

# **Government Communication as a Device for the Nationalization of the Public: Ecuador 2010: The Speech That Converted a Police Revolt in President Assassination Attempt**

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*During the decade 2007-2017, Ecuador was led by a regime that identified itself as part of 21st Century Socialism. Rafael Correa came to the Presidency with a speech that questioned the traditional party system and the promise of a new Constitution that would recognize the diversity of interests of Ecuadorian society. On September 30, 2010 (30-S), a police revolt led to the retention of President Correa for several hours and ended with an armed confrontation between the police and the military that left several victims. Among them, the reorientation of government communication that distanced itself from the initial inclusive proposal to discourse of exclusion that subordinated the public to the State. This essay proposes a communicational interpretation of this transit based on the evolution of the relationship between the government and social movements and its manifestation in the official discourse about the public.*

*Keywords: Ecuador, 30-S, massmedia, government communication, public space, nationalization, populism*

## **INTRODUCTION**

On September 30, 2010 (30-S), Ecuador witnessed a police revolt that, after the detention of then President Rafael Correa for several hours, led to an armed confrontation between police and military, which caused some casualties. Among them is the governmental change in the discursive formulation of the public sphere, which distanced itself from the inclusive approaches that led to Correa's electoral triumph and the guarantee postulates on the Ecuador's Constitution of 2008. Giving way to an exclusionary discourse that subordinated the public sphere to state politics and, in addition, articulated the government party's project to plebiscite legitimacy.

This paper arises from the concerns raised for communication theory by the recurrent modifications on the public notion in the communication policy of Rafael Correa's government (2007-2017), which are evidenced in the central elements that articulated the official discourse, a privileged factor of media construction of the collective ideology and the forms of generation and legitimization of political representation.

Most contemporary communicational analyses agree -under different formulations- that the field of mass social communication is an informer of the political process, that is, a generator of forms of apprehension of the denoted, a connotator of facts and, finally, a fact that is added to reality. However, it is still necessary to deepen the analysis of mass communication as an actor in the policy-making process, in

itself, of the generation of the political fact; therefore, a scenario of dispute for the accumulation of symbolic power (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1995).

Although words are not enough to generate reality, its performative vocation -exponentially present in governmental discourse- can have an impact on the forms of political action of organized social sectors and, therefore, on the channels for the exercise of democracy. Therefore, the differences about the public issued by the representatives of power can be object of analysis, as they become an expression of the changes in the relationship between the government and the social movement and, therefore, of the spaces for the construction of democracy.

Official discourse presupposes the recognition of a hierarchical subject of enunciation, which is why the message is constructed from its discursive content, but also from the quality of the person who issues it: an individual, an organized group or an institution; in the discourse enunciated by a representative of power, it emerges from an issuer invested with authority and, therefore, its relationship with the receiver is inevitably hierarchical (Noëlle-Neumann, 1995).

In the first phase of the Alianza PAIS government, which has as a milestone the date of January 15, 2007,<sup>1</sup> when Rafael Correa assumed the presidency, a process of recovery of the institutional capacity of the State began, justified as a response to the instability of political representation faced by Ecuador in the decade from 1996 to 2005. The approval of the 2008 Constitution is part of this collective requirement and socially legitimizes a legislation with a strong presidential orientation through a governmental discourse that reinforces the idea that this process of strengthening the state is also a process of strengthening the public and, therefore, favors the democratic expression of popular sectors traditionally excluded from the spheres of political decision making.

The end of this phase was marked by 30-S, the date of the political crisis unleashed as a result of the National Police revolt, which triggered a change in the discursive formulation of the government, which opted for a distancing from its inclusive proposals, leading to the installation of the Montecristi Assembly and the guarantee postulates of the Constitution drafted therein, to raise the defense of the triumphant project and its legitimization through multiple electoral processes and plebiscites won by the ruling party.

This paper focuses on the main elements that differentiate the official discourse of the first phase of the Correa's regime from that of the Correa's second term (2019), reinforced by the events of 30-S, when a new moment of transition began, focused on the defense of the changes made by the government and its preservation efforts in the face of a growing political opposition and social mobilization.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the discursive methods used to express the consequences of 30-S and that were extended until the official defeat in the regional elections of 2014, in the context of action against social mobilization and activation of the political opposition stimulated by governmental and legislative decisions that found a turning point in the popular protests of July 2015 and that concluded with the presidential election of Lenin Moreno in 2017, whose prompt separation from Rafael Correa showed that this form of government and the communication model that legitimized it had worn out.

