

# The Sydney Morning Herald

## Ecuador on edge as both presidential candidates claim victory in tight vote

April 3, 2017

**Quito, Ecuador:** A narrow finish in Ecuador's presidential election had both candidates declaring victory Sunday, with the country on edge and possibly heading for a political crisis. With more than 93 per cent of the ballots counted, leftist candidate Lenin Moreno was leading 51 per cent to 49 per cent over right-wing challenger Guillermo Lasso.

### WikiLeaks to work with tech companies

In order to help defend them against the CIA's hacking tools, founder Julian Assange says WikiLeaks will work with tech companies.

But both men claimed victory ahead of the final results, with Lasso citing a key exit poll by the Cedatos firm showing him winning by a comfortable margin.

Speaking on television after an emotional speech declaring victory, he said that the official results were fraudulent and that "the Ecuadorean people aren't fools."

Moments later, Moreno told his cheering supporters that he had won, even as the final tally was incomplete.

He urged his supporters to march to the headquarters of the electoral authorities, where pro-Lasso crowds were gathering. "Onward to victory!" he shouted. "We'll continue changing Ecuador for the better."

### Advertisement

On Twitter, President Rafael Correa declared victory for Moreno, his former vice president. "The Revolution has triumphed again in Ecuador," he wrote. "The right has been defeated."

Also at stake Sunday night was Julian Assange's asylum protection at Ecuador's embassy in London, because Lasso has pledged to evict Assange within 30 days from the embassy where the WikiLeaks founder took refuge in 2012. Moreno has said Assange can stay.

Lasso and his supporters claimed victory and began celebrating in the streets of the capital as soon as exit polls showed them winning - waving flags and honking car horns wildly. In an emotional speech, he urged his supporters to "fight" to preserve their triumph. "We won't let them cheat us!" he shouted, his voice going hoarse.

Observers fear a contested result that could trigger another South American crisis, after clashes in recent days in Venezuela and Paraguay. A well-respected non-governmental organisation, Participacion Ciudadana, said its exit poll results showed a tie between the two candidates.

Correa's decade in power has left Ecuadorans sharply divided, and with his legacy on the line, his government has thrown its full weight behind Moreno, 64.

Lasso, 61, a former banker, offered Ecuadorians a message of "change," and bet that frustration over the country's sagging economy and Correa's heavy-handed style would lift him to an upset. He trailed in Cedatos polls heading into the final week, but he appears to have surged by convincing undecided voters to back him.

"We need new ideas. Everything is stagnant here," said Luzmila Munoz, 47, a chemical engineer who cast her vote for Lasso in a middle-class sector of Quito. "Ten years is enough," she said, referring to Correa, who is ineligible for reelection.

Right-wing candidates have won recent presidential contests in Argentina and Peru, after a long period of dominance by left-wing populists such as Correa who used a commodity boom to cut poverty and cultivate a broad base of support. But with prices for oil and other exports slumping, the region has shifted to the right, and many leftists see the mild-mannered Moreno as their best chance to break the trend.

Moreno, who was shot in a 1998 carjacking, would be the first candidate in a wheelchair to win a presidential race in Latin America.

"He'll fight for equality, because he knows what it's like to be disadvantaged," said Janet Bravo, 40, who cast her vote for Moreno in the rough hillside neighborhood of Comite del Pueblo.

Bravo, who owns a small office supply shop, said she has been able to save money in recent years because the government provided her two small children with free health care. "I want government to continue along this path," she said.

Moreno's campaign is betting on voters like Bravo who are wary of what sort of change a Lasso win would bring to their lives.

"I'm afraid we'll go back to the way things were before," said Erick Lara, 22, an Afro-Ecuadoran who is studying to be a chef. He credited the Correa government for promoting racial equality and said his mother was able to buy her own home thanks to a government loan. "We have more opportunities now," he said.

Lasso has said he will give Assange 30 days to leave after he takes office, but analysts say he's likely to try to negotiate his exit in a fashion that would avoid an immediate arrest. If Assange is taken into custody, "I'm pretty sure U.K. authorities would immediately extradite him to Sweden," said Patrick Eddington, a former CIA agent who is now a national security analyst at the Cato Institute.

Surveys showed Moreno with a slight lead going into Sunday's vote, but pollsters warned that as much as 15 per cent of the country's nearly 13 million voters would make up their minds at the

last minute. "Those undecided voters are the ones who will decide this election," said Polibio Cordova, director of Cedatos.