The Permanent Campaign of Rafael Correa: Making Ecuador's Plebiscitary Presidency

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Analysts developed the notion of the permanent campaign to describe how presidents and prime ministers employ political marketing techniques in their quest to mobilize public support. To date, most scholarly studies of the phenomenon have focused on its features and consequences in advanced democracies. This study expands the analysis of the permanent campaign by examining its relationship to the rise of an extreme version of the plebiscitary presidency in the Andean region of Latin America. Through an examination of the administration of Rafael Correa in Ecuador, we show how the permanent campaign has been used as part of a strategy to secure the president's stay in office and effect far-reaching constitutional change. In countries where mechanisms of accountability are already weak, we conclude that conjoining of the plebiscitary presidency and the permanent campaign is likely to exacerbate the accountability deficit and generate problematic consequences for democratic political development.

Keywords: *permanent campaign; plebiscitary presidency; presidential communication; democracy; Ecuador*

The "permanent campaign" entered the American political lexicon more than a quarter century ago and quickly became a staple in the analysis of presidential politics. Coined by President Jimmy Carter's pollster Patrick Cadell and popularized by journalist Sidney Blumenthal, the term was embraced as useful shorthand for describing the seamless joining of the techniques of political campaigning with the act of governing. Reflecting on the new development, Blumenthal (1982, 7) described the phenomenon as one in which governing became a perpetual campaign and government becomes an "instrument designed to sustain an elected official's popularity." The term became virtually synonymous with the communications strategies of the Clinton presidency (Jones 1996; Harris 2000; Miroff 2000). The notion continued to serve analysts in understanding the dynamics in the Bush White House (Cook 2002).

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Admittedly, the permanent campaign is a wide-ranging concept that refers to various aspects of how political marketing techniques have become intertwined with and essential to the act of governing. Echoing the original formulation by Blumenthal, Ornstein and Mann (2000, 219) defined it as the state in which the "process of campaigning and the process of governing have each lost their distinctiveness." In a similar vein, Heclo (2000, 17) described it as "a non-stop process seeking to manipulate public approval to engage in the act of governing itself." Disaggregating the concept, Needham identified the component elements of the permanent campaign (2005, 344). According to Needham, the defining feature of the permanent campaign is found in the significant role that campaign consultants such as pollsters or media experts play in shaping the conduct of elected leaders and government policy. Using the information provided by polls and focus groups, these experts mount strategies that are intended to bolster the popularity of leaders, a resource that in turn becomes a "bargaining chip" in political conflicts. Scholars using the permanent campaign as a point of departure frequently opt to focus on a single dimension such as the use of polling in government decision-making (Tenpas and McCann 2007) or how travel and public appearances figure into a president's broader political strategy (Cook 2002; Doherty 2007).

Analysts concur that the permanent campaign in the United States went hand in hand with the rise of the "plebiscitary presidency." According to Theodore Lowi, the plebiscitary presidency marked a new approach to governance, one in which presidents sought to mobilize public opinion directly in order to govern "over the heads of congress and the party leaders" (1985, 65). As parties progressively weakened during the course of the 20th century and legislators turned into free agents, presidents shed their traditional role as "bargainers" in the system, opting instead to "go public" and make their case to the electorate as a way of cowing a recalcitrant congress (Kernell 1993). The coming of age of the polling industry and broadcast media made it possible for presidents to hone their messages and reach the public in entirely news ways. Communications technology and marketing techniques were marshaled for the purpose of enhancing executive power.

Born in the nexus of the modern presidency and mass communications, the permanent campaign may well be claimed as an American invention. Nonetheless, the permanent campaign also found its way into parliamentary systems as politicians turned to marketing techniques to promote their policy agendas. Scholars have applied the notion to the governance styles of British prime minister Tony Blair (Needham 2005), Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi (Roncaraolo 2005), and Australian prime minister John Howard (Van Onselen and Errington 2007).

Despite the comparative boom in the study of the permanent campaign, most of the literature is still focused on mature democracies. What the proliferation

of the techniques of the permanent campaign may portend for developing democracies is still largely unexplored territory, even as the "Americanization/internationalization" of campaigns and electioneering is widely acknowledged (Farrell 1998; Sussman and Galizio 2003; Plasser 2000). This study is a modest attempt to address that gap; we offer an exploratory case study from Ecuador that examines how the permanent campaign unfolded in conjunction with an extreme variant of the plebiscitary presidency. We conclude with reflections about how these developments complicate and exacerbate the problems of democratic accountability.

The Extreme Plebiscitary Presidency

Like their American counterpart, Latin American presidents are well acquainted with the problems posed by divided government and the mercurial nature of legislative coalitions in undisciplined party systems. Connecting with the mass public in unmediated ways and keeping presidential polling numbers high are recognized as normal tools of the trade in presidential politics. Fully schooled in all the arts of television-focused, poll-driven election campaigning, Latin American candidates turn readily into "media-centric" presidents (*presidentes mediáticos*). The examples are numerous: Brazil's Fernando Collor de Mello, Argentina's Carlos Menem, and Mexico's Carlos Salinas immediately come to mind. More recently, Argentine president Nestor Kirchner happily proclaimed his governing style to be that of the "permanent campaign."[1] With the barriers to immediate presidential reelection dismantled in Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia, the drive to keep the president popular assumes even greater importance.

