

Ecuador prison massacres claim 79 lives amid election tensions

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The official death toll in a wave of rioting that swept through four penitentiaries in Ecuador rose to 79 Wednesday as police and troops took control of the prisons. The Ecuadorian daily *El Comercio* reported that another 1,500 soldiers were deployed on the streets of the capital Quito because of the government's fear of unrest.

Not a single guard or member of the security forces was killed in the prison violence, which was attributed by government officials and the media to a clash between members of rival gangs. It is not known how many of the prisoners were killed by security forces in retaking the facilities.

Crowds of relatives, many of them in tears, gathered outside the prisons in the cities of Guayaquil and Cuenca, where most of the deaths took place, clashing with security forces.

Ecuador's right-wing, US-backed President Lenin Moreno used his regular television program to describe the bloodbath as a "fight between organized mafias," refusing to take any responsibility for the catastrophic conditions in the country's overcrowded prison system, which saw similar rioting in May 2019 and August 2020.

Moreno further suggested, without the slightest evidence, that supporters of his predecessor and former political ally, Rafael Correa, were behind the upheavals. Claiming that Correa and his backers had "contracted criminals" to foment violence during the October 2019 mass popular revolt against IMF austerity measures that forced the government to flee the capital, Moreno declared that "it wouldn't surprise us if their hand were present" in Tuesday's prison riots.

The provocative comments came in the context of political tensions over Ecuador's presidential election, which is headed for a second round on April 11.

Andrés Arauz, a former minister and director of the Central Bank in Correa's government, who ran as the candidate of the Unión por la Esperanza (Union for Hope,

UNES), came in first in the first round of voting on February 7 but failed to win an outright majority. The party also won the largest block of seats in the country's parliament but again failed to achieve a majority.

According to the official results, Arauz won 32.72 percent of the vote, with Guillermo Lasso, a right-wing multimillionaire ex-Coca Cola executive and banker who ran as the candidate of the CREO (Create Opportunity) party, coming in second with 19.74 percent, and Yaku Pérez of the Movimiento Pachakutik placing third with 19.38 percent.

Pérez and his indigenous party have cried electoral fraud, demanding a recount of some five million votes. Supporters of the party marched in Quito on Tuesday to press their demand. Over the weekend, Moreno's attorney general and comptroller general announced that they were seizing "all digital content from the database that administers the electoral system" to investigate alleged irregularities.

This triggered a constitutional crisis, with the president of the National Electoral Council (CNE) insisting that the body has independent control over the vote count and warning against the investigation becoming an instrument of "political forces that want to take over the CNE by assault" in order to "promote their interests in the present electoral process."

Arauz organized a press conference in which he denounced the "gross interference of other institutions of the state" in the electoral process and insisted that there could be no change in the dates for the election's second round. He charged Moreno with engaging in "maneuvers, tricks and manipulations" intended to "extend the term in office." For his part, Correa, speaking from exile in Belgium, warned against the threat of a "coup" aimed at keeping his supporters from winning the presidency.

There is no doubt that Moreno and his patrons in Washington are strongly opposed to the coming to power

of UNES, the Correaist party. The government made repeated attempts to keep it off the ballot and has sought to enforce a decree barring the use of Correa's image or voice in election campaigning. Last year, an Ecuadorian court convicted Correa of corruption charges, sentencing him in absentia to eight years in prison and a 25-year suspension of his political rights.

Correa governed Ecuador for a decade beginning in 2007. Declaring himself a supporter of "21st century socialism," he was part of the so-called "left turn" or "Pink Tide" in Latin America that saw the coming to power of a number of bourgeois governments that sought to utilize the continent's "commodities boom" to implement minimal assistance programs for the poor, while reorienting trade and commercial ties toward US rivals, particularly China.

The slowing of the Chinese economy and the resulting fall in commodity prices spelled economic crisis and political instability for all of these regimes. Ecuador, with oil accounting for 40 percent of its export earnings, was among the hardest hit.

Correa, whose politics never infringed upon the essential profit interests of the Ecuadorian bourgeoisie or international capital—he maintained loyal support for the dollarization of the country's economy—had already begun turning sharply rightward before he left office in 2017, backing his vice president, Lenin Moreno, as his successor.

Under Moreno, this rightward turn accelerated sharply, with the new government subordinating itself unequivocally to the interests of US imperialism, expressed most nakedly in the expulsion of WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange from the Ecuadorian embassy in London in April 2019. Two months later, as part of his government's ever closer alignment with Washington, it granted the US rights to a military base in the Galapagos Islands. In a further gesture of fealty to the Trump administration, Moreno cut back ties with China.

Meanwhile it obtained a series of loans from both the International Monetary Fund and the US government, driving the country's foreign debt up to \$52 billion. These loans were conditioned upon drastic austerity measures, the privatization of state enterprises and the slashing of public sector employment. One deal reached with the US International Development Finance Corporation just weeks before Trump left office was conditioned upon the Moreno government excluding Chinese companies from Ecuador's telecom networks.

The increasingly draconian austerity measures imposed

under the IMF agreement sparked a mass uprising in October 2019, whose ferocity literally forced Moreno to flee the capital for the coastal city of Guayaquil. While the government was forced to beat a tactical retreat on the most deeply unpopular measure, the ending of fuel subsidies, the mass movement was contained only with the assistance of the trade union bureaucracy and the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), in which Yaku Pérez, the indigenous candidate in the current election, played a major role.

The mass movement of Ecuadorian workers and oppressed has also suffered the impact of the coronavirus, which has had a particularly devastating effect in Ecuador. In April of last year, the city of Guayaquil literally saw bodies piling up in the streets. The catastrophic handling of the pandemic has only deepened popular hatred of the government.

The front running UNES candidate, Arauz, has campaigned on slogans asking voters whether they were better off before or after Moreno took office. A return to the period of surplus revenues for oil exports, however, is not an offer. Ecuador saw its GDP cut by 10 percent in 2020, while more than 600,000 workers joined the unemployment lines.

The bitter lesson of the Correa-Moreno presidencies is that the fight against social inequality, imperialist domination and the threat of dictatorship in Ecuador and throughout Latin America cannot be waged under the leadership of any faction of the national bourgeoisie, no matter what its "left" pretensions. All of them are subordinated to the profit interests of international capital.

The most urgent task is the forging of a new revolutionary leadership to mobilize the working class in opposition to the unions and political organizations that seek to subordinate workers to the bourgeoisie and fighting to unite their struggles with those of workers across the Americas and internationally to put an end to capitalism.



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