

served as Interim President for 15-months after the Supreme Court rejected arguments by then-Vice President Arteaga to fill the vacancy. New elections, deemed to be “free and fair” by international observers, were held in July 1998. However, the winner of this election, Jamil Mahuad, was subsequently ousted in a military coup in January 2000.

Severe economic crises have combined with weak democratic institutions to produce repeated government crises in recent years. Efforts by President Mahuad to stabilize the economy triggered 1,500 Amerindian activists and 200 uniformed officers to take to the streets on 21 January 2000. This political demonstration against the Government triggered massive street protests. When the military informed President Mahuad that it could no longer secure his safety, he vacated his office. A military-civilian junta attempted to assume control of the government but quickly fell apart after the military withdrew its support. However, instead of allowing President Mahuad to resume his position of power, the military swore in Vice President Gustavo Noboa Bejarano as the new president. While this is not a coup in the traditional sense, it still marks a decline in the competitive nature of executive recruitment. In presidential elections held October-November 2002, in which President Noboa Bejarano refused to stand for reelection, Col Lucio Gutiérrez, the joint candidate of the leftist Popular Socialist Party (SPS) and the New Country-Pachakutik Movement (NMN-PP) was elected president after a second-round runoff election against Alvaro Noboa Pontón, of the rightist New Party for National Action (PRIAN). Gutiérrez, a left-wing populist politician, had been a leading participant in the coup against President Jamil Mahuad Witt in January 2000.

In 2005 the political environment in Ecuador continued to deteriorate. Early in the year tens of thousands of citizens took part in street protests both in favor of, and against, President Gutierrez. While President Gutierrez was elected on a populist platform, in order to finance the country’s mounting debt he was forced to impose wildly unpopular economic austerity measures. Opponents of the President accused him of acting like a dictator in his drive to reform the political and economic institutions of the country which, according to Gutierrez, were plagued by corruption and ineptitude. In his reform effort President Gutierrez persuaded Congress to sack most of the Supreme Court in December 2004, alleging that the magistrates were biased against him and his policy of reform. However, political opponents of the President claim that the dismissal of the judges was actually part of a political deal between the President and members of former President Bucaram’s Roldosista party. The Supreme Court had been actively seeking to prosecute Bucaram for crimes committed during his tenure in office. Bucaram’s supporters had actively backed Gutierrez’s drive to replace the Supreme Court and had also helped block an opposition attempt to impeach him in November 2004. The political crisis in the country deepened in March 2005 when the new Supreme Court dropped corruption charges against ex-president Bucaram. In the midst of massive street protests triggered by this action, in April 2005 Congress fired the judges appointed in December 2004 and voted to impeach the President. On 20 April 2005 President Gutierrez abandoned the presidential palace and went into exile after the army withdrew its political support for the chief executive. Congress immediately voted to replace Gutierrez with Vice President Alfredo Palacio. After his return from exile in the fall of 2005, Gutierrez was immediately imprisoned, triggering further street protests. Gutierrez was released from prison in March 2006.

The 2005 Quito-based “rebellion of the forajidos” (outlaws), which ultimately led to the demise of the Gutierrez presidency, also prompted the emergence of a new political force in the country led by Rafael Correa. Drawing support from what remained of the forajido movement, in 2006 Correa quickly assembled MPAIS as a new political party. Embracing the forajido movement’s demand for political reform, Correa promised to fundamentally reshape the political system if elected to the office of the presidency. In second round balloting in November 2006, Rafael Correa was elected president of Ecuador with 57% of the vote thereby signaling a return to competitive executive selection. Correa, a political outsider with no political party backing, promised to lead a social revolution to benefit the poor. As a first step in this process, Correa promised to depoliticize the courts, decentralize the state apparatus and rewrite the constitution in an effort to limit the power of the traditional political parties. In an April 2007 referendum, the voters gave their overwhelming support to President Correa’s plan to re-write the constitution.