While harnessing the power of public opinion is high on the agenda of every Latin American president, the most extreme versions of the plebiscitary presidency have emerged in Andean countries. Acute crises of governability gave birth to the trend. Over the last decade, the presidency has become a plebiscitary institution in the most sweeping sense of the term in three Andean countries: Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador. In these countries, a new generation of presidents has sought to mobilize public opinion not just to win battles with congress, but to launch projects aimed at "re-founding" their respective republics. To that end, presidents assumed office with an agenda that depended on staging and winning a succession of high-stakes electoral contests—referenda, constituent assembly elections, and a subsequent round of national elections. Assuming power in a context of crisis and intent on transforming politics, these presidents sought to remake the political system through a series of rapid-fire electoral events aimed at constitutional restructuring, enhancing presidential powers, and resetting the party system in their favor.

The trend began in Venezuela when Hugo Chávez was elected president in 1998. Staging a referendum on a constituent assembly and elections for the

assembly in 1999, Chávez was able to enact a new constitution that endowed the executive with greater powers and allowed for presidential reelection. The electoral wave continued with presidential reelections in 2000 and 2006, a referendum aimed at weakening trade union opposition in 2000, and a surprise 2004 recall vote that Chávez won.

Taking office as the first indigenous president of Bolivia in early 2006, Evo Morales followed Chávez's lead, opting for elections for a constituent assembly. In contrast to Venezuela, the formula proved to be more problematic in Bolivia. While his party enjoyed a majority in the assembly, conflicts between the government and opposition stalled progress and ended in a controversial promulgation of the new constitution in December 2007. To date, the constitutional referendum and new elections remain pending, with Morales likely to seek reelection.

Inaugurated as president of Ecuador in 2007, Rafael Correa moved swiftly, staging a national referendum and elections for a constituent assembly that gave his government decisive victories in both contests. A referendum on the constitution and another round of national elections will take place in 2008. Correa has already announced his intention to run for another term under the new constitution.

Chávez, Morales, and Correa have been classified as presidents who represent the radical, nationalist, and populist side of Latin America's recent "Left Turn" (Castañeda 2006). By effectively side-lining or tamping down competing institutions, Chávez and Correa disposed of the legal obstacles that lay in the way of their plans for leftist transformations, yet they did so in a fashion that ensured a fair share of domestic and international legitimacy for the process. Rather than simply disband congress and suspend the constitution in the style of President Alberto Fujimori's 1992 coup in Peru, these plebiscitary presidents mobilized public opinion and electoral support in advance of their moves to dismantle and re-make institutions.

For Correa and Chávez, presidential popularity and repeated electoral validation have been the linchpins of the process—key elements that allowed presidents to drive ahead with their transformative projects. With so much riding on the president's standing in the polls and at the ballot boxes, the permanent campaign became, by necessity, a critically important feature of how these presidencies function. For a closer look at why and how the extreme plebiscitary presidency and the permanent campaign are conjoined, we turn to the case of Ecuador.

Campaigning to Govern

When Rafael Correa swore in as Ecuador's president in January 2007, he did so with a keen appreciation of the precariousness of power. In the decade prior to his election, Ecuador was one of the most troubled democracies in Latin America, suffering from the syndrome of what Arturo Valenzuela (2004)

termed "presidencies interrupted." Between 1997 and 2005, three elected presidents—Abdalá Bucaram, Jamil Mahuad, and Lucio Gutiérrez—were forced from office prior to completing their terms. In all three cases, mass protests against economic policies and/or corruption provided the justification for congressional opponents to remove the presidents, with the tacit approval of the armed forces. The public's alienation from politics was plain to see in public opinion polls. In three successive democracy audits undertaken in 2001, 2004, and 2006, Ecuadorians expressed a profound lack of confidence in the "central nucleus" of the political system: the national government, congress, and political parties (Seligson 2006). Not surprisingly, the lack of confidence went hand in hand with a widely shared view that politicians were corrupt (Larrea Oña 2007).

Correa entered the 2006 presidential race as a quintessential "outsider," with no previous experience in electoral politics or partisan affiliation. Trained as an economist with a doctorate from the University of Illinois, Correa was tapped by the interim government of President Alfredo Palacio to serve as minister of the economy in 2005. His term lasted little more than one hundred days but Correa used the time to establish an image as a maverick and a virulent critic of neoliberal economic policies. After leaving the ministry, Correa quickly assembled a political vehicle to launch his presidential candidacy, the Movimiento Patria Altiva I Soberana (PAIS). The movement attracted the support of disparate groups on the left, including many activists who had led the charge to force the resignation of President Lucio Gutiérrez in 2005. Nonetheless, the highly fragmented nature of Ecuador's party system virtually ensured that Correa's newly created organization had no hope of electing a majority in the incoming congress, even if Correa was able to win the presidential election.

