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## Populist polarization and the slow death of democracy in Ecuador

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This article analyses how the interactions between a strong populist government in Ecuador and a weak, divided, and inefficient internal opposition in a context of weak liberal institutions could lead to what Guillermo O'Donnell termed “the slow death of democracy”. Rafael Correa was elected with a substantive project of democratization understood as economic redistribution and social justice. His administration got rid of neoliberal policies and decaying traditional political parties, while simultaneously co-opting social movements, regulating civil society, and colonizing the public sphere. Because the judiciary was subordinated to Correa, social movement activists, journalists, and media owners could not use the legal system to resist Correa's crack down of civil society and regulation of the privately owned media. They took their grievances to supranational organizations like the Organization of American States. When these organizations stepped in to challenge Correa, his government denounced imperialist intervention in his nation's internal affairs, and advocated for the creation of new supranational institutions without US presence.

**Keywords:** populism; Rafael Correa; authoritarianism; Ecuador

This article uses the framework prepared for this special issue to analyse Rafael Correa's administration in Ecuador (2006–present). It examines how the interactions between a strong populist government and a weak, divided, and inefficient internal opposition in a context of weak liberal institutions could lead to what Guillermo O'Donnell termed “the slow death of democracy”.<sup>1</sup>

Democracies do not always experience sudden deaths with coup d'états. The systematic erosion of rights and civil liberties, the curtailment of institutions of accountability, and the tilting of the electoral playing field to favour incumbents could also lead to the transition from democracy to authoritarianism.

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The case of Rafael Correa in Ecuador represents a very particular example of a populist in government since the country experienced a crisis of democratic representation before he came to power<sup>2</sup> and, in consequence, the capacity of domestic actors to react against Correa has been very limited. Neither mainstream parties nor independent institutions have had enough influence and legitimacy to oppose Correa's administration. At the same time, external actors have not been very influential when it comes to checking Correa's populist government. Thanks to high oil prices, the latter has developed social policies in favour of the poor and this certainly has contributed to its support.

This article's main argument is that Ecuador is an interesting case study not only because of the failed attempts to respond to populism, but also and mainly because of the ways in which a populist government can successfully respond to their opponents' manoeuvring. We demonstrate that Correa's government used the strategies of militancy and incorporation identified by Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart in their framework of analysis to repress and to accommodate national actors such as political parties, organizations of civil society, and the privately owned media. Correa carefully chose the timing of his attacks. His first targets were delegitimized traditional political parties and the Congress. His administration convened a Constituent Assembly tasked to write a new constitution. The assembly arbitrarily assumed legislative powers, sent the recently elected congress to a recess, and packed institutions of accountability with Correa's loyal followers.<sup>3</sup> Some traditional parties disappeared, while others took advantage of the growing disconnection between support for Correa and the rest of his party to successfully retreat to local politics.

After defeating traditional parties at the national level, Correa used militancy to limit the political and civil rights of the leadership of social movements, which he portrayed as special interests that only sought to benefit their group. Amnesty International reported that more than 200 leaders of peasant and indigenous groups were accused of terrorism.<sup>4</sup> His administration organized alternative loyal social movements from the top-down. Simultaneously Correa's government created laws and institutions to regulate the content of what the media could publish, and key journalists and some private media venues were charged astronomical fines. Social movement activists and journalist unsuccessfully tried to use the legal system in Ecuador to resist state encroachment on civil society and the public sphere. After the courts dismissed their cases or ruled in favour of Correa's administrations, and with all institutions including the courts in the hands of Correa's followers, civil society organizations, journalists, and the owners of private media outlets did not have any other venue but transnational civil society and supranational institutions to take their grievances. External actors such as the Organization of American States stepped in to protect the rights of social movement activists, journalists, and the owners of the privately owned media. In response, Correa argued that US controlled institutions were meddling in the internal affairs of his country and vowed to construct new supranational organizations free from US influence.

Under Correa, Ecuador went through a process of democratic erosion. According to Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez Liñán, the country shifted from weak democracy to semidemocracy.<sup>5</sup> Even though there are spaces for democratic contestation (particularly at the local level), we argue that the process of democratic erosion is leading to an ongoing political transformation that might well result in the establishment of a competitive authoritarian regime.<sup>6</sup> To better understand this, we use the framework of analysis developed by the editors of the special issue to show the ways in which different actors have unsuccessfully tried to respond to Correa's administration and the ways in which the latter has successfully deployed the strategies of both militancy and incorporation to confront its opponents. As Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart postulate, populists in power can use the toolkit that democracies have for dealing against extremism in their own favour.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. First, we discuss the weakness of domestic actors and Correa's actions against them. Next, we turn our attention to two mechanisms employed by Correa – permanent campaigning and socioeconomic redistribution – to maintain high levels of public support. In the third section of the paper we examine not only the responses of social movements and NGOs to the current government, but also their co-optation and repression by Correa's administration. In the fourth section of the article we discuss the role played by the media. Then we analyse the external reactions to Correa's populist project. Finally, we conclude by emphasizing the singularity of this case study as an example of a populist government that has utilized democratic anti-extremism tools to respond to opponents and implement major political transformations that might lead to “the slow death of democracy” in the country.

### **Weak domestic actors and Correa's reactions against them**

Before Correa came to power, Ecuador went through a deep crisis of political representation.<sup>7</sup> Between 1997 and 2005, three elected presidents (Abdalá Bucaram, Jamil Mahuad, and Lucio Gutiérrez) were ousted through congressional coup d'états. President Abdalá Bucaram was ousted in 1997 with a simple plurality in Congress on charges of mental incapacity to govern and without medical proofs of his insanity. In 2000, and again in 2005, Congress ruled that presidents Jamil Mahuad and Lucio Gutiérrez “abandoned power” when in fact they were still sitting in the presidential palace.

