

RAFAEL CORREA

Latin America is the only region of the world where levels of inequality have been declining, and democratic participation expanding, under a chain of 'Bolivarian' or broadly social-democratic governments elected since 1999: Chávez in Venezuela, Kirchner and Fernández in Argentina, Morales in Bolivia, the Frente Amplio in Uruguay, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, Humala in Peru. Rafael Correa's 2006 victory in Ecuador was a central part of this sequence, confirming the left's regional advance and extending the repertoire of political forms it could take. For Correa as for others, the path to power lay over the ruins of the previous political order. After the debt spiral of the 1980s and neoliberal assault of the 1990s, Ecuador had suffered a full-blown economic collapse in 1999–2000; the party system had been chronically destabilized, with the Carondelet Palace housing six presidents in ten years. As with the other Bolivarian leaders, Correa's term in office has involved a democratic-constitutional process, redistributive measures and assertions of national economic sovereignty over debt and resources, rejecting the diktats of the IMF and World Bank. Conversely Ecuador has particularities that single it out within the continental pattern: indigenous peoples have a smaller weight here than in Bolivia and Peru; Alianza PAIS, embracing 30 parties and movements, is probably a more heteroclite ruling alliance than elsewhere; Correa's was the first government in the world to undertake a transparent, public audit of the national debt. Re-elected under the new Constitution in 2009, Correa has already served a longer continuous period in office than any Ecuadorean president since the 19th century; a renewed mandate seems the likeliest outcome of elections due in early 2013. Though his government has faced a perpetual onslaught of criticism from the right, rival candidates are lagging his estimated 45 to 60 per cent in the (unreliable) polls. Closest is Guillermo Lasso, a Guayaquil banker and Opus Dei member, on around 15 per cent; following at under 10 per cent are Lucio Gutiérrez, the former president chased out in 2005 by a popular uprising, and Alberto Acosta, a former minister in Correa's government who broke with him in June 2008, in part over the question of extracting natural resources from indigenous areas. What has been the actual record of the Correa government, and how would it respond to such criticisms? Interviewed in the wake of the Assange affair, Correa discusses his formation, his government's social and economic policies, and the ecological dilemmas facing his country.

RAFAEL CORREA

Interview

ECUADOR'S PATH

Could you tell us something about your personal and political formation?

MY FORMATION IS rooted in liberation theology and the social doctrine of the Catholic church. I was born in Guayaquil in 1963. I studied at the Universidad Católica de Santiago de Guayaquil, where I was a militant in a left group in the economics department. We were the first left movement to win the presidency of the student federation at that university, which was one of the most conservative in the country. This was in a harsh period, under the Febres Cordero administration, a very repressive government of the right.¹ Then I did a year's voluntary social work in Zumbahua, an indigenous region at an altitude of 3,600 metres, before gaining a bursary to study in Europe. At Louvain, I also took part in student politics, but then I got married and went to the US to study for a doctorate. Although I maintained my left convictions, I was not politically active. Some people who call themselves the radical left say I'm not from the left because I wasn't active alongside them, but this is arrogance. There are many spaces on the left in which one can be formed and take part, and liberation theology and the social doctrine of the church are one of them.

Ecuador underwent an economic crisis in 1999–2000, followed by a period of political turmoil—Presidents Mahuad and Gutiérrez were chased from office in 2000 and 2005, with unelected figures holding power in between. How did you come to join the government of Gutiérrez's successor in 2005?

Every once in a while, on a voluntary basis, I gave advice to Alfredo Palacio, when he was Vice President of the Republic.² I'd never met

Palacio, but had made contact with him through a mutual friend, Rubén Barberán, whom I knew from our time as left student activists.³ I wrote some papers for the Vice-President on dollarization and on oil funds, which were well received. When Gutiérrez fell and Palacio assumed the presidency, he nominated me Economics and Finance Minister.

What led you to run for president in 2006?

In my short time at the Finance Ministry—around a hundred days—we showed that one didn't have to do the same as always: submission to the IMF and World Bank, paying off the external debt irrespective of the social debts still pending. This created a high level of expectations on the part of the public. When I resigned, there were demonstrations—probably the first in the country in support of a finance minister! I initially planned to return to teaching at the Universidad San Francisco de Quito, but was dismissed just before term started because, the hierarchy said, I was a politician. At this point Ricardo Patiño and a group of collaborators told me that we couldn't let the expectations that had been raised, the feeling that things could be done differently, end in disappointment.⁴ We travelled across the country and formed a political movement to secure the presidency. For we saw very clearly that in order to change Ecuador, we had to win political power.

When did you begin to call this a Citizens' Revolution?

During the campaign we were clearly aware that what we were proposing was a revolution, understood as a radical and rapid change in the existing structures of Ecuadorean society, in order to change the bourgeois state into a truly popular one. Faced with the delegitimization of the political class, which no longer represented anyone except itself, we said to ourselves that it was we citizens who had to reveal its inadequacies. So

¹ León Febres Cordero: president of Ecuador 1984–88, from the Social Christian Party; in May 2008 Correa created a commission to investigate torture, disappearances and summary executions of oppositionists reportedly carried out by government death squads in the 1980s. [Footnotes: NLR]

² Alfredo Palacio was Vice-President to Lucio Gutiérrez from 2003–05, assuming the presidency when the latter was deposed in April 2005.

³ Rubén Barberán served as Minister for Social Well-Being under Palacio.