Facing the prospect of an unruly congress and its tradition of unseating elected presidents, Correa decided to run against the system itself. His targets included the institutions of state and the so-called "political class." Correa vowed that his first act as president would be to sign an executive decree mandating a nationwide vote (*consulta popular*) on his proposal to hold elections for a constituent assembly that would write a new constitution.[2] Correa framed the constituent assembly as a transformative process, one that would radically redistribute political power and put an end to the domination of the traditional parties that he derided as the *partidocracia* (partyarchy). In the economic realm, the constituent assembly would be the vehicle for dismantling neoliberal economic reforms and restoring the managerial and regulatory functions of the state.

In order to undertake this ambitious agenda, Correa insisted that the constituent assembly had to operate with "full powers"—that is, as a body vested with the authority to overrule or dissolve and replace all other existing institutions. With full powers, the constituent assembly could do anything from disbanding the incumbent congress to handing powers to the president to govern by decree.

Correa matched his "maximalist" position on the constitutional assembly with another controversial decision. Approaching the start of the official campaign season in August 2006, Correa announced that PAIS would not run a slate of congressional candidates. It was a bold move, one that unequivocally identified his candidacy with the prevailing anti-political mood of the electorate. Moreover, it tied the viability of his prospective presidency and his survival in office to the drive for a constituent assembly. In the absence of an assembly capable of vetoing or dissolving congress, Correa would likely face the same conspiratorial maneuvering that had brought down previous presidents.

With a clear anti-establishment message, the marketing of Correa as the hip, contrarian candidate of change began. In mid-2006, Vinicio Alvarado took the reins as campaign director and media strategist. An executive of the Creacional public relations firm, Alvarado was a veteran of previous presidential campaigns. As a candidate, Correa provided Alvarado with the raw materials to win: he was young, good looking, upbeat, and indefatigable on the campaign trail.

Alvarado, joined by other Creacional staffers, crafted a sophisticated, multifaceted media campaign that introduced the man and the message to voters. Their official documentary told Correa's personal story. Born to a family of modest means in Guayaquil, Correa was a former Boy Scout, a devoted Roman Catholic mission volunteer, a scholarship winner, and a dedicated family man. But he was no milquetoast. On the campaign stump, Correa projected the image of an angry, macho leader who relished the prospect of smacking down those who might stand in the way of his proposed Citizens' Revolution. Alvarado was credited with the slogan that captured Correa's aggressive style and cleverly played on the candidate's last name, which can be translated as "belt" or "whip": "*Se viene el correazo*" (Here comes a whipping). The slogan later morphed into "*Dale Correa*" (Hit 'em Correa)—a cry that referred to Correa's confrontation with elites. During campaign appearances in the first round of the election, Correa brandished a belt to make the point.[3]

Alvarado ran a campaign that mixed old and new modes of electioneering and political marketing. In a tradition typical of Latin American campaigns, Correa traveled around the country in motorized caravans, stopping to press the flesh and appear at rallies. Correa campaigned like a rock star. Dressed in denim jeans and jacket, the candidate danced and strummed his guitar alongside popular musicians who were a staple at his rallies. The crowds sang along with campaign songs that ran the gamut from a witty take-off on the Twisted Sisters' "We're Not Gonna Take It" to a soaring ballad entitled "Dreams." It was a campaign designed to evoke youth, good times, and a cocky rejection of the past. The outreach to younger voters was evident on the campaign's content-laden website (www.rafaelcorrea.com), which included options to download its popular songs and television commercials.

Alvarado used television and radio strategically and effectively. During the first two weeks of the official campaign period, Correa outspent his competitors on television and radio spots. In the same period, Correa saw his support in polls jump from 15 percent to 22 percent, placing him at the top of a crowded field of 13 presidential candidates vying to make it into the second-round run-off. Emilio Espinoza, a veteran radio producer, oversaw an informal network of 45 radio stations that provided extended air time and sympathetic coverage to Correa.

Alvarado's advertising was witty, bold, and eye-catching. Television spots hammered home Correa's anti-party message by depicting rivals as everything from ravenous animals to clowns, and ending with a simple invocation: "*Ya Basta*" (Enough's enough!). Alvarado's designs turned Correa and PAIS into a brand name, instantly recognizable thanks to the sharp chartreuse color, distinctive lettering, logos, and the slogans used in ads and campaign materials.

