



Ecuador's Correa Declares Election Victory

First President Elected In Country In 30 Years Without A Runoff

QUITO, Ecuador, April 26, 2009

(AP) President Rafael Correa, a leftist champion of the poor, declared re-election victory Sunday just moments after the polls closed - a win that breaks sharply with Ecuador's history of political instability.

Three separate exit polls said Correa garnered well over half the vote in an eight-candidate field, making him the first president elected in Ecuador in 30 years without a runoff.

Correa, who promised to rid the small Andean nation of its corrupt political class when first elected in 2006, danced, sang his party anthem and pumped fists with his close political advisers in his home city of Guayaquil. Exit polls predicted a victory moments after voting ended.

"We will never defraud the Ecuadorean people," he told cheering supporters. "I think that's why we received such immense support. We've made history in a nation that between 1996 and 2006 never saw a democratic government complete its term."

International observers reported no serious irregularities in the voting Sunday.

Exit polls done for state TV and two independent channels gave Correa at least 54 percent of the vote, with former president and coup leader Lucio Gutierrez a distant second.

To win without forcing a runoff, a candidate needed either 50 percent of the vote plus one or at least 40 percent with a 10-point margin over his closest competitor.

The vote was mandated by the new constitution that voters approved in September by a 64 percent margin. It strengthens the president's hand and makes him eligible to run in 2013 for another consecutive four-year term.

A feisty, 46-year-old economist who blames the global economic crisis on capitalism's "structural flaws," Correa has alarmed foreign investors by defaulting on debt payments in tough dealings with oil companies and other multinationals.

And he's imposed some of the world's strictest protectionist measures, including tariffs that have put imported goods out of reach for many consumers.

But the charismatic, sharp-tongued Correa has largely won over the lower classes. He tripled state spending on education and health care, doubled a monthly payment for single mothers to \$30 and launched subsidy programs for small farmers and people building their own homes.

"I voted for Correa because there is honesty in his government. He's very different from the others and gets things done," 56-year-old dentist Manuel Guerrero said after casting his ballot.

Gutierrez, his main opponent, contended a Correa re-election would put Ecuador on the road to ruin as the recession digs in this year.

"Ecuadoreans have shut down their businesses and they're going to neighboring countries, and fewer foreign investors will come," he said during campaigning.

Voters at home and abroad on Sunday also chose a new 124-seat National Assembly - six seats of which will directly represent the Ecuadorean diaspora - as well as governors and mayors.

The new constitution lowers the voting age to 16 and permits soldiers, police and prison inmates awaiting trial to vote for the first time.