As a whole, these three phases of the Ecuadorian political situation in the decade 2007-2017 are visible as communicational transits that involve modifications in the way the governmental discourse formulated the relationship between the State and the social movements, which was also manifested as an evolution of the conceptualization of the public, as a scenario for the construction of political representation, as well as in the officialism's reading of the meaning of popular actions and reactions.

## **METHODOLOGICAL CRITERIA**

The paper is descriptive and is framed within the theoretical criteria proposed by Political Communication, which combines the academic work tools developed by social communication and politics, from an interdisciplinary approach. This epistemic node contains a set of communicative phenomena whose specificity has been called "government communication" (Canel, 2006: 17). With the elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), we identified the central elements of the presidential discourse and its projection on public opinion based on the news agenda of the *massmedia* (Van Dijk, 2003).

Based on the question: how does the evolution of the relationship between the government and social movements relate to the discourse about the public in Ecuador? This research takes as a reference the events of 30-S, an event that catalyzed a nationalization process of the public space in search of the defense and legitimization of Rafael Correa's governmental project. The changes undergone by the official word, as a factor in the construction of political representation, are identified, as well as the official understanding of the meaning of popular actions and reactions.

Although the phenomena experienced by Ecuador during the presidency of Rafael Correa (2007-2017) can be understood as a specificity, which concretizes a process that developed in Latin America with much greater scope and dynamism, its analysis allows an approach to the ways in which the state discourse reflects the evolution of the link between a government and social movements that may be part of its social base or -in a swinging manner- an opposition sector.

Based on these criteria, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

- In what aspects of Ecuador's official discourse was the official understanding of the public evident?
- What were the relevant changes in the governmental discourse about the public after the events of September 30, 2010 (30-S)?
- To what extent was there a correspondence between the changes in the discourse and the changes in the relationship between the government and the social movement?

### **The State as the Protagonist of the Public**

From the foregoing, it follows that the State is a privileged protagonist of the public to the point that State property is often called public goods and that State management is assumed to be synonymous with "the public matter".

This paper starts, as a framework criterion, from the non-existence of a general theory of the State; there are several theories that approach the State from different understandings of its nature, in a given historical context and around specific relationships with the economy, society and social classes, which are expressed in a privileged way in the political field and, therefore, also in its discursive formulations (Nicholls, 2015).

The relations of the State with society exist as centralized and decentralized forms of the exercise of power, which are inherent to the State and also external to it. Therefore, state action or inaction can be analyzed, from a governance approach, as forms of governmentality expression that also deals with the narratives and discourse-practices that contribute to the constitution of the state and governmental regimes.

The State articulates processes of domination and control that take the form of specific ways of disposing of things and allocating resources. The complex nature of the contemporary State leads to a growing exercise of prerogative power, where remote devices require prior internalization in the social subjects - conceived as holders of collective interests - and, therefore, social acceptance of the structures of subordination and processes of domination constituted (Foucault, 2006).

Ideology and ideological devices, observable as effects on the organization of populations standardized by bureaucratic institutionality, are located at the heart of the tension of State power and the co-building of images and practices. The discursive practice produces the visible in the environment of power relations, the visibility of the processes of domination constitutes, in itself, a domination effect, a device of mutual ascendancy between the State and society; but considering that it is, in addition, a device of contradictory effects.

The Ecuadorian State governed by Rafael Correa was framed within the characteristics that define a transitional State due to the modification of the State structure and the legislation that guided it, it can well be included in what some authors call neoinstitutionalism, typified by the deployment and strengthening of State institutions, whose efficiency and effectiveness is based on a strong increase in bureaucracy, the centralization of citizen information thanks to advanced technology, greater political and economic control of the territory, as well as the increase in regulations that force companies and private organizations to subordinate themselves to government policy as a monopolistic axis (Estrada Álvarez, 2010).

Under these conditions, the organization of the public acquires renewed importance for the State, since it is in this environment where the construction of identities generates groups and incorporates actors capable of legitimizing and providing a social base for the political project of the hegemonic power fraction. Simultaneously, the modification of the public that, from the official action, seeks to expand for the discourse of the representative of power and reduce for social diversity, establishes the limit for the different, for the antagonist who ends up being identified as the enemy.