As Correa's strategists readily acknowledged, their campaign benefited greatly from the missteps and heavy-handedness of Correa's principal opponent, Alvaro Noboa. Noboa, a Bible-thumping billionaire and Ecuador's richest man, launched his third consecutive bid for the presidency using his electoral vehicle, the Partido Renovación Institucional Acción Nacional (PRIAN). Saturating the airwaves with television ads and mobilizing an extensive clientele network based in his business empire and charitable foundation, Noboa bested Correa in the first round of the presidential election, garnering 27 percent of the vote to Correa's 23 percent.[4] Shocked by the second-place finish, the Correa campaign rebounded in the runoff election, blasting Noboa as an exploitive, capitalist oligarch who would run the country as if it were one of his own banana plantations. Noboa responded with attacks that portrayed Correa as dangerous leftist and friend of Hugo Chávez. The bitter, polarized contest concluded on November 26, 2006, when voters rendered their decision: they gave Correa a decisive victory, bestowing 57 percent of the vote. Yet, as one campaign concluded, another was joined. With congressional opponents assembling to block Correa's proposed referendum on a constituent assembly, Correa understood that his survival in office depended on winning the battle for public opinion.

Governing to Campaign

Taking office in mid-January 2007, Correa immediately faced the consequences of having ceded congress to his political rivals. Boasting the largest congressional delegation, Noboa's PRIAN stood ready to block Correa's plan for a constituent assembly, striking alliances with Lucio Gutiérrez's Partido Sociedad Patriótico (PSP) and the rightist Partido Social Cristiano (PSC). Arguing that Correa's plan to convoke a referendum on the issue was unconstitutional, the anti-assembly majority in congress was a direct threat to the new president. If the majority could block the proposal for a constituent

assembly, it was not difficult to imagine scenarios in which a presidential impeachment could follow. Nor could Correa afford a constituent assembly controlled by his foes; an anti-Correa assembly with "full powers" could easily use those to remove the president. Facing the prospect of a "presidency interrupted," Correa confronted three immediate challenges. First, he had to make sure that neither congress nor other institutions such as the electoral tribunal or constitutional tribunal could block the staging of a referendum on the constituent assembly. Second, he had to win the referendum. Third, Correa needed to win a majority of seats in the incoming assembly.

By November 2007, Correa had achieved all three objectives. From January through March, the Correa administration waged a highly charged public campaign against congressional opponents and threatened the electoral tribunal. A war of nerves and a convoluted legal battle ensued; it ended when the electoral tribunal reversed its opposition to the referendum and scheduled the referendum on the constituent assembly for April 15, 2007. In the course of the conflict, Correa's congressional opponents were stripped of their seats, as were members of the constitutional tribunal who were charged by the electoral tribunal of obstructing the electoral process.

Leading the campaign for the "yes" vote on the assembly in the April referendum, Correa scored an overwhelming victory, winning the endorsement of 82 percent of the electorate. The September elections for the constituent assembly rendered another stunning victory for Correa. His PAIS slate won a solid majority, 80 of the 130 seats in the assembly. The victory guaranteed that Correa and the PAIS caucus would enjoy complete control over the writing of the new constitution. Convening in November 2007, the assembly immediately voted to suspend the sitting congress. Thus, in the march to the constituent assembly, Correa effectively eliminated what remained of party and institutionally based opposition.

The pressing need to keep the public firmly aligned with the president and to win two successive electoral victories necessitated a permanent campaign. The "war-room" of the 2006 election campaign was recreated in the presidential palace. In a key appointment, Correa named Vincio Alvarado to serve as secretary of public administration. The job gave Alvarado broad jurisdiction in the executive branch that included effective control over the palace's secretariat of communications. Roberto Puga, another Creacional executive and veteran of the 2006 campaign, joined Alvarado in strategizing communications policy. Santiago Pérez, the campaign's pollster, continued polling for the communications operations in the presidential palace. Emilio Espinoza, the coordinator of Correa's 2006 radio campaign, stayed on to coordinate the president's radio strategy.

As shown in Table 1, Correa took office with impressive poll numbers that showed his public approval at 73 percent and a positive credibility rating of 68

Table 1
Presidential approval and credibility ratings, January–December 2007

Survey Dates	Approval	Credibility	Events
January 15	73	68	Correa inaugurated, January 15
February 15	71	67	
March 15	69	65	
April 24	76	74	Referendum on constituent assembly, April 15
May 30	67	62	
June 25	62	54	
July 31	59	53	
August 31	56	56	
September 28	63	57	Constituent assembly elections, September 30
October 30	72	66	
November 30	72	63	Constituent assembly installed, November 15
December 23	64	55	

Source: Centro de Estudios y Datos CEDATOS, http://www.cedatos.com.ec/contenido.asp?id=46 (accessed March 28, 2008).

percent. At the same time, more than 70 percent of the public favored a constituent assembly.[5] In Alvarado's view, Correa's popularity and credibility were inseparable elements. As a leader who had run against politics-as-usual, Correa had to show that he was a man of action in office, a president who delivered substantive public policy.[6] In his first months in office, Correa delivered a steady stream of popular policies. He doubled poverty assistance payments, doubled credits available for housing loans, and reduced electricity rates for low-income consumers. Moreover, Correa clearly made good on his political promises, successfully pursuing a referendum and installing a constituent assembly. As Correa's approval ratings show, the elections and the constituent assembly were events that heightened the president's popularity.

