

The Correa Coup

by
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On September 30, 2010, discontented police officers and military troops plunged Ecuador into a political crisis as they took President Rafael Correa hostage, seized airports, and stormed the National Assembly building. In response, Correa declared a state of emergency and denounced what he termed a coup attempt. To outside observers, what appeared to be in process was yet another potentially extraconstitutional transfer of power in Ecuador's tumultuous political history, with some pointing to the presence of the heavy imperial hand of the United States. Some grassroots activists, however, cast the political disruptions as little more than a labor dispute that Correa manipulated to entrench his increasingly authoritarian control over the country. At play in these competing narratives were debates over what political and economic direction Ecuador should take and whose interests those developments would benefit. Furthermore, the September 30 protests raise questions of how various domestic and international actors opportunistically exploit political developments to advance their own competing interests. Analyzing these events leads to a deeper understanding and appreciation for the compromises local social movements make, as well as the difficulties inherent in building transnational solidarity networks.

El 30 de septiembre de 2010, tropas militares y oficiales de la policía descontentos sumieron al Ecuador en una crisis política al tomar como rehén al Presidente Rafael Correa, ocupar aeropuertos y asaltar el edificio de la Asamblea Nacional. En respuesta, Correa declaró un estado de emergencia y denunció lo que él consideró un intento de golpe de estado. Para los observadores externos, lo que parecía que estaba ocurriendo era un nuevo intento de cambio de poder potencialmente extra constitucional en la tumultuosa historia política del Ecuador, y algunos llegaron a señalar la presencia de la pesada mano imperial de los Estados Unidos. Algunos activistas populares, sin embargo, vieron las perturbaciones políticas como poco más que una disputa laboral que Correa manipuló para afianzar su control cada vez más autoritario sobre el país. En juego en estas narrativas antagónicas estaba el debate sobre qué dirección política y económica el Ecuador debería tomar y a quiénes beneficiarán esos desarrollos. Además, las protestas del 30 de septiembre suscitan interrogantes sobre cómo varios actores domésticos e internacionales explotaron de manera oportunista estos desarrollos políticos para adelantar sus propios intereses antagónicos. El análisis de estos acontecimientos nos lleva a un mejor entendimiento y apreciación sobre las concesiones que los movimientos sociales locales tienen que hacer, y también sobre las dificultades inherentes en la creación de redes de solidaridad transnacionales.

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At 8:00 a.m. on Thursday, September 30, 2010, several hundred police officers at Quito's Regiment No. 1 paralyzed their activities to protest a new public service law. When news of the protest reached the presidential palace, Rafael Correa raced off to the barracks with his presidential entourage to clarify the intent of the law with the dissenting officers. Correa declared, "No one has done more for the police than this government." As he spoke of his support for salary increases, the protesters shouted back that the previous president and Correa's political opponent Lucio Gutiérrez had followed similar policies. In rather brusque fashion, Correa called the protesting officers "a bunch of ungrateful bandits" who did not understand or appreciate the initiatives that he had taken on their behalf. He tore open his shirt, as if to show that he was not wearing a bulletproof vest, and proclaimed, "If you want to kill the president, here I am if you have the guts to do so." As he attempted to leave the barracks, the police attacked with tear gas. The president's security detail evacuated the incapacitated leader to the neighboring police hospital for treatment.

From the hospital, Correa proclaimed that he was the victim of a coup attempt. Although the police made no moves to assassinate him, they did forcefully repel a march of his supporters that arrived at the hospital. Finally, 12 hours after the police protest began, an elite special squad stormed the hospital to free the president. Correa mobilized 900 soldiers from the three branches of the armed forces (navy, air force, and army) for the rescue, in addition to 55 officers from the police's Grupo de Operaciones Especiales (Special Operations Group—GOE), 106 from the Grupo de Intervención y Rescate (Intervention and Rescue Group—GIR), and dozens of other intelligence officers, all armed to the teeth as if prepared for combat. With electricity out in the hospital, the loyal troops used night-vision goggles to guide Correa from the room where he had been held. As they fled the hospital, snipers fired on the president's armored sport-utility vehicle. In the process, five people (a student, two police officers, and two soldiers) were killed and close to 300 injured, including Correa's foreign relations minister, Ricardo Patiño. Furthermore, a refusal of police to patrol the coast city of Guayaquil was blamed for looting and thefts that resulted in another five deaths, 28 injuries, and more than US\$5 million in economic losses. Correa would subsequently remember the events of that day and the deaths that they involved as the hardest part of his presidency (de la Torre, 2011; Paz y Miño, 2011; Pérez, 2012; Tamayo, 2011; Villavicencio, 2011).

On the surface, what appeared to be in process on September 30 was yet another extraconstitutional transfer of power in Ecuador's tumultuous political history. And, indeed, Ecuador does have a stormy history of frequent and extraconstitutional changes of government, challenging Bolivia for the dubious record of the country with the highest number of chief executives in Latin America. Immediately before Correa's presidency, the country had quickly burned through 10 different heads of state in 10 years. In fact, during the twentieth century, the country enjoyed only three periods during which an elected president successfully completed a term in office and peacefully transferred power to an opposing candidate (de la Torre, 2010). After reintroducing a mid-century period of uncommon political stability, President Galo Plaza still faced repeated demonstrations and two coup attempts that led him to quip that he was "witnessing a demonstration of the national sport" (*Hispanic World*

Report, 1949: 18). Correa's election in 2006 appeared to have ushered in an unusual period of political stability in which a single leader could remain in office for as long as 10 years, but the events of September 30 threatened to return the country to the status quo ante of street protests and coups.

To international solidarity activists less well versed in what the political scientist J. Samuel Fitch (2005) terms Ecuador's history of "soft" military coups,¹ September 30, 2010, seemed to be a replay of the June 30, 2009, military coup that removed Manuel Zelaya from power in Honduras, and they were quick to condemn the role of the United States. When a march of Correa's supporters descended on the hospital where police held the president captive and later rallied on Quito's central plaza after his release, observers saw a repeat of the popular uprising that reinstated Hugo Chávez in power after a failed April 2002 coup attempt in Venezuela.

