

State of emergency declared in Ecuador after killing of presidential candidate

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11 August 2023

Less than two weeks before the August 20 snap election in Ecuador, presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio was killed on Wednesday after a campaign rally at a high school in Quito. An alleged perpetrator was killed in the ensuing confrontation between hitmen and security forces, while six suspects were subsequently arrested. All the suspects are Colombian nationals.

Villavicencio was a right-wing legislator whose campaign was based on anti-corruption rhetoric, condemnations of gang leaders and proposals for a militarized, law-and-order response to organized crime and a purge of criminal elements in the police. He had reported death threats in recent days by “Fito,” a local leader of the Mexican Sinaloa Cartel, which uses Ecuador as a key logistics hub for drug trafficking to the United States and Brazil. A video from alleged gang rivals surfaced claiming responsibility, which was followed by another video denying this.

Ecuador’s incumbent president, the wealthy right-wing banker Guillermo Lasso, had dissolved Parliament last month and convoked snap elections to forestall his impeachment on corruption charges. He has responded to the murder by declaring a 60-day state of exception enforced by the military, which will suspend the right of assembly, movement, free speech and other democratic freedoms. The elections will effectively be held at gunpoint.

In a nationally televised address on Wednesday, Lasso condemned the murder as a “political crime” and then made a veiled threat to overturn the results. “We are not going to hand power and the democratic institutions to organized crime, even if it is disguised as political organizations. We must banish hatred and vengeance as political practices.”

While Lasso cited the threats made by drug cartels, his statements and those of his political allies have sought to lay responsibility for the murder on the main opposition

tendency led by exiled ex-president Rafael Correa. Villavicencio, who was polling in fourth or fifth place, was one of the most vocal critics of the Correistas, whom he accused of belonging to the “mafia”.

Correa’s presidential candidate Luisa González was polling first with a significant lead, but analysts expect that significant sectors of the population will blame the Correistas for the murder, which could affect the vote. On the other hand, Villavicencio was publicly close to Lasso and his allies, who will benefit electorally from his killing.

This is only the latest of several assassinations of politicians this year, including the well-known mayor of Manta, Agustín Intriago, mayor candidates Oscar Menéndez and Julio César was and congressional candidate Rider Sánchez.

While it’s still unclear who was behind the killing of Villavicencio, its effect will be to discredit the elections as a whole and create potential for their being overturned, either through a continuation of the Lasso regime or a military takeover.

More broadly, the murders of politicians and the recent constitutional crisis in Ecuador are emblematic of the crisis of bourgeois rule across Latin America and beyond, as the ruling elites rely increasingly on attacks on democratic rights, states of emergency, military and police repression of social protests and strikes and other forms of political violence.

Capitalism has demonstrated that it has nothing to offer to Latin American workers and the rural masses but the threat of dictatorship, super-exploitation, social misery and ecological destruction. This is chiefly the result of more than a century of semi-colonial domination by US imperialism, which has become increasingly reliant on regime change operations and its influence over the regional security forces to counteract the rapid decline of its economic influence relative to China, Europe and other

economic rivals.

Certain sections of the local ruling elites have exploited the channeling of popular opposition behind their political representatives by the Stalinists, Pabloites, indigenous groups and other petty-bourgeois nationalists to bargain for a larger slice of the profits from the exploitation of Ecuadorian workers.

Villavicencio's political record exemplifies this process. He entered politics in the 1990s as a union leader at the state-owned oil firm Petroecuador and later as an organizer of the indigenous nationalist party Pachakutik, which is historically tied to the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities (CONAIE). These forces have worked for decades with the Stalinist-controlled parties and unions to channel social opposition by giving a "left" cover to one faction of the ruling elite after the next, even as the national bourgeoisie as a whole has shifted further and further to the right.

Villavicencio gained prominence after Pachakutik broke with the second administration of Rafael Correa in 2009. The party's legislator Clever Jiménez and Villavicencio, working as his advisor, claimed Correa had conspired to incite a deadly police riot on September 30, 2010, when the President was abducted by police and rescued by the military. Facing criminal convictions for defamation, Jiménez and Villavicencio hid in the Amazon.

Villavicencio continued to shift to the right and into the direct service of Washington, up to and including demands for US sanctions against Ecuador and the smearing of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who faces life in prison or worse in the United States for exposing countless war crimes and anti-democratic conspiracies by US imperialism. In 2018, Villavicencio made unfounded claims that Assange had agreed to block the publication of proof of corruption by the Correa administration in exchange for political asylum at the Ecuadorian embassy in London. Numerous smears against Assange followed on Villavicencio's social media. In 2019, Lenin Moreno, the hand-picked successor of Correa, withdrew Assange's asylum and allowed British police to drag him out of the embassy, which led to the ongoing extradition procedures to the US.

The already crisis-ridden regimes in Latin America are being pushed to the brink, confronting an explosive sharpening of the class struggle combined with mounting pressure by US imperialism on the Latin American elites to oppose China as Washington prepares for a global conflagration.

This takes place amid rampant poverty and

inequality—over a third of Ecuadorians suffer multidimensional poverty, which surpasses 70 percent in rural areas—after decades of social cuts and privatizations at the behest of the IMF and finance capital. Meanwhile, capitalist politics have become clearly exposed as a door to enrichment schemes through bribes and ties to organized crime, further discrediting the political establishment.

A recent report by the pollster Latinobarómetro summarized the crisis of bourgeois rule. It indicates that 21 presidents have been sentenced for corruption, 20 did not end their mandates and a third violated democratic norms since the transitions to civilian rule after the US-backed military dictatorships of the 1970s-80s. The firm found that popular support for bourgeois "democracy" has fallen from 63 percent in 2010 to 48 percent, while 77 percent of those polled disagree that "political parties function well." The fear of military coups is also rampant, according to the polls.

Mass protests and strikes against social inequality erupted in 2022 and 2019, when Lenin Moreno was forced to temporarily move the government from Quito to Guayaquil, amid an ongoing escalation of the class struggle internationally. At each step, the Stalinist-led trade union bureaucracy, the CONAIE, the Correistas and their pseudo-left apologists have worked to chain the working class to the rotten capitalist regime in Ecuador and US imperialism. Today, these same forces are working to block the popular opposition to the authoritarian maneuvers of Lasso backed by the military.

The defense of the democratic and social rights of workers and all oppressed masses in Ecuador demands that workers mobilize against all pro-capitalist and nationalist organizations and parties and take up the struggle for world socialist revolution.



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