To keep the president and his government's accomplishments ever present in the minds of voters, Alvarado oversaw a multi-faceted communications strategy. As in the 2006 election, radio was the centerpiece of the administration's efforts to address the public on its own terms, without the interference of journalists. One of their first innovations was the inauguration of a weekly radio program for the president, "The President Dialogues with his Constituents." Broadcast by more than 150 radio stations around the country and aired every Saturday morning for two hours, the show provided Correa with a format to publicize his government's accomplishments and lambaste his opponents. While Correa's critics were quick to draw the parallel between Correa's show and Hugo Chávez's weekly television show, "*Aló Presidente,*" the idea was not Chávez-inspired.[7] The show had national roots. Emilio Espinoza,

the show's producer, had worked in the 1990s for Abdalá Bucaram, the flamboyant populist politician and short-lived president who had pioneered the extensive use of radio programming during his career.

While the idea of using radio was not new, the sophisticated political management of the programming is noteworthy. Prior to the broadcast, a palace-based advance team travels to the show's locale to brief the local media on the president's visit. The broadcast is often done in tandem with "traveling cabinets" in which ministers are deployed to the show's location to meet with local authorities and discuss community problems. In small towns and rural areas, the president's visit becomes an exciting political spectacle. Correa broadcasts his show, greets the public, and rounds out the day with appearances at festivals or cultural events. In addition to its direct political impact on the places that the president visits, the show ensures that Correa is the principal newsmaker in the otherwise slow weekend news cycle; his pronouncements on the Saturday morning show feature prominently in the Sunday newspapers.

Television became another powerful tool in the permanent campaign. Ecuadorian law stipulates that television stations are obligated to provide the government with free air time for national public service broadcasts in what is called the *cadena nacional* (national network). With a broad interpretation of what constitutes public service messages, the palace communications operation made extensive use of the *cadenas.* Starting in advance of the constituent assembly election, the *cadena* became a weekly event. Usually shown in the prime-time slot around 8 P.M. (and sometimes repeated on a subsequent night), the broadcasts are approximately eight minutes in length. Most often, they are newsreels that chronicle the administration's latest accomplishments, with President Correa figuring prominently in each installment. On some occasions, Correa used the slots to address the audience directly, letting loose with attacks on opponents. On other occasions, the slots were used for negative advertising targeting critics. For example, when environmental groups lashed out against the president's new shark fishing policy, the groups were walloped more than once in a *cadena nacional.* Between late July 2007 and late February 2008, a total of 25 *cadenas* were broadcast.

Pervasive paid advertising on television and radio was another important avenue for promoting a positive image of the president and his policies. In 2007, the government spent an estimated $6,938,108 on advertising, with the office of the presidency accounting for half of the expenditures. While the six-million-dollar figure was less than the estimated $9.5 million spent in 2006 by the previous government of President Alfredo Palacio, Correa's communications team confirmed that they negotiated deep discounts with television stations, as high as 60 percent. Thus, Correa's advertising, while less costly, was far more ubiquitous than that of his predecessor. Without the discounts, the amount of advertising contracted by the Correa government would have amounted to an estimated $16.7 million.[8]

Mounting more than 40 different government publicity campaigns during 2007, Alvarado drew on the talents of his former Creacional employees who had worked on the 2006 election. Not surprisingly, they built explicitly on many of their own winning ideas, especially the use of the word, "*Patria*." The official motto of the government was coined: "*La Patria ya es de Todos*." (Now the Homeland Belongs to Everyone). It is important to recall that "*Patria*" is a word in the name of Correa's political organization, PAIS. The insistent use of the word was integrated into what Vinicio Alvarado portrayed as a campaign to promote national pride and "values." In one of the most frequently broadcast commercials, happy Ecuadorians from around the country were featured in a montage singing the vintage grade-school song, "*Patria*." The feel-good commercial equated the homeland with one's mother and feelings of "infinite love." The *Patria* motto and a refrain of the song appeared at the conclusion of all government advertising, as did a video clip that referred to Correa. Every government commercial ended with a long-distance shot of a vibrant man, welcoming a sunrise over the Andes, with a victory salute. While the face of the man is never shown, the manner and the bearing of the man clearly evoked Correa on the campaign trail.