⁴ Ricardo Patiño: founder of Ecuadorean branch of Jubilee 2000, chief of staff to Correa as Finance Minister in 2005; since January 2010, Ecuador's Foreign Secretary.

we decided to call it a citizens' revolution, a revolt of indignant citizens. In that sense we anticipated the recent *indignado* movement in Europe by five or six years. But the movement was also profoundly Bolivarian, in terms of regional integration. And we are also inspired by Eloy Alfaro's liberal revolution—the only real revolution to have occurred in this country before ours. This was why Alfaro was assassinated in 1912, in barbaric fashion, because he was really changing the structures of the country at the time.⁵

You took office at the start of 2007. Later that year the world economy was hit by the credit crunch which developed into the financial crisis of 2008. What was its impact on Ecuador, and how did your government attempt to confront it?

We were struck a threefold blow by the crisis. In addition to the usual consequences—loss of export markets, reduction of financing and so on—there was a collapse in remittances from emigrants, which is what had sustained the country from the crisis of 1999 to the beginning of my administration. The price of oil also slumped, which struck at another important foundation of the national economy. Despite this, in 2009, while Latin America contracted by 2 per cent, our growth was small—under 1 per cent—but positive. Modesty aside, this was all the more remarkable considering that the economy has been dollarized since 2000, depriving us of one of the key instruments of policy. How was this achieved? Through a combination of technical know-how and a vision of the common good—acting on behalf of our citizens, not on behalf of finance capital. For example, we used to have an autonomous central bank, which is one of the great traps of neoliberalism, so that whichever government is in power, things carry on as before. Thanks to the 2008 Constitution, it is no longer autonomous. We took advantage of the few benefits that a rigid, dollarized system offers, such as not needing reserves to back a national currency. When the central bank was autonomous, it had millions of dollars of national savings—the

⁵ Eloy Alfaro (1842–1912): leader of Ecuador's liberal revolution of 1895. During two terms as president (1895–1901, 1906–11), he enacted a series of modernizing reforms—separation of Church and state, redistribution of land, institution of free primary education, suspension of debt repayments, construction of railways—meeting intense opposition from conservative landowning elites and the Church. Amid civil turmoil, he and several other liberals were summarily executed, their bodies dragged through the streets of Quito and publicly burned.

biggest contributor being social security—which it would send overseas, to Florida. After the bank's autonomy was taken under democratic control we could bring those reserves back to the country and use them to dynamize the economy. In the case of private banks sending money overseas, we imposed a domestic liquidity coefficient, obliging them to bring that money back. We have also obtained new financing from China. All this meant we could take counter-cyclical measures to mitigate the effects of the crisis. Not only did we not reduce public investment, we increased it. This mix of measures meant that we could grow in 2009; according to CEPAL, Ecuador was one of the countries that recovered most rapidly from the crisis, and last year was among the three fastest growing economies in Latin America.

What have been the advantages and disadvantages of the dollarization instituted by President Mahuad in January 2000?

Dollarization meant monetary suicide for Ecuador—and not, as in Europe, in order to adopt a common transnational currency; here it was a foreign currency that was adopted. As a consequence, our economic destiny depends to a great extent on whether the monetary policy of the US coincides with our needs. Our great fortune in recent years has been that, on the whole, it has. The weakening of the dollar has been beneficial to us, whereas countries which don't have the dollar as their currency are experiencing problems: real appreciation, loss of competitiveness in exports. But one has to distinguish between good luck and good policies. Dollarization was a totally mistaken measure. Within that error, we've had a degree of fortune.

In 2008, you set up a commission to audit Ecuador's public debt, which by the start of your mandate had reached \$10.3 billion, just over a quarter of GDP. What was the thinking behind this, and what effect did it have?

The cost of the external debt was one of the greatest obstacles to Ecuador's development. At one time, servicing the debt consumed 40 per cent of the budget, three times what was spent on the social sphere—education, health and so on. The allocation of resources demonstrated who was in charge of the economy: bankers, creditors, international financial institutions. We organized the creation of the Comisión para la Auditoría Integral del Crédito Público (CAIC); this was the first time such a body had been set up in Latin America on the initiative of a government, as

opposed to civil society. The Commission proved beyond any doubt what we already knew: the external debt was immoral, a robbery. For example, the 2012 and 2030 Global Bonds were sold on the secondary market at 30 per cent of their value, but we had to pay them at the full 100 per cent. When it looked at the contracts, the Commission also found a lot of corruption and conflicts of interest. So in December 2008 the CAIC ruled that this debt was immoral, and we declared a unilateral moratorium on those bonds. This was at a moment when we were in a strong economic position—oil prices were high, exports were growing—which was deliberate. This meant that the value of the debt dropped, and we forced our creditors to negotiate and sell back their bonds in a Dutch auction. We managed to buy back our debt at 32–33 per cent of its value, which meant billions of dollars of savings for the Ecuadorean people, both in capital and in interest payments. This freed up a lot of resources which we could dedicate to the social sphere; now, the situation is reversed from what it was before—we spend three times as much on education, health, housing as on debt service.

What policies has your government pursued in order to reduce inequality?

Latin America holds the grim title of most unequal region in the world, and the Andean countries are the most unequal part of that region. This is why it was crazy to apply the neoliberal system, supposedly based on competition and the liberation of the market, in countries like Ecuador in recent decades. What competition were they talking about? It was a massacre. Now we are reducing inequality, and poverty with it, through a combination of four things. Firstly, making the rich pay more taxes. We have instituted a much more progressive taxation system, and people now actually pay their taxes—collection has doubled. These resources, together with oil revenues and the money saved by reducing the debt burden, can be devoted to education, health and so on. This is the second point: giving equality of opportunities. People no longer have to pay for healthcare or education, which were quite expensive for the poor—school enrolment cost \$25 per child, but is now completely free; some children are given books and uniforms too.