From the perspective of Ecuador's social movements and in the context of that country's recent history, however, the meanings of 30-S (as the events of September 30 came to be known) quickly became much more contested. As elsewhere in Latin America, a left-wing government had come into conflict with social movements over its neo-extractivist policies (Dangl, 2010; Rénique, 2009; Webber, 2011; Zibechi, 2010). What was at play was conflicting ideas over what political and economic direction Ecuador should take and whose interests those developments would benefit. Popular movements struggled with how to push the government's social agenda to the left without bolstering a conservative oligarchy that attacked the president from the right. Leftist activists wondered whether Correa formed part of Ecuador's tradition of populist politicians who employed popular rhetoric to win elections but once in office catered to the economic interests of the wealthy and the political concerns of the military to maintain themselves in power (Sosa, 2012).

This essay raises the question whether international solidarity activists should ally themselves with sympathetic "pink tide" governments in South America or with social movements that had long challenged neoliberal economic policies and continued to question the neo-extractivist positions of these new governments. It examines how various domestic and international actors, including Ecuadorean social movements, international solidarity activists, the Ecuadorean military, and other governments, exploit political developments to advance their own competing interests. While comparative studies provide compelling analytical frameworks that significantly advance our understanding of political developments, caution must also be exercised in extrapolating conclusions from other times and places based on superficial similarities. Rather than understanding 30-S as a repeat of historical developments elsewhere in the hemisphere, this event is best interpreted through the lens of historical developments in Ecuador and in the context of domestic disputes for power.

WAS IT A COUP?

In the immediate aftermath of 30-S, a hot debate raged in Ecuador as to whether what the country had just lived through was a failed coup, a police mutiny, or simply a labor dispute (Chiriboga et al., 2010; Ospina, 2011; Paz y

Miño, 2011). Whether or not these events amounted to a coup attempt depends in part on one's definition. At its core, a coup requires prior planning and organization, conspiratorial negotiations, and a political agenda of capturing governmental power, characteristics that extend well beyond a spontaneous street protest. The events of September 30 did have some of these characteristics. Coordinated actions included seizing the National Assembly and attempting to capture other public buildings and media outlets. About 100 air force officers occupied the Quito and Guayaquil airports and blocked other strategic transportation networks. Although only about 1,000 of Ecuador's 42,000 police officers participated in the protests, Correa's supporters pointed to a series of factors that indicated a broader conspiracy: provincial governors were in Quito for a meeting, Vice President Lenín Moreno was in the United States, and Correa had just undergone knee surgery and as such faced physical limitations (Ortiz, 2011; Quintero and Sylva, 2010).

These debates over whether to categorize 30-S as a coup attempt tended to fall out along political lines, with those allying themselves with Correa determined to define the uprising as a failed coup and denouncing those who denied it as such as conservative sympathizers who sought to turn back political advances in the country. Many of Correa's supporters acknowledged that 30-S was not a classic coup in which insurgents intended to remove one leader and replace that person with another, but they continued to insist that this intent was there (Ramos and Páez, 2010). Both those to the right and those to the left of Correa denied that an attempted coup had taken place, instead portraying the events as a police protest that protagonists alternatively intended as a moral movement to check the excesses of an authoritarian president or a labor action designed to halt the implementation of encroaching neoliberal economic policies.

As developments unfolded on September 30, government officials presented contradictory statements as to whether a coup was under way or not (Paz y Miño, 2011: 157). Initially many government ministers and officials strenuously denied that a coup was in progress. Late in the afternoon, Minister of Tourism Freddy Ehlers emphasized that Correa was still in command of the country, and Policy Minister Doris Soliz characterized what was occurring as merely a problem of discipline within the police. Rather than his being held incommunicado, government officials freely came and left from the third floor of the hospital where the president was recuperating with his personal physician and security detail.

The first proclamations that 30-S was a coup came from outside of the country. Already in the morning, Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez tweeted from Caracas that a coup was under way in Ecuador (Villavicencio, 2011: 35–36). Only later in the evening, after reasserting political control, and in the days and years that followed did Correa and his supporters join a chorus insisting that the president had been kidnapped and that the perpetrators had engaged in an attempted coup and assassination. Soliz (in Soliz and Mancero, 2010) quickly reversed her stance and now proclaimed that it was "clearly a coup attempt" because it "was something that went beyond a mere protest over salaries into the realm of destabilizing the system and attempting to assassinate the president." The sociologist James Petras (2010) echoed that "a violent attempt by the police and sectors of the military to seize power and depose the president" was

“by any definition a coup.” Rather than a simple protest that got out of hand, a coordinated armed response across the country would seem to indicate a level of planning and political intent that extended beyond a spontaneous and unplanned response of disciplined police officers to the arrival of a president in their midst with unpopular economic proposals.

Instead of illustrating inconsistencies, an initial official hesitancy to identify what was happening on September 30 as a coup does have a certain logic in terms of political strategy. While in retrospect successful coups appear to have been inevitable in their outcome, these are periods in which many different political forces are in play and it is not at all clear where they will lead, as was apparent in the failed April 2002 coup in Venezuela. Coup attempts are a type of spectacle similar to the public executions in medieval Europe, which Michel Foucault (1977) describes as rituals that allowed for the exercise of political power even though their outcomes were not always ensured. Without demands for Correa’s resignation or any clear alternative force petitioning for executive power, it made little sense for the administration to appeal to the Inter-American Democratic Charter that pledged nonrecognition of extraconstitutional changes of government in the hemisphere. In fact, doing so might have encouraged and emboldened oppositional forces. Instead, it served Correa’s best interests to proclaim quite strongly that he remained in firm control of the government. Once the immediate crisis had passed, however, it would now serve Correa’s interests to claim that he had just survived a coup attempt because of the emotional benefit of such appeals and the political value of denouncing his political opponents for having engaged in an illegal action. Similarly, Chávez’s proclamation can be interpreted as an attempt to rally supporters to the defense of a besieged ally, which in turn could serve as a rhetorical device to shore up his international image as the most steadfast supporter of the hemisphere’s democratic leftward turn.

Those who denied that an attempted coup had taken place pointed to the fact that the military high command never broke with Correa. Two elite police squads, the GIR and the GOE, remained loyal to the president and controlled the third floor of the hospital building where he was recuperating. An opposing political force had not achieved a degree of social legitimacy or control over instruments of power such as state structures and the media or support from serious power brokers. The president remained in full control of the government, including signing a decree from the hospital that declared a state of emergency (*estado de excepción*) and ordering a *cadena nacional* in which all broadcast media were required to transmit from a government-owned station. As a result, the only news most people received as events unfolded was from an official point of view.