Political scientist Simón Pachano argues that at the heart of Ecuador's unstable politics was an electoral system that created incentives for party fragmentation and personalism.<sup>8</sup> Rather than voting for closed party lists or preference voting within a list, voters were allowed to choose congressional representatives across a variety of lists. As a result, between 1979 and 2006 at least nine political parties had representatives in Congress. With few restrictions on inscribing new electoral movements, presidential candidates proliferated. Moreover, Ecuadorian parties were regional rather than national, and operated as clientelistic machines to distribute jobs and

resources. Social movements took advantage of the weakness and regional divisions of the elites to successfully install their agendas. For instance, indigenous organizations controlled the program for bilingual education, and women's groups were in charge of promoting policies of gender equality and inclusion.

Correa entered politics as the ultimate outsider, confronting traditional elites and vowing to refound all institutions such as congress and the courts, strengthening the role of the state in the economy, and refocusing foreign policy. He never belonged to a party, and was not socialized into the bargaining and the give and take of parliamentary politics. Until April 2005, he was a professor in the department of economics at one of Quito's elite private universities, Universidad San Francisco de Quito. After the overthrow of President Lucio Gutiérrez (who was an outsider and former leader of the coup against president Mahuad in 2000) in April 2005, Correa became Minister of Economy and Finance in President Alfredo Palacio's administration. Correa quickly became the government's most controversial figure. He was young, charismatic, and sure of himself. He used his office as a bully pulpit for denouncing neoliberalism and showed his independence by taking on the International Monetary Fund to demand a renegotiation of Ecuador's external debt.

After leaving office, he organized the *Movimiento Alianza País* (MPAIS Alliance for Proud and Sovereign Homeland) in November 2005. Correa framed the 2006 election as a Manichaean confrontation between the honest citizenry (embodied in his persona) and corrupt politicians. To show his commitment to wipe out traditional elites he abstained from running candidates for the Congress. Instead he promised to shut it down and to convene a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution.

Correa's anti-party rhetoric was compelling because most Ecuadorians demanded a populist solution to the crisis of political representation. During the demonstrations that ended in the ousting of president Gutiérrez in April 2005, Ecuadorians cried *¡Que se vayan todos!* (Throw them all out!), and were convinced that political parties, congress, and the judiciary were responsible for corruption and all types of political and economic harms.<sup>9</sup> In 2006, confidence in Ecuador's political parties was the lowest found in any Latin American country.<sup>10</sup> Because the struggle was of the citizenry against politicians, Correa's message was inclusive, embracing Ecuadorians of all backgrounds who felt disenfranchised by the political system.

Correa's first act as president was to fulfil his promise to convene a referendum authorizing a Constituent Assembly with "full powers" tasked with the re-founding of the nation. Congress, controlled by traditional parties and without any representatives of Correa's movement, threatened to halt the proposed referendum. But after securing key institutional support from the Electoral Tribunal Board (TSE) and the Constitutional Tribunal (TC), Correa managed to push it through, disqualifying 57 legislators opposed to the constitutional assembly in the process. He then went on to win the April 2007 referendum, with 82% of the electorate voting in favour of a new Constituent Assembly.<sup>11</sup>

Correa's successful confrontation with the political establishment at the beginning of his term enhanced his image as an uncompromising leader with the will and the guts to renovate decaying political institutions. Not surprisingly, in September 2007, Correa's movement secured a majority of 80 out of 130 seats in the voting for the Constituent Assembly. It is worth noting that decaying traditional parties were not able to reconstruct after Correa's successful and devastating attacks at the beginning of his term. Traditional parties lost the support of crucial brokers who instrumentally transferred their loyalties to Correa. The parties that dominated politics since the transition to democracy in 1979 until 2005, such as the social democrat Democratic Left (ID), the Christian democrat Popular Democracy (DP), the right wing Social Christian Party (PSC), and Abdalá Bucaram's populist Partido Roldosista Ecuatoriano (PRE), were dissolved. Thus, after less than a year in office, mainstream political parties lost their power in congress, had little public support, and consequently virtually no capacity to oppose Correa.

The first act of the Constituent Assembly was to assume full constituent powers declaring that its constituent mandates, laws, and resolutions were superior to all existing juridical norms and hence ought to be obeyed by all citizens. Article 6 ratified Correa as president, and article 7 declared that the assembly assumed legislative functions and sent the recently elected Congress to a recess. With this mandate, Correa decapitated traditional political parties who lost Congress as a site from where they could oppose his administration. New officers aligned with Correa's project replaced individuals linked to political parties in institutions of accountability such as the Comptroller and the Ombudsman. The assembly reappointed the members of the Supreme Court of Justice who sat silently while Correa and the National Assembly were dismantling the liberal framework of democracy.

The process of writing the new constitution was participatory. The National Assembly organized 10 roundtables, met 1500 delegations of civil society, and processed more than 1000 proposals for constitutional change from civil society, political parties, and individual citizens.<sup>12</sup> Proposals of organizations of civil society that supported Correa however received priority over critical organizations, and Correa played the role of final arbiter, overruling one proposal by indigenous groups to make Kichwa an official language, another from environmentalists to forbid open-pit mining operations, and still others from feminists to guarantee abortion and gay rights. Even when critical civil society and the political opposition tried to participate and influence the National Assembly, they did not have enough political power to push forward their agendas.

