

# Juan Carlos Holguín: “Socialism of the 21st century generated narco-states”

Pedro Pablo Peñaloza

*“I have executed the mandate that was assigned to me to serve Ecuador, always acting with justice and in accordance with the law, with the intention of safeguarding the high interests of the State permanently. During these months, I sought to use all my competencies to contribute to the common good.”*

These were the words Juan Carlos Holguín Maldonado (Quito, 1983) pronounced to resign from the position of Foreign Minister of the government of Ecuadorian President Guillermo Lasso on April 1, 2023. He concluded a period that had begun with his appointment as responsible for the transition between the administrations of Lenin Moreno and Lasso, following the latter’s electoral victory in February 2021.

With a degree in Corporate Communication and Public Relations from the University of San Francisco de Quito, this politician and entrepreneur, associated with technological development and sports, holds a Master’s in Public Policy from Georgetown University in the United States, as well as postgraduate degrees in Sports

Management from the Catholic University of Argentina and FIFA, and in Leadership in Government from the IDE Business School in Guayaquil.

Based on his experience in President Lasso's administration, Holguín Maldonado analyzes the situation faced by Ecuador, a nation plagued by political instability and a wave of violence that claimed the life of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio.

–After Rafael Correa's decade in power, the government of Lenin Moreno –who was Correa's vice president– seemed to pave the way for a democratic transition that promised to be completed with the arrival of President Lasso.

Ecuador has not yet had a democratic transition. It must be understood that Correa came to power in 2006, supported by the political project of Hugo Chávez, known as Socialism of the 21st century, an experiment that promoted totalitarianism and authoritarianism under the guise of democracy. Let me explain: these were dictatorships with popular support resulting from elections. However, once in power, they all took control of the electoral institutions to ensure there would never be transparent elections again.

In the case of Ecuador, it is evident that there was an electoral blackout in 2017 which Moreno won. He was the only electoral card that Correísmo could play, already worn down by the impossibility of Rafael Correa's participation and, at the same time, after running out of money. This shows us that Moreno's case is a subject of analysis because the exit of Correísmo came from its very own insides. Something unprecedented but, at the

same time, very risky since people still didn't know which leader to respond to.

It is worth noting that Ecuador has been dollarized for more than 20 years, and this has been the best defense for Ecuadorian democracy. There is nothing more popular in the country than the US dollar, and not even Correa, with the strength of populism and his authoritarian project, as a detractor of dollarization, was able to go against it. The US dollar has helped to stop the economic deterioration that usually comes with socialism or populism when they have the capacity to print money, and, at the same time, it has been a stronghold of freedom and democracy.

The country's institutional crisis is a direct result of the 2008 Constitution, the 21st-century-socialism constitution, which replaced traditional powers with a structure of five powers. This experiment has caused a lot of harm, and neither President Moreno nor President Lasso have been able to generate a structural change in this regard. Moreno did manage to block indefinite reelection with a referendum and other changes that history will be able to acknowledge.

–How was your experience as the leader of President Lasso's government transition team?

It was a positive experience, and I am grateful to President Lasso for entrusting me with that responsibility. The country was coming from a process of institutional destruction after a decade with Correa in power. In addition, we were dealing with many cases of large-scale corruption that were not made public due to total control of power. We were in the worst moment of the pandemic, without a single vaccine in the country.

I do recognize that the Moreno government had two very good vice presidents and good ministers who fought against Correísmo, but politics had been given priority over management, and that led to a country with three types of crises: a health crisis amid the worst moment of the pandemic; an economic crisis, a result of the same pandemic; and a moral crisis due to the high levels of corruption of Correísmo. The challenge was being transparent when delivering information, and I believe that's what we received. It was a transition that rose to the challenge.

–What is your assessment of that process? As I mentioned earlier, Lasso's rise seemed to complete a democratic transition in Ecuador. However, Lasso has had to call for early elections.

The transition to a full democracy, or at least one that, while imperfect, can function within an expected framework, will likely take several governments and many years. The damage inflicted by Correa's regime is extensive, and their political strategy aimed at destabilizing any government in the pursuit of soft coups to return to power and secure impunity will continue to hinder the normal development of future governments. This is a problem exacerbated by an international community that, at times, appears complicit with these leaders who present themselves as ideological projects for just causes but are, in reality, dictatorships plagued with corruption, allied with criminal structures.

–Why couldn't Lasso stay in power?

I cannot give an opinion about a government of which I was a part. Time will allow for assessments of what was done well, what could have been done better, but above all, to correct the mistakes

-which were several- so that no one with democratic principles repeats them when the time comes.

-Like most countries in the region, Ecuador has faced moments of political instability; however, it is currently experiencing an unprecedented wave of violence, manifested in prison riots and even the assassination of political leaders. Why has this wave of violence erupted?

The leader of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Raúl Reyes, who died in Angostura, declared in a video back in 2008 that they had financed Correa's campaign. I don't want to judge Correa's upbringing, as his father was detained for drug trafficking in the United States, which is a personal matter, but it is a factor to understand Correa's political relationship with drugs.

Socialism of the 21st century has criminal structures as a fundamental ally in all countries. During Correa's era, not even 50 tons of cocaine were confiscated per year. President Lasso has seized 500 tons in 24 months. The Moreno government initiated this process with a very capable Minister of Government. From there, the country faced two coup attempts disguised as "indigenous marches", during which criminal structures and Correísmo attempted to overthrow governments. For years, the operation of criminal structures was allowed, not only in drug trafficking but also in illegal mining and human trafficking. The violence we see today is the result of the efforts of the last two governments to combat this reality.

–Has the Ecuadorian State lost the ability to confront criminal groups?

There was a decade during which these groups got stronger while deliberately weakening the Armed Forces, the Police, intelligence, and almost all the country's institutions. The firepower of criminal organizations in Ecuador is nearly seven times greater than those of the State. This is gradually changing with international support. But it will take time.

–To what extent do crime and politics are mixed in Ecuador?

I have said this before: they are the same. It's narco-politics. Socialism of the 21st century generated narco-states because not only was there financing from illegal economies but also because many high-ranking officials in these governments have been linked to criminal organizations.

–In your experience, how can progress be made in the recovery of democracy and, at the same time, in the fight against criminal groups that are entrenched in the government?

Continue educating new generations who know that we must seek positions of power to execute projects with democratic principles, fighting for freedom and peace. The only way is to engage in politics, attain power, and continue fighting for these values. Change and peace will come. We must have strength, courage, and faith.