Government advertising, and the advertising used by Correa's PAIS organization for the constituent assembly election in September 2007, effectively collapsed any distinctions between the president, the government proper, and his political organization. The 2006 campaign chant, "*Dale Correa*" was updated by Alvarado to play on the government's "values" advertising campaign and the incessantly broadcast *Patria* song: it became "*Dale Patria: Elige con infinito amor*" (Go Get 'Em Homeland: Choose with Infinite Love). As the assembly elections approached, Correa appeared on television commercials and on the stump alongside PAIS candidates. He also used the ostensibly non-partisan free air time afforded to the government for public service announcements to make his electoral pitch. Just days before the balloting, Correa appeared in a *cadena nacional,* urging voters to make their choice "with infinite love" and eschew the "wolves dressed in sheep's clothing." The phraseology clearly referred to PAIS's slogan and to its television commercials that depicted rival politicians as wolves.[9]

Correa's aggressive use of the palace communications operations in the months prior to the assembly election had opponents crying foul and editorialists wringing their hands over the president's questionable use of public resources.[10] The electoral observation mission of the Organization of American States shared those concerns. New regulations enacted by the government for the assembly elections stipulated that parties and their assembly candidates were to be restricted to allotted television and radio slots paid for by the government. No private purchases of television and radio time were permitted. Touted as a measure to "even the playing field" and ensure that wealthy candidates such as Alvaro Noboa could not dominate the debate on the assembly, the prohibitions

on private spending effectively gave the upper hand to the government, which balked at the suggestion that it back off from its myriad advertising campaigns.

Bashing and Building Media

Correa used the bully pulpit of the presidency and the palace communications operation to launch a verbal/psychological war on the groups whom he deemed to be enemies of change, the so-called "*poderes fácticos*" (de facto powers)—traditional politicians, business elites, and the mainstream media. As Correa saw it, his first task at president was to confront the enemy: "Let's not be naïve. We won the election, but not power. Power is controlled by economic interests, the banks, the partyarchy and the media connected to the banks."[11]

As numerous analysts have noted, Correa's world view draws deeply from Ecuador's Manichean populist tradition (de la Torre 2002). In that view, political opponents are not simply wrong-headed, misguided, or misinformed; they are corrupt and immoral representatives of the privileged, *la oligarquía* (the oligarchy). Correa labeled his opponents as bigwigs, gangsters, liars, and dinosaurs doomed to extinction. In stark contrast to those on the dark side stand the forces allied with *el pueblo* (the people), the morally superior common folk. Faithful to the populist script and the logic of the plebiscitary presidency, Correa projected his administration as the embodiment of the people, endowed with legitimacy that competing actors, institutions, and parties lacked. Laying claim to this special legitimacy, Correa dismissed and ignored all attempts to constrain the actions of the executive branch, whether they emanated from institutions such as the congress or from actors in the party system or civil society.

Correa's aggressive rhetoric and style of governing did not go unnoticed by the national media. As a candidate in the 2006 election, Correa's relations with the press were amicable for the most part. Media monitors reported that Correa received significantly less negative coverage than Noboa in the runoff election from television, radio, and print outlets (Participación Ciudadana, 2006). Moreover, Correa enjoyed the open support of Fredy Ehlers and Carlos Vera, two of the most watched political commentators on Ecuador's top television network Ecuavisa.

Correa welcomed the favoritism that he received as a candidate, but the honeymoon with the press was brief. When television commentators and newspaper columnists took offense at the president's bellicose language and questioned his tactics during the battle with congress over the referendum, Correa took aim at them. He lambasted press critics as mediocre, incompetent, and corrupt. Among the epithets used to describe journalists and journalism: Mafiosos, journalistic pornography, human wretchedness, savage beasts, and idiots who publish trash.[12] Correa directed special ire toward a handful of the

most influential journalists and media outlets. Both of Ecuador's leading daily newspapers, *El Comercio* and *El Universo,* were targets of presidential criticism. So was Carlos Vera, the popular news anchor and talk show host who had openly embraced Correa in 2006 but soured on the president in 2007. Jorge Ortíz, the leading news interviewer and commentator on the Teleamazonas network was singled out for insulting tirades. Correa referred to Ortíz as a "big fake, a swine, a professional defamer, and a bank employee."[13]

The reference to Ortíz as a bank employee alluded to the broader point that Correa regularly hammered home: that the owners of media outlets dictated news coverage in accordance with their own business interests. Correa's criticism was not entirely unfounded. As in other Latin American countries, Ecuador has a tradition of advocacy journalism in which the lines between news coverage and editorializing are sometimes blurred and the political views of owners weigh heavily. But the views and the interests of media owners in Ecuador are mixed. In contrast to Brazil and Argentina, where the media empires of the TV Globo group and Clarín dominate, ownership in Ecuador's media establishment is dispersed across 17 different family-run groups (Navarro Jiménez 2006). The groups, located in Quito and Guayaquil, have diverse business interests and varying levels of investments in media-related businesses.

Despite the pluralism found in Ecuador's media establishment, Correa dismissed mainstream journalism as "disinformation" disseminated by the lackeys of the ruling class. Correa urged Ecuadorians to tune out the mainstream media, as he did. He advised them to get their information from his weekly radio show or from the content-laden website of the presidency (www.presidencia.gov.ec) that features news releases, presidential speeches, and links to a YouTube archive (http://www.youtube.com/presidenciaecuador).

