

A note about the failed coup in Ecuador

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1. What happened yesterday in Ecuador?

There was an attempted coup d'état.

It was not, as various Latin America media reported, an “institutional crisis”, as if what happened had been a jurisdictional conflict between the executive and the legislature rather than an open insurrection by one branch of the executive, the National Police, whose members make up a small army of 40,000 men, against the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of Ecuador, who is none other than the legitimately elected president. Neither was it as U.S. Under Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Arturo Valenzuela claimed, “an act of police insubordination”. Would it have been characterized this way if the equivalent of the Ecuadoran National Police in the U.S. had beaten and physically assaulted Barack Obama, injuring him? Or if they had kidnapped him and held him in custody for 12 hours in a police hospital until a special army commando unit liberated him following a fierce gun battle? Certainly not. But given that we are talking about a Latin American leader, what in the U.S. would sound like an intolerable aberration is made to appear like a schoolyard prank here.

Generally speaking, all the media oligopolies offered a distorted version of what occurred yesterday, carefully avoiding talking about an attempted coup. Instead they referred to it as a “police uprising” which, from any perspective, converts Thursday’s events into a relatively insignificant anecdote. It is an old rightwing ploy, always interested in minimizing the importance of the outrages committed by its supporters and magnifying the errors and problems of its adversaries. For that reason it is worth remembering the words of President Rafael Correa in the early hours of Friday morning when he characterized the events as a “conspiracy” to perpetrate a “coup d’état”. A “conspiracy” because, as was more than evident yesterday, there were other actors who demonstrated their support for the coup as it was underway: Was it not elements of the Ecuadoran Air Force – and not the National Police – that paralyzed the Quito International Airport and the small airfield used for regional flights? And were there not groups of politicians who took to the streets and plazas to support the coup leaders? Was not ex-president Lucio Gutierrez’s own lawyer one of the fanatics who tried to forcibly enter into the installations of Ecuador National Television? Didn’t Jaime Nebot, the mayor of Guayaquil and a major rival of President Correa, claim that this was a power struggle between an authoritarian, despotic character, Correa, and a sector of the police, mistaken in their methodology but justified in their complaints? This false equivalency between the two parties to the conflict was an indirect confession of his complacency about current events and his deep desire to be free of this – until now at least – unassailable political enemy.

And don’t even mention the lamentable reversal by the “indigenous” movement Pachakutik, which in

the middle of the crisis made public its call to the “indigenous movement, social movements, and democratic political organizations to form a united national front to demand the ouster of President Correa.” “Life brings surprises”, said Pedro Navaja; but it is not much of a surprise when one takes note of the generous aid that USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy have provided in the last few years to “empower” the Ecuadoran people via its parties and social movements.

Conclusion: It was not a small isolated group within the police trying to carry out a coup, but rather a group of social and political actors at the service of the local oligarchy and imperialism, who will never forgive Correa for having ordered the removal of the US military base at Manta and the audit of Ecuador’s foreign debt and its incorporation into ALBA, among many other actions. Incidentally, the Ecuadoran police have for many years, like other forces in the region, been trained and supported by their US counterpart. Have they provided some sort of civic education or instruction regarding the necessary subordination of the armed forces and police to civilian authority? Apparently not. In reality, this makes clear the need to put an end, without further delay, to the “cooperation” between security forces in the majority of the countries in Latin America and the United States. It is already well-known what is taught in those courses.

2. Why did the coup fail?

Basically for three reasons. First, because of the rapid and effective mobilization of significant sectors of the Ecuadoran population which, in spite of the danger that existed, took to the streets and plazas to manifest their support for President Correa. What happened is what should always happen in situations like this: the defense of the constitutional order is effective to the extent that it is taken up directly by the people, acting as protagonists and not simply as spectators to the political struggles of their times.