Critics point out that in most coup attempts insurgents approach the presidential palace to gain power, while the president seeks a safe place to maintain political control over the situation. On September 30, however, in an apparently spontaneous and arguably foolhardy act of bravery, Correa was the one who visited the police barracks to exercise his executive power. In addition, it was his decision to enter the police hospital to seek medical treatment. The Ecuadorean writer and social commentator Fernando Villavicencio Valencia (2011: 67) describes the police as engaged in a chaotic, leaderless protest and

surprised by the arrival of the chief executive in their midst. Initially the police did not issue a political program, and only once the situation began to escalate did the protesters begin to draft formal demands and sort out who might support them. Some opponents maintained that rather than a coup the president's aggressive actions had provoked a police rebellion. Correa's former interior minister, Gustavo Larrea, blamed the president's own temperament for unnecessarily aggravating a tense situation. Correa's errors "put our democracy at risk," Larrea declared (Romero, 2010a).

Both during and after the events of September 30, conservative business and political sectors, including Guayaquil mayor Jaime Nebot, condemned the disturbances and made statements in support of institutional democracy. "At no time did Correa lose control of the government," right-wing opposition congressional deputy César Montúfar stated, "nor did anyone attempt to succeed him." These declarations could be interpreted through a variety of lenses. Undoubtedly, some politicians were committed to the existing institutions and the rule of law and did not want to risk losing political legitimacy by being seen as having supported an illegal action. Their position may also have reflected the political reality that they were not behind the disturbances and feared that they could not control their potential outcomes. The sociologist Mario Unda (2011: 147–148) points to a lack of organized support from the political right for the coup plotters as evidence of Correa's failure to challenge entrenched capitalist interests.

The sociologist Carlos de la Torre (2011: 26–27) argues that in a sense Correa was correct that what had transpired was a coup attempt because the police who detained the president thought that their actions would inspire others to act as well, but he concludes that this was no ordinary coup attempt because the military remained loyal to the government. A subsequent June 2012 expedited impeachment of Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo that his supporters denounced as a parliamentary coup underscored the reality that coups against new left governments could take many different forms in the twenty-first century. Persistent problems of a crisis of institutional legitimacy and a historical context of neoliberalism, corporatism, and clientelism led to the fragmentation of civil society that allowed for these types of protest to emerge (Ramos and Páez, 2010). In particular, a problem was a legacy of corporatism that undercut democratic developments in the country, including weakening the development of political parties (Quintero and Sylva, 2010). Correa's attempts to dispose of corporatist privileges that previously had allowed public-sector employees to negotiate special rights directly with the government in part led to the police protest (de la Torre, 2011: 26–27).

Nevertheless, the semantic question of whether or not to categorize 30-S as a coup is not the key concern of this essay. Rather, what mattered more was whether Ecuador was making progress toward social justice and a more equal society. Tensions over those larger visions for Ecuador's future were what defined and characterized contrasting responses to the police protests. The persistent question facing social movements was how they should respond to the threats facing a neo-populist president who had emerged from outside of their ranks and with whom they repeatedly clashed on his neo-extractivist policies but who still provided an alternative that was unquestionably and

demonstratively better than previous oligarchical governments. Could they use a coup attempt to push what should have been a sympathetic government in a leftward direction?

SOCIAL MOVEMENT RESPONSES

Ironically, the clearest statements in support of the police and in favor of a change of government were from a small but vocal group of left-wing dissidents who had broken with Correa's government over what they criticized as his neo-extractivist policies and increasingly authoritarian forms of governance. They viewed the challenge to his government as an opportunity to push a weakened executive in a leftward direction and soften his attacks on social movements. Although this support was by no means the dominant perspective of grassroots activists, Correa (2012) exploited these statements to denounce what he considered to be the irresponsible positions of "infantile" and ultraleftist environmentalists and *indigenistas*.

Despite social movement opposition to government policies, demonstrations against Correa had been rather limited in size since his inauguration in 2007 and did not begin to approach the size of the large-scale street protests in 1997, 2000, and 2005 that had brought down previous presidents. Through a combination of maintaining high approval ratings (according to some polls, the highest level of any South American president) and undermining the strength of popular movements, Correa did not face the precarious situation that the previous presidents had confronted. The events of September 30 highlighted the fact that, while Correa enjoyed majority approval ratings in Ecuador, much of this was passive support that was not easily mobilized in defense of a besieged president (Unda, 2011: 148). Correa's political party, Alianza PAIS, with Foreign Minister Ricardo Patiño and other party functionaries in the lead, organized a march on the hospital where he had been detained and convoked a rally that greeted him upon his release at the presidential palace. These demonstrations were not spontaneous grassroots responses as occurred in 2002 in Venezuela or the social movement mobilizations that suppressed right-wing destabilization efforts against Evo Morales's government in Bolivia in 2008. Most of the participants were from Quito's growing middle class rather than from the grassroots social movements or leftist political parties that had raised repeated challenges to previous neoliberal governments. As is common for such rallies, estimates of its size varied dramatically, from a low of 2,000 to a high of 100,000 (Ospina, 2011: 21). Whatever its true size, a demonstration *in favor* of a president such as happened on September 30, even if organized by a political party, was unusual in a country where such protests typically were designed to overthrow a government.

On the afternoon of September 30, while events were still unfolding, the powerful Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador—CONAIE) released a statement that complained that Correa had brought these problems upon himself because, while he continued to attack social movements, he had done little to weaken the power of oligarchical structures. Furthermore, his refusal to

listen to or consider police demands was indicative of the authoritarian nature that had caused him so many problems with the social movements. While the CONAIE (2011) stated that in no way did it support a coup attempt, it criticized the president for acting in a manner that opened up possibilities for a right-wing reaction that would roll back the social movements' positive gains.

