

The Establishment Strikes Back: The Rise & Fall of Abdalá Bucaram

INTRODUCTION

In July 7, 1996, after a colorful campaign, the controversial populist candidate Abdalá Bucaram Ortíz was elected president of Ecuador with 54.5% of the vote in the majority runoff election, defeating a member of the traditional political elite who represented the interests of the coastal export-based oligarchy, Jaime Nebot Saadi. Already during his campaign Bucaram had openly made enemies of many prominent Ecuadorian political figures through his use of vulgar insults aimed at individuals and at the oligarchy as a class. During his brief six months as president Bucaram's list of adversaries grew until, on February 5, 1997, a nation-wide strike to protest his government filled the streets of the major cities with protestors. In response to this demonstration of widespread discontent, Congress voted to remove Bucaram from office by declaring him insane and therefore unfit to govern. After great confusion, and a period in which three different people claimed the title of President of the Republic of Ecuador, it was ultimately decided that Fabian Alarcón, speaker of the Congress, would be made interim president.

Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, in his article "Presidential Crises and Democratic Accountability in Latin America, 1990-1999," identifies three elements that, when present, make a presidential impeachment possible. To establish this argument he examines the cases of Brazil (1992), Venezuela (1993), Colombia (1996), Ecuador

(1997) and Paraguay (1999). I will argue that, at least in the case of Ecuador and the impeachment of Abdalá Bucaram, these are not three separate issues, but rather they are closely interrelated and all three stem from Bucaram's status as an outsider, which threatened his presidency from the beginning. These factors have important implications not only for politics in Ecuador, but for other countries as well. It shows that Latin American elites, when they feel threatened, actively conspire to regain the reins of power and to avoid changes to the status quo. Another recent example of this phenomenon is seen in the actions of the elite led opposition to President Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. Due to the failure of the attempted coup against Chávez in 2002, we have a different view of what went on behind the scenes that may provide an idea of how similar forces worked in Ecuador to remove Bucaram from power.

PÉREZ-LIÑÁN'S ARGUMENT

Pérez-Liñán describes the benefit of his analysis as identifying how the impeachment crises in Latin America in the 1990s shared three common elements:

First, the press has questioned the moral authority of the president and his or her administrators to rule the country. Second, a social coalition typically involving both elites and masses has made charges against the president, eroding his or her survival capacity. The third element has been the inability of the president's office to prevent the formation of a hostile coalition in Congress. (Pérez-Liñán 2003, 110)

I would argue that in the case of Bucaram's impeachment in Ecuador, these three factors were present, but they were all largely the result of one factor: the existence of a united elite class in opposition to Bucaram. Elites from the left and right felt threatened by the rise of Bucaram, because he was not only a populist, but also he was not one of *them*.

Previous populist leaders were not a threat because they themselves came from the ranks of the traditional oligarchy. Bucaram was the son of immigrants, and from a new class of economic bourgeoisie. His rise in politics threatened the traditional political domination of the Ecuadorian oligarchy. Furthermore, his use of vulgar language and manners threatened the image of the presidency as a space for elites only, attacking the traditional conservatism of executive power. Bucaram represented a threat to elites that allowed them to unite (in spite of the numerous conflicts of interest amongst them) long enough to remove him from office. As a united front they could influence the elite-owned mass media, they could create the coalition of elites and masses, and they could form a hostile coalition against Bucaram in Congress. The end result was a virtual coup d'état arranged through actions of questionable legality, which did not even follow the normal Constitutional order of succession. As a result, Bucaram's Vice-President, Rosalia Arteaga, was pushed aside in favor of the President of Congress, Fabian Alarcón to serve as interim president of Ecuador.