The new hyper-presidentialist constitution (approved in a referendum with 64% of the vote) expanded rights (including collective rights and rights for nature), strengthened the executive branch, allowed for presidential re-election for another term of four years, subjugated the legislative branch placing restrictions on its oversight powers, and established "a system of control over civil society through a variety of participation plans to incorporate and subordinate social groups to the government's administrative apparatus".<sup>13</sup> With a defeated opposition and an absolute majority in the legislative branch, Correa proceeded to

restructure the Supreme Court in 2009 and again in 2011, and packed all institutions of control and accountability with people loyal to himself.

With Correa and his movement in control of national politics, some politicians like Jaime Nebot of the right wing Social Christian Party successfully retreated to local politics. Nebot is the mayor of Guayaquil and was comfortably re-elected in 2014. Correa's movement has not been able to dominate politics at the local level. In February 2014, Correa's opponents were elected mayors in some of the largest cities like Guayaquil, Quito, Cuenca, and Manta. Correa's handpicked candidates also lost elections in areas of conflict over mineral resource exploitation. The defeat of Correa's candidates indicates a growing disconnect between support for Correa and for the candidates of his party. Opponents of different ideologies successfully incorporated Correa's constituencies that continued to be loyal to the president but that did not support his handpicked candidates.<sup>14</sup>

However, the success of the opposition in local elections does not mean that they could successfully challenge Correa at the national level. Old time politicians such as former President Lucio Gutiérrez disputed the leadership of the opposition with new outsiders such as Guillermo Lasso, a banker who led a renovated right unlinked to traditional parties, and Mauricio Rodas, a young technocrat. Instead of advancing toward their unity, leaders new and old competed to become the figure around which the opposition could unite in the future. Their dispersion led to a poor performance in the 2013 presidential election. Whereas Correa got a commanding 58% of the vote, Lasso won 22%, Gutiérrez 6%, and Rodas won 4%. Correa's former supporters Alberto Acosta and Norman Wright got 3% and 1% of the vote, respectively. Their poor performance showed Correa's supporters the high costs of shifting their political alliances.

Correa's inability to always transfer his popularity to his candidates, and the absence of a successor in a hyper-personalized populist movement, led his supporters to promote changes in the constitution to allow Correa to run again for the presidency in 2017. It remains to be seen if the opposition follows the Venezuelan example and tries to form a united front against Correa by constructing a pluralist and programmatic electoral vehicle. As Kirk Hawkins shows in his article of this special issue,<sup>15</sup> this is probably the most viable way to confront a populist government, which not only has been able to advance rules of the game in their favour but also is supported by an important part of the population.

### **Permanent campaigning and socioeconomic redistribution**

Before moving to the next section to analyse the reactions against Correa's political consolidation by other actors, it is important to explain why his government has been able to win elections since 2006, maintaining high levels of public support. Correa's movement used two strategies to consolidate its hegemony. The first one was permanent political campaigns and elections.<sup>16</sup> Table 1 shows that, since assuming the presidency in 2007, Correa has won six plebiscitary elections including two re-elections as president.

Table 1. Correa's electoral results, 2006–2013.

Date	Election	National Percentage
October 2006	First Presidential Round	22.89
November 2006	Second Presidential Round	56.67
April 2007	Plebiscite calling for a Constitutional Assembly	81.72
September 2007	Assembly Members	69.47
September 2008	Referendum Approving the Constitution	63.93
April 2009	First Presidential Round	51.99
May 2011	Constitutional Referendum and Popular Consultation	52.98
February 2013	First Presidential Round	57.17

Sources: Montúfar, "Rafael Correa" 307; Consejo Nacional Electoral.

Constantly campaigning, Correa kept alive the populist myth of the people confronting powerful elites. Even though the process of voting was free and fair, Correa skewed the playing field.<sup>17</sup> Leftwing presidential candidate Alberto Acosta compared the 2013 elections, for example, to playing a soccer match in a tilted field and with a referee purchased by the other team.<sup>18</sup> His words were not exaggerated, as the head of the National Electoral Council was a close ally of Correa, and institutions of control were in the hands of the government. For example the General Prosecutor Galo Chiriboga was previously Correa's Ambassador to Spain, and the head of the Judicial Council, Gustavo Jalkh, worked as President Correa's private secretary up until he was named.<sup>19</sup>

Correa framed the 2013 election as a referendum on his administration. Thanks to electoral engineering, such as the reintroduction of the D'Hondt seat allocation method – known for favouring large parties and coalitions – and the creation of new electoral districts, he was able to convert slightly better than 50% of the vote into control of 100 out of 131 seats in the 2013–2017 National Assembly.<sup>20</sup> With Ecuador's political future once again resting firmly in the hands of Correa and his lieutenants, they voted to once again change the constitution, this time to allow for Correa's permanent re-election.