Later that evening and once it became clear that Correa would retain his hold on power, the CONAIE's highland affiliate Ecuarrunari (2010) released an even more strongly worded statement. The federation complained that, in advancing an export-oriented economy, Correa had "formed broad alliances with right-wing groups in mining, oil, agribusiness, etc., and attacked and persecuted popular left-wing organizations (especially the indigenous movement), which leaves those reactionary sectors free to act in this way." Nevertheless, Ecuarrunari continued, "despite our deep disagreements with the national government that has prosecuted some of our leaders as terrorists, this is no reason to stand with our historic enemies," the oligarchy. It would oppose any moves toward dictatorship and continue to fight for a plurinational democracy and to "deepen urgent changes in the process of agrarian revolution." Once the immediate threat had passed, the indigenous movements moved back to a position of pressuring Correa from the left in order to strengthen the revolution rather than fostering a personification of governing structures.

Government supporters accused the indigenous movements of being pawns, whether knowingly so or not, of local right-wing parties and outside imperial forces. From their perspective, the CONAIE's failure to mobilize street protests on behalf of the government meant that it had granted passive support to the coup attempt (Quintero and Sylva, 2010). Correa (2012) echoed these points, charging that the indigenous movements had entered into an alliance with conservative forces in conspiring against his government. In the minds of some people, this raised images of the Central Intelligence Agency's manipulating Miskito desires for autonomy in Nicaragua to create a subversive force against the leftist Sandinista government in the 1980s. This narrative, however, does not match the trajectory of an ideologically grounded movement in Ecuador that had long allied itself with other leftist forces, both domestically and internationally, against neoliberal economic policies.

Because of this long history of social movement challenges to neoliberal governments, other observers assumed that Ecuador's leftist indigenous movements would support Correa and became fiercely critical of them for not rallying to the president's defense on September 30. And, indeed, during his electoral campaigns Correa did embrace many of the proposals that had come out of popular movements, including a call to convoke a constituent assembly in order to build a more equal and participatory government. But the social movements and in particular the CONAIE never gave Correa their unqualified support. In part, this was a learned response from participating in Lucio Gutiérrez's government in 2003 after having joined the former colonel in an unsuccessful coup attempt two years earlier. In power, Gutiérrez implemented the same neoliberal economic policies that he had previously claimed to oppose. As a result, the social movements were hesitant to form new alliances with political figures from outside their movements (Becker, 2011; Mijeski and Beck, 2011).

Underscoring social movement estrangement from the Correa administration were repeated charges that the president was not a leftist. From this perspective, what happened on September 30 was not similar to the coups that Salvador Allende faced in Chile in 1973 or Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 2002. "If Correa's government were really a leftist government that fights for the interests of poor people," the social movement activist and former member of the guerrilla group *Alfaro Vive Carajo* (Alfaro Lives Dammit—AVC) Natalia Sierra (2010) maintains, "the national and international right would have already tried to depose him, and organized forces would have come to his defense because he would be backing a revolutionary project against right-wing capitalist forces." Instead, according to her, Correa pursued clientelistic and populist policies that demobilized popular forces.

As the sociologist Jorge León (2010: 17) notes, indigenous people's relations with Correa "have oscillated between complete agreement and outright opposition." As Correa began to implement his policies, the social movements increasingly found themselves in opposition to a government that spoke openly of twenty-first-century socialism and positioned itself as part of Latin America's drift toward more participatory governing structures. Correa came to power on the strength of his denunciation of neoliberal economic policies, but as president he was accused of implementing some of the same austerity measures he had pledged to defeat. In particular, the social movements protested his policies of reducing wages, bonuses, and subsidies, which negatively affected farmers and poor workers in particular, and turning toward foreign investment in large-scale extractive industries (Becker, 2011). He became, as some observed, a manager of a state-run capitalism. "Correa advocates a statist model of development that allows for no real popular participation," the social critic René Báez notes. "His actions are a violation of the new constitution. Workers, teachers, indigenous organizations, and ecologists have no say in this government" (quoted in Burbach, 2010: 16). Correa's policies and style of government led to a growing distance from the social movements. They complained that Correa was not a true leftist and had betrayed the promises of fostering a more participatory society that had won him election.

While indigenous organizations and most social movements in general made strong statements against any potential coup and in favor of a continued peaceful and progressive transformation of society, individual militants came out in support of an extraconstitutional change in governance. Most notable were two deputies from the *Movimiento Unidad Plurinacional Pachakutik* (Pachakutik Movement for Plurinational Unity—MUPP, commonly simply called Pachakutik) that indigenous and other social movement activists had launched in 1995 as a vehicle to compete for political office. Cléver Jiménez, head of Pachakutik's legislative block in the National Assembly, denounced what he saw as Correa's dictatorial attitude and violation of the rights of workers. He then took one step farther and called for the president's resignation and the formation of a unified national front to usher in a new government, a statement that subsequently formed the basis for his being stripped of his diplomatic immunity and sentenced to 18 months in prison (Tamayo, 2010). In more widely broadcast statements, the Pachakutik delegate Lourdes Tibán (2010) declared that she would never support a coup but what occurred on September

30 was neither a coup nor a kidnapping. She contended that the political crisis was the result of the government's having ignored the demands of the social movements and trampled on their rights. "Correa cannot act as a victim and say there has been a coup attempt," Tibán said. "There has been no coup attempt whatsoever. What is happening now is his responsibility, he is calling for a confrontation" (quoted in Caselli, 2010). For these Pachakutik members, the solution to the political crisis was a new government that would be more responsive to social movement demands.

When Correa consolidated his control after the police uprising, Pachakutik (2010: 114) quickly distanced itself from the earlier proclamations of its individual members and replaced Jiménez as head of its legislative block (Paz y Miño, 2011: 105). "The CONAIE was never in agreement with 30-S," the indigenous leader Humberto Cholango emphasized (Cano, 2014). Tibán's comments in particular led to a vigorous denunciation from those who identified themselves as part of the indigenous left (Simbaña, 2010: 22). The former Pachakutik deputy and longtime indigenous leader Ricardo Ulcuango argued that indigenous movements should never support the police. "The police are a repressive apparatus of the indigenous movement and a tool of repressive state structures," he declared. "Perhaps there are some voices that support the police, but these are very specific voices that do not reflect the CONAIE's position" (Harnecker, 2011: 294–295). While Ulcuango was critical of aspects of Correa's government, he remained adamant that a coup would not advance social movement interests. Most of the social movement and political left condemned those who would applaud a rupture in the democratic order or ally themselves with police and military forces that had historically been used to repress the aspirations of Ecuador's popular sectors. Many social movement activists agreed with the former Correa ally Alberto Acosta that despite their political disagreements with the government they would defend the democratic system and strenuously oppose any coup attempt (Tamayo, 2010). No one wanted to return to the period of repressive military governments.

