

Ecuador

Period of democratic transition: 1978–1979

Pro-democracy civic movement: not present

Since gaining independence in 1830, Ecuador has seen close to 100 changes of power, averaging a new government every two years, with few completing a full term. Political turbulence in the 1960s gave way in 1972 to a government overthrow by a military junta with General Guillermo Rodríguez Lara in control. Political and social reform organizations such as labor unions and peasant groups stagnated under control of the armed forces.

A bloody military coup in September 1975 cost 22 lives but failed to overthrow Lara. A bloodless coup in January 1976 succeeded, and Lara was replaced by a military triumvirate, the Supreme Council of Government. The three military commanders aimed to return the government to constitutional civilian rule for pragmatic reasons. The bloody coup had illuminated divisions within the armed forces, and civilian control was seen by the military as a mechanism to heal, or at least mask, the divisions. The original timetable set presidential elections for February 1978, but disagreement among military leaders and military manipulation of the electoral process postponed the vote. A national referendum in January 1978 resulted in a newly drafted national charter, and presidential elections were held in April 1979, with Jaime Roldos winning 68.5 percent of the votes. Pressure from the United States and Ecuadorian public consensus led to a peaceful transition. Still, the military blocked any investigation into human rights abuses within their ranks, which remained a source of political turmoil.

Indigenous organizations have gained and flexed political strength and often spearhead protests, yet civic movements still have little influence, and government is far from stable.