On September 30, 2010, a police uprising against a variety of government actions temporarily threatened Ecuador’s constitutional order. President Rafael Correa attempted to personally intervene when officers took control of a barracks in Quito; instead of negotiating, the officers fired tear gas and other projectiles, injuring the president. Correa fled to a police hospital, where he remained until the military was able to break through a surrounding blockade. The event, which Correa and many other Latin American leaders labeled an attempted coup, led to hundreds of investigations and raised questions about the degree of civilian control over the security forces.

Established in 1830 after the region achieved independence from Spain in 1822, the Republic of Ecuador has endured many interrupted presidencies and military governments. The last military regime gave way to civilian rule after a new constitution was approved by referendum in 1978, although President Jamil Mahuad was forced to step down in 2000 after midlevel military officers led by Colonel Lucio Gutiérrez joined large protests by indigenous groups. Mahuad was succeeded by Vice President Gustavo Noboa.

Gutiérrez won a surprise victory in the 2002 presidential election, marking the first time that Ecuador’s head of state shared the ethnicity and humble background of the country’s large indigenous population. However, by the end of 2003, Gutiérrez’s popularity had been weakened by political conflicts and the immediate effects of his fiscal austerity policies. The powerful Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) movement soon withdrew its support for the president. Dissent over fiscal and labor reforms spilled into the streets, and the opposition began to press for his removal in 2004. The protest movement grew after Gutiérrez engaged in a series of arbitrary dismissals of and appointments to the Supreme Court. He was ousted in April 2005 on the spurious charge of “abandonment of post,” and Vice President Alfredo Palacio assumed the presidency.

Demonstrations against foreign oil companies and a proposed free-trade agreement (FTA) with the United States dominated the first half of 2006. In May, the government annulled the contract of U.S.-based Occidental Petroleum, accusing the company of violating its terms; the move prompted the United States to suspend FTA talks indefinitely.

Charismatic former finance minister Rafael Correa—who criticized free-market economic policies and pledged to renegotiate the country’s foreign debt and end the FTA talks with the United States—won the 2006 presidential election, defeating banana magnate Álvaro Noboa with 57 percent of the vote in the November runoff. However, Álvaro Noboa’s Institutional Renewal Party of National Action (PRIAN) led concurrent congressional elections with 28 out of 100 seats. Gutiérrez’s Patriotic Society Party (PSP) placed second with 24.

Correa soon began pressing for a constituent assembly that would be empowered to write a new constitution. By the spring of 2007, Congress, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), and the Constitutional Court were engaged in an institutional struggle over the rules governing the prospective body. In April, some 82 percent of referendum voters approved the creation of a constituent assembly, and Correa’s Proud and Sovereign Fatherland (PAIS) party captured 80 of the assembly’s 130 seats in September delegate elections.

After fitful progress, the constituent assembly approved a draft constitution in July 2008, and the charter was adopted in a September referendum with 64 percent of the vote. A subset of 76 constituent assembly members were tasked with fulfilling legislative duties until fresh presidential and legislative elections could be held in 2009. Supporters of the new constitution said it would
guarantee an array of rights and services to all citizens, and praised the charter’s separation of powers into five independent branches—executive, legislative, judicial, electoral, and transparency and social control. Critics of the document argued that it concentrated both political and economic power in the hands of the president, and posited a long list of rights that the state would be hard pressed to uphold.

Correa won a new four-year term in the April 2009 general elections, taking 52 percent of the vote in the first round. Gutiérrez placed second with 28 percent, followed by Álvaro Noboa with 11 percent. PAIS captured 59 of 124 seats in the new National Assembly, followed by the PSP with 19, the Social Christian Party (PSC) with 11, PRIAN with 7, and a range of smaller parties with the remainder. Parties allied with PAIS garnered over a dozen seats, giving it a working majority.

In late 2009 and early 2010, holding the coalition together became increasingly difficult. Indigenous groups—including CONAIE—distanced themselves from the executive over mining and water laws. However, Correa used his popularity and an unyielding style of leadership to maintain control of his congressional bloc. In September 2010, PAIS legislators passed a number of important laws after careful negotiation with opposition groups. Several controversial measures, including the Law on Superior Education, were subsequently returned to Congress after Correa used his line-item veto power to strike many of the opposition’s key demands.

