

Ecuador shaken by police, military uprising

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Helmeted troops in combat gear and carrying automatic weapons were deployed Friday outside Quito's Carondelet Palace, the office of the Ecuadorian president, following an uprising by police and sections of the military the day before.

The entire country has been placed under a week-long state of emergency, with army units patrolling the streets and enforcing public order, and basic rights suspended.

Thursday's uprising was begun by several thousand police in Quito and spread to a number of other cities. Ostensibly, the action was taken in response to a section of a new Public Service Law, which would alter bonus payments and promotions for both the police and the army.

President Rafael Correa, who was physically attacked and held captive by the police for several hours Thursday, has charged that the compensation issues were a pretext for a politically directed coup attempt.

"No one should be fooled," said Correa referring to the dispute over the public service law. "This was not the motive, this is not what happened today; what happened was an attempted coup, a conspiracy and destabilization in which the conspirators failed thanks to the action of the national government, the Ecuadorian people and the loyal forces of order."

In addition to the action by the police, elements of the Ecuadorian Air Force seized Quito's international airport and other commercial airports, halting all flights in and out of the country and surrounding the hanger containing the president's aircraft in an apparent attempt to prevent Correa from escaping. Police also shut down the National Assembly, and elements supporting the uprising seized control of the public television station.

Thursday's extraordinary events unfolded after Correa, accompanied by other government officials, went to the Quito police barracks in an attempt to placate police who had occupied the facility. He was met with open hostility by the cops, who booed him and chanted, "The troops united will never be defeated."

Correa responded by tearing open his jacket and shirt

and daring the cops to kill him "if you have the courage." The police responded by firing tear gas grenades and rubber bullets. Overcome with the gas, Correa was taken to the nearby police hospital, which was then surrounded by the insurgent police, who held him captive over most of the day.

Thousands of demonstrators marched on the hospital in support of Correa and clashed with police, who sought to turn them back with gas, rubber bullets and baton charges.

It was only late in the day that the head of the Ecuadorian armed forces, General Ernesto González declared his support for the law and the "maximum authority" of the president. At the same time, however, he called for Correa—while stressing that it was not a condition for his support—to amend the same law that the rebellious police had demanded be rescinded.

The declaration was followed by the intervention of over 500 army troops, who were sent to the police hospital to rescue Correa. They managed to get him out of the building only under a hail of bullets from the police.

Correa and his supporters have charged a political opponent, retired army Lt. Col. Lucio Gutierrez, with orchestrating the uprising. Gutierrez was one of the leaders of a movement that included both protests by indigenous organizations and the backing of the military that brought down President Jamil Mahuad in 2000. He was subsequently elected as president, campaigning as a left nationalist, in 2002. After embracing capitalist austerity measures, drawing closer to Washington and adopting a series of repressive measures, he himself was brought down by mass protests that included some of the same organizations that had backed him just a few years earlier.

Gutierrez rejected Correa's charges. "The only one responsible for the chaos that we now have in Ecuador is the abusive, corrupt, arrogant government of Rafael Correa," he said.

The uprising was condemned throughout Latin America. Both the Organization of American States in Washington and UNASUR (the Union of South American

Nations) in Buenos Aires met in emergency session to defend Correa's government. Presidents Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, Alan García of Perú, Sebastián Piñera of Chile and Evo Morales of Bolivia attended the UNASUR meeting, along with Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim.

Washington also issued a condemnation of the uprising, declaring its opposition to "violence and lawlessness."

There was widespread speculation in Latin America, however, that Washington had a hand in the abortive coup. Such suspicions are fueled by the open support of the Bush administration for the unsuccessful coup attempt against Venezuela's Hugo Chavez in 2002 and the thinly veiled backing of the Obama administration for the successful overthrow of Honduras's President Manuel Zelaya in June of last year.

"We already had prior information," said Bolivia's President Evo Morales, an ally of Correa. "As always, the political adversaries of Latin America, allied with the government of the United States, are trying to finish with mandates; when they can't do it with a referendum, they attempt a coup. History repeats itself."

Argentina's Foreign Minister Héctor Timerman expressed similar sentiments. "This comes from monopolistic and concentrated sectors of the economy; Ecuador is being attacked by the multinational corporations."

"This began in Honduras, but it wasn't going to end in Honduras," he added. "In the end, no one is immune from suffering destabilization."

While the "citizens' revolution" proclaimed by Correa, a US-trained economist, has posed no direct challenge to capitalism in Ecuador, some of his policies have earned Washington's ire. These include his refusal to renew the lease on a key strategic air base used by the US military in Manta, on the Pacific coast. The government has carried out changes in Ecuador's agreements with the multinational energy corporations that have cut into their profits. It has also defaulted on some \$3.2 billion in international debt since 2008.

The country has faced mounting difficulty in obtaining funding after the default and in financing its estimated \$2.7 billion budget deficit.

In response, the Correa government has turned to austerity measures aimed in particular at the public sector, which has provoked union and student protests. Among these measures are proposals to pay pensions for retired public sector workers in part with government bonds and a reorganization of the work force that is expected to

produce mass layoffs.

In the aftermath of Thursday's events, the country's major union federations issued a joint statement declaring their defense of democracy and the constitution against "authoritarianism, arbitrariness, abuse, attacks; from whomever they come." While disassociating themselves from "the right, the oligarchy and any adventurer who promotes anarchy," they called for renewed struggle against the public sector law and condemned the state of emergency imposed in response to the police uprising as "a pretext to violate human rights."

Thursday's coup attempt and the televised scenes of the two arms of the security forces exchanging gunfire have underscored Ecuador's deep-going social and political crisis and the increasing instability of the state. While the Obama administration and the CIA are undoubtedly seeking to exploit this crisis to advance US imperialism's interests in the region, the fundamental source is the insoluble contradiction between the interests of the Ecuadorian working people and those of the country's ruling elite and foreign capital.

While a failure, the police uprising represents a stark warning. Correa was restored to the presidential palace by the military, whose loyalty in the future is hardly assured. The threat of a new coup and the imposition of rightwing dictatorship remains. It can be successfully countered only by means of the independent mobilization of the working class in the struggle for socialism.



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