

ECUADOR - Presidential Candidate Rafael Correa Closing the Gap With his Rival Álvaro Noboa

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IPS - November, 18, 2006 - With only 10 days to go to the second round of the presidential elections in Ecuador, three surveys have found that leftwinger Rafael Correa has reached a technical draw with his rival, banana magnate Álvaro Noboa, and that voter intentions in his favour are still rising.

The polling firms, whose results were obtained by IPS, have a three percent margin of error either way. No poll results have been published in Ecuadorian media since Nov. 6, in line with electoral law.

Consulting firm Informe Confidencial found that 40 percent of respondents said they intended to vote for Noboa, and 37 percent for Correa. The rest said they would cast blank or spoiled ballots or were still undecided.

Survey firm Market, in contrast, had Correa in the lead, with 41 percent ratings, Noboa with 37 percent, and 17 percent undecided.

Cedatos had still not processed the figures from its latest poll, but IPS learned that a technical draw had again been found between the two candidates, with Correa's share growing.

Analysts who received this information from IPS were surprised by the figures, because at the outset of campaigning for the second round, surveys indicated that Noboa was so far ahead in voting intentions that it would be difficult to catch up with him.

In the first ballot of the presidential elections, on Oct. 15, Noboa came first, with 26.8 of the vote, followed by Correa, with 22.8 percent, and the gap between them expanded during the first part of the second campaign.

Survey results published by Informe Confidencial, only hours before the "curfew" on such information came into force, indicated that Noboa could expect 46 percent of the vote, and Correa 35 percent.

However, IPS learned that a final poll, conducted on Nov. 7, showed that Correa's share of voter intentions was rising and Noboa's was falling.

Hugo Barber, an expert with the Datanálisis firm of consultants, said "Survey results in recent elections showed that 22 percent of the electorate decided whom to vote for at the last minute, right at the ballot boxes," he said.

Barber told IPS that speeches in this second political campaign had been much more ideological than in previous elections, because Noboa was clearly aligned with the right, and Correa had declared himself strongly of the left.

Political analyst Pablo Ospina agreed that the second round electoral campaign was one of the most ideologically polarised in recent decades, comparable only to the 1978 contest between Jaime Roldós and Sixto Durán.

"However, the electorate doesn't vote along ideological lines; most people do so for much more varied reasons, such as charisma and personal confidence and trust," Ospina told IPS. Furthermore, people are very disenchanted with elections and political candidates, he said.

"People vote, but they have no faith in anyone. So they don't vote according to what the candidates say, but for what they give them. Some choose whom to vote for at the last minute, in front of the ballot box, others support the candidate who has made more television appearances, or for the one who has given them, or could give them, something," the analyst said.

Ospina said that Correa was very astute in the first round when he capitalised on the vote of those disillusioned with the political system, and added that it was a good move to present him as a vote for the left.

"His worst mistake was to believe that he'd win in the first round, because he was a new face, completely unknown. Getting to the second round with 22.8 percent of the vote was a great achievement, but because he had talked of nothing but victory, at the beginning of the present campaign he looked like a loser," he said.

Adrián Bonilla, director of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLASCO), said that neither of the candidates command a clear consensus or majority among the population, because they both have profiles that rouse fears in different sectors.

"Noboa raises fears among middle-income people in the Ecuadorian highlands region and organised rural and urban social sectors in the country, while Correa is not liked in business and financial circles."

"At the same time, Noboa can't unite all the business and financial sectors behind him, because there are internal conflicts over the control of resources and political power, which prevent it," Bonilla explained to IPS.

He also said that these elections were unique, because Noboa, representing a candidacy rooted in the wealthiest economic sectors of the country, identified with a rightwing philosophy, was being opposed by Correa, representing a leftwing platform.

"Correa is an excellent candidate, but his weakness is that he still hasn't been able to build a solid base that could support his political project, because he is not backed by organised parties or social sectors," the FLASCO expert pointed out.

"Only in the past few weeks has he received a great deal of support from leftwing and centre-left parties, and from a large number of civil society organisations all over the country," he added.

Bonilla preferred not to speculate about who might win the election, due to the volatility of the Ecuadorian electorate. However, he predicted "a very hard-fought election," with a "small" difference in the number of votes between the candidates.

Meanwhile, over the last week Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's opinion has been added to the electoral campaign. He expressed doubts about Noboa's high voting result in the first round, echoing the accusation of fraud made at that time by Correa, and saying that "strange things" had occurred in the banana magnate's political ascent.

Chávez also accused Noboa, Ecuador's richest man, of being a "banana king" and of "exploiting his workers," among whom there are child labourers.

Chávez's words were used by Noboa to claim that the Venezuelan government was meddling in the internal affairs of Ecuador.

There followed publicity spots on television paid for by Noboa's supporters, which predicted that if Correa became president he would be manipulated by Chávez.

Most analysts were convinced that Chávez's remarks had "buried Correa's candidacy," although such views do not seem to take into account the fact that the Venezuelan president enjoys considerable popularity in Ecuador, especially among low-income people, where Correa had difficulty gaining adherents in the first round.

According to Informe Confidencial, Chávez is popular among 65 percent of Ecuadorians, while other polls have reported 80 percent in his favour a larger proportion than in his own country.

Chávez's words, and support from numerous and varied sources, such as the indigenous people's movement, dozens of rural and urban social organisations, hundreds of personalities in the world of culture, members of the business community and some of the media, together with greater direct contact between Correa and the poorer areas of the country, appear to be the key reasons for Ecuadorians' apparent electoral change of heart.

The Goldman Sachs investment bank, quoting a study it had commissioned, told a press conference on Wednesday that at the moment there was a technical draw between the two candidates, but asked that the precise figures not be published.

The figures and the trend seem to speak eloquently for Correa, whose chances of being elected president of Ecuador on Nov. 26 are looking increasingly rosy.

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