrez termed them, in Quito beginning on April 13, 2005 was an important series of events and processes indicating that the people of Quito were finally and totally fed up with not only President Gutierrez and his government, but also the total lack of credibility of the political parties and their leaders. They took action into their own hands during late April until mid-May 2005 as they appeared again and again on the streets of Quito demonstrating their total disgust with the political game as played by the parties and their leaders.

The final decision to depose President Gutierrez was made in the Congress where, in a special session on April 20, 2005, the political parties opposed to him voted 62 to 0, in the 100 member unicameral Congress, to declare the presidency vacant on charges that the president had “abandoned his post” even though Gutierrez was in the presidential palace issuing statements that he would not resign. This ploy was similar to how President Abdala Bucaran was deposed in 1997, for “mental incapacity.” Just after to the vote in the Congress, Admiral Victor Hugo Rosero, head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, announced that the armed forces formally withdrew their support from President Gutierrez.[7]

What emerged, in short, was a bizarre mixture of the old, the political deals and maneuverings of the political parties, where all revolves around personalities and economic gain, along with popular and totally unstructured political mobilization on the streets—where the crowds estimated to total 50,000 were also clamoring for the dissolution of Congress—yet meeting once again with another traditional element which was the armed forces. In the same model as Mahuad who was forced to resign in January 2000 after an attempted coup by a military which would no longer support him, so it was on April 20th when the Joint Chiefs of Staff withdrew support from President Gutierrez and he had no option but to flee the country since the attorney general issued an arrest warrant for him.

There was at this time, however, a new and more ominous dimension: a serious discussion within the military to create a civil-military group, or junta, to rule rather than turning over the government, as stipulated in the constitution, to the vice president. The dynamics involved in the removal of Gutierrez, and finally his replacement by Vice President Alfredo Palacios Gonzales, were very complicated. During at least five hours Palacios was without military protection, and was threatened by an unruly mob.[8] There was considerable give and take on this, and according to well-placed observers, it was resolved only when foreign governments made it clear that this would be unacceptable in view of the commitment to democracy by important allies and the OAS.

The Continuing Vicious Circle of Illegitimacy and Political Paralysis

With the background described above, especially that concerning the thinly veiled illegitimate actions in overthrowing three democratically elected presidents in the past eight years in which the armed forces were involved, it is no surprise that there is something of a vicious circle of illegitimate and self-perpetuating behavior. One of the local newspapers, the *Hoy*, includes daily on page 3a, clocks keeping track of the number of days, weeks, and months since the judicial components of the state had stopped functioning. Ecuador currently lacks the legal institutions to establish legitimate government processes. The government of President Palacios, arising as it did from the overthrow of President Gutierrez, and with elections scheduled for late 2006, is, not surprisingly, facing serious challenges. In reviewing the change of ministers, it seems obvious that most political energy is utilized in just keeping the ship of state afloat, and not in governing. In order to attempt to establish a legitimate basis, the government has put forth a plan for a national referendum on a new constitution.

But, during the week of October 17th, one of the legal institutions that continued functioning, the Electoral Tribunal, found that it was not constitutional. Even in early 2006, they are still working on the instruments, such as elections and laws, whereby some democratic institutionalization can be achieved. The institutions have been unable to reform key structures as they are not operating, since no board of directors and/or chief executive has been designated. This is the case of the Attorney General, the Constitutional Tribunal, and until just recently the Supreme Court. In short, Ecuador is currently caught in a vicious circle that is not increasing legitimacy of the democratic government, but probably just the opposite. In this situation of institutional disintegration, the personal power of Leon Febres Cordero, historic leader of the Social Christian Party and President from 1984 to 1988, looms large. He wields tremendous power in the judicial system

and to a great extent in the legislature. He is frequently referred to, even in public, as “el dueño del país”—or owner of the country.[9]

Civil-Military Relations in the Context of Governmental Instability

The armed forces led the transition to civilian government in 1979, and there are minimal indications today that either the vast majority of the armed forces or the people of Ecuador want them back in power. Even so, in addition to the severe economic and political problems, there are also a series of very serious challenges regarding the armed forces and national security and defense. The Ecuador armed forces acquitted themselves well in the border conflict with Peru in 1995. That issue was apparently fully resolved through negotiations in 1998. Today, in the context of non-traditional threats, things are not nearly so clear or positive. First of all, without the traditional territorial defense threat, there is a real question about their proper roles and missions.