The second strategy Correa used to consolidate power was to pursue strongly redistributive economic policies, fulfilling his promise to roll back neoliberalism in the country. Spending on social programs increased from 5% of the GDP in 2006 to 9.85% in 2011, and the minimum wage was raised from US\$170 to US\$240 a month. The government continues to subsidize natural gas for domestic consumption, gasoline, and the price of electricity for the poor. The human development bonus – a cash transfer programme for those in the lower 40% of income distribution, those who are mothers of children under 16, and those who are above the age of 65, or are disabled – improved the income, health, and education of

the poorest parts of the population. The number of recipients of this programme doubled between 2006 and January 2012 to about two million recipients. Poverty had started to decline before Correa took power from 49% in 2003 to 37% in 2006. Under Correa it was further reduced to 29% in 2011. The Gini coefficient was reduced from 50.4 in 2006 to 47.0 in 2011.<sup>21</sup>

Correa's economic policies through 2013 were buoyed by high oil prices, with the price of petroleum increasing from US\$52 a barrel in 2006 to US\$98 in 2013; petroleum represents 53% of the nation's total exports. Correa further boosted government revenues by raising the royalty tax on windfall profits from 50% to 99%.<sup>22</sup> But while Correa's redistribution of the extraordinary windfall revenues reduced inequality, it did not affect other measures of income and property concentrations. Fernando Martín, a professor of economics at the Latin American Faculty for the Social Sciences, reports that the country's wealthiest economic groups increased their share of GDP from 32.5% in 2003 to 44% in 2010.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, Correa's state-centred model of development is highly dependent on the price of oil. Declining prices – along with a stronger dollar, which Ecuador adopted as its national currency in 2000, making Ecuadorian exports less competitive – are likely to lead to sluggish growth rates and to jeopardize the future of his social programmes. Here again we can observe an important similarity with the case of Venezuela as analysed by Hawkins,<sup>24</sup> since in both countries the declining price of oil represents a major challenge to the populist government as well as an opportunity to the opposition to develop a united front against the government.

### **Civil society organizations and social movements**

To understand Correa's hegemony it is important to note that he came to power in a context of social movement fragmentation and weakness. If in the 1990s Ecuador had the strongest indigenous movement of the Americas that led the resistance to neoliberalism and actively participated in the removal of presidents Bucaram and Mahuad, by 2005 its capacity to stage sustained collective action had diminished substantially. The leadership of the largest indigenous organization, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador CONAIE, took part in a failed coup d'état in January 2000 with Colonel Lucio Gutiérrez. Later they served under Gutiérrez's elected government. For CONAIE's leadership it became difficult to mobilize the rank and file because their successful demands for cultural recognition were not accompanied by socioeconomic distribution.<sup>25</sup>

Correa's government exacerbated the divisions of the indigenous movement by simultaneously co-opting and incorporating some of their mid-level leaders and repressing its most vocal critics. Given the weakness of social movements and the high costs associated with resistance to a populist government that claimed to represent their agendas, it became difficult for civil society to actively resist Correa. This does not mean that civil society actors and social movements have been absent. They have tried to oppose the government but, as we explain below, the latter has been able to control them.

In effect, Correa's administration aimed to regulate associations and groups labelled "corporatists" and hence not true social movements or authentic organizations of civil society. The notion of corporatism that was applied by social scientists to analyse the relationship between the state and civil society became a normative category under the Correa administration. It was used to stigmatize all existing organizations as special interest groups who defended their "egotistic interests".<sup>26</sup> As opposed to particularistic corporatist special interest groups, the state under Correa was presumed to represent the universal interests of all sectors of society.

Correa's government confronted most organized groups of civil society: teachers, students, public employees, and indigenous organizations.<sup>27</sup> Correa's government clashed with both students and teachers over changes in the high school and university curricula. The government tried to reduce the power of the unions of state employees; it intended to get rid of the teacher's union controlled by the leftist Democratic Popular Movement; and it aimed to restrict unionization in the public sector.

The government's conflicts with the main indigenous organization, Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), were rooted in strong disagreements over mineral extraction. President Correa asserted several times: "we always said that the main danger to our political project, after defeating the right in elections, are the infantile left, environmentalists, and Indianists".<sup>28</sup> Correa saw mining as the country's future and proposed to use natural resources to alleviate poverty. He repeatedly said: "We cannot be beggars sitting in a sack of gold". The indigenous movement and ecologists argued that the new constitution's overarching goal of *sumak kawsay* – meaning "the good life" or "living well" in Kichwa – required a rejection of mineral extraction and asked for alternative relationships between humans, nature, and development.

Correa used two strategies to tame the power of social movements. The first was militancy, understood by Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart in their framework for analysis as using the legal system to limit the civil and political rights of autonomous and critical social movements. Following the old-time Latin American maxim "for my friends, everything, for my enemies, the law!", Correa's government used "discriminatory legalism, or the use of formal legal authority in discretionary ways".<sup>29</sup> Over 200 hundred peasant-indigenous activists faced accusations of terrorism for resisting mineral resource extraction.<sup>30</sup> A few notorious leaders of social movement organizations have been prosecuted and sentenced for "terrorism". The most prominent were Pepe Acacho, a Shuar leader and deputy from the Pachakutik party, Mery Zamora leader of the teachers union, and several leaders of the student movement.

In a bold and controversial move to regulate civil society and NGOs, the government created legislation that requires all organizations of civil society to register with the state. Executive Degree 16, enacted in June 2013, also gave the government authority to sanction organizations for deviating from the objectives for which they were constituted, for engaging in politics, and for interfering in

public policies in a way that contravenes internal and external security or disturbs public peace.

Several civil society groups reacted to Correa's undemocratic regulation and surveillance of civil society by filing petitions with the Constitutional Court to overturn Decree 16. After the Constitutional Court controlled by Correa dismissed their petition, they took their case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights at the Organization of American States with the support of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Despite internal and external pressure, Correa did not back down and, for example in December 2013, his administration closed the international environmentalist NGO Pachamama Alliance. The government argued that this NGO deviated from the original organization's goals and interfered with public policy and security.<sup>31</sup>

Correa's second strategy was to isolate the leadership of CONAIE from the rank-and-file. Clientelist redistribution was one of the strategies used to incorporate the indigenous base, as the beneficiaries of social programmes felt personally indebted to Correa.<sup>32</sup> Another tool of incorporation and cooptation was state employment. According to indigenous leader Marlon Santi, thousands of indigenous people are working for the state.<sup>33</sup> Prominent leaders of the Afro-Ecuadorian movement are employed in Correa's government.<sup>34</sup> These new government officials are becoming unconditional supporters of his administration.