While most indigenous movement activists refused to support the police and stated their opposition to any coup attempt, the small clandestine Partido Comunista Marxista Leninista del Ecuador (Marxist Leninist Communist Party of Ecuador—PCMLE) and a segment of its allied political party the Movimiento Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Movement—MPD) took to the streets in support of the labor demands of the very same state apparatus that historically had repressed their frequent protests. The Maoists, in what they recognized as an ironic and opportunistic alliance, now found common cause in their opposition to a government that refused to listen to their demands and implemented neoliberal austerity measures (PCMLE, 2010). They rallied to the cause of the police with the chant "Uniformed people are also exploited!" (Paz y Miño, 2011: 93). Correa's supporters, however, pointed to something much more sinister in the MPD's actions, claiming that it had engaged in an active and synchronized attack on the government. In April 2012, seven MPD activists in the central highland province of Cotopaxi were convicted of conspiring against state security for occupying a government building during the police mutiny. The MPD (2010: 106) denounced these charges as part of Correa's attempt to silence and criminalize leftist dissent against his government.

These varied social movement responses indicated that grassroots activists did not speak with a single voice and that the attitudes of certain sectors should not be used to characterize the movement as a whole. These distinct perspectives point to competing interests within the social movements that alternatively indicated the presence of a healthy debate and a reflection of their weakened position that resulted in a failure to present the government with a unified agenda. Despite their aspirations, social movement leaders found it difficult to use 30-S to push the president leftward.

INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY RESPONSES

International solidarity campaigns are of the utmost importance in drawing attention to marginalized voices, as a rapidly growing literature illustrates (Power and Charlip, 2009). The most successful of these campaigns are conducted in alliance with grassroots activists and take their guidance from those with knowledge of and investment in local issues. In Ecuador, however, a besieged president received more eager support from international solidarity activists than from domestic social movements. In their haste to come to the defense of a leftist president under siege, some international observers rewrote significant details of Ecuador's recent political history. For example, Petras (2010) wrote, "Correa came to power by ousting pro-US client Lucio Gutiérrez and decimating the oligarchical parties who were responsible for dollarizing the economy and embracing Washington's free market doctrine." Most of all, Petras continues, "Correa was an ally of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, a member of the ALBA [Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America)] and a strong opponent of Colombia, Washington's main ally in the region."

This retelling of history is problematic on a variety of levels (for a somewhat different critique, see Coffey, 2010). First, at the time of Gutiérrez's ouster in April 2005 Correa was an obscure academic rather than a key player in the middle-class *forajido* movement that brought down the government. With a doctorate in economics from the University of Illinois, a Belgian wife, and a job teaching at the elite and conservative San Francisco University in Quito, Correa was an unlikely revolutionary. He appeared more similar to the technocrats who had previously governed the region than someone who represented a clear alternative to these policies. At most, Correa (2003) had contributed a short academic essay in which he criticized Gutiérrez for following the same orthodox economic policies that had characterized the dominant thinking in Latin America over the previous two decades. Correa rose to political prominence only during a short-lived stint as minister of economics in the subsequent government of Gutiérrez's vice president, Alfredo Palacio, where his Keynesian critiques of neoliberal economic policies made him the most popular member of the government. Even in that position and subsequently as president, Correa never seriously considered reversing the dollarization of the economy (a policy that had led to the fall of president Jamil Mahuad's government at the hands of Gutiérrez in 2000) and initially held Venezuela's leftist government of Hugo Chávez and the ALBA at a certain distance. In fact, as

minister of economics Correa had a falling out with his deputy Pablo Dávalos, who advocated closer relations with the Venezuelan government. As president he waited until 2009 to join the ALBA. For the most part, Correa followed a dual-track policy with regard to Venezuela, embracing Chávez's government when it served to rally a leftist base and distancing himself from the same when he felt the need to solidify his support among the capitalist class. Correa had broken relations with Colombia in March 2008 when Álvaro Uribe's government ordered a cross-border attack on a Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—FARC) camp in Ecuadorean territory in violation of international law. At the time of the police uprising, however, Correa had made initial moves to reestablish diplomatic relations with Juan Manuel Santos, who had assumed office as Colombia's new president the previous month, and maintained fairly cordial if not warm relations with the neighboring country.

Even more objectionable than Petras's comments was a piece by the Venezuelan-American lawyer and activist Eva Golinger (2010). With a broad stroke, she condemned Ecuador's indigenous movements for opposing Correa's government and accused the CONAIE of supporting the failed coup. Referring to larger apparent political interests behind the coup attempt, Golinger wrote that "Pachakutik entered into a political alliance with Lucio Gutiérrez in 2002 and its links with the former president are well known." Golinger misrepresents this history. Gutiérrez initially came onto the political scene in January 2000 when he joined forces with the CONAIE to remove Jamil Mahuad from power. Two years later, he allied himself with Pachakutik to win the presidential elections. At the time, international activists cheered Gutiérrez as a new Chávez. In fact, history seemed to be repeating itself as South America significantly tilted to the left. In Ecuador, a lower-ranking army official first led a failed coup attempt only to return to capture power through electoral means, much as Chávez had done in Venezuela in 1992 and 1998. At the time of his ascension, many international solidarity activists celebrated Gutiérrez's achievements as an advance of progressive aspirations for the continent. Social movements in Ecuador, however, were much less convinced of his leftist credentials, both because he had not emerged out of social movement organizing efforts and because as a presidential candidate he opportunistically played multiple sides of political debates around neoliberal economic policies when it served his interests to do so. After six months in his government, Pachakutik finally broke with Gutiérrez over his rightward drift. At the same time, Gutiérrez worked to divide and disrupt the indigenous movements. He continued to draw on a significant base of support in some indigenous areas, but these tended to be more conservative communities that responded to his populist and clientelistic policies rather than the leftist and politicized base that the CONAIE/Pachakutik represented. In 2010 the Pachakutik activists who opposed Correa most definitely did not support Gutiérrez and in fact had come into opposition to Correa partly because of the hard lessons learned from the failed alliance with Gutiérrez (Becker, 2011; Mijeski and Beck, 2011).