Without this presence of the people in the streets and plazas, a fact that Machiavelli had pointed out 500 years ago, there is no nation that can resist the onslaught of the guardians of the old order. The institutional framework alone is incapable of guaranteeing the stability of a democratic regime. Right wing forces are too powerful and have dominated that framework for centuries. Only the active and militant presence of the people in the streets can thwart the plans of the coup leaders.

Second, the coup was prevented because the popular mobilization that developed so quickly within Ecuador was accompanied by rapid and overwhelming international solidarity that began to take action with the very first news of the coup and that, among other things, precipitated the very opportune convocation of an urgent and extraordinary meeting of UNASUR in Buenos Aires. The clear backing received by Correa from the governments of South America and several from Europe was effective because it made clear that the future of the coup makers, had their plans ultimately proved successful, would have been ostracism as well as political, economic and international isolation. Once again it was shown that UNASUR functions and is effective, and that the crisis could be resolved, as was that of Bolivia in 2008, without intervention in South America by outside interests.

Third, but not least in importance, is the courage demonstrated by President Correa, who would not give in and who forcefully resisted the harassment and the kidnapping to which he had been subjected in spite of the evident fact that his life was in danger and that, up until the last moment, when he left the hospital, his car was fired upon with clear intention to assassinate him. Correa showed that he possesses the courage required to successfully confront the huge political machines. If he had wavered, if he had been intimidated, or if he had indicated willingness to submit to the plans of his captors, the results would have been different. The combination of these three factors -

the internal popular mobilization, international solidarity, and the president's courage - brought about the isolation of the mutineers, weakening them and facilitating the rescue operation carried out by the Ecuadoran army.

3. Could it happen again?

Yes, because the foundations of coups have deep roots in Latin American societies and in the foreign policy of the United States toward this part of the world. If one reviews the recent history of our countries, one sees clearly that attempted coups haven taken place in Venezuela (2002), Bolivia (2008), Honduras (2009) and Ecuador (2010), i.e., in four countries characterized by being home to significant processes of economic and social transformation, as well as by their membership in ALBA. No government of the right has been disrupted by this coup phenomenon, whose oligarchic and imperialist trademark cannot be hidden. For just that reason, the world leader in human rights violations, Alvaro Uribe - with his thousands of disappearances, his mass graves, and his "false positives" - never had to worry about military insurrections against him during his eight year's in power.

It is also very unlikely that any of the region's right-wing governments will be victims of attempted coups in the coming years. Of the four coups that have occurred in ALBA countries since 2002, three have failed and only one, the one perpetrated in Honduras against Mel Zelaya, was successfully carried out.(*). The significant factor there was its surprise execution in the middle of the night, a fact that kept the news from becoming known until the next morning and that prevented the people from having time to take control of the streets and plazas. When the people were able to mobilize, it was too late because Zelaya had been physically removed from the country. Furthermore, the international response was slow and lukewarm, lacking the necessary speed and decisiveness that was demonstrated in the Ecuadoran case. The lesson to be learned: the rapidity of popular democratic reaction is essential to deactivate the sequence of actions and processes of the coup makers, a sequence which is rarely anything more than the unleashing of initiatives which, in the absence of obstacles placed in their path, are mutually reinforcing. If the people's response is not immediate, the coup process strengthens, and when you want to stop it, it is too late. And the same should be said of international solidarity, which to be effective must be immediate and unyielding in its defense of the existing political order. Fortunately these conditions occurred in the Ecuadoran case and, as a result, the attempted coup failed. But let's delude ourselves: the oligarchy and imperialism will again attempt, perhaps by other means, to overthrow those governments that refuse to surrender to their demands.

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(*) The four coups referred to above correspond to other ALBA nations. One must also add to our list the case of Haiti, which was not included because it was not part of ALBA. On February 28, 2004, Jean-Bertrand Aristide was kidnapped, also in the wee hours of the night, forced onto an aircraft chartered by the government of the United States, forced to present his renunciation, and transported to an African country. As in the other cases, there were also huge popular protests in Haiti demanding the restoration of Aristide to the presidency, but all to no avail.

P.S.

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