Parallel social movement organizations were created from the top down. For instance, the government formed the student movement "New University" to successfully challenge the Maoist MPD at the Central University in Quito in 2009.<sup>35</sup> The state sponsored the Council for Afro-Ecuadorian Unity. This organization, funded by the Secretariat for the Peoples, staged demonstrations in support of Correa in exchange for jobs.<sup>36</sup> The government reactivated defunct indigenous organizations, such as the Federation of Ecuadorian Indians (FEI). Leaders of smaller organizations that had rivalries with CONAIE used the conflicts between CONAIE and Correa as an opportunity to strengthen their organizations. Similarly, several Afro-Ecuadorian organizations chose to ally with the government. They used the state to push for their demands for affirmative action and the elimination of racist stereotypes in the media.

Despite electoral defeats and demobilization, indigenous and other social movements did not passively accept Correa's policies. Indigenous organizations vowed to resist open-pit mining and the exploitation of oil in national parks because these developmental projects would destroy the environment and water supplies in very fragile ecological environments, such as those located in the rainforest. It is an open question if CONAIE will be able to rebuild its strength to lead widespread collective action against Correa's extractivist policies.

### **The media**

When Correa was elected in 2006, the structure of the media industry reflected Ecuador's regional fragmentation. As opposed to Brazil, Mexico, Peru, or

Argentina, where media empires dominate the market, Ecuador's pattern of media ownership was dispersed. Notwithstanding some interconnections among economic groups, 17 regionally-based family groups comprised the media industry.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, these economic groups were limited mostly to controlling just a few outlets. Newspapers, as well as most radio stations, were local and/or regional but not national. While the major television stations broadcasted nationally, the structure of news shows reflected the regionalist divide of Ecuador. News shows generally had two anchor people: one in Quito and another in Guayaquil.

As in other Latin American countries, the Ecuadorian media had a tradition of advocacy reporting. Not surprisingly, a number of journalists took openly partisan positions during the 2006 presidential election. While 28% of all television news coverage cast a positive light on Correa, 13% favoured his rival Álvaro Noboa. Of all opinion pieces and newspaper coverage, 34% favoured Noboa and 41% Correa.<sup>38</sup> Alternative models of journalism such as watchdog journalism emerged, particularly in the print media. The major newspapers had investigative reporting units. The press uncovered important corruption scandals; among them was the succession of corruption cases during Abdalá Bucaram's short presidency.

Despite an initial honeymoon, Correa's administration soon clashed with the privately owned media. Fundamedios, an NGO that monitors freedom of the press, reported 597 government attacks since 2008.<sup>39</sup> According to President Correa: "the media have always been one of the *de facto* powers that have dominated Latin American countries".<sup>40</sup> He asserted that a few families from the oligarchy controlled the media, and that because they were losing old privileges they had mounted campaigns to discredit leftist regimes at the national and international level. Journalists, according to Correa's analysis, reproduced what the owners of media outlets dictated. Most importantly, he considered that information that was a public good was in private hands. Therefore, the task of the state was to regulate the content, and set limits on how a public service could be administered by private providers.

In order to regulate the privately owned media, Correa used a five-prong strategy. First, unlike in the past when all the media was in private hands, the state today controls newspapers, TV, and radio stations. The Correa administration created a public television, station, *Ecuador TV*, and newspapers *El Ciudadano* and *PP El Verdadero*, targeted to working class audiences. Three television and four radio stations that belonged to the Isaiás brothers were confiscated in order to collect their debts to the state. Using the same arguments, the government took possession of *Diario El Telégrafo*. The state is in charge of a media conglomerate that includes the two most watched TV stations, as well as a several radio stations and newspapers. Without a tradition of a public media, and in the hands of a government that did not differentiate its interests from those of the state, these outlets were put to the service of Correa's administration.

The president's second strategy was to use the media to communicate directly with his electorate. Correa was convinced that the media had an immense power to shape opinion and to gather votes. After becoming President, he declared: "let's not

be naïve, we won the elections, but not power. Power is controlled by economic interests, the banks, the partidocracia, and the media connected to the banks".<sup>41</sup> Because the media was assumed to have a big role in the construction of hegemony, the argument was that the government needed to inform the citizenry directly. His administration used mandatory national broadcasts in order to publicize the accomplishments of his government, to challenge media reports of corruption and abuse of power of his administration, and to attack the opposition. From 2007 to 2012, the government aired 1365 mandatory broadcasts that lasted for 11,793 minutes.<sup>42</sup>

The main innovation of Correa's media strategy was the weekly radio and television programme *Enlace Ciudadano* (Citizens' Connection or Citizens' Ties) broadcasted for about two hours every Saturday morning. Correa became an everyday figure in the life of Ecuadorians, constantly appearing on television and radio to explain his policies, and to attack his enemies. In addition, the day before every broadcast the president and his cabinet met with local authorities. By visiting remote regions where politicians and state official rarely went, he reinforced his charisma and populist appeal. As the "kings" discussed by Clifford Geertz, Correa visited all of the nation's territory to become the centre of the social order.<sup>43</sup>

His third strategy was to use discriminatory legalism to sue journalists and newspaper owners. The most notorious cases that were reported worldwide involved an editor and three board members of the largest privately owned newspaper, *El Universo*, who were convicted of defamation and sentenced to three-year terms for publishing an editorial entitled, "No to Lies"; the paper was also fined US\$40 million. Correa sued investigative journalists Juan Carlos Calderón and Christian Zurita for libel for uncovering detailed allegations of corruption by his brother. Their book, entitled *The Big Brother*, details the favouritism Fabricio Correa enjoyed while obtaining contracts from the state for about US\$150 million. Rafael Correa demanded that these two journalists pay him two million dollars for causing moral harm. After they were promptly convicted, the President pardoned them.