Executive Constraints: Intermediary Category (4)

As stipulated by the 1979 constitution, Congress has broad powers to question and censure cabinet ministers, including the president. The power of impeachment has been a widely used tool by Congress during the last two decades. While opposition forces in Congress are loosely organized and have weak party discipline, nevertheless, they often unite temporarily to block executive branch initiatives and to remove cabinet ministers. Congress was even able to successfully impeach President Bucaram in 1997 on

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grounds of mental incompetence (although this was a thinly veiled guise to eliminate a populist reformer who challenged the elite interests found in Congress). Moreover, Congress is also entitled to appoint the Supreme Court which, not surprisingly, typically rules in favor of the legislative branch when balance of power issues are raised. However, with the constitutional reforms of August 1998 the powers of the legislative branch have been slightly reduced. A key component to restoring stability to Ecuadorian politics was the constitutional reform that terminated Congress's power to dismiss cabinet ministers.

Corruption in all branches of government remains the greatest barrier to effective government in Ecuador. In October 2005 President Palacio called for a referendum to re-writing the Constitution and sack all current members of both the legislative and executive branches of government. However, this proposal was abandoned in December 2005 after it was rejected by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal. A new Supreme Court was sworn-in in November 2005. The new members of the Supreme Court were appointed by an impartial panel and are said to better represent a larger cross-section of Ecuadorian society.

In the run-up to the 2006 presidential and congressional elections, Rafael Correa, the leader of the new MP AIS party, announced that his party would decline to run any candidates in the legislative elections. While Correa was elected president, nonetheless, as a direct result of his calculated political gamble, he came into office with zero assurance of legislative support. While not enjoying an absolute majority, nonetheless, the opposition Institutional Renewal National Action Party (PRIAN) and the Patriotic Society Party (PSP) emerged as the two largest forces in Congress. In an effort to work around the obstructionist forces in the National Assembly, President Correa proposed the creation of a constitutional assembly which would bypass Congress. In March 2007, 57 members of parliament were sacked by President Correa for opposing his plan to establish a constitutional convention outside of the control of Congress. In response to this move, the Supreme Court ruled that the dismissals were unconstitutional and demanded the reinstatement of the fired MPs. Congress, now led by supporters of the President, responded by sacking the Court's top nine judges. While all of the MPs were reinstated in late April 2007, 24 of them were subsequently accused of rising against the government.

In an April 2007 referendum voters overwhelmingly supported President Correa's plan to form a Citizens' Assembly to rewrite the constitution. President Correa's Alianza PAIS party won 80 of 130 seats in the new body. The new Citizens' Assembly was given "full powers" to overrule, dissolve or replace all existing institutions. On 29 November 2007 the Citizens' Assembly formally convened. In their first act, the Assembly asserted its full powers by declaring the old legislature to be "in recesses" and assumed lawmaking powers. In addition, the assembly sacked many congressionally appointed officials in the judiciary and executive branch. With no formal institutional oversight and with the full backing of the Citizens' Assembly, President Correa enhanced his powers to push through significant political and economic reforms. The legal system, widely seen as a corrupt extension of the party system, has little credibility in Ecuador.

Political Participation: Factional Competition (7)

Ecuador has deep geographic and ethnic cleavages. Ecuador's recent political instability has stemmed from the exacerbation of these cleavages. The core geographic division is between the highland town of Quito, the political center of the country, and the coastal city of Guayaquil, the nation's economic center. This geographic division has produced regional-based parties that have created a virtual paralysis of government. Also contributing to the political chaos in Ecuador is the fact that most political parties seem to be guided solely by short-term electoral calculations and personal ambition rather than ideological or programmatic goals. Another factor contributing to the instability of Ecuadorian politics in recent years has been the increasing political activism of the Amerindian population. Consisting of 15-25% of the population, the indigenous population has traditionally been the poorest segment of Ecuadorian society. In an effort to redress this inequality, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), has mobilized the Amerindian population in an effective strategy of street protest politics. In February 2002, President Gustavo Noboa Bejarano declared a state of emergency in northern Ecuador where protests by a loose coalition of indigenous farmers and civic groups had led to the seizures of five refineries and dozens of drilling facilities and forced suspension in the construction of an oil pipeline. In mid-2005 the army stepped up efforts to quell protests in the oil-rich Amazonian regions of Sucumbios and Orellana. The protestors demanded that a higher share of the profits from the country's oil revenues be reinvested back into these regions.