Thirdly, governing the market and improving the labour system. The market is a reality that we cannot avoid; but believing the market should allocate everything is a different matter. The market needs to be governed by collective action. We are putting an end to forms of exploitation

such as subcontracting. We are improving real wages—we have been able to close the gap between family incomes and a basic basket of consumption goods. Around 60–65 per cent of families could afford the basic basket at the start of our mandate, now we've reached 93 per cent, the highest in the country's history. We've disproved orthodox economic theory, the idea that to generate employment one needs to lower real wages: here the real wage has risen substantially, and we have one of the lowest unemployment rates in the region—just under 5 per cent. We've also paid attention to the quality of employment, making sure businesses comply with labour laws. While raising wages for labour, we've reduced the remuneration for capital. In this country, if one proposed raising the minimum wage by a few dollars one was called a demagogue, a populist, but no one was surprised by interest rates of 24–45 per cent. We drastically lowered interest rates, to 8–9 per cent, for the corporate sector.

Fourthly, distributing adequately our social patrimony. We used to give away our oil: before the Palacio government, transnational companies would take the equivalent of 85 out of every 100 barrels and leave us with 15; now we have renegotiated the contracts, the proportions have been reversed. Another example: after the economic crisis of 1999–2000, many enterprises which were used as collateral for loans should have ended up in state hands; it was we who finally seized them. In the case of the Isaías Group, owned by the family of the same name, in 2008 we recovered around 200 enterprises. Other governments would probably have privatized them again, so they would end up in the same hands as usual. We've used the public banking system to provide finance so that the workers themselves can buy all or part of these enterprises.

You mentioned an increase in tax collection—how was this achieved?

Through a combination of credibility, controls and incentives. In Guayaquil we have a saying: 'The monkey knows which tree to climb.' Businessmen and bankers in Ecuador used to know that if they didn't pay their taxes, they had friends in the government and nothing would happen to them. When it became clear that a government had arrived which they couldn't order around, they began to pay their taxes. Secondly, we have greatly improved controls, and the Servicio de Rentas Internas has also improved a lot in terms of human resources. Thirdly, incentives: for example, we killed two birds with one stone by allowing families tax deductions for spending on housing, health and education. Previously,

a man with six children earning \$20,000 paid the same as a bachelor earning the same amount; now the system is fairer. At the same time, to get those deductions everyone has had to get invoices. This meant that we have improved tax collection from independent professionals—doctors, dentists—and from rental contracts and so on. Another example is in the banana sector: the producers would sell 600 million dollars' worth and pay 1 million in taxes, it was ridiculous. We implemented a new formula to calculate in advance how much tax was due; if anyone wants to question the formula—which would be embarrassing for them, since it would mean they were selling bananas at a loss—we audit them. There have been many other reforms too which have allowed us to collect more taxes.

Turning now to problems of development, how do you propose to balance the exploitation of Ecuador's natural resources with preservation of its amazing ecological diversity?

It is madness to say no to natural resources, which is what part of the left is proposing—no to oil, no to mining, no to gas, no to hydroelectric power, no to roads. This is an infantile left, which can only legitimate the right. In the classic socialist tradition, I don't know where Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao, Ho Chi Minh or Castro said no to mining or natural resources. This is an absurd novelty, but it's as if it has become a fundamental part of left discourse. It is all the more dangerous for coming from people who supposedly speak the same language. With so many restrictions, the left will not be able to offer any viable political projects.

We cannot lose sight of the fact that the main objective of a country such as Ecuador is to eliminate poverty. And for that we need our natural resources. There are people here who seem ready to create more poverty but leave those resources in the ground, or who even see poverty as something folkloric—as if children in the central highlands should keep dying of gastroenteritis and life expectancy should stay at 35. That is criminal. What is more, if you look at the capitalist countries which successfully overcame poverty through development—South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore—they all imposed large doses of labour exploitation over a long period of time, in order to accumulate the required human talent, science, technology and so on. Thanks to its natural resources, Latin America doesn't have to put up with that kind of exploitation. For example, Ecuador has just climbed 16 places in the World Economic Forum's

Global Competitiveness Report. I don't believe in those rankings much, they are a mixture of ideology and technical questions—deregulation of markets, flexibilization of labour, etc. But we've risen, mainly because of improvements in communications and infrastructure. These were possible thanks to our natural resources. Countries without those resources might have had to resort to exploitation of the labour force. That is unacceptable. We will never allow it, and we won't have to. What we need to do is exploit those resources in the right way.

But there have been many disasters with oil and mining.

Of course, that's true. But it's one thing to say there have been bad singers, and another to say the song is bad. There is another fallacious argument from parts of the left—that, because things have been done badly in the past, they will keep being done badly. Anything can be a curse—sex tourism in Asia, gambling in Las Vegas, agriculture that uses a lot of chemicals or imports plants that damage native flora—but there are good forms of tourism and agriculture. Oil has caused a lot of harm, and mining has practically destroyed entire countries, but it doesn't have to be that way. The first oil extraction project completed by my government at Pañacocha, in the Amazon, includes several alternatives for clean development. If we exploit natural resources carefully, it can even benefit the environment, in two ways. Firstly, just as wealth harms the environment through energy consumption, so does poverty: I can't tell a poor family living next to a forest not to cut down the trees. If we reduce poverty, we can conserve the environment. Second, there are a series of delusions: that oil destroys the jungle, for example. What does the most damage to the jungle? The expansion of the agrarian frontier. To avoid this we need to create alternative sources of employment and income. Then there is the idea that mining contaminates the water supply. Not true: the main source of water pollution is sewage. Quito's waste water, for example, is still dumped into the Machángara River, now totally contaminated. In order to change the situation we need hundreds of millions of dollars. We can obtain those resources from mining. That is to say, the proper exploitation of natural resources can help to conserve nature rather than destroying it.

