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## Ecuador's Correa Wins Referendum, but Challenges Remain

By MERCEDES ALVARO

QUITO—Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa won the approval of a national referendum on the imposition of restrictions on media content and ownership as well as an overhaul of the Andean nation's judicial branch, among other things.

The referendum furthers the fulfillment of Correa's promise back in 2007, when he first took office, to radically overhaul Ecuador's political and economic systems.

Like his regional allies in Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and Bolivia's Evo Morales, Mr. Correa has used referendums to amass power in the presidency and pave the way for an extended stay in the presidential palace by lifting term limits.



Associated Press

Ecuador's President Rafael Correa at a May 12 news conference in Quito.

Ecuador's Electoral Council, or CNE, said Thursday that with 100% of ballots from the May 7 balloting counted, the "yes" vote gathered between 44.96% and 50.46%, while the "no" vote accounted for 39.25% to 42.56% for nine questions with national jurisdiction.

Yet Mr. Correa's victory isn't as sweet as he had expected, and could even have implications for presidential elections in 2013, which he is expected to contest. The referendum wasn't passed with sweeping approval, indicating vulnerability in his level of support.

"The results have been a surprise for the opposition and for the government. It is the first time the president faces a scenario in which his popularity is questioned," said Gabriela Calderon, a research associate at the Cato Institute, a think-tank based in Washington.

Mr. Correa's confrontational governing style appears to have taken a toll, having alienated a number of social sectors, including some erstwhile allies on the left.

"The government believed that the loss of political allies would not affect it, and that the important thing was vindication at the ballot box," said Mr. Calderon, who suggested the strategy may not be a winner the next

time around.

But it did succeed again this time. The referendum included questions of transcendent importance, such as those relating to the judicial system overhaul and the new media regulations. It also addressed issues that have fewer political and social repercussions, such as the restriction of bull- and cockfighting.

The government can now pursue regulations to bar media companies and banks from holding other commercial interests. It will also be able to strictly regulate media content and even hold individual journalists responsible for any violations.

Although the referendum was successful, it showed that Ecuador is clearly divided, given the closeness of the results.

The "yes" vote won in 12 of Ecuador's 24 provinces, including most provinces with the greatest populations. The "no" vote won in the remaining provinces, most in the central highlands, where there are significant numbers of indigenous people, and in the Amazon region.

Moreover, about half of the referendum questions will need laws to be implemented, which may not happen easily. Although the government has the largest voting block, with 52 ruling party votes in the 124-seat National Assembly, it's short of the 63 votes required to pass laws.

The Assembly is scheduled next week to debate the legislation to more tightly control Ecuador's media companies.

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