



By: **Guillaume Long**

Referendum in Ecuador rejected Trump's policies towards Latin America



While US President Donald Trump's administration claims that its aggressive strikes on alleged drug-trafficking boats in the Caribbean are vital to regional security, experts are accusing US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth of war crimes for his authorization of a "double-tap" strike targeting survivors of such an attack.

But Trump's militarized "war on drugs," and the logic underlying it, faced another, less-noticed rebuke recently – this one coming from Ecuador.

A November 16 referendum pushed by right-wing President Daniel Noboa posed four questions to Ecuadorian voters.

Two questions – whether to reduce the size of the country's parliament (which is already relatively small by international standards) and to cut public funding to political parties – were demagogic appeals to a population that is mistrustful of politicians.

But voters roundly **rejected both measures**, with 53.7% and 58.3% majorities, respectively.

Perhaps they saw the Trump-style self-dealing behind Noboa's populist rhetoric: heir to one of Ecuador's largest fortunes, he can easily bankroll his own party, but the same cannot necessarily be said for his competition, particularly on the left.

Another issue on the ballot was whether to lift a constitutional ban on foreign military bases.

Had the proposition succeeded, this would have opened the way for the United States – which was forced to shutter its Manta airbase in 2009 – to reestablish a permanent base in the country, as part of its broader military buildup in Latin America and the Caribbean. But more than 60% of voters said no.

No to conservative policies

The final proposal was the boldest: Noboa wanted to establish a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution.

Ecuador's political right – beginning with the current government – abhors the current "progressive" document, which guarantees fundamental human rights, such as access to health care and public education, recognizes the "rights of Nature," and ensures that the Constitutional Court acts as an effective check on the executive.

Such provisions have stood in the way of many conservative goals, such as the privatization of public services and natural resources, and the restoration of investment-state dispute settlement mechanisms that allow investors to sue governments in corporate arbitration courts when they introduce new tax, labor, or environmental regulations.

And Ecuadorians are apparently fine with that: nearly 62% rejected the proposition.

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Ecuador's constitution has now been ratified at the ballot box not once but twice – both times with more than 60% of the vote.

Noboa and his allies did everything in their power to **sway voters**. Not only did the "yes" campaign vastly outspend its opposition; the largest opposition party, Citizens' Revolution, was prohibited from campaigning on the questions related to military bases and state funding of political parties. (Much of the RC's former leadership, including former President Rafael Correa who has been granted political asylum by Belgium, remains abroad, fearing government persecution.)

Moreover, state institutions campaigned in favor of the referendum, in violation of the law, and Noboa's government wooed voters with cash transfers, subsidies, and early bonuses.

But not even these authoritarian tactics could deliver the outcome Noboa wanted.

Nor were Ecuadorians swayed by the

simplistic narrative that a permanent US military presence in their country would help end gang violence. They have heard that story before.

The security situation has deteriorated

The last three Ecuadorian presidential administrations – led by Lenín Moreno, Guillermo Lasso, and Noboa – have deepened security cooperation with the US, which was supposedly going to prop up Ecuador's fight against drug cartels.

To this end, Lasso signed two Status of Forces Agreements in 2023, allowing for a non-permanent US military presence on Ecuadorian soil and giving US military personnel full immunity from prosecution.

More recently, Ecuador has also turned to Israel and the United Arab Emirates for support in this fight.

But the **security situation** has only deteriorated. The homicide rate has risen from 5.8 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2017 – the final year of Correa's term – to 14 in 2021, 45.7 in 2023, and a projected 52 this year, putting **Ecuador** at the top of global homicide rankings.

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Two factors explain this trend. First, traffickers of Colombian cocaine changed their routes, causing gangs to compete for control over Ecuadorian ports.

Second, in exchange for International Monetary Fund assistance, Ecuador's government pursued radical **austerity measures** that severely weakened **state capacity**.

Moreno's government shut down entire ministries (including the Security Coordination Ministry, the Ministry of the Interior, and the Ministry of Justice), and defunded the prison system, which became the hub from which drug cartels operated. Meanwhile, **poverty and inequality** have risen sharply.

Ecuador's voters elected Noboa partly on the promise that he would resolve their country's **security crisis**.

In a **2024 referendum**, they approved his nine security-related ballot measures, including the extradition of Ecuadorians to third countries and the militarization of law enforcement.

Reports of forced disappearances by Ecuador's security forces began to proliferate, which for many Ecuadorians reawakened dark memories from the 1980s.

Message to Trump

Meanwhile, Noboa failed to deliver any progress on security, and now he has lost his shine.

The "influencer" tactics that once packaged him as a dynamic, unconventional candidate who might be able to bring real change – such as his taunting of the opposition on social media – now appear childish and cruel.



President Noboa failed to deliver any progress on security, and now he has lost his shine

And his overt displays of wealth, like showing up to vote in an electric-blue Porsche, come

across as obnoxious and out of touch.

In the recent referendum, Ecuadorians made clear that they are not impressed.

They also demonstrated an understanding that neither Noboa nor Trump seems to share.

A security crisis will not be resolved through the militarization of poor neighborhoods or the expansion of the US military's presence. It certainly will not be resolved by changing the constitution.

Crime can be defeated in only one way: through the cultivation of robust, credible, sovereign institutions, with the mandate, resources, and capacity not only to fight organized crime, but also to mitigate poverty, address inequality, and reduce youth unemployment.

This is Ecuadorians' message to Noboa. It is one that the Trump administration should also hear.

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