GEOGRAPHY AND POLITICS

To understand the events that led to Bucaram's removal from office, it is important to understand the nature of Ecuadorian political rivalries. While Ecuador has three regions, the coast, the sierra and the oriente, traditional political rivalries have revolved around the elites of the coast and the elites of the sierra. The coastal region is dominated by the city of Guayaquil, whose influence reaches inland to the province of Bolivar. The coastal economy depends on exports and a modern financial sector. The

sierra is dominated by the capital city of Quito, whose influence reaches north to Esmeraldas on the coast and east to Napo. Most of the sierra's manufacturing, finance, communications and government services are based in Quito. While wealth is highly concentrated in the hands of only a few families in both regions, elite status is defined differently between these two regions. Social status on the coast is based on money, while in the sierra social status is based on hacienda ownership, or membership in the church, army and/or the government bureaucracy (Thoumi 1990). Regional rivalries have been heightened by clientelistic, caudillo-style leaders whose patronage to regional supporters often comes at the expense of the other region due to the disparity in national resources between regions (Thoumi 1990: 50). These regional political divisions have created "centrifugal forces that plague the country" (Thoumi 1990: 51).

Conflicting regional economic interests have contributed to political divisions based on regional loyalties first and ideology second. Even populist movements have been split along regional lines because the interests of workers in Guayaquil conflict with the interests of peasants in the Sierra (Thoumi 1990: 55). With divisions along the lines class, ideology and region, Ecuador has typically experienced low social cohesion.

BUCARAMS HISTORY & METHODS

Bucaram was not Ecuador's first populist president. How was, however, the first to pose a major threat to both coastal and serrano elites. Ecuador's five-time populist president José María Velasco Ibarra of the Concentración de Fuerzas Populares (CFP) was a prominent figure in politics from the 1950s to the 1970s. While Velasco Ibarra

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was a populist, he was white and considered to have come from the elite class himself, and was never seen as threatening to elites. In fact, in spite of his populist platform, he had strong support from factions on the political right and the wealthy agro-export elites of the coast (Paz 2003). When another populist leader Assad Bucaram, Abdalá's uncle, was considered likely to win the 1972 presidential elections the military led a coup and installed General Guillermo Rodríguez Lara as president. Jaime Roldos Aguilera, Abdalá Bucaram's brother-in-law, for whom Bucaram's party was named, was a populist president as well, elected in 1979. He was a somewhat controversial figure due to his family ties to Assad Bucaram. Roldos died in a mysterious plane crash less than two years after assuming the presidency. Due to his controversial family connections, some people question whether the crash was an assassination.

During his campaign Bucaram relied on standard populist rhetoric. He reduced politics to a struggle between good and evil and used political drama to make the lower classes feel included and like they were participating in politics (de la Torre 1997). In his article titled "Populism and Democracy: Political Discourses and Cultures in Contemporary Ecuador," Carlos de la Torre described how Bucaram's campaign style was appealing to lower classes:

His use of simple, humorous, direct, and authentically popular language without regard for the rules of oligarchical etiquette (seen by the popular sectors as obscurantist and deceptive) is well received. People see him as one of them and as someone who is proud to share their manners and to express himself in a popular style (de la Torre 1997: 17).

He went to the poor neighborhoods his opponents would have considered dangerous, and addressed his supporters in person. In doing so he provided them with the “human dignity of being at the center of the political struggle” (de la Torre 1997: 18). Bucaram, a *guayaquileño*, was particularly popular with the lower classes in Guayaquil. Bucaram’s choice of a running mate, Rosalía Arteaga, showed a careful effort to appeal to a broader electorate. While Bucaram’s style was well received with the lower classes, it was not well received by the middle class. Arteaga provided a different image, one that was more appealing specifically to *serranos* and the middle class (*Diario Hoy*, April 7, 1996).

Bucaram’s opponents from the beginning were elites. He relied on manners and language that were offensive to elites, who considered him “unfit for the presidency” from the beginning. He even went so far as to ridicule the “delicate manners and tastes” typical of traditional elites, while portraying the manners of the common people as being more masculine (de la Torre 1997: 16). He challenged social hierarchies by depicting elites as effeminate, corrupt and immoral (de la Torre 1997: 18).

Bucaram represented a break from elite-domination of national level politics, where even populist and left-leaning political figures at the national level had come from the elite classes in the past. Unlike the other presidential candidates he competed against he was not a member of an oligarchic family but rather the son of poor Lebanese immigrants. He emphasized during his campaign how he overcame his humble beginnings to become a successful lawyer, politician and businessman (de la Torre 1997). Part of his strength as a candidate was his status as an outsider. A vote for him was a symbolic protest against elite domination (de la Torre 1997). Pérez-Liñán described

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Bucaram's support as being largely "negative support" which was more *against his opposition* than it was *in favor of him* (Pérez-Liñán 2003: 107).

