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Ecuadorean President's Push to Improve Higher Education Meets Resistance

By Marion Lloyd

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Rafael Correa, Ecuador's self-styled "socialist revolutionary" president, is known for his grand gestures. Since taking office in 2007, he has temporarily reneged on his country's foreign debt, threatened to go to war with Colombia, and pushed through a new Constitution to incorporate the cosmology of Ecuador's indigenous minority.

Now in his second term as president, he has turned his attention to overhauling the country's troubled higher-education system, proposing a new law that could be voted on in the Ecuadorean National Assembly as early as this month.

While he has been accused of trying to install a socialist-style higher-education system like the one under development in Venezuela, Mr. Correa's ideas appear to be rooted in his experience as an economics professor and are as much a personal agenda as a political one.

But despite his being a former academic, the president and his ideas are opposed by university leaders. They charge him with trying to undermine university autonomy in violation of the Constitution.

Among controversial points, Mr. Correa's proposal would require all professors and university presidents to hold advanced degrees, create a new academic accrediting agency, and tighten government control over the university system through a revamped governing body, the National Council for Higher Education.

"If we don't change higher education, the country won't move forward," the president said in April, before his government submitted the latest version of the bill for debate in the legislature on May 7. "There is no going back. This law must go through."

Tighter Standards vs. Academic freedom

The president, whose party, the Proud and Sovereign Fatherland Alliance, or PAÍS, controls the largest bloc of the 124 assembly seats, needs to win some outside votes in order to overturn legislation from 2000. While few university officials question the need to improve the quality of the country's 75 institutions of higher education, many warn that the proposed law would threaten hard-earned academic freedoms. They have spent the past year negotiating changes in the law, which was first presented to the National Assembly last August. The latest version makes numerous concessions to the universities.

But the government has refused to budge on a particularly controversial clause that empowers the president to appoint the leader of the National Council for Higher Education, in addition to other key members of the organization. The council would serve as the main coordinating body for the university system, as well as a mediator between the universities and the federal government. In contrast, the current council comprises almost entirely university officials.

"It's a question of control," said José Barbosa Corbacho, president of the Private Technical University of Loja, a Roman Catholic institution in the country's southeast. "The president wants to put his own people inside the university system."

President Correa, who holds a Ph.D. in economics from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, dismisses such criticism as "malignant rumor" fueled by academics who want to hold on to their privileges.

"Here, anyone thinks they can be a university professor," the president was quoted as saying in April by the Cuban news agency Prensa Latina. "I graduated and I started to teach a course on economic dynamics, and I am now ashamed of the stupidity of what I taught."

The new law would impose a minimum of a master's degree for professors; starting in 10 years, all university presidents would be required to hold a Ph.D.

Highly Qualified in Short Supply

Mr. Barbosa, a Spaniard who holds a Ph.D. in philosophy and educational sciences from the Autonomous University of Madrid, said such requirements were unrealistic. He noted that Ecuador has only 250 full-time professors with doctorates, all from foreign institutions.

"Imagine if we sent them all to be university presidents," he said. "There would be nobody left to do research."

Despite efforts over the past decade to strengthen the country's graduate programs, there are still no doctoral programs at Ecuadorean universities, he said. Instead, many universities pay to send their professors abroad for graduate studies or rely on shared degree programs with foreign institutions.

However, such programs could be hit hard by the proposed law, which would cap government support to subsidized private institutions such as Loja. The university, which has some 22,000 students, was founded in the 1970s during a government campaign to expand access to higher education in provincial areas.

The current proposal also seeks to increase enrollment, particularly among underprivileged students, by creating six new public universities and bringing two others under state control. Critics argued that the existing universities are sufficient to meet demand, and that creating new ones would only divert scarce government funds. Ecuador has one of the highest university

matriculation rates in the region—23 percent, compared with the regional average of 18 percent, according to Unesco. Some 500,000 students are enrolled in higher education in the country.

Lack of Quality Assurance

However, many of those students attend private universities that are of poor quality and were created in the 1990s amid a surge in demand for university degrees. The 2000 Higher Education Law sought to fix the problem by cracking down on so-called "garage universities" and barring the Congress from creating any new institutions of higher education. (Under Ecuadorean law, all new universities and technological institutes must gain congressional approval, a practice that critics say foments cronyism).

"I think the government's worry is genuine, authentic, and is shared by a majority of the society," said Adrián Bonilla, director of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences, one of the country's top higher-education institutions. "The real debate is political. The universities see this as the ultimate consequence in a government that has been characterized by its efforts to increase the role of the state."

However, he dismissed speculation that Mr. Correa was trying to follow the lead of his friend President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, whose 2009 education law gives the government complete control over university admissions, faculty hiring, and salaries, even at private universities. And in 2003, Mr. Chávez created the Bolivarian University of Venezuela, named for South American revolutionary hero Simón Bolívar, with the goal of providing free college education for up to one million students, regardless of their academic credentials or nationality.

"The Venezuelan case is very different," Mr. Bonilla said. "From the beginning, the universities were overt in their opposition to the government, so Chávez wants to control the universities."

In Ecuador, he said, Mr. Correa's focus on higher education is based more on personal conviction.

"The president sees himself as an academic, and he has pushed the idea that higher-education reform is a key prerequisite to development," Mr. Bonilla said. "It's a kind of presidential obsession."

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