

Witness to a coup; Louisville couple experiences Ecuadorian tumult

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--The American embassy warned all U.S. citizens to stay away. So, of course, we went! The event was a mass march on February 5 to protest the corruption and economic measures of Ecuador's eccentric president, Abdala Bucaram.

Previous Latin American protests which we had encountered were primarily high school and college students throwing stones, burning tires and getting to skip a day or two of classes.

This one was different.

The entire country was in the grip of a general strike. Two million people turned out to block highways, hold marches and call for the ouster of Bucaram.

Young and old, male and female, rich and poor put aside their differences and united for one mass outpouring of frustration and political will.

We went to the staging area for the north end of the city. Tens of thousands turned out to cheer, sing the national anthem and prepare to march to the presidential palace.

Banners were everywhere denouncing corruption and mismanagement, opposing the increasing rate of inflation, and calling for Bucaram's removal. "Que se Vaya" (get out!) was the message taped to automobiles, posted on trees and telephone poles, and worn by almost everyone.

Bucaram was elected by the indigenous and the lower economic class of Ecuador on promises that he would be the president of the poor. While beginning an ambitious housing program and donating his monthly salary to the needy, he also instituted economic reforms which have seen the price of electricity, telephones, cooking gas and gasoline go up by almost 300 percent. Suddenly, those who supported him turned against him. Bucaram's popularity rating was pegged at around 11 percent.

In addition to his alleged corruption--a European diplomat says it has doubled in the six months of Bucaram's presidential term--and the increase in prices, Bucaram was an embarrassment to many Ecuadorians. He calls himself "El Loco,"--The Crazy One. He has cut a rock CD, "A Crazy Man in Love," appeared on stage singing and dancing with scantily clad women, invited Ecuadorian Lorena Bobbit to lunch at the presidential palace and proclaimed that she was prettier in person than on TV.

His unpopular energy minister, Alfredo Adum, who was removed on the day of the march in a last ditch effort to regain some of Bucaram's sagging support told a local magazine that he would like to live naked in a cave and drag in and ravish any woman who walked by. Needless to say this did little to endear Adum or Bucaram to local feminist groups or anyone else for that matter.

Bucaram and his advisors were dubbed "Abdala and his 40 thieves" early in his administration due to charges of corruption. His son Jacobo who was given charge of the customs office in the port city of Guayaquil recently celebrated having earned his first one million dollars as a special advisor to immigration and customs.

Even the United States government became a bit frustrated. Ambassador Leslie Alexander recently told a chamber of commerce meeting in the southern city of Cuenca that corruption was growing and he could no longer recommend that U.S. companies invest in the country.

The events of a 48-hour general strike and an attempt by the congress to remove Bucaram left the country in an even more embarrassing position. Following the congressional vote, the congress swore in its leader, Fabian Alarcon.

Meanwhile, due to the constitution's failure to clearly define a successor should the office of president be vacant, Ecuador's Vice President, Rosalia Arteaga signed a document proclaiming herself as president.

The morning after the attempted removal, the daily newspaper Hoy ran the headline "Three Presidents?"

What one felt here the most was the frustration of the people. Former presidential candidate Freddy Ehlers told me "We are wanting him (Bucaram) to go. He is presiding over the most serious corruption Latin America has ever seen."

Other Ecuadorians asked what an American thought about the statements of the ambassador, and then before one could answer the Ecuadorian would say that he was absolutely correct and someone had to say it.

As we went to observe the march we wondered what the Ecuadorians would feel about the presence of two foreigners in their midst. Would they blame their problems on the U.S. and any American who happened to be standing nearby? Would they think that we were interfering?

The most telling event was an older, lower-income woman who approached us. Smiling she handed us a small Ecuadorian flag. She was pleased that we were interested and that we cared. We knew we were welcome

Life has returned to normal in most of Ecuador as the issue was worked out politically. Mrs. Arteaga will serve for a week or two until congress passes the legislation necessary to elect Mr. Alarcon as president. He will preside over new elections early next year.

More importantly, the military did not interfere except to maintain the peace. That is good in a country where democracy is new. Ecuadorians are learning to solve their problems politically, not with force. The army is learning that their role is to protect democracy and uphold the constitution, not to overthrow it.

We remembered the uncertainty and tension in our own country during those dark days when the Nixon Watergate scandal was reaching its climax. We too hope that Ecuadorians can soon move beyond this and that their "long, dark nightmare" will soon be over.

Witness to a coup; Louisville couple experiences Ecuadorian tumult; *The Courier-Journal*, Feb 11, 1997