In the absence of domestic legal venues to defend themselves from the attacks of Correa's government, journalists and owners of private media outlets, like civil society activists, took their cases to transnational civil society and to supranational organizations. The Inter American Commission of Human Rights requested precautionary measures for the accused journalists. The Ecuadorian government did not accept this request, and threatened to abandon the Inter-American System of Human Rights.

The state regulation of the privately owned media was Correa's fourth strategy. In 2013, the National Assembly controlled by Correa approved a communication law that created a board tasked with monitoring and regulating the content of what the media could publish. According to the administration, such a regulatory mechanism was needed in order to assure that the private media delivered information objectively. Their argument was that since the privately owned media, like privately owned banks, provided a public service, they needed to be regulated by the state. Any attempt at watchdog journalism was viewed with suspicion, and

the president as well as other state officials used libel laws in order to intimidate and to try to silence critical journalists.

Some social movements approved of the regulation of media content and used Correa's media laws to ban the use of sexist images in tabloids, and of racist and homophobic representations in television shows. Instead of worrying about state censorship, some activists took advantage of the opportunity to get rid of what they considered to be offensive media representations.

A group of 60 journalists, academics, and intellectuals challenged the constitutionality of the law of communication. The court dismissed their petition, and supranational organizations were the only actors that could defend freedom of expression in Ecuador. Catalina Botero, the Organization of American States Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, requested that Correa's government respect the international agreements on free speech, and argued that the creation of a state office to regulate media content (the "Superintendencia de Comunicación"), would violate the American Convention of Human Rights.<sup>44</sup> Correa responded by accusing Botero of echoing the opinions "of big businesses".<sup>45</sup> Frank La Rue, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, described some of the law's provisions as "unacceptable".<sup>46</sup>

Finally, the state economically strangled the privately owned media. Owners of newspapers and radio stations, which for the most part have relatively small profit margins, were quite vulnerable to the pressures of the state. The Constitution of 2008 prohibited bankers to own media outlets. The 2011 referendum banned media owners from having stocks in any other type of enterprise. The state raised the price of paper, stopped using government advertisement in newspapers and radio stations that criticized their policies, and pressured big business to reduce their marketing in critical media outlets. These strategies economically suffocated the privately owned media. They would have to choose between "softening" their editorial lines and investigative reporting or risk being forced out of business. In August 2014, *Diario Hoy*, a centre-left newspaper founded in 1982, went bankrupt. The government cut state advertisement, and encouraged big business to stop advertising in this media outlet. While some newspapers resisted the state's colonization of the public sphere, most television stations accepted the new rules of the game.

### **External reactions to Rafael Correa's populist project**

Political scientist César Montúfar writes that Correa's was not merely a "national political project but part of a continental or even global movement: twenty first century socialism".<sup>47</sup> Correa's project was built on the notions of national sovereignty, the critique to US imperialism, and attempts to create alternative supranational Latin American institutions without US influence.<sup>48</sup> Correa's nationalist-populist discourse was in tune with public opinion in Ecuador. A study on perceptions of foreign policy showed that Ecuadorians rejected the interventions of other

states, multinational corporations, and even supranational organizations in their domestic affairs.<sup>49</sup>

Correa led initiatives for Latin American integration. He joined the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas (ALBA) founded by President Hugo Chávez in 2004 as an alternative to US-led trade partnerships. Correa searched for closer diplomatic and trade relationships with Russia, Iran, and especially China. His government aimed to replace the Organization of American States, where he claimed that the US is dominant, with the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) without American or Canadian presence. The headquarters of UNASUR moved to Ecuador. This organization was created in 2008 to promote a deeper integration among Latin American countries when Mercosur and the Andean Community of Nations were merged.

His government put forward bold foreign initiatives when Correa became the protector of international icons of the free access to information Julian Assange and Edward Snowden. His anti-imperialist postures were well received at home because they enhanced his image as an international revolutionary leader. They also attracted the support of leftwing academics overseas, who praised his anti-imperialist struggles without reflecting on how his policies were suffocating the public sphere and civil society inside Ecuador.<sup>50</sup>

Unlike the past, when the US directly intervened in shaping Ecuador and other Latin American nations' policies, the Obama administration kept a low profile and abstained from directly confronting Correa's government. For example, the US quietly left the military base of Manta when its lease was not renewed in 2009. In 2011, Correa declared US Ambassador Heather Hodges *persona non grata* and expelled her after the WikiLeaks revelations that she denounced the corruption of Ecuador's chief of police; President Obama responded by ousting Ecuador's Ambassador to Washington. In mid 2012, Ecuador and the US renamed ambassadors.