In response to Golinger's charges, the Ecuador Solidarity Network (ESN, 2010) issued a statement countering her accusations against the CONAIE. It pointed out that not only did she fail to provide evidence to back up her allegations but her

charges served to detract from very real concerns regarding competing visions for the country's economic development model, mining projects, oil industry expansion, and the nature of a plurinational state that the social movements had been pushing for years. Correa's antagonism toward the social movements had exacerbated these issues, and Golinger's comments did not serve to rebuild these relationships and strengthen Ecuadorean democracy. Her actions in rallying to Correa's defense while condemning social movements and others who opposed his government from the left challenges superficial interpretations that lay out the political positions of indigenous movements and Correa's government on a simple left-right continuum. The actions of social movements had paved the way for the emergence of new left governments and arguably were the primary force that could ensure their continued success in power, and therefore listening to their concerns was of the utmost importance to the survival and advance of progressive policies.

Local social movements and their international allies face a certain amount of competition, particularly with regard to the relationship of domestic policies to regional macro-level political changes. If Correa disappeared, the historian Pablo Ospina argued, within two weeks his political movement would disintegrate, whereas if something similar happened to a social movement leader such as Luis Macas his project would continue to advance (Guerrero et al., 2008: 12–13). The desire for outside allies to support a leftist president who was leading the hemisphere in a positive direction is understandable and logical, but it does raise the question of where the primary allegiances of international solidarity activists should fall when domestic forces come into conflict with each other.

MILITARY RESPONSES

In Latin American countries such as Ecuador, with their historically weak institutions and widely held belief that strong-armed juntas are better suited than easily corruptible civilian governments to cure society's ills, *golpista* tendencies in the military will inevitably persist. Petras (2010) raises the possibility that what happened on September 30 was a test run for a more serious challenge to Correa's government, perhaps not unlike the June 29, 1973, *tanquetazo* in Chile that predated the fall of Allende in September (Paz y Miño, 2011: 127), and, indeed, 30-S may have been a test or a prelude to a more serious putsch. Not only would a police uprising sort out who would and would not support a coup but the threat would place Correa on notice, perhaps making him more pliable, more "pragmatic," more responsive to the interests of capital. While certain individuals undoubtedly did (and continued to) favor a military coup, it remained unclear how widespread that sentiment was. Apparently police concerns extended beyond economic issues, and what superficially appeared to be economic demands had been mobilized for overtly political ends.

The role of the Ecuadorean military in the uprising is not entirely clear and points to divisions in the armed forces. Many top officials in the army opposed the coup. "We are subordinated to the maximum authority, which is the president of the republic," General Ernesto González, the top-ranking military

official, declared (Romero, 2010c). In contrast, about 100 air force officers joined the protest by occupying airports and other transportation hubs. The air force personnel unfurled printed banners protesting Correa's measures that did point to premeditation, although both Correa and the air force claimed that their demonstration was peaceful, apolitical, and separate from the police protest. Competing perspectives could reveal class divisions within the armed forces, as the army largely draws on lower-class draftees whereas the air force and navy are typically associated with white, wealthy oligarchical interests. Meanwhile, Correa's palace guard and special forces remained loyal to the government. After 10 hours, the military rescued Correa from the hospital, possibly indicating that during this period it was negotiating its demands with the president. In privileging pragmatic interests over ideological concerns, Correa and the military recognized that they needed each other to defend their institutional interests.

Whether or not 30-S revealed underlying sentiment for a military solution, various parties used those events to advance their political interests. After elite troops freed Correa from the police hospital, he returned to the presidential palace, where in a fiery speech to his gathered supporters he blamed infiltrators in the security forces for the uprising. In particular, he accused police officials with close connections to the former president and his political opponent Lucio Gutiérrez and his Partido Sociedad Patriótica (Patriotic Society Party—PSP), including some officers who had received training at the United States Army's School of the Americas (which activists have repeatedly denounced as producing dictators), of plotting his overthrow and assassination. On June 27, 2012, Correa announced his decision to pull Ecuador out of the School of the Americas, but he was never able to provide definitive proof that Gutiérrez had conspired to overthrow his government. After 30-S, Correa was understandably suspicious of the security forces and purged the police as well as taking other steps to solidify his political position and prevent further challenges to his rule.

Gutiérrez, who was in Brazil at the time serving as an electoral observer, vehemently denied involvement or that a coup attempt had taken place. "This can't be called a coup d'état," Gutiérrez said. "The police were simply protesting for their rights" (Romero, 2010b). Correa's accusations against Gutiérrez, however, did have a certain logic. As a career military officer, Gutiérrez's base of support remained in the armed forces. After leading a coup in alliance with indigenous movements against Jamil Mahuad's unpopular government in 2000, undoubtedly some of his supporters would have liked to act once again against a government they opposed. Whether or not the former president was involved in a conspiracy or even supported a coup, he did take advantage of the situation to attack Correa and call for new elections.

The public service law that led to the police protest had been bogged down in legislative debates for well over a year, to the point that Correa had threatened to dissolve the National Assembly and call new elections to break the deadlock. After seemingly endless delays, the assembly had only finally passed the law the day before the police uprising. The law was part of broader austerity measures that curtailed police and military bonuses and lengthened the time between promotions from five to seven years. Correa contended that the police had misinterpreted the law and that he was not harming their economic

interests. In fact, he had raised their monthly salary from US\$355 to US\$750, a payment more than three times the monthly minimum wage of US\$240. Nevertheless, police and military officers often anticipated end-of-year bonuses to subsidize holiday expenses. Furthermore, the police gained prestige and recognition through more frequent promotions and the elaborate ceremonies surrounding them, and these rituals could mean as much as or more than salary increases. The sociologist Manuel Chiriboga points out that the public service law was simply the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back and that the police mutiny was a reactionary movement intended to retain autonomy and privileges that had been eroded under Correa's administration (Chiriboga et al., 2010: 22–23). Some of Correa's conservative opponents complained that as a civilian he did not understand the logic of the police economy and how his policies had led to the protests (de la Torre, 2011: 28).