He also served as a symbol for a new rising class of economic bourgeoisie whose entrance into national politics poses a threat to the monopoly of traditional elites in politics, which could then threaten their economic interests. As a result, elites from the sierra and the coast, from the left and the right, found themselves united in their opposition to Bucaram. Bucaram made it easier for them to justify their opposition by publicly insulting powerful individuals. In April of 1996 he was quoted as saying "Everything Febres Cordero says is a lie," referring to the ex-president and then mayor of Guayaquil, León Febres Cordero, long a prominent figure in Ecuadorian politics (*Diario Hoy*, April 7, 1996). Ex-presidential candidate Jaime Nebot announced in January of 1997 that he was pressing charges against Bucaram for slander after Bucaram accused him of stealing \$5 million during the construction of a highway in Guayaquil during Nebot's time as governor of Guayas (*Diario Hoy*, January 1, 1997). Bucaram was also quoted as having called ex-president Sixto Durán Ballén a "liar," and ex-president Rodrigo Borja a "burro." (He then this was offensive to burros.) He referred to the party of the President of Congress, the Frente Radical Alfarista as the "Frente de Rateros Asociados," called the Social Christian Party (PSC) "immoral," referred to the electoral number "6" belonging to the PSC's Nebot as the "number of Satan," and used many other names and insults for his enemies (*Diario Hoy*, January 6, 1997). These powerful politicians were already his enemies, but his use of insulting language may have helped alienate him from the middle class.

Once in office, Bucaram's economic program featuring neo-liberal reforms, a dramatic break from his campaign promises, began alienating sectors other than elites, and eventually an opposition coalition was formed, the Frente Patriótica, uniting indigenous and other social movements, with trade unions and other groups against the president's economic programs (Pérez-Liñán 2003:121). The Frente Patriótica called for a general strike to be held February 5, 1997 to protest these programs. Doctors and health workers announced they would join the strike after the Ministry of Health announced they would have to start charging for services provided in public hospitals (*Diario Hoy*, January 18, 1997). After Bucaram and his Energy Minister, Alfredo Adum, both made statements and actions seen as threatening by the major petroleum companies (*Diario Expreso*, January 18, 1997) the president of the federation of petroleum workers announced that employees of Petroecuador would join the strike as well (*Diario Hoy*, January 22, 1997).

THE MEDIA QUESTIONS BUCARAM

One of the results of a high concentration of wealth in the hands of a few families is that, like most businesses, most of the mass media is also owned by a small number of elites. Due to the regional and ideological rivalries among the elite owners of the mass media, there is generally some balance of support and opposition in the media towards a given politician. However, in the case of Bucaram, elites were united against him, regardless of their regional or ideological preferences. This would imply that the media would be overwhelmingly against Bucaram, creating the illusion through this united front, that the country itself was united against him.

Pérez-Liñán describes how the press in Latin America is “more independent and professional” after the late 1980s and has contributed to making presidents more accountable through their willingness to disclose scandals (Pérez-Liñán 2003:122). I would argue that while the press has grown increasingly independent of the government, the end result is that politicians are more accountable to elites, especially under the circumstances Bucaram faced, where all elites were against him. As will be discussed later, the case of Venezuela’s media and President Hugo Chávez is another example of this.

Bucaram’s style certainly made it easier to unite the middle and upper classes against him, and his neo-liberal reforms brought the lower classes to the side of his opposition. But the elite run media played a crucial role in shaping perceptions, particularly those of the middle class. As Zirker stated:

Continually persuaded of the relevance of oligarchic and individualistic goals by the elite-controlled media, the upper middle classes of Latin America’s diverse countries have thus proven uniformly willing to sacrifice “secondary” (although often more immediately representative) goals... (Zirker 1998: 71).