Despite Obama's lack of direct confrontation, Correa argued that US dominated supranational institutions, such as the Organization of American States, were orchestrating a campaign against his and other left-leaning governments. When the Colombian army raided a camp of the Revolutionary Army of Colombia (FARC) inside Ecuadorian territory in 2008, and the Organization of American States (OAS) with US support failed to condemn what Ecuador considered to be a Colombian aggression, Correa responded by accusing the OAS of defending American interest. In a long interview with the *New Left Review*, Correa asserted that it was time that Latin Americans moved "from the Washington Consensus to the consensus without Washington".<sup>51</sup>

His government stopped accepting US aid to train the police in 2009, and in 2014 refused aid to train the military. Correa inherited a multibillion dollar conflict with Chevron. The Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague ruled in favour of Chevron that Ecuador violated the US-Ecuador Bilateral Investment Treaty.<sup>52</sup> Correa replied by threatening to abandon this bilateral agreement. The immediate US reaction was to admonish Ecuador, arguing that these actions would

compromise the renovation of the Andean Trade Preferences and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA). This law provided eligible countries with unilateral preferential access to the US market for certain products, to combat dependence on the illegal narcotics trade.

Some US politicians perceived Correa's search for national sovereignty as unfriendly acts towards their government. When Correa granted diplomatic asylum to Julian Assange in June 2012 at the Ecuadorian Embassy in London, to avoid Assange's deportation to Sweden to face accusations of sexual assault, and perhaps an eventual extradition to the US where according to Correa he "could be exposed to the death penalty for political crimes",<sup>53</sup> these US politicians became enraged. Correa also overestimated the positive image he was receiving from left-leaning actors around the world because of the Assange case, and offered political asylum (in case if he so requested) to the former CIA consultant Edward Snowden, who had denounced that the United States spied on friendly and unfriendly governments alike. Senator Robert Menendez, head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, asserted that he would block the renewal of the ATPDEA to Ecuador if Snowden would receive asylum. He declared: "Our government will not reward countries for bad behaviour".<sup>54</sup> In response, Ecuador unilaterally renounced the ATPDEA.

Correa invested resources to show the world the successes of his political and economic project. He constantly toured international academic circuits such as the London School of Economics, Harvard, and Yale to lecture about the accomplishments of his administration in reducing poverty, and reaching high levels of economic growth. More pragmatically Correa's government hired the firm Van Scoyoc Associates (VSA), based in Washington DC, to improve its relations with the US government.

Correa used his foreign policy to challenge leftwing criticism to his government and to export an anti-imperialist image. The Yasuní initiative to leave oil underground in exchange of a monetary compensation from rich nations was the poster image of his pro-environmental credentials even while his administration was opening the country to open-pit mining and while he was promoting the "responsible" exploitation of oil from this natural reserve in order to alleviate poverty.

The timing of external responses, as the editors of this special issue argue, is indeed important. Supranational institutions such as the Organizations of American States only reacted after domestic forces could not check Correa. In a context where the courts and all institutions of horizontal accountability are in the hands of Correa's government, civil society activists and journalists could only appeal to external actors. Correa contested that international critics serve the interests of global capitalism and the US government. Lumping together US conservative politicians, global civil society organizations, and supranational organization, by the same token, he portrayed himself as the victim of a global imperialist conspiracy. He responded by advocating for the construction of new international institutions without US influence.

## Conclusions

The literature on populism has differentiated the effects on democracy of populist movements and populist governments. Whereas the former could be regarded democratic in so far as they promise to include the excluded, politicize topics considered to be irrelevant or technical, and transform the stigmas of the poor into virtues, populist governments often clash with the liberal framework of democracy.<sup>55</sup> When populists take power during a crisis of liberal representative institutions such as parties, congress, and the judiciary, populist leaders in office might further undermine democracy.

The framework for analysis of this special issue contributes to this debate by focusing on the interactions between populist governments and a constellation of internal and external actors. Instead of arguing that the logic of populist discourse leads to authoritarianism, the different cases illustrate the institutional conditions under which the interactions between populist governments and parties, social movements, and the media result in authoritarianism or not. The case of Ecuador under Rafael Correa illustrates that under conditions of a serious crisis of political representation, and when domestic actors do not have the organizational resources to resist the populist leader's appropriation of the voice of the people, democracy is eroded.

Correa had the upper hand and used some of the strategies discussed in the framework of analysis to confront the main domestic actors that could resist his project: parties, social movements, the media, and supranational institutions. Correa combined strategies based on militancy and incorporation to decapitate traditional parties, to weaken and try to co-opt social movements, and to restrict the freedom of the press. Traditional political parties that were in crises were the first of Correa's victims. After unsuccessfully using congress to resist Correa after he got to office, many parties simply collapsed and disappeared, while others retreated to local politics. The strategy of the old and new political opposition has been to challenge Correa locally. His administration imposed candidates that alienated local constituencies, and supported incumbents such as Quito's former mayor who had low popularity levels. The goal of the opposition was to win over Correa's constituencies at the local level. Correa responded to the disconnection between support for him and the rest of his party by seeking yet another term in office.

Social movements, journalists, and the owners of private media venues resisted Correa's colonization of civil society and the public sphere by unsuccessfully trying to use domestic legal venues. With the judicial system in the hands of Correa's supporters they failed in their legal appeals, and had to recur to supranational institutions. Correa interpreted the interventions of supranational institutions on behalf of activists and journalists as interference by US imperialism. However, he has been less hostile to external forces than Chavismo in Venezuela and, in consequence, with the partial exception of the US, foreign governments have not tried to confront him. Transnational civil society actors such as Amnesty International

and Human Rights Watch are probably the only external actors who have been outspoken in criticizing Correa's regime.