Correa's quest for "unfiltered" contact with the public is likely to get a further boost as the government's communications infrastructure expands. In a country with no tradition of publicly owned media, the Correa administration announced plans to create new "public media." The public media project began when the government acquired majority shareholder status in the Guayaquil-based newspaper *El Telegráfo* when it fell into bankruptcy. In addition to print media, the government started test runs of a new state-owned television station, TV Ecuador in 2007, with full programming scheduled in 2008. The relaunching of the moribund radio network, Radio Nacional, also figures into the public media project.

In early 2008, Rafael Correa hit the campaign trail once more, looking forward to a mid-year referendum on the new constitution and a new round of national elections in which he will be a presidential candidate. Proclaiming that his primary job as president is to serve as "motivator," Correa promised to travel to every corner of the country to promote the government's message that "the homeland belongs to everyone." Anticipating his absence from the presidential

palace, Correa announced an institutional reorganization that put Vinicio Alvarado at the apex of the government in a new role as policy coordinator of the cabinet and overseer of day-to-day operations.[14] With Alvarado at the helm of the executive branch, policy making is now completely intertwined with the communications apparatus and the president's campaign machine.

Permanent Dilemmas for Democratic Politics

Correa's presidency, like those of Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales, was forged in a context of deep political crisis. Facing the real possibility that his presidency could be cut short by opponents who controlled competing institutions, Correa opted for high-risk strategy aimed at remaking the political system through serial elections. Winning those elections became the primary objective of the new administration; thus, the permanent campaign was born out of necessity and directed as part of a larger scheme of political transformation.

The transition from the 2006 election to the serial elections of 2007 was near seamless. Campaign personnel turned into palace operatives and public officials. Vinicio Alvarado assumed a central position, directing communications and overseeing the broad contours of policy as secretary of public administration. The design of the 2006 campaign served as a template for government advertising. With the simple but insistent use of the word "*Patria*" (Homeland), Alvarado created a public relations campaign that wrapped Correa and his administration in emotive appeals to patriotism. At the same time, Correa stuck to the script that had served him so well in the 2006 election; his persona was that of indefatigable fighter who reveled in defying Ecuador's establishment. Taking advantage of the diverse resources that the presidency afforded, Alvarado and his communications team used a variety of channels to deliver Correa's message to the public with a minimum of media filtering: the weekly radio program, *cadenas nacionales,* direct advertising, and the Internet. By the end of the first year in office, the Correa administration was on its way to developing an even more sophisticated infrastructure in a new public media sector spanning print and broadcast outlets.

As we noted in our introduction, the permanent campaign has come to be regarded as a standard feature in the operation of modern executives, whether in presidential or parliamentary systems. In this sense, the rise of the permanent campaign and the expansion of sophisticated government communications operations across Latin America are not unexpected developments. But while the permanent campaign is ubiquitous, its effects on democratic politics are by no means uniform, nor necessarily benign. Scholars of the permanent campaign have bemoaned its impact on advanced democracies, associating it with the polarization of politics and a growing incivility in the political arena. Ornstein and Mann (2000, 225) described the fallout in American politics:

> Campaigning intrinsically is a zero-sum game with a winner and a loser. Governing, ideally, is an additive game that tries to avoid pointing fingers or creating winners and losers in policy battles. Campaigning and campaigners use the language of war—opponents are enemies to be vanquished. Policymakers use the language of negotiation—today's adversaries may be tomorrow's allies. The more campaigning absorbs governing, the more difficult it becomes to facilitate coalition building and the more strained are intraparty relations.

As the permanent campaign promotes shrill and confrontational politics, it also runs the risk of creating an "uneven playing field" for the political opposition. By virtue of their high office and their newsworthiness, incumbent presidents or prime ministers always enjoy an inherent advantage in getting their messages out to the public. But that advantage can turn highly disproportionate when incumbents use the resources at the disposal of their government to saturate the public with marketing campaigns.

Nonetheless, executives face constraints on how far they can take the permanent campaign in advanced democracies. Regulatory regimes governing campaign finance and laws prohibiting the use of public resources for political purposes, while obviously plagued by loopholes that politicians are quick to exploit, at least create a firewall against a wholesale mobilization of the government apparatus for partisan ends. While opposition parties may find themselves overshadowed or overwhelmed by a popular president or prime minister, they face no barriers to going on the offensive and employing the same array of techniques and tactics—polling, consultants, and advertising—to reinvigorate their presence in the public sphere. And as much as executives maneuver to avoid the mediation of journalists, the media establishment cannot be ignored or dismissed altogether. In short, while presidents and prime ministers may wish that the permanent campaign induced some kind of de facto hegemony, permanent contestation and counter-campaigns are a fact of life.