Arteaga wrote that the things Bucaram said were collected in an “absolutely stellar” manner, and prominently displayed on the front pages of the newspapers in a way to cause maximum harm to his image in the eyes of their readers (Arteaga 2003: 60)

Pérez-Liñán mentioned the importance of scandal and the media questioning the president in the impeachment process. In Bucaram’s case, the accusations of corruption were numerous. Pérez-Liñán himself stated that:

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Instead of being affected by one highly investigated event, the Bucaram administration was permanently eroded by minor scandals involving the president, his family, and his closest associates...it was the number of scandals, rather than the burden of proof, that supported the crisis.
(Pérez-Liñán 2003: 112)

With the quantity of scandals, whether real or fictitious, the absence of legal proof became irrelevant (Córdova del Alcázar 2003: 30). Reflecting on what happened, Bucaram wrote in his book, *Golpe de Estado*:

During the coup, and in the early days following it, the media became inquisition tribunals. The declaration by any enemy of mine was considered proof; the most outlandish absurdities perfect syllogisms if they denigrated Bucaram or his people (Bucaram 1998: 20).

In general the media leads readers to accept assertions as facts, and contributes to the strengthening of beliefs held by the public through its use of descriptive discourse. In his own analysis of the role played by the media, Bucaram wrote:

The coup d'etat could not have happened without this contest, to the point that we could define it as the invasion of the powerful groups of the collective mass media in defense of its interests in the political, economic, social and communications spheres (Bucaram 1998: 351).

In the case of Bucaram, the publicity of accusations in great numbers gave them a sense of legitimacy that they may not have deserved. To date no corruption charges have been successfully proven.

The mass media demonstrated on several occasions that regardless of what path Bucaram took, they were going to criticize him. They criticized him for the increase in gas prices, claiming that he was not taking into consideration the poorest sectors of the country and demanding compensation for the poor. When the government announced it

would provide a voucher of 84,000 sucres to offset the price increase for the poor, the press rejected this on the grounds that the government had made this offer without knowing how much it would ultimately cost (Córdova del Alcázar 2003: 41). They criticized him for deciding to eliminate fuel subsidies, but when he announced that these plans were suspended they criticized him for putting off necessary actions that someday his successor would have to deal with (Córdova del Alcázar 2003: 42). Ultimately, it was Bucaram himself that the media was against, his policy decisions were close to irrelevant.

The press also contributed to opposition to Bucaram by providing inaccurate information to the public regarding the price increases. For example, on January 8, 1997 *El Comercio* announced that the price of a tank of gas for household use would rise to 18,000 sucres. The following day they published a correction, stating that the price had been estimated at 15,000 sucres but that in the end it would stay at 10,000 sucres per tank (Córdova del Alcázar 2003: 40n3). Regardless of whether this was the result of an innocent error or misunderstanding or whether it was an act of bad faith, the author, editor and owner of the publication are still responsible for the angry reaction this information caused amongst their readers.

There are similarities in the behavior of the mass media in Ecuador in 1997 leading up to the removal of Bucaram and the actions of the mass media in Venezuela in 2002 before and during the attempted coup to remove President Chávez from office. In both cases the mass media showed that they were collectively willing to defend the establishment even if it meant betraying the constitution (Córdova del Alcázar 2003: 13). Venezuela's five largest television channels - *Venevisión*, *Radio Caracas Televisión*

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(RCTV), *Globovisión*, *CMT*, and nine of the ten major national newspapers - are privately owned and openly opposed to the Chavez government. On April 11, 2002, when the coup appeared to have been successful, Vice-Admiral Victor Ramírez Pérez, speaking on *Venevisión*, acknowledged the importance of media support for the opposition when he stated "We [the coup organizers] had a deadly weapon: the media" (<http://www.chavezthefilm.com/html/backgrd/media.htm>). In Venezuela the privately owned media supported the opposition forces by advertising calls to join the demonstration against Chávez at regular ten-minute intervals (Hellinger 2003: 51). In the documentary film "*The Revolution Will Not be Televised*" the filmmakers show footage that was broadcast repeatedly during the time that Chávez was detained, that was supposedly showing *chavistas* firing off of a bridge at unarmed protestors in the street below. Because the documentary film crew had a view of the same scene at that time, they were able to pan back and show an entirely different scenario: there were no protestors beneath the bridge - the street below was empty - while people on the bridge were ducking and hiding to avoid being shot at, apparently by one or more snipers. The privately owned media put their political goals before professional ethics of journalism. In this case they would have been successful at creating their own version of a small piece of history if a foreign film crew had not been at the right place at the right time to expose the media's manipulation of the truth. Since the winners typically write the history books (at least in the short term) the case of Venezuela, where the coup was ultimately unsuccessful, can provide some useful perspective as to what forces *may* have