In December 2007, your government launched the Yasuni-ITT Initiative, in which the oil deposits beneath the Yasuni National Park in the Amazon are

to be left unexploited, in exchange for compensation. Could you explain the thinking behind this?

The largest proven reserves of oil in the country are in Yasuní-ITT—close to 900 million barrels. That would have a current value of around \$14 billion, money which the country needs to escape poverty. We are prepared to forego that, in order to continue generating a global environmental public good. But we need to be compensated for it. We're not asking for the full \$14bn, but rather a portion of it. How did we calculate that portion? If the oil were to be extracted, it would mean the emission of more than 400 million tons of CO₂ into the atmosphere. So we should be paid the value of those tons on the carbon market. This is in line with the concept of what has been called net avoided emissions. Kyoto had a shopping list of things which must be compensated—such as deforestation, for which there is the UN-REDD programme—and they keep adding more items, but have not yet arrived at the integrating concept of net avoided emissions, which is what should be compensated.

Coordinated international action on climate change seems less likely now than ten or twenty years ago. Do you see some way of reviving this movement?

At the end of the day, the problem is a political one. When there is a crisis, does one act in the interest of human beings or of capital? Look at Spain: there is money to save the banks but not families' houses. On a global level, environmental goods are generated by the Third World and consumed for free by the First. Imagine for a moment that the situation was the other way around—that we were the ones polluting the world, and that the Amazon jungle were in the US and Europe. They would invade us to demand compensation, in the name of justice, the principles of civilization, international law. But they are the strong ones, with armies and missiles and so on. Why should they compensate us? As long as power relations don't change, there will be a lot of rhetoric and few actions. Some enthusiasts say that with what is happening in Latin America, those power relations will be changed from the South. I think this is a mistake: we're a long way from being able to affect power relations on a global level. It is the citizens of the North who are going to change them. This was why there was so much hope raised by the *indignado* movement and Occupy Wall Street, which were an awakening of the citizens of the First World. But only once those citizens have rebelled against the prevailing structures will we descend from rhetoric

to actions, so that real commitments can be made to avoid climate change and preserve the only planet we have.

What has been the thinking behind your policies on universities?

There are two dimensions to our higher education policies. One is social. It used to be said that education was free here, but it wasn't: public universities charged fees, which meant that \$1 billion of spending on public education—a large investment for a country like Ecuador—went to the richest. The 2008 Constitution declared that higher education should be absolutely free. The results have been extraordinary—for example, enrolment rates for indigenous and Afro-Ecuadoreans have risen exponentially, and 15,000 of the 204,000 students entering university this year came from households that received the Bono de Desarrollo Humano, a government transfer for low-income families.⁶ We didn't create the Bono, we improved it technically; and I'm convinced that monetary transfers, though they certainly help, are not going to end poverty. Opportunities will end poverty, and the fact that people can now go to university, that education is being democratized, means a great chance in terms of opportunities. The second dimension is quality. One of the other errors of the left is to confuse democracy with mediocrity—the idea that everyone should be able to go to university, and the state should pay for whatever they choose to do. For example we used to have 49 law faculties, which had never coordinated among themselves, turning out 60,000 lawyers for a country like Ecuador. And yet we're supposed to keep subsidizing more law faculties. Thanks to the credibility and popular support we have, we've said no: we should finance education in accordance with what the country needs. Those kids are not sitting there to use up society's taxes, they should be prepared to transform it.

In October 2010 we adopted a new Organic Law on Higher Education which introduced national entrance exams. These are designed to test aptitudes rather than knowledge, so poor students from bad institutions have the same chance of passing as rich ones. The Law also introduced assessments of the quality of universities. In the first assessment, 26 were put in category E, the lowest of the five. This meant they weren't universities at all—here, a garage with a blackboard used to be called a university, it was a fraud perpetrated against society. Those 26 were

⁶ Introduced in 2003 by the Gutiérrez government, merging two earlier programmes.

given a year to improve, and when the assessment was done a second time, 14 fell short. So we closed them—an unprecedented event in the history of Latin America and perhaps the world, especially in a democracy. On the other hand, universities in category A are being given a lot of support, and we are creating four new centres of excellence in higher education: the Amazonian Regional University, IKIAM, specializing in life sciences, amid the greatest natural laboratory on Earth; in the north of the country, Yachay, a ‘city of knowledge’ dedicated to hard sciences; in Azogues, in the southern highlands, a pedagogical university, to drastically improve the training of our teaching staff; and the University of the Arts in Guayaquil. The Organic Law also requires that by 2017, all titular professors have PhDs. There have been complaints that this is unrealistic given the national reality—that because the national reality is mediocre, we need to keep being mediocre. We aren’t going to yield to that pressure: we’re going to allocate funds from the budget for a programme of bursaries, so that our teaching staff can study for PhDs abroad. Without improving the quality of our teaching staff there will be no substantial improvement in the quality of education. The poor quality of universities is a regional problem. A study has just been published according to which the top Latin American university in the world rankings is São Paulo, in 139th place. We need to take drastic measures to overcome, as quickly as possible, this problem which keeps us anchored in underdevelopment.