Until 2013, Correa ruled under an oil boom, the like of which had not been seen in Ecuador since the 1970s. The government increased the number of recipients and the amount of conditional cash transfers, which worked well to alleviate poverty and to create clientelistic loyalties among the very poor. Middle class people benefited from the expansion of state employment and from an oil boom that produced a sum-sum game. Economic elites profited from his policies and did not feel the urge to resist his populist government. Despite rhetorical attacks on some bankers and entrepreneurs, Correa did not threaten the economic interests of elites. The disarray of the opposition might be explained by the fact that the interests of the middle and upper classes have not been affected, and they have not perceived Correa as a real or an imaginary threat. On the contrary, they valued the economic boom and political stability after previously enduring a decade of uncertainty provoked by political and social turmoil.

Despite his current popularity, Correa is a giant with feet of clay. His populist government is highly dependent on his persona. He has not built a true political party, and the different factions and interest groups of his movement are held together by his charisma. The oil price drop is leading to more protests by the different constituencies harmed by Correa's policies. So far, the different opposition groups have not formed a common front against Correa. But even if they join forces, they will confront a charismatic leader who controls all state institutions. In such a context, as Guillermo O'Donnell noted, the opposition and the government might try to occupy streets augmenting the risks of generalized violence, and for an authoritarian outcome of the crisis.<sup>56</sup> Regardless of how long Correa clings to power, his legacy of democratic erosion might last longer than his rule. For even after his eventual departure, Ecuadorians will still struggle with the laws and regulations that Correa passed to control civil society and the public sphere.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes

1. O'Donnell, "Nuevas reflexiones," 30.
2. Mainwaring Bejarano, and Pizarro, *The Crisis of Democratic Representation*.
3. Basabe-Serrano and Martínez, "Ecuador"; Mejía Acosta, "Revolución."
4. Amnistía Internacional, "*Para que.*"
5. Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, "Cross-Currents in Latin America," 116.
6. Basabe-Serrano and Martínez, "Ecuador"; Levistky and Loxton, "Populism and Competitive."
7. Mainwaring Bejarano, and Pizarro, *The Crisis of Democratic Representation*.
8. Pachano, "Partidos políticos," 73.
9. Conaghan, "Ecuador: Correa's Plebiscitary Democracy," 262–4.

10. de la Torre and Conaghan, "The Hybrid Campaign," 339.
11. Conaghan, "Ecuador: Rafael Correa," 271–2.
12. La Constituyente Avanza, suplemento institucional, *El Comercio*, Quito, 13 May 2008.
13. Montúfar, "Rafael Correa," 313.
14. Ospina Peralta, "Radiografía."
15. Hawkins, "Responding to Radical Populism."
16. de la Torre and Conaghan, "The Hybrid Campaign."
17. Basabe-Serrano and Martínez, "Ecuador."
18. Hernández, "Ecuador," 23.
19. Basabe-Serrano and Martínez, "Ecuador," 155.
20. *Ibid.*, 160.
21. Ray and Kozameh, *Ecuador's Economy Since 2007*.
22. Conaghan, "Ecuador: Correa's Plebiscitary Democracy," 209.
23. Martín, "El desempeño," 247.
24. Hawkins, "Responding to Radical Populism."
25. Martínez Novo, "Introducción."
26. See Correa, "Interview"; Quintero and Silva, "Ecuador."
27. See Becker, "The Stormy Relations between Rafael Correa"; Martínez Novo, "The Backlash"; Ortiz, *La sociedad*.
28. See for example, Correa, "Informe."
29. Weyland, "The Threat from the Populist Left," 23.
30. Amnistía Internacional, "*Para que.*"
31. Conaghan, "Surveil and Sanction."
32. Tuaza, "La relación."
33. Ortiz, *La sociedad*, 257.
34. de la Torre and Sánchez, "The Afro-Ecuadorian," 144.
35. Ortiz, *La Sociedad*, 327.
36. de la Torre and Sánchez, "The Afro-Ecuadorian," 148.
37. Navarro, *Poder económico, poder político y poder fáctico*, 114–75.
38. de la Torre and Conaghan, "The Hybrid Campaign."
39. Fundamedios, "El silencio."
40. Correa, "Interview," 100.
41. Conaghan, "Ecuador: Correa's Plebiscitary Democracy," 200.
42. Fundamedios, "El silencio."
43. Geertz, "Centers, Kings, and Charisma."
44. [http://www.oas.org/dil/esp/tratados\\_B-32\\_Convencion\\_Americana\\_sobre\\_Derechos\\_Humanos.htm](http://www.oas.org/dil/esp/tratados_B-32_Convencion_Americana_sobre_Derechos_Humanos.htm)
45. <http://www.ecuadortimes.net/2013/07/01/correa-will-not-answer-to-the-rapporteur-over-freedom-of-expression/>
46. <https://knightcenter.utexas.edu/blog/00-14071-8-highlights-understand-ecuador's-controversial-communications-law>
47. Montúfar, "Rafael Correa," 299–300.
48. See the book written by his former Minister of Foreign Relations Fander Falconí, *Al Sur de las Decisiones*.
49. Zepeda and Verdesoto, *Ecuador*.
50. See Latin American Experts, "An Open Letter to the Media."
51. Correa, "Interview," 104.
52. Beittel, "Ecuador: Political and Economic Conditions," 8.
53. Correa, "Interview," 103.
54. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2013/06/27/ecuador-us-trade-relations-snowden/2462687/>

55. See Levitsky and Loxton, "Populism and Competitive"; Rovira Kaltwasser, "The Ambivalence of Populism"; Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart. "Dealing with Populists in Government."
56. O'Donnell, "Nuevas reflexiones," 29.

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