

INTERNATIONAL

The Latino Obama?

Rafael Correa won a landslide second term as president of Ecuador in a "citizens' revolution," but he faces huge challenges in realizing his election manifesto and placating a demanding electorate

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STREET NEWS SERVICE

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Is this what hope looks like after two years in power? Rafael Correa – a little stockier, greyer and hoarser – bounces onto the stage, hugging just about anyone he can get his arms around.

The rally is meant to mark the end of his re-election campaign. In fact, the president of Ecuador is already celebrating. He starts off with some group karaoke – one number about Che Guevara, another proclaiming that "the people united will never be defeated" and finally, "Tropical Banana," a bizarre song about Ecuador's role as a commodities exporter.

Only when the president starts to speak does something resembling decorum set in. "We've kept our word!" he bellows at the ecstatic crowd. "The citizens' revolution is happening and nothing can stop it!" Next to me, a star-struck old man chokes, "a great president, a great president."

Around us, hundreds of supporters wave lime-green flags bearing prints of Correa's face, the striking image he first used in 2006 as an affront to the traditional political colors and mug shots. It was Barack Obama-style advertising, before Obama entered our consciousness. Four days after the rally, Correa's celebrations were proven right.

He was re-elected on April 26 in the first round of voting – the first time in three decades a candidate has won without having to go to a second round – in an unprecedented feat of popularity in Ecuador.

Ecuador is a dreamy world of turtles, jungles, beer for breakfast, and indigenous women carrying babies across their backs – as any bus-beaten backpackers will tell you.

However, it is also a political volcano. Since 1997, economic crisis and massive corruption have led to three presidents being ousted from office. The first victim, now exiled in Panama, won the nickname "El Loco" when as president he released an album titled "El Loco que Ama" (The Madman who Loves)

So, in a country where the tourists sometimes stay longer than the presidents, what makes Correa different? "There's a yearning for change and Correa has presented himself as someone who is sincere, whatever mistakes he may make," says the pollster Santiago Pérez. "His best

allies have been his very opponents, those traditional politicians who keep doing politics in the same outdated ways."

Change and slick advertising, yes, but the Ecuadorian president is not a conciliator like Obama. If there's an opportunity to insult someone, he'll probably take it. Environmentalists and indigenous groups are "imbeciles". One of his rivals in the election, Ecuador's richest man is a "big-bellied oligarch." The press are "part of the

grave for some time.

When Chávez compared George Bush to Satan, Correa chimed in that it was unfair to the devil. Yet most of the time Correa is happy to leave the humor to the Venezuelan president; he is more boffin than buffoon. He earned a master's degree in Belgium, an economics doctorate in Illinois, and speaks Spanish, French, English and Quechua. Before being elected president, his only political experience was a few months as

Occidental Petroleum and the phone network Porta, for environmental offenses and tax evasion respectively. "The party's over," he told Porta. "If you don't like it, we'll use another company." The moves were "a boost to national self-esteem," according to analyst Paulina Recalde.

The president then announced Ecuador would default on \$3.4 billion of its national debt, claiming it had been contracted "illegally and illegitimately" by past



PHOTO BY REUTERS/GUILLERMO GRANJA

Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa addresses an enthusiastic crowd at the end of his re-election campaign. He was re-elected April 26 in the first round of voting, the first time in three decades a president has won with such support.

He earned a master's degree in Belgium, an economics doctorate in Illinois, and speaks Spanish, French, English and Quechua. His only political experience was a few months as finance minister; otherwise, he was a university professor and consultant. This is the intelligent face of "21st century socialism."

structure of corruption and accomplices of the national disaster."

But insults are not a bad tactic in a country fed up with its politics. Then there's Rafael Correa's affinity with Hugo Chávez. Gordon Brown et al may have declared the Washington consensus dead, but the two Bolivarians (supporters of a political ideology named after Simon Bolívar, the 19th century general and liberator of much of South America) have been dancing on its

finance minister; otherwise, he was a university professor and consultant. This is the intelligent face of "21st century socialism."

Correa's first move as president was to declare the need for a blank slate, a new set of politicians to allow real change. Like Chávez, he introduced a new national constitution and then won a healthy majority in the resulting Assembly.

However, while Chávez now launches wave after wave of nationalization, Correa has steered a moderate economic course. He has cracked down on big companies,

governments. Last week he said Ecuador would in fact repay it, but at a 70 per cent discount. Nonetheless, the government claims that for the first time Ecuador is spending more on social services than debt repayments. Correa still lacks the money for Chávez-style missions, but his supporters attribute virtual miracles to the new social programs.

"Before, there were three social classes: upper, middle and lower. Now there are just

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