been at play in Ecuador against Bucaram, even though they have not been exposed the way these forces were exposed in Venezuela.

COALITIONS

When Zirker evaluated the importance of José Nun's analysis of the "Middle-Class Military Coup" he argues that it remains critical today because it demonstrates to what extent "most Latin American politics was - and remains - a desperate struggle of the economic elites to ensure their own material well-being" (Zirker 1998: 71). Ecuador is no exception to this, and the coalition that formed to remove Bucaram from power is a demonstration of this. This coalition would not have formed without the role played by the media. The media played a role in bringing other groups into the coalition with elites to oust Bucaram. Three days before Bucaram was named president, the newspaper *Diario Hoy* was already announcing that Bucaram was not fulfilling his campaign promises to the working class (Córdova del Alcázar 2003: 41). After his election, Bucaram did what many populist presidents in Latin America have done: he broke his campaign policies and began implementing neo-liberal reforms. He hired Domingo Cavallo, the former Finance Minister of Argentina, to devise a plan for pegging the Ecuadorian sucre to the U.S. dollar, similar to the plan he had designed for Argentina. (Pérez-Liñán 2003:106). These reforms should have had the support of powerful economic elites. However, the resentment against him by elites was so strong, that they seized his economic reforms as an opportunity to attack, and they criticized him in the name of the poor, who would certainly suffer the most from these reforms, as had been

seen in other countries. As transportation and natural gas prices rose, many of the elites he had insulted began to call for his resignation. The hypocrisy of elite concern for the poor was later made clear when President Jamil Mahuad implemented similar reforms, and elites and the media not only did not raise the concerns for the poor that were raised during Bucaram's presidency, the media showed itself to be highly critical of the peasant masses protesting the reforms.

CONGRESSIONAL OPPOSITION

As Pérez-Liñán described, the opposition to Bucaram was able to form a strong coalition in Congress. What made this coalition unusual, highlighting the importance of Bucaram's status as an outsider, was that it was created between parties with radically different ideologies who, under other circumstances are not allies. The initial alliance created to block the president's initiatives involved the right-leaning Democracia Popular (DP), the center-right to extreme right PSC, the center-left Izquierda Democrática (ID), and two extreme left parties: the party of the petroleum workers and teachers, Movimiento Popular Democrático (MPD), and the indigenous party, Movimiento Nación Pais Pachakutik (*Diario Hoy*, January 7, 1997).

After Bucaram's trip to Peru, instead of appreciating the historical and political importance of the first official state visit of an Ecuadorian president to Peru in 150 years, several congressmen formed an alliance supporting the idea of charging Bucaram with treason for asking Peru for forgiveness. This alliance was even more odd than the first congressional coalition, this time involving congressmen specifically from the extreme

right and the extreme left, from the PSC, MPD and Movimiento Nación Pais Pachakutik parties (*Diario Hoy*, January 21, 1997).

Finally, when people flooded the streets in a nationwide strike to protest on February 5, 1997, the members of Congress decided to declare Bucaram mentally incompetent to rule, which they accomplished with a simple majority. This method for impeaching Bucaram was “constitutionally doubtful” (Domínguez 2003: 354). Congress then named the President of Congress, Fabian Alarcón as the interim president. Vice-President Arteaga argued that she was legally the next in line for the presidency. The Constitution in effect at that time specified in Article 76 who was to replace the president in the case of his temporary or definitive absence and it listed them as: a) the Vice-president of the Republic; b) the President of the National Congress; and c) the President of the Supreme Court (*Constitución Política de la República de Ecuador, 1984*). Not only does it appear clear from this that the Vice-President would be second in line for the position, but there was a prior precedent set after the death of Roldos when his Vice-President Oswaldo Hurtado succeeded him. Therefore the decision to make Alarcón interim president lacked serious constitutional validity.

