

# THE ECUADOR

HISTORY,  
CULTURE,  
POLITICS

# READER



CARLOS DE LA TORRE AND STEVE STRIFFLER, EDITORS

THE  
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READER

HISTORY, CULTURE, POLITICS

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# Civilization and Barbarism

*Carlos de la Torre*

*Ecuador's return to civilian rule and representative government in 1979 signified a real turn toward democracy. Political parties flourished, popular movements were reinvigorated, and the military has not taken formal, sustained control of the government since the 1970s. Yet, as the sociologist Carlos de la Torre shows, it is a fragile, incomplete, and contradictory form of democracy that remains clientelistic, prone to populist impulses, highly unstable, and ultimately corrupt.*

Ecuador's "transition to democracy" (1976–79) was envisioned not simply as a return to elected civilian governments, but rather as the political complement of the economic and social modernization achieved by Ecuador during the military regimes of the 1970s. Ecuador was transformed from a banana- and cacao-exporting country into an oil-producing nation. This predominantly rural society, where hacendados controlled rural cultivators, saw the weakening of the hacienda system, high levels of urbanization, the growth of the state, and the expansion of the urban informal sector as well as the working-class and middle-class sectors. Until approximately the 1960s, traditional haciendas were the dominant institutions structuring life for Ecuadorians. The first agrarian census showed that in the 1950s, when most of the highland population (73.8 percent) was rural, large haciendas monopolized more than three-quarters of the total area. The hacienda was also a system of political and ideological domination that allowed landowners, directly or via the mediation of mestizo priests and village authorities, to monopolize power at local levels. The agrarian reform laws of the 1960s and 1970s eroded the social and political power of the traditional haciendas. By 1985, 36.2 percent of the land belonged to large farms, 30.3 percent to medium-sized units, and 33.5 percent to small units. Unfortunately, these agrarian transformations did not put an end to the *latifundio-minifundio* system, and the peasants' third of agricultural land is still insufficient to sustain the majority of the rural population. Nevertheless, such changes did create a power vacuum in the countryside that allowed for the eruption of autonomous Indian organizations and the increasing presence of modern political parties.

Ecuador is currently an urban country. In 1988 urban voters accounted for 75 percent of registered voters. As in other Latin American nations, capitalist development has not resulted in full proletarianization. Moreover, the crises of the 1980s have diminished the number of workers employed in manufacturing by 10 percent: from 113,000 in 1980 to 102,000 in 1986. Industrial workers rely on various strategies to make up for the lack of adequate family wages. Neoliberal adjustment policies have resulted in a drastic decline of real wages, which decreased by almost 30 percent between 1980 and 1985 and at an annual rate of 8 percent between 1986 and 1990. Most workers survive through a wide range of informal activities, such as street vending, domestic service, and self-employment in microenterprises. Official estimates place the informal sector between 40 and 50 percent of the economically active population.

Urbanization and the transformation of the traditional hacienda system were seen as the preconditions for political "progress." With the hope of designing new political institutions and creating a "modern" political system based on party competition, the military government of the 1970s appointed three commissions composed of representatives of political parties, employers' associations, labor unions, and other organized groups. Their goal was to rationalize the party system to avoid the cycle of populism and military coup that had characterized the country's history since the emergence of Velasquista. The franchise was expanded from 2 million to more than 4 million voters between 1979 and 1988 due to population growth, voter registration drives, and the elimination of literacy requirements.

The plan to create a political system based on regular elections has been somewhat successful. Ecuador is experiencing its longest phase of elected civilian regimes to date. From 1979 to the present, presidents of different ideological persuasions have succeeded one another in office. Even so, political parties continue to be weak and numerous. Personalism, clientelism, and populism still characterize political struggles. Political parties, politicians, and politics in general appear discredited in public opinion surveys. The semilegal demises of President Abdalá Bucaram in February 1997, President Jamil Mahuad in January 2000, and President Lucio Gutiérrez in April 2005 revealed that democracy, even in its more restricted definition, has not been institutionalized.

Political elites still view the state as an entity to be either captured, in whole or in part, to be defended against, or both. The Ecuadorian state is booty. Elites are more interested in capturing state resources to build and maintain clientelist networks and increase the pool of patronage resources than in respecting democratic procedures. Civilian regimes, ruling in an economic crisis, have applied neoliberal policies, which have further increased



social inequalities and political instability. Thus far, the military has abstained from carrying out a coup d'état. Its respect for civilian regimes, however, cannot be explained by a general commitment to democracy. More likely, the military has been deterred by economic crisis, by the dangers intervention would present to professional unity, and especially by a new international conjuncture. The military is not fully subordinated to civilian rule but maintains a series of privileges and veto powers, which, in apt characterization of the political scientist, Brian Loveman, make Ecuador at best a "protected democracy."

The sobering reality of Ecuador's political system is that common citizens and political elites typically do not behave according to the expectations of the modernizing intellectuals and politicians who designed the new political institutions. Instead of reflecting on the failure to fully realize this (restricted) conception of democracy, these intellectuals and politicians have constructed images of the antimodern populist "other." Populist leaders and their followers have been constructed as outsiders to the rule of reason and democracy. Populist followers are told that instead of shouting in public plazas in response to demagogues, they should "rationally" consider how to vote in the solitude of their homes. A quixotic task indeed, but one that nonetheless allows so-called modernizing elites to prescribe how politics should be conducted and reinforces their self-designation as the moral guides of what they term as modern Ecuador. Reflecting global changes in political discourse, neoliberalism has become the new dogma and panacea since the 1992 elections, replacing the modernizing social democratic plan of 1980.

Today, as in the past, populist politics continues to challenge the restricted character of Ecuadorian democracy. Contrary to the interpretations of many politicians and academics, populism is a specifically modern phenomenon. It is a form of political incorporation and of rhetoric that has been present in Ecuador since the eruption of mass politics sparked by Velasquismo in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Given the ways in which existing conceptions of democracy and citizenship silence and exclude the popular sectors, populist followers continue to seek empowerment by staging mass dramas and occupying public spaces in the name of their leader. The continuing relevance of the rhetoric and mobilization style that appeals to "lo popular" has not been matched by a strengthening of citizenship rights. Civil rights are not respected, and neoliberal economic policies have further reduced limited entitlements to social rights.

Plans for democratization, which appeal to supposedly universalistic conceptions of rationality, tend to silence and exclude large segments of the population. Despite elite wishes that the excluded "other" adapt and conform

to proper notions of modern and rational politics, these subjects have not accepted such impositions even if defiance has been articulated through the delegation of power to authoritarian leaders. Populist politics presents an important example of how the marginal other does not conform to elitist so-called democratic politics.