In the months after the uprising as investigations dragged on, the government arrested a handful of leaders and in June 2011 convicted six members of the police for their actions against the government at the National Assembly, even though it claimed that more than 1,000 members of the security forces were involved in the uprising. Over the next four years, the government investigated over 500 people and brought charges ranging from attempted murder to sedition and rebellion against 109, although prosecutors still were searching for the intellectual authors of the unrest (Telesur, 2014). In January 2011 Correa promulgated a decree to bring the police under tighter governmental control. He justified the assertion of government sovereignty over the force by claiming that the September 30 uprising was a result of the police's falling under the influence of external actors such as Gutiérrez. As the *Latin American Weekly Report* (2010: 6) notes, "the government clearly cannot afford to question publicly the loyalty of the armed forces, but it is difficult for it to sustain the credibility of its claims that there was a full-scale coup attempt, on the one hand, while publicly absolving the armed forces from involvement, on the other." Correa faced a difficult balancing act in using the protest to justify a crackdown on his opponents while not alienating precisely those forces that could most easily depose him.

That it was the military and not a popular uprising, as happened with Chávez in Venezuela in 2002, that placed Correa back in power was not without significance. The president faced two alternatives: either consolidate his relationship with the military and gain support from wealthy business interests or broaden and democratize his political project by turning to the popular sectors for support (Ortiz, 2011: 33). Correa's response was to accuse Ecuador's historically left-wing indigenous movements of conspiring with the political right against his government while simultaneously applauding the military, which was traditionally associated with conservative interests, for acting in a professional manner in defending his government from attack. Having the military rather than the social movements play the role of power broker threatened to push Correa in a conservative rather than progressive direction.

DIPLOMATIC RESPONSES

In contrast to the tepid social movement support for Correa, international diplomatic responses strongly backed the besieged president. Support came

from across the region and even some European countries (Paz y Miño, 2011: 127). Sara Joseph (2010: 17), a communications associate for Witness for Peace (a grassroots organization dedicated to changing U.S. policies and corporate practices that contribute to poverty and oppression in Latin America), warned that the June 2009 coup in Honduras would “embolden right-wing forces and cause instability throughout the Americas.” So why was a coup not successful in Ecuador? “A decisive and unified response from the international community can help determine the outcome of an illegitimate coup,” Joseph argued.

The coup attempt underscored in Correa’s mind the importance of international allies in the context of a polarized domestic environment. The actions of the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (Union of South American Nations—UNASUR) illustrated Joseph’s point. It quickly convened a meeting in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and condemned the coup. The assembled heads of state “reaffirmed their strong commitment to the preservation of democratic institutionality, the rule of law, constitutional order, social peace, and unwavering respect for human rights, essential conditions in the process of regional integration.” The UNASUR pledged that the South American governments would “strongly reject and will not tolerate—in any way—any further defiance of the institutional authority or any attempt at a coup against the legitimately elected civil power.” Any disruption in the constitutional order would be met with “immediate and concrete steps, such as the closure of borders, suspension of commerce, air traffic, and energy, services, and other supplies” (*La Nación*, September 30, 2010). The UNASUR’s response to what it viewed as an attempted coup and kidnapping of the president was unequivocal (Paz y Miño, 2011: 129; Soliz and Mancero, 2010: 127–128). One of the fringe benefits to emerge from the unrest was renewed hemispheric unity and a commitment to peaceful and democratic forms of governance. Rather than relying on the United States or former colonial overlords to address internal disputes, Latin American governments came together to resolve the crisis.

The conservative presidents Juan Manuel Santos and Alan García of Ecuador’s neighboring Colombia and Peru also released strongly worded statements in support of the embattled president. They closed their borders with Ecuador and threatened to break diplomatic relations with the country if a coup overthrew the government. Even the conservative Honduran government that had come to office a year earlier after a blatantly extraconstitutional change in power defended the embattled Correa, even though Ecuador did not recognize it. Shortly after the failed coup, Chile’s newly installed conservative president, Sebastián Piñera, also exchanged warm visits with Correa. The responses of neighboring countries pointed to a new assertive stance in defense of democratic institutions. In part, these positions were the result of the strong action of the Organization of American States (OAS) against extraconstitutional changes of power in the hemisphere (Soliz and Mancero, 2010: 125–126). But they also indicated that external powers did not view Correa as a threat or, alternatively, that his overthrow would have a destabilizing effect on their own imperial or economic interests. The continuation of Correa in power represented stability, and this better served their economic and political interests than any apparent and immediate alternative.

While the heavy hand of the United States was visibly present in recent coups in Honduras, Haiti, and Venezuela, it remained questionable whether such forces were at play in Ecuador. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (2010) quickly issued a strongly worded statement in which she declared that “the United States deplores violence and lawlessness and we express our full support for President Rafael Correa and the institutions of democratic government in that country.” Her statement urged “all Ecuadorians to come together and to work within the framework of Ecuador’s democratic institutions to reach a rapid and peaceful restoration of order.” In contrast, a year earlier while condemning “the action taken against Honduran President Mel Zelaya” as a violation of “the precepts of the Inter-American Democratic Charter,” Clinton (2009) stopped well short of declaring United States support for that president as she did for Correa. For those who followed Ecuadorean politics, Clinton’s statement came as no surprise, because in June 2010 she had a very warm visit with Correa that was designed to pull his government into her orbit. At the time, Correa’s leftist opponents criticized the president for not taking a stronger anti-imperialist and anticapitalist stance in the face of empire (Proaño, 2010: 5). Furthermore, historically Ecuador has maintained a more independent foreign policy from the United States than its sister republics in the Caribbean basin (Hey, 1995; Pineo, 2007). Consistent with this pattern, in 2009 Correa refused to renew the United States lease on the Manta Airbase, and the United States departed without a complaint, moving its operations to Colombia instead. International solidarity activists sought to frame the coup attempt as a United States-sponsored payback for loss of the Manta base, but such a response would not be consistent with the nature of the bilateral relations between the two countries. The United States had little motivation for supporting a coup and rather clear reasons to favor political stability in the region.