Tensions peaked following the passage of the Public Service Law, which altered the system of salaries, bonuses, and promotions for the police, among other provisions. On September 30, several police units and a few military regiments initiated angry protests; many police refused to patrol, leading to looting and lawlessness in a number of cities, especially Guayaquil. Correa showed up at a particularly tense protest at a police barracks in Quito, attempting to discuss the officers’ grievances. However, his characteristically combative approach only escalated the situation, and the officers blocked his attempt to flee. Correa sustained minor injuries and eventually sought refuge in a police hospital. The government responded to the protests by declaring a state of emergency and interrupting private broadcasts on the country’s airwaves. In early evening, a military unit broke through the police blockade and rescued the president; five were killed in the firefight, adding to a daylong total of at least 10 fatalities.

In the aftermath, the government alleged an attempted coup, a position supported by the Organization of American States and the Union of South American Nations. The government blamed both internal and external conspirators, focusing on former president Gutiérrez and foreign interests that were purportedly opposed to Correa’s progressive policies. Meanwhile, the opposition denied that a coup attempt had occurred and generally condemned the police actions. Many also blamed the president’s high-handed governing style for tensions prior to and during the mutiny. By October 9, the state of emergency was lifted everywhere except in Quito. Many analysts supported the government’s view that the police’s specific concerns over compensation were misguided, but also noted that discontent over a variety of other issues had not been addressed by the government. In addition, the military waited several hours during the crisis before making a strong statement upholding the constitutional order, thereby implicitly confirming the armed forces’ traditional—but illegitimate—role as the ultimate arbiter of regime stability. At year’s end, hundreds of investigations were underway, and several dozen police and military officers faced charges ranging from insubordination to attempted murder of the president.

**Political Rights and Civil Liberties**

Ecuador is an electoral democracy. However, it suffers from an unstable political system that has brought it eight presidents since 1996. The 2009 elections, the first under the 2008 constitution, were deemed generally free and fair by international observers, although the European Union monitoring team noted some problems with vote-tabulation procedures and the abuse of state resources on behalf of government-aligned candidates.

The new constitution provides for a president elected to serve up to two four-year terms; in practice, this means that President Rafael Correa, who won his first term under the charter in 2009, could serve until 2017. The unicameral, 124-seat National Assembly is elected via open-list proportional representation for four-year terms. The president has the authority to dissolve the legislature once in his term, which triggers new elections for both the assembly and the presidency; in 2010, rumors of a dissolution ran through Ecuador during the tense legislative period before the police mutiny. The assembly can likewise dismiss the president, though under more stringent rules.
For decades, Ecuador's political parties have been largely personality-based, clientelist, and fragile. Correa's PAIS party—while not fully ideologically coherent—is currently the largest in the legislature, though several members left the bloc in 2010. Its competitors include the right-of-center PRIAN and PSC, the populist PSP, and the center-left Ethics and Democracy Network (RED).

Political representation of the indigenous population has increased greatly over the past 15 years; the CONAIE indigenous movement is one of the better-organized and more vocal social groups in the country. CONAIE's leadership appeared to break definitively with the Correa government in 2010, though some member groups continued to support the administration.

Ecuador is racked by corruption, and numerous politicians and functionaries have been investigated for graft. In 2009, a corruption scandal erupted over hundreds of millions of dollars in government contracts that had been awarded to Fabricio Correa, the president's brother and former fundraiser. The contracts were nullified that year, and while investigations and counteraccusations of government corruption by Fabricio continued in 2010, no charges had been filed by year's end. Ecuador was ranked 127 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedom of expression is generally observed, and the media are outspoken. The sector is increasingly polarized between the active private media, which is generally sympathetic to the opposition, and the growing set of state-controlled outlets. President Correa often lambastes journalists, and his hostile rhetoric has been blamed for an increase in physical attacks on and harassment of reporters and news outlets. In 2010, press watchdog Fundamedios reported 151 cases of harassment against journalists, a sharp increase over the previous year. An outspoken columnist, Emilio Palacio, was sentenced to three years' imprisonment under criminal defamation laws in March, though the charges were eventually withdrawn. A controversial media law remained under consideration in Congress throughout the year. Internet access is unrestricted.