*What have been the relations of the indigenous communities to the Citizens’ Revolution? What is the significance of what you call *sumak kawsay*—‘good living’—to 21st-century socialism?*

Their contribution has been of great importance. The indigenous communities have posed fundamental challenges to traditional notions of citizenship. This can be seen in the new Constitution in several ways. We now define our republic as a ‘pluri-national’ state, recognizing the indigenous communities as fundamental and distinct entities, endowed with distinct rights and status. It is also largely thanks to the indigenous communities that nature itself is recognized as a fundamental value in trust to the nation. The philosophical principles of *sumak kawsay* stress the primacy of use value over exchange value, and this has helped to shape our policies. While we insist that we need real development, we do not identify this narrowly with GDP defined in monetary terms, but instead take full account of its costs and consequences at every level, imposing

the most stringent controls. The indigenous have an important role to play in defining our values—but of course, there is diversity within and amongst the indigenous communities, so there is a need for continuing dialogue concerning the specific implications of our principles in practice. Depending on the issue, some indigenous communities have supported the government, others sometimes opposed it. Naturally, it is disappointing when some indigenous leaders voice support even for rightwing leaders like Lucio Gutiérrez, but we hope in time such differences will be reconciled at a higher level.

How would you respond to critics, both within Ecuador and outside it, who say that your government has curtailed freedom of the press?

There is so little freedom of the press that they can say as much and print it every day! The media have always been one of the *de facto* powers that have dominated Latin American countries. It was they who got presidents elected, dictated policy and sat in judgement. But now there are progressive governments with great legitimacy and popular support—in Ecuador, Argentina, Bolivia, Venezuela—which are not prepared to submit to that media power. And so the media, because they realize they are losing their old privileges, have mounted a permanent campaign to discredit these presidents and their governments, both personally and as political projects, on the national and international level. The major national newspapers in Ecuador are owned by a few families from the oligarchy, which have always been on the right and have in the past supported dictatorships. These are tremendously corrupt businesses, which have grown used to having the government under their control. This might be surprising for those who don't know the Latin American press. But for example, calling Murdoch before the Leveson Inquiry in England—if we had done even a tenth part of that, we would have been seen as attacking freedom of expression. People in Europe and the US don't understand that even asking the media here to pay taxes is interpreted as an attack on freedom of expression. With the kind of press we have in Latin America, it's not heroic, persecuted journalists who denounce the corruption of the political authorities, but often the reverse.

In two specific cases—an article in El Universo by Emilio Palacio after the attempted coup against you in September 2010, and El Gran hermano, a book published the same year detailing allegations of corruption against your

brother—you took the matter before the courts. They found in your favour; but in retrospect, was it wise to sue?

In a state where there is the rule of law, such as Ecuador, it is not journalists who are prosecuted but offences. That newspaper committed the offence of defamation and libel, saying that I ordered the armed forces to fire on a hospital full of civilians. What would happen in England if a newspaper printed that the Queen was guilty of crimes against humanity? Over there such slanders would be inadmissible, but here it's 'freedom of the press'. The law forbids defamation, and we have almost 12,000 such cases here. But when one of those cases is against a journalist or a newspaper, it becomes an assault on freedom of expression. In fact, *Vanguardia* magazine has just taken out a suit for defamation against our Minister for Labour Relations, for accusing them of not complying with labour regulations. The media are practising the very thing they criticize every day. I know there is a debate over whether to penalize libel or not. Personally, I'm in favour of penalizing it—I don't understand why, if you can go to prison for not paying royalties, someone who takes away another person's honour and dignity shouldn't also go to prison. There is a double standard at work here. I believe one way of confronting the power of the media—its excesses, its corruption, its bad faith—is by applying the law. And the law should apply to everyone.

This may be true when there is a large political question at issue, but wouldn't it be sensible to make exceptions in some cases?

In the case of *El Universo*, all possibilities had been exhausted. The Constitution states that when incorrect information is printed, a correction must be made immediately. They never corrected it. During the initial trial, at the appeal, at the court of cassation, they were told: correct the error and it's over, we don't want to put anyone in prison or make millions out of anyone. But such was the arrogance of these people, with the complicity of other national and international media. For instance, *El Universo* has just been given a prize by Columbia University, which said that the paper had been sued for calling me a dictator. A lie! It called me a criminal against humanity and said I'd ordered the army to fire on a hospital full of civilians.⁷

⁷ *El Universo* was one of five recipients of a 2012 Maria Moors Cabot Prize for reporting on Latin America; other winners included Teodoro Petkoff, whose newspaper *Tal Cual* has repeatedly compared the Venezuelan president to Hitler.

You mentioned the magazine Vanguardia, recently raided by the tax police for failure to comply with labour regulations. Given that this is an organ of opinion, wasn't there a better way to tackle its offences?

But these are not separate things. The media fail to comply with labour regulations because they think they are untouchable. To tell you the truth, I didn't know about the action against *Vanguardia*, and neither did the Minister for Labour Relations. The decision was made by a functionary at the ministry. There had already been 3,000 labour inspections, and 300 cases of legal action, and the functionary didn't see why he had to make an exception for *Vanguardia*. We seized their property. With the other 300, nothing happened. But because we seized the property of a media company, it became an attack on freedom of expression. We need to overcome this blackmail. It was one more business that did not comply with labour regulations, and the law should apply to all. It's an attack on the rule of law to think that, because you have a media company, you are above the law.

In the wake of your government's decision to grant asylum to Julian Assange, the British government threatened to enter the Ecuadorean embassy and forcibly remove him—Foreign Secretary William Hague evidently believing he was Lord Palmerston.

Britain's threat was a colossal error which legitimized Ecuador's position all the more.

Did the Ecuadorean government offer to allow Swedish prosecutors to question Assange? And if so, what was the Swedish response?