Several problems arise from this fact. First, they no longer receive a percentage of the funds from the sale of petroleum. Second, what they are faced with are the very complex and serious set of challenges that arise from their location bordering on Colombia with great implications on two issues. Ecuador serves as an avenue and a warehouse for drugs. This can only make for huge challenges in terms of how to size and situate the forces and keep them honest. Even more importantly, whereas in Colombia, and Peru with Sendero Luminoso, drugs are one of the main resources to fund the terrorism of all three of the insurgent groups—FARC, ELN, and AUC, in Ecuador there is no public willingness to recognize the likelihood that at least the FARC might be doing the same on the Ecuador side of the border as on the Colombian side. This despite the Ecuadoran military's admission in 2003 that the FARC were using their territory as a place to rest and in January an important FARC leader, Simon Trinidad, was captured in Quito. That is, Ecuador is unwilling to either define the FARC as a terrorist organization or to be publicly supportive of Colombia in its fight against the FARC and the other two groups. This issue became very polemic in mid-2005 following an attack by the FARC on a Colombian army base in Teteye, near the Ecuadorian border, killing 22 soldiers. President Uribe alleged that the perpetrators had set out from Ecuador, and called on the government to exercise tighter control over the border, and even proposed carrying out joint counterinsurgency actions.[10]

There are several reasons for the unwillingness to become involved in counterterrorist operations, and the most important is the calculation that if Ecuador were to define the FARC as terrorists, then they might become targets of their attacks. Then too, there is no consensus in Ecuador, and probably elsewhere in the region, that Colombia will be able to beat the FARC. So, although there are reports in the media about attacks and violence on the Northern border, government reaction has been to temporize. There are just too many factors involved, including the domestic politics of Colombia and U.S. policy in the region. Thus, while at least in the long run, the security of Ecuador depends on the security of Colombia, there is little beyond civil and military diplomacy that Ecuador can do to increase the security of the latter.[11]

Civil-military relations in terms of both studies and influence by civilians in issues of national security and defense are fairly rudimentary in Ecuador. While there are probably a half dozen academic experts interested in these themes, they are located in different institutions and cooperation is slight.[12] The civilians, then, not in government are poorly situated to influence policy. Even more important, the engagement by civilians in the legislature, executive, and interest groups is minimal. As one of the academic experts states: “In any case the politicians accept that there is a quid pro quo in this arrangement [of military autonomy]: the military does not involve itself in the areas reserved for civilian power, and the civilians leave the military in peace in their areas of putative professional ‘expertise’.”[13]

In short, civil-military relations in Ecuador, the relations of power between civilian officials and military officers, are distant. The civilians control the military only in the last instances; for the

President, in terms of nominations and retirements; for the legislature in terms of budgets. And, to stress what is probably already obvious, the control is often used for political purposes. For example, in order to solidify his political base in the armed forces, and weaken his enemies, President Lucio Gutierrez diminished the size of the General and Admirals Council from 46 to 29 members in 2003, and saw to the promotion of those officers he considered loyal to him during the next year.^[14] The latter could also be in terms of laws and oversight. The congress has not passed any laws regarding the armed forces since the new constitution was passed in 1998. And, from what I can determine, they have no interest in oversight nor the staff or expertise to exercise it if there were such interest.

The most prominent role of the armed forces in the context of the institutional disintegration of the political system has been to support, or finally to no longer support, the elected political leader. This happened during the ousting of Presidents Bucaram and Mahuad, and finally it also happened with President Gutierrez.^[15] According to one of the most respected political analysts in Ecuador, who also researches on the armed forces, the Ecuadorian armed forces are the most active politically in the region. They are legitimate in the eyes of the population due to both their past "developmentalist" works as well as in contrast to the disoriented or goal-less civilian leaders. According to Bonilla, the armed forces, even after the ousting of Mahuad, have more prestige than even the Catholic Church or the media.^[16]

Despite the prestige of the armed forces in comparison to others, they still have a huge problem in that they really can't deal with the biggest, and most obvious, security challenge—terrorism—and at the same time are sucked into politics. President Lucio Gutierrez, although coming from the military, did little to develop or strengthen its institutions. In fact he personalized it through appointments of friends regardless of competence. And, the manner in which he was ousted just further weakened it, and kept it involved in politics. Since the armed forces were known to be deliberating on whether to allow Vice President Palacios to assume the presidency or not, and didn't protect him from the crowds, he—not surprisingly—changed out the military high command shortly after taking office. Since his ouster there have been internal efforts in the military to reform and restructure.

But now—since September of 2005, and mainly under the leadership of Minister of Defense Oswaldo Jarrin—the forces are making major efforts to establish the bases for restructuring and modernizing.^[17] If they are able to make these reforms, they will be unique among state structures in breaking out of the archaic, semi-legal, and all but static morass of the past.^[18]

Conclusion

Ecuador is a challenged—or as some have said, tumultuous—democracy in that while the military has not controlled the government since 1979, the political institutions of a civilian-led democracy are extremely weak and highly personalized. Consequently, democratically elected presidents are periodically forced from office, and the military is pulled in to play a passive or complicit role in what are clearly unconstitutional changes of power.