Freedom of religion is constitutionally guaranteed and generally respected in practice. However, tensions between the government and the Roman Catholic Church have increased in recent years. Academic freedom is not restricted.

The right to organize political parties, civic groups, and unions is upheld by the authorities. Ecuador has numerous nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that operate with relative freedom and report openly on human rights concerns, including arbitrary arrests and instances of police brutality and military misconduct. Numerous protests occur peacefully, but NGOs have strongly objected to repression by security forces—specifically hundreds of arrests, including of top indigenous leaders, on vaguely defined charges of terrorism—during protests in 2009 and 2010. The country's labor unions have the right to strike, though the labor code limits public-sector strikes. As little as 1 percent of the workforce is unionized, partly because most people work in the informal sector.

The judiciary, broadly undermined by the corruption afflicting all government institutions, has in recent years also been subject to significant political pressures. The highest judicial bodies under the new constitution are the nine-member Constitutional Court and the 21-member National Court of Justice. In early 2010, tensions between some PAIS members and the executive increased after the attorney general, a presidential ally, was accused of pressuring prosecutors to protect his wife from the legal repercussions of her involvement in a fatal traffic accident.

Judicial processes remain slow, and many inmates reach the time limit for pretrial detention while their cases are still under investigation. Prisons are seriously overcrowded, and torture and ill-treatment of detainees and prisoners remain widespread. Various projects to reform the penal and criminal procedure codes in order to improve the system's efficiency and fairness were undertaken in 2009 and 2010, but rising crime—partly blamed on prisoners who had been released to relieve overcrowding—pushed the tenor of debate away from comprehensive reform and toward calls to tighten restrictions. In June 2010, a truth commission appointed by the president in 2007 released its findings, which called for investigations, prosecutions, and victims' reparations in the cases of over 450 Ecuadoreans whose rights were violated by government agents over the previous 25 years. Most of the violations—which included torture, extrajudicial execution, and forced disappearance—dated to the 1984–88 government of León Febres Cordero. Also that month, UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Executions Philip Alston concluded a visit to Ecuador, decrying widespread impunity for murders perpetrated by both criminals and the police.
In 2008, after the Colombian military launched a cross-border raid on leftist Colombian rebels encamped on Ecuadorean territory, it emerged that Ecuadorean military officials had provided information to their Colombian counterparts that had not been provided to Correa. The president consequently dismissed his defense minister and several senior commanders, and broke off relations with Colombia. Efforts to step up patrols along the border continued in 2010, as did attempts to regularize the status of the tens of thousands of Colombian refugees living in Ecuador. In November, Correa met with Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos and reestablished diplomatic ties.

Despite their political influence, indigenous people continue to suffer discrimination at many levels of society. In the Amazon region, indigenous groups have attempted to win a share of oil revenues and a voice in decisions on natural resources and development. The government has maintained that it will not hand indigenous groups a veto on core matters of national interest, but the Constitutional Court ruled in April 2010 that a draft water bill could not be passed prior to parliamentary consultation with potentially affected groups. A mining law enacted in January 2009, combined with the introduction of the draft water law, stirred conflict between the government and CONAIE-led indigenous groups. A September 2009 protest ended in the death of one indigenous man and dozens of injuries to demonstrators and police. In July 2010, forensics experts angered indigenous groups by reporting that the fatal shot came from a weapon commonly used by indigenous hunters and not the police.

Women took 40 of 124 seats in the 2009 legislative elections, and the new constitution calls for a significant female presence throughout the public sphere. Violence against women is common, as is employment discrimination. Trafficking in persons, generally women and children, remains a problem.

*Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](http://freedomhouse.org/inc/content/pubs/fiw/inc_country_detail.cfm?y=2010&c=Ecuador) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*