In Zirker’s words, “Latin American coups have tended to be extra-constitutional exercises of power in the interest of maintaining the status quo” (Zirker 1998: 74). He later describes the common practice of Latin American leaders, including Bucaram, of breaking campaign promises as a palatable coup, “a cosmetic version of the military interventions of the 1960s and 1970s” (p.75). I would argue that according to Zirker’s description, Bucaram’s removal from office was at least as much a coup as were his

broken campaign promises. Zirker alludes to this later in his article: “[Bucaram’s] removal from office was on the grounds of mental incompetence and was effected by a simple congressional majority, another extra-constitutional action linked to preservation of elite interests described in the Brazilian press as a coup” (p.81).

It appears that another traditional player in Ecuadorian politics, the armed forces, did not participate in the removal of Bucaram from office, but it is important to note that the military also did not attempt to support the government, even when actions of Congress lacked constitutional authority. During the heat of the crisis the military declared its neutrality and stated that the armed forces were relying on politicians to resolve the situation (Carey 2003: 23). Some considered this to be an encouraging sign for the future of democracy. However, there is evidence to argue that the military’s supposed neutrality was based more on convenience and self interest than any new respect for democracy. The military had never been an ally of Bucaram. As mayor of Guayaquil, Bucaram made remarks offensive to the armed forces, stating that the only thing they were good for was for marching in parades (*Diario Hoy* 1/22/1997 p. 3-A). As a result of these remarks, the military threatened to revolt if Bucaram won the 1989 presidential campaign (Loveman 1999: 216). As president he once again offended the armed forces when he stated that he was taking down the names of those opposed to him, and that in an emergency he would send them to the border to serve as cannon fodder (referring to the on-going border conflict with Peru at that time). Ex-president Borja was quoted as stating, “That an Ecuadorian president considers that going to the border to defend our territorial heritage is a punishment and not an honor, is full of shame for

Ecuador and disgrace to Ecuadorian soldiers” (*Diario Hoy* 1/22/1997, p.3-A).

Furthermore, Bucaram’s interest in resolving the border conflict with Peru threatened the armed forces with decreased spending on defense. Considering these sources of resentment on the part of the armed forces, the passive role they played during the crisis could be interpreted as their simply being satisfied with the obvious direction things were taking. Political analyst Jorge León, was quoted as having commented on how surprising the position taken by the military was, considering the powers the constitution provides for them to defend the constitution itself. (*Diario Hoy*, February 11, 1997). The role of the military during the coup to remove Mahuad from the presidency in 2000 provides further evidence that the military is not yet politically neutral, but that in the case of Bucaram, they were simply satisfied with the actions being taken to remove him from office.

CONCLUSION

Under the right circumstances, an illusion of reality can *create* reality through peer pressure, or by eliminating a fear of pressure. As a (somewhat) hypothetical example, if the media states that 9 out of 10 Ecuadorians is against the president, and a respected political leader is quoted saying that only thieves and prostitutes support the president (Bucaram), it is possible that this sort of press can influence people’s political leanings the same way clever marketing influences consumers choices. It is impossible to tell to what extent this was the case in Ecuador, and how much the media contributed to the growing opposition to Bucaram, but it cannot be ignored how the media treated him and

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the misinformation that was provided. Furthermore, the media's ties to elite interests cannot be ignored, especially after considering how the media behaved during Mahuad's administration and the coup that removed him from office. Finally, elite interests also dominate in Congress, making all three of the factors that Pérez-Liñán identified as conducive to a successful impeachment the result of one single factor in the case of Bucaram: his status as an outsider from traditional elites. The parallels between the case of Bucaram and the failed coup attempt against Chávez demonstrate that, in addition to the book written by Bucaram himself on the subject, further careful analysis is needed of the real reasons that led to the fall of this polemic Ecuadorian president.

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