This is a crucial point, of which the British and Swedish people should be aware. In addition to the attempts to denigrate our government for not having submitted to the imperial powers—saying that there is a dictator here and so on—there was this idea that we were trying to obstruct Swedish justice. A lie! We spent months in discussions trying to obtain guarantees that if Assange were extradited to Sweden, he would not then be extradited to a third country. We proposed that the Swedish prosecutor question Assange—he is wanted for questioning, he has not yet been charged with anything—in the Ecuadorean embassy in London, as Swedish law perfectly well permits, and as has been done in other cases; it can even be done by video. With perhaps a dose of arrogance, they said

no, they didn't want to. Faced with this unwillingness to explore options that would allow the alleged offence to be investigated, and with the lack of guarantees that Assange would not be extradited to a third country, we saw clear signs of political persecution and risks to Assange's life, and made a sovereign decision to grant him asylum. But the British and Swedish people should be very clear on this: no one here had any wish to obstruct the course of Swedish justice—we tried to facilitate it in every way, but it was they who refused.

In a way, it was Bradley Manning who made possible the entire Wikileaks 'Cablegate' operation. What can be done to draw attention to his situation?

If we in Ecuador had done a tenth part of what is being done to Manning, we would be called dictators, authoritarians, uncivilized. But there, no one says a thing. We have reason to believe that due process is not being observed, and that Manning's rights are being violated. But Manning has not asked for asylum, so we can't interfere in what is an internal affair of the United States. International human-rights organizations and the UN have tried to get involved, and have met serious obstacles. I don't justify what Manning did, or everything Assange has done, but our concern is that due process be applied, and that there is no political persecution. Ecuador does not accept the death penalty, it is an assault on human rights; therefore we cannot allow anyone who has requested asylum in Ecuador to be exposed to the death penalty for political crimes in the US. We also see some large contradictions here. It could be said that Manning stole the information, but Assange did not. So what is Assange being accused of? Disseminating secret information of the United States. But didn't the media which bought that information also disseminate it? The *New York Times*, *El País* and the other newspapers—why aren't they being pursued? Once again, it's a question of power. Assange is a mere citizen, the others are media powers.

Did the leaked cables contain any important revelations about Ecuador?

Initially, out of around 3,000 Wikileaks cables on Ecuador, our corrupt press published only what they thought would do no harm. Later we discovered many cases where that same press was criticized—where the US ambassador himself told them, when they went to see him at the start of our administration to complain about the lack of freedom of expression, that they shouldn't tell such lies. The cables also give details

of how rival media groups—Teleamazonas, which belongs to the Banco Pichincha, and TC Televisión and Gamavisión, which belonged to the Isaías brothers—came to an agreement not to air their dirty laundry in public. If you're worried about press freedom, you should read the Wikileaks, where the embassy itself says there is complete press freedom here, and that there are excesses and abuses on the part of the media, who conspire to hide information that is damaging to them.⁸

In the realm of foreign policy, one notable position Ecuador has taken is that it would not participate in the Organization of American States unless Cuba was readmitted. What was the thinking behind this policy?

How can it be called a Summit of the Americas without Cuba? Cuba was deliberately excluded from the OAS because 'there is no democracy there'. There is no liberal democracy as the US understands it. But Pinochet's Chile—a bloody military dictatorship which toppled a democratic civilian government—was never excluded. There is a double standard here. As Fidel Castro has put it, the OAS has served as the US's Colonial Ministry. And in this day and age, we in Latin America can't continue to allow that. That is why Ecuador declared that we would not attend any Summit of the Americas while Cuba was not present. We did not go to the Sixth Summit in Cartagena this year, in protest; when the subject of Cuba was discussed, 31 out of the 33 countries attending—the exceptions were the US and Canada—agreed that the island had to be present at the next summit. I think this marked an important point in the history of Latin America. We have moved from the Washington Consensus to consensus without Washington.

⁸ For example, a February 2009 cable from the US embassy in Quito stated that Correa had 'with some justification' painted the media 'as aligned with the country's political and business elite and therefore an obstacle to the change agenda of his Citizens' Revolution', while noting that 'the private media has shown solidarity in defending themselves against the attacks and continues to report and comment critically on Correa and his government'. See cable 09QUITO108, available at wikileaks.org.

II. POSTSCRIPT

NLR posed some follow-up questions to Rafael Correa once the interview above had been transcribed. The President was unable to address these before the issue went to press, but his answers on the government's relations with Ecuador's indigenous movements and on the 2007–08 constitutional process are published below. The full interview will be available in the Spanish-language edition of NLR 77, available online at www.newleftreview.es.

You've said that Ecuador's indigenous movements have made an important contribution to the Citizens' Revolution, but some of them, such as CONAIE, have been very critical of your government. What have been the principal points of difference and what forms of resolution have you sought?

Three moments are crucial to understanding relations between our government and the indigenous movement. The first came during the election campaign of 2006, when our electoral coalition Alizana País approached the leaders of the indigenous grouping, Pachakutik, with the offer to run joint candidates.⁹ We did this despite the fact that Pachakutik had been discredited and lost a good deal of support by serving in the 2003–05 government of Lucio Gutiérrez, who was finally chased out of office by a popular insurrection. Gutiérrez was a colonel who had been elected in an alliance with the left and then betrayed all its principles—declaring himself Bush's best ally, supporting Plan Colombia, offering to sign a Free Trade Agreement with the US, appointing a banker as Finance Minister and running the economy on neoliberal lines. Pachakutik had four ministers in his cabinet, and even though the party itself withdrew from the alliance after seven months, several Pachakutik leaders remained in office until the last day of the Gutiérrez administration. After this, many saw Pachakutik as just another establishment party.