Meanwhile, the armed forces are unable to respond to—or for that matter even clearly define—what for many is the most obvious threat, which is drug-financed terrorist organizations. Before and after the most recent change of government, on April 20, 2005, large sectors of the population, mainly in Quito, became mobilized to demand both a change of government and an end to the personalized and self-serving system of political patronage.

Many of the legal control mechanisms of a democracy are, as of early 2006, still not in place—and it appears likely that for the rest of this year, until the elections in October, we'll see more of the same.

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References

1. The opinions expressed in this article are my own and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Navy or U.S. Government. The research for the article was conducted in Ecuador during two visits there, during the period of July to September 2005, and ongoing communications with colleagues in Ecuador since that time. I want to thank in particular the faculty at FLACSO, Quito, including Oswaldo Jarrin, for providing me with insights and materials that have proved invaluable.
2. This argument is nicely summarized in Paul Beckerman, "Longer-Term Origins of Ecuador's 'Predollarization' Crisis," in Paul Beckerman and Andres Solimano, eds., *Crisis and Dollarization in Ecuador: Stability, Growth, and Social Equity* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2002). See especially 19-22.
3. *Analisis Semanal*, October 14, 2005, 481. Overall, in mid-2005 petroleum constituted 60% of total exports from Ecuador, followed at a distance by exports from the coast including bananas (12%) and shrimp (5%). *Analisis Semanal* September 2, 2005, 420.
4. Judith A. Gentleman, *The Regional Security Crisis in the Andes: Patterns of State Response* (Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2001), 17. On the social impact of the crisis see Maria Correia, "Gender Dimensions of Vulnerability to Exogenous Shocks: The Case of Ecuador," in Beckerman and Solimano, *Op. Cit.*, 177-215.
5. See Clare Ribando, *Ecuador: Political and Economic Situation and U.S. Relations*, Congressional Research Service, Report for Congress, January 11, 2005, 2.
6. In support of this pessimistic assessment see also the extremely critical article by ex-president Osvaldo Hurtado, "Ecuadorian democracy's governability problems," *Diplomacia, estrategia, politica* (3): April/June 2005, 80-92. Probably classic by now on "the only game in town" is Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), especially 5-7. For a comprehensive study on the transition from military rule see Anita Isaacs, *Military Rule and Transition in Ecuador, 1972-92* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993). For a useful series of studies on the political institutions and culture in contemporary Ecuador see Felipe Burbano de Lara, ed., *Democracia, gobernabilidad y cultura politica* (Quito: FLACSO, 2003).
7. See for example, Fausto Jaramillo Yerovi, *La noche de las Cacerolas* (Guayaquil: Editorial Edino, 2005), 130.
8. Among other sources, see Mario Ramos, *La rebellion forajida* (Quito: Editorial Ecuador, 2005), 75-77.
9. In addition to what people are saying in Ecuador, see also the reporting by Hal Weitzman in *The Financial Times*, August 10, 2005 referring to Febres Cordero in precisely these terms.

10. See report by Kintto Lucas, *IPS-Inter Press Service*, July 7, 2005. The Minister of Defense, General Oswaldo Jarrin, (Ecuadoran Army, Ret.), stated on August 30, 2005 at a CCMR public seminar in Quito that whereas the Colombian Government under President Uribe requested in a meeting of foreign and defense ministers in March 2003 that the Ecuadoran Government declare that FARC is a terrorist organization, the Ecuadoran Government refused. President Uribe responded critically to these remarks on September 3rd, indicating that by any definition the FARC are terrorists. See *El Tiempo*, September 3, 2005.
11. General Jarrin, *Ibid.*, regarding security of Ecuador and of Colombia.
12. An effort to promote interest and cooperation is the newsletter from the Catholic University in Quito, *Democracia, Seguridad y Defensa*.
13. Fernando Bustamante, "Las Dificultades de la Participacion Civil en la Formulacion de Politicas de Defensa en el Ecuador," *Mimeo*, Quito, FLACSO, May 2002, 12.
14. On the numbers and the politicization see Mario Ramos, *La rebellion forajida*, 70-3. On the problems in the armed forces see also Oswaldo Jarrin R., "Institucion military: conflicto, crisis, conflicto," *Quantum Ano 5* (9): July 15, 2005.
15. For information and a discussion see Fausto Jaramillo Yerovi, *La noche de las Cacerolas*, 17.
16. See the very credible and far-reaching analysis by Adrian Bonilla, "Las fuerzas armadas ecuatorianas y su contexto politico," in Jose A. Olmeda, ed., *Democracias Fragiles: Las Relaciones Civiles-Militares en el Mundo Iberoamericano* (Valencia: Tirant lo Blanch, 2005), 687-720.
17. These themes receive extensive attention in the media. See for example, *El Universo*, December 14, 2005.
18. For more on the problems of the state, politics, and society see Hurtado, *Op. Cit.*, 84-92.