Correa recognized and embraced this diplomatic support of his government. On multiple occasions he blamed the failed coup on the infiltration of Ecuador’s intelligence services by the CIA, but he contended that neither Clinton nor United States president Barack Obama was behind the uprising. Amy Goodman on the independent news program *Democracy Now!* (2010), which is politically sympathetic to the new Latin American left, asked Correa whether a connection existed between a leaked February 2010 U.S. State Department cable that advocated marginalizing Ecuador and the September coup. In response, Correa unequivocally responded, “I honestly believe that neither President Obama’s government nor the State Department had an intervention in the coup attempt on September 30,” a statement he reiterated on various occasions (Paz y Miño, 2011: 68). In fact, Correa claimed that Obama called him personally to assure him that the United States was not involved in the failed coup, and Correa stated that he had no reason to doubt the president’s word (Petrich, 2010). Despite strong rhetoric and even the expulsion of U.S. Ambassador Heather Hodges in April 2011 over Wikileaks revelations, Julian Assange’s request for asylum in Ecuador’s London embassy, and the withdrawal of Ecuador from the School of the Americas in June 2012, Correa acted as if he had little fear of the United States’ attempting to overthrow his government. At the same time, he took steps that ensured continued support from the international left. In June 2011 Ecuador was the only holdout when the OAS voted to readmit Honduras

after evicting it after the 2009 coup against Zelaya. Correa stated that Ecuador would recognize the Porfirio Lobo administration only if those involved in the coup were punished. Even the Venezuelan and Bolivian governments consented to a normalization of relations with Honduras, seemingly positioning Ecuador to their left.

Correa's relationship with Washington and with neighbors such as Colombia and Peru alternated between rhetorical hostility and pragmatism. His positioning reflected an understanding of the demands of *realpolitik*. His rhetorical statements gained the acclamation of the international left, while his concrete policy objectives did not seriously challenge international capital or imperial interests through actions such as the nationalization of the means of production.

WINNERS AND LOSERS

A key question to ask about any social upheaval or political development is who benefits and who loses from it. Although in the aftermath of the disturbances Correa worked to bring the security forces more tightly under his control, he also granted police officers and members of the military more concessions than they had initially demanded. Correa's poll numbers had been slowly declining since his initial election in 2006, but 30-S provided him with a bump in popularity that gave him the highest approval ratings of any chief executive in the Americas, with some polls reporting his support at as high as 80 percent. That Correa enjoyed majority support was a remarkable achievement in Ecuador's typically fractious and volatile political environment (Conaghan, 2011). The failed coup attempt illustrated the weakness and marginalization of the right and the extent to which Correa had consolidated his political control over the country. Whether intentional or not, the clearest and primary winner of 30-S was Correa, who could use the challenge to his government to isolate his opponents on both the left and the right.

Indigenous movements, in particular the CONAIE and Pachakutik, came out of September 30 in a weakened position, thanks in part to Correa's presenting the opinions of a few individuals as the position of the movement as a whole. Indigenous militants had already gained a reputation as continual coup plotters for successfully removing elected presidents Abdalá Bucaram and Jamil Mahuad from power and briefly serving in an indigenous-military junta in 2000 (Paz y Miño, 2011: 85). A public perception that indigenous, labor, and other social movements had allied themselves with an extraconstitutional coup attempt only proved to discredit and isolate them further as they faced already declining political fortunes. Their failure to mobilize in defense of a popular president opened them up to broad criticism the likes of which had not been seen for years. The leading longtime leftist intellectuals and activists Rafael Quintero López and Erika Sylva Charvet (2010) used Golinger's writings to engage in an all-out assault on the CONAIE and its members as stooges of the United States who allied themselves with right-wing forces in an attack on Correa. The political analysts Mario Ramos and Alexei Páez (2010) embraced Correa as the president of all Ecuadoreans, a leader who represented the hopes of a people long exploited by neoliberalism, and condemned indigenous peoples who had been "mythologized by the global

left similar to Rousseau's idea of a noble savage" for advocating the removal of a kidnapped president. These attacks on the indigenous movements led to an increase in reports of racist incidents as the president's actions emboldened his supporters to vent their frustrations on indigenous peoples who over the previous two decades had so often disrupted the smooth functioning of society with their well-organized social protests. It would be difficult for the movement to recover from such a compromised position.

Nor were Correa's conservative opponents able to use 30-S to strengthen their hand, and their inability to take advantage of a challenge to Correa's government illustrated just how weak and divided they had become. Correa symbolically acceded in clientelistic fashion to some of the economic concerns of the armed forces but also used the police and military protests as a pretext for removing leaders with questionable allegiances and solidifying his control over the country's security apparatus. With an increase in Correa's popularity, a concerted effort by the right-wing journalist Carlos Vera to launch a recall referendum against the president had little chance of success. Correa, for his part, declared that he hoped that Vera's efforts to organize a recall were successful so that he could score a crushing victory over the "relics of the oligarchy" (*Latin American Weekly Report*, 2011: 7). Conservatives feared that the president would make use of coup threats to marginalize them politically and even criminalize their political actions.

An additional fallout from 30-S was to place other leftist governments in the hemisphere on alert that they could be targeted next. All of the recent coup attempts in Latin America (Chávez in Venezuela in 2002, Jean-Bertrand Aristide in Haiti in 2004, Morales in Bolivia in 2008, Zelaya in Honduras in 2009, Correa in Ecuador in 2010, and Lugo in Paraguay in 2012) were against progressive governments. In the face of this threat, El Salvador's president, Mauricio Funes, of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front—FMLN), called on the OAS to take a stronger stand against threats to democratic rule.

Ultimately, however, September 30 must be understood in the context of class and political divisions within Ecuador. The journalist and former vice minister of foreign affairs Kintto Lucas points to 30-S as a lost opportunity for leftists both within and outside the government to come together to process the events and rally around common issues. For Lucas, neither throwing stones at the government nor uncritically embracing it as the ultimate achievement of revolutionary aspirations was an appropriate response (Burch, 2012: 28). While the social movements had deep disagreements with Correa's administration, they made it clear that they would never ally themselves with their historical enemies in the oligarchy, would oppose any moves toward dictatorship, and would continue to fight for an inclusive and plurinational democracy as promised in the progressive 2008 constitution. The emergence of Correa's government, like that of other new left governments, was a direct result of historic social movement struggles. Its survival and success were dependent upon social movement support. However attractive left-wing governments might appear, the interests of international solidarity activists remained best served by continuing to work with their long-term social movement allies, even through their darkest and most difficult moments.

NOTE

1. "Soft" coups, sometimes called *dictablandas* rather than *dictaduras*, are military-instigated changes of government that lack the overly repressive apparatus and dismantling of existing institutional structures of, for example, Augusto Pinochet's 1973 coup in Chile.

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