In Latin America, the rise of an extreme form of the plebiscitary presidency in the Andean region has turned the permanent campaign into far more than just a package of techniques used to promote presidential popularity: it is a vital practice that presidents use to stay in power and to pursue political projects aimed at reconfiguring power relations. But while the permanent campaign is a tool that presidents wield in their quest to transform politics, its utility in enhancing presidential power comes at the cost of exacerbating a broader problem affecting the quality of democracy in Latin America: the relative absence of functioning mechanisms of accountability. In Guillermo O'Donnell's classic formulation (1999, 185–186), horizontal accountability is understood as the ability of intrastate agencies to check and sanction the conduct of state agencies and public officials. The logic of the plebiscitary presidency is to eschew checks and balances. As our case study shows, Correa constructed a plebiscitary

presidency and mounted a permanent campaign for the express purpose of ridding himself of the possible constraints on his power that competing institutions could pose.

Without institutions capable of overseeing or monitoring executive behavior, presidents can make use of a vast array of communications resources with few, if any, limits on their conduct. The permanent campaign is permanently unleashed in a plebiscitary presidency. Societal accountability—the pressures that can emanate from civil society aimed at holding public officials accountable—is compromised further in the process (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2006). Presidents use their communications apparatus in campaigns to delegitimize opponents. When journalists and commentators scrutinize the president, they become his targets, dismissed like other opponents as part of a reactionary establishment.

The conjoining of the plebiscitary presidency and the permanent campaign is problematic for democratic politics, especially in countries already suffering from fragile institutions and weak civil societies. As executive power increases during the course of plebiscitary presidencies, the temptation for presidents to abuse the communications apparatus is substantial. In countries where the struggle for democratic accountability is still ongoing, the need to wage the permanent campaign invites an unfair use of government resources and blurs the distinctions between government and partisan activity. Where civil liberties are not fully consolidated, the chronically confrontational tone of the permanent campaign readily turns the public sphere into a chilly environment for free expression. The polarizing rhetoric characteristic of the permanent campaign runs the risk of turning the president's real or imagined opponents—in parties, civil society, and the media—into permanent enemies.

Envisioned by a new generation of Andean presidents as a weapon in their epochal struggle for political transformation, an unchecked and unlimited permanent campaign must also be regarded as a potential minefield for democratic politics.

Notes

1. "Sí, estoy en campaña permanente," *Clarín*, July 21, 2005. Kirchner's predecessor, President Eduardo Duhualde, was also viewed as a practitioner of the permanent campaign. See "La campaña permanente," *Página 12,* March 12, 2002.
2. To simplify this reference, we refer to this nationwide vote as a referendum throughout the remainder of the essay.
3. Because of its obvious association with violence against women and children, feminists decried Correa's belt-wielding antics. Correa denied that it was an expression of machismo, but backed off the belt-wielding in the second round of campaigning. For an analysis of Correa's campaign style, see Carlos de la Torre, "Rafael Correa, inovador y continuista," *Hoy,* November 16, 2006.
4. Ecuador's election system provides for two rounds of balloting in the presidential race under the following conditions: 1) if no candidate wins 50 percent of the valid vote plus

one in the first round; 2) if no candidate wins the first round by obtaining 40 percent of the vote by a margin of 10 percent more than the runner-up.

5. "¿Qué espera el pueblo de Correa?," *Cedatos*, January 15, 2007.
6. "Lo que mantiene la imagen del Presidente es su coherencia," *El Universo,* June 29, 2007.
7. Weekly shows are becoming a feature of presidential communications strategy. Bolivian president Evo Morales inaugurated the weekly show "El pueblo es noticia" (People are the News) that features information on government programs. In Colombia, President Alvaro Uribe is seen regularly on public television in his weekly meetings held in local communities around the country.
8. The figures are taken from Blanco y Negro, "El gasto en propaganda, inversión de gobierno," *Hoy,* February 25, 2008.
9. "Presidente pidió voto en cadena nacional," *El Universo,* September 26, 2007.
10. Jorge Ribadeneira Araujo, "El Jefe en campaña," *El Comercio,* August 16, 2007; "La veda que solicita la OEA," *El Comercio,* August 21, 2007; Ana María Correa Crespo, "Veda publicitaria," *Hoy,* August 3, 2007; "Presidente en campaña," *El Universo,* September 5, 2007; "Desigual competencia electoral," *Hoy,* September 14, 2007; "Insensibilidad del gobierno," *Hoy,* September 10, 2007.
11. Gobierno Nacional de La República del Ecuador, "La correlación de fuerzas tiene que cambiar en el país," July 14, 2007. www.presidencia.gov.ec.
12. "Ecuador," 63rd General Assembly of the Inter-American Press Association, Miami, Florida. http://mercury.websitewelcome.com/%7Esipiapa/informe.php?id=10&idioma=us.
13. Gobierno Nacional de La República, "El Presidente alerta a la oposición y la banca," August 4, 2007. htpp://www.presidencia.gov.ec.
14. "Carondelet en campaña," *Hoy,* February 13, 2008.

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