⁹ CONAIE (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador): confederation founded in 1986 by over two dozen indigenous organizations, including representatives of peoples from the highlands, Amazon and the coast. Movimiento de Unidad Plurinacional Pachakutik (MUPP): electoral vehicle launched by indigenous activists in 1995; the Quechua word *pachakutik*—meaning 'change', 'rebirth', 'transformation'—was the name of a 15th-century Inca ruler, but had also been applied to a wave of indigenous protests that swept the country in June 1990.

Despite this, and because we respected the indigenous movement's trajectory, we proposed a joint Alianza País–Pachakutik ticket for the presidency, headed by whoever would have the best chance of winning the election—to be decided by a national survey on the question—with the other standing as Vice President. They refused, and some were very hostile to us because of this offer. It's been suggested that, after their experience with Gutiérrez, there was opposition in their ranks to supporting any candidate outside their own movement; that might be true, but I think the leadership was also moving farther away from its base, and it knew that working with us would mean opening up the political agenda. When they rejected our proposal we offered the candidacy to Lenín Moreno; five years later, that decision looks to have been a wise one because he has been the Vice President of all Ecuadoreans and not just one sector of the population.¹⁰ His work on behalf of the disabled has been important, and he is now a much-loved figure across the whole country. In the 2006 election, we went into the second round against the multi-millionaire banana magnate, Alvaro Noboa, with 23 per cent of the vote, while the Pachakutik candidate had only got 2 per cent. People no longer saw them as a force capable of fighting for change.

And the second moment?

The second moment came in 2007–08, with the National Constituent Assembly. Alianza País won 80 out of 130 seats in the Assembly elections, a comfortable majority. All the same, we tabled each and every one of the points on the indigenous agenda, despite the fact that Pachakutik had won very few Assembly seats. As part of that debate, we declared the pluri-national and inter-cultural character of the Ecuadorean state, a long-standing indigenous demand. Ten years earlier, when Pachakutik had won 10 per cent of the seats in the 1998 constituent assembly, they hadn't been able to get that passed although they were stronger then. We, on the other hand, were well aware of the historical legitimacy of that declaration and insisted on the concept of pluri-nationality from the first day of the Assembly. This did not mean, however, committing ourselves to a fragmentation of the state or an end to national unity. The idea has always been to recognize diversity and difference in order to be

¹⁰ Lenín Voltaire Moreno Garcés, b. 1953, former civil servant, left paraplegic after being shot by muggers in 1998; campaigner for disability rights and proponent of laughter therapy as relief for intractable pain.

more integrated and cohesive as a nation, not so as to make room for any kind of territorial autonomy that weakens the national state. The left also recognized the rights of nature, the possibility of forming indigenous territorial electoral districts, the right to water as a public good and the idea of community democracy.

Of course, there were tough debates in the Constituent Assembly on certain points. We did not agree to the idea that communities would have to give prior consent when the state wanted to make use of the country's strategic resources; this generated a lot of discontent in some sectors close to the indigenous movement. Natural resources are public goods, public property, and we cannot allow small communities, however great their historical legitimacy, to have the last word on their use. In the end, the Constitution included the concept of 'prior consultation', which features in the ILO's Convention 169.¹¹ In any case, in the referendum held on 28 September 2008 to approve the *Carta Magna*—the Supreme Law—Pachakutik supported the 'Yes' option, and we won with 63 per cent of the popular vote. Despite our differences with the indigenous movement, it was possible to share many positions—the fight against neoliberalism, for example—and to move forward politically, in dialogue. This was what was destroyed later by the intransigence of some of its leaders and their parcellized view of the country. We govern for all Ecuadoreans, and we cannot yield to the pressure of minorities, however justified their demands might seem.

The third moment came with the 2009 elections, which were held on the basis of the new Constitution. There are two elements here: on the one hand, we made alliances with the indigenous movement in particular areas—for example in Imbabura and Chimborazo, territories with a large indigenous population, where Alianza País candidates drawn from indigenous organizations won convincingly. In other areas alliances did not materialize, but we established relations with the middle ranks and the indigenous base; that has been our strategy, given the impossibility

¹¹ Reference to ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (C169), adopted in 1989; Article 15, Clause 2 states that 'In cases in which the State retains the ownership of mineral or sub-surface resources or rights to other resources pertaining to lands, governments shall establish or maintain procedures through which they shall consult these peoples, with a view to ascertaining whether and to what degree their interests would be prejudiced, before undertaking or permitting any programmes for the exploration or exploitation of such resources.'

of dialogue with some of the indigenous leaders. On the other hand, in the wake of the 2009 elections an inflexible, corporatist view took hold among some of the CONAIE leaders. They had grown accustomed to dictating ‘mandates’ to the central government, which it was supposed to accept simply because they came from these leaders. They were not prepared for democratic debate and wouldn’t accept that a party elected by the people should govern in accordance with the programme on which it ran for office. These leaders think their mandates are legitimate simply because they have been the victims. That cannot be allowed.

In the debates on the water law, the mining law and other bills, it was becoming impossible to debate with Pachakutik. Their view is fundamentalist and strongly influenced by foreign NGOs, who provide a distorted ecological discourse that fails to take into account the great needs of the Ecuadorean people. The Bolivian Vice President has just written a book on how NGOs are jointly responsible for the loss of state sovereignty over large stretches of the Amazon.¹² We are no strangers to this reality in Ecuador. In the case of the water law, we were agreed on 80 per cent of the legislation, but Pachakutik clung to the idea that the state body in charge of running the country’s water supply should be composed only of community representatives, *comuneros* and water committees. What about democratic legitimacy? How can we have a public regulatory body for a sector as important for the country as water without the political presence of the government, of the national state? There are conceptual differences here: we are not corporatists; the indigenous leaders often seek to have institutions which they can control, but we go beyond this fragmented view of the state. The upshot was that Pachakutik, lining up with the right opposition in the Assembly, did not allow the water law to be approved, and today we still have the same law that was passed by the neoliberals in the 1990s—one that doesn’t allow the state to regulate the water sector. That’s just one example. There are several others on which Pachakutik has consistently voted with the right: they did not support the creation of ALBA; they did not support the establishment of the SUCRE and the regional financial architecture¹³; they have just abstained on a vote condemning the scandalous ruling recently handed down by the ICSID that Ecuador should pay more than \$2.2 billion to Occidental

¹² Alvaro García Linera, *Geopolítica de la Amazonía: Poder haciendal-patrimonial y acumulación capitalista*, La Paz 2012.

¹³ SUCRE (Sistema Unitario de Compensación Regional): virtual currency and common unit of account adopted by members of ALBA and Ecuador in November 2008.

Petroleum.¹⁴ Finally, during the attempt to destabilize our democracy made on 30 September 2010, the indigenous leadership called on its base to mobilize against the President and his democratic and constitutional mandate. It is not easy to have a dialogue in these conditions.

Believe me when I say this situation weighs on me. When I was younger I lived for a time in one of the most deprived indigenous areas in the country. There I learnt a little *kichwa*, learnt the rigours of indigenous-peasant life, did literacy work and political training with people who are now leading the CONAIE. I understand the issues involved, and I think we can do much more for those sectors, but it is difficult to have dialogue when political outlooks are so narrow. I have always treated the indigenous movement as equals—none of this infantilizing of indigenous actors or treating them as victims, as NGOs and a certain paternalist left have always done—which means that I can sometimes be tough with them, as I am with anyone else. We don't share the view of the indigenous question as a problem only for the indigenous, to be dealt with through indigenous institutions. That is the standpoint of the multicultural neoliberalism which proliferated in Latin America in the 1990s. The indigenous problem is an issue for Ecuador as a whole, and all public institutions should contribute to solving it, regardless of whether they are run by indigenous people or not. From that point of view we have made great strides towards the inclusion of the indigenous in education, universities, health, among other sectors. The largest reductions in poverty we have made have been among the indigenous. But there is still much to be done.

You've touched on the 2008 popular-constitutional process, which has been a common feature of the left-reformist Bolivarian governments in Latin America over the past decade. What form did this take in Ecuador, and what social and political problems did the Constituent Assembly seek to address?

The call for a new Constituent Assembly was our response to the demand, *¡Que se vayan todos!*—'Out with all of them!'—of the popular insurrection that toppled the Gutiérrez government in 2005, known as the 'rebellion of the outlaws'. We were trying to give this aspiration

¹⁴ In October, the International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes, a World Bank body, ordered Ecuador to pay Oxy \$1.77 billion plus accumulated interest over a contract dispute from 2006; see 'Ecuador vs US Oil: Quito loses a round', FT.com, 6 October 2012.

concrete form, in a radical but democratic and constitutional way. The actors and parties who had governed Ecuador since 1979 now lacked all legitimacy. We aimed to lay the basis for a new contract that would allow the country to emerge from neoliberalism, recover national sovereignty over strategic resources, and put the democratic state back into the forefront of social policy. The call for a new Constituent Assembly allowed us to gain people's trust and to restore the value of the word as a substantive part of the country's political life, despite the fact that we did not have an organized party. We secured the support of 80 per cent of Ecuadoreans in the referendum on establishing the Constituent Assembly. That was the first major defeat of the right and the reactionary forces in the country.

Once the Assembly was in place, the challenges facing it were immense. We were trying to set out the constitutional bases not only for the actions of our government, but for the Ecuadorean state and society in the coming decades. We were inspired by various democratic ideals and popular experiences, but the text itself is a national response to our concrete problems and utopias. At the same time, we were innovative and creative with our proposals: ideas such as the 'rights of nature', 'universal citizenship', Ecuador as a 'territory free of foreign military bases', among others, were forged in the heat of debates between Assembly members and society.¹⁵ Perhaps we were ingenuous or excessively idealistic on some issues, but that is also what any constituent process is about—producing a horizon of aspirations that allows us to imagine ourselves as a country, within the framework of a collective project. One example of an imaginative, endogenous response to our specific political experience is what the Supreme Law terms *muerte cruzada*, 'mutual death': in the case of clashes between the executive and legislative powers, this allows one to request the termination of the other's functions, resulting in immediate general elections for both powers. This arrangement, particular to parliamentary regimes—although our political system is presidentialist—provides an institutional solution for the country's recurrent political crises. We must not forget that between 1996 and 2005, no president managed to finish his term, and three were toppled amidst large-scale social mobilizations.

¹⁵ On the rights of nature, see Constitución del Ecuador, 2008, Title II, Chapter VII; on universal citizenship, see Title VIII, Ch. I, Art. 416.6; on bases, Title I, Ch. I, Art. 5.

The Constitution marks out a horizon for us, but it doesn't automatically solve the country's problems. The real political struggle began after the Constitution was approved, amid a process of institutional transition that involved a raft of legislation to give concrete form to the constitutional principles. In 2010, when we approved a law mandated by the Constitution—the Law on Public Service—the most retrograde forces in the country mobilized violently against the government and put democracy on the brink. It's no coincidence that the post-constituent transition has been more tense and conflict-ridden than the constituent process itself.