Nevertheless, social conflict is still finding in the public sphere the space to influence the relationship between the State and social organizations, the approximations between and within classes, alluding to the tension and negotiation that puts permanent pressure on government decisions and its capacity to legitimize itself and legitimize them beyond the institutional scenarios, in processes of building new territories for the public and thus reformulating the exercise of democracy.

### **Approach to the Concept of the Public**

Due to its dimensions, this paper does not propose a detailed review or, even less, a state of the art of the theoretical proposals that have been developed around the evolution of categories such as: the public, the public sphere, the political public, public space, public opinion, etc.<sup>2</sup> In the spirit of development a “toolbox” and not a theoretical framework, I limit myself to identifying some conceptual formulations whose relevance allows us to advance in the examination of the relevant elements of the official discourse regarding the public and to explain its variation in specific political situations.

I adopt as a starting point Habermas’ reflection which, based on the formulation of the “public sphere”, directs the understanding of the public as a space of encounter between the State and the different social sectors, which generates a field of social life in which the so-called public opinion is formed. This enters the political sphere insofar as it contributes to the legitimization of the decisions made by power, formulated as a response to the common requirement of society (Habermas, 1994).

This concept makes it possible to differentiate the political public, from the public or public opinion and:

...to see where processes such as participation and political communication are generated, which in turn feed into institutionalized politics in the state through the creation of ‘political will’. These processes of building the public make it possible to structure modern democracy as we know it (Navas Alvear, 2012: 57).

According to this reflection, it can be assumed that the political public is structured as a space of mediation between the State and civil society (Habermas, 1998), which would make possible the construction of democracy in the general interest. On the other hand, mass communication, an instrument of identity of the citizen collective, manifests itself as public opinion, in other words, as the opinion of the collective that becomes the common will capable of legitimizing the system of political representation and its State.

This formulation is based on the Habermasian approach of communicative action conceptualized as encounters, in the sense of mechanisms for conflict management and its institutionalization or assimilation by the State. According to Habermas, civil organizations can exercise an offensive role by putting pressure on state powers, while at the same time exercising a defensive role to build their own spaces of identity through the formulation of differentiating discourses. In this context, discourse is understood as a reflection that, being initially monological, moves towards a dialogical argumentation based on a conceptual universalization that integrates the participants in a joint practice focused on the search for reasons, mutual influences and motivation of responses (Habermas, 2003).

In this framework, Martín-Barbero’s (2001) communicational proposal allows to deepen the understanding of the public which, as a sphere crossed by power relations in the building of social relations, is also a scenario of tension between the State and the social movement, where power relations are projected as processes of signification and resignification of social processes and, therefore, of construction or deconstruction of democracy. Therefore, we assume that the public media sphere is, above all, “that of the

visible" (Martín-Barbero, 2001), which would explain the closeness of the concept of the public with: the published, the audience, public opinion, public space; and, going one step further, with shared meanings, identities and, finally, citizenship.

### **The Political Public in Rafael Correa's Discourse**

#### *The Inclusive Discourse of Montecristi: The Homeland Belongs to Everyone*

Since 2007, with the government of PAIS - an acronym for the political movement Patria Altiva y Soberana, led by Rafael Correa - a recovery process of the State's capacity began, which the official discourse justified as a response to the instability of political representation experienced between 1996 and 2005. In this connection, it is understood the perception that "Alianza País rescued the vision of the State as a sense of the public and placed it within a political process in which the recovery of the public implied the reformulation of power. This reformulation of the sense of the public had a specific destination: to recover the State as a government and, of course, behind the government was the shadow of Alianza País". In this way, "there was a symbiotic linkage between leadership and the political project and recovery of the State" (Dávalos, 2014: 36-37).

In this context, the processing of the tension that the public space offers to the relationship between the State and the social movement was reduced to the opposition between the traditional right wing recognized by PAIS and the government and its "popular" and "revolutionary" social base. In the public sphere, the choice of a convenient enemy is confirmed, the previously defeated, the previously delegitimized, the historically overcome, which -according to the official discourse- is the only one really excluded from government policy.

Assimilating the popular interest to the governmental project allows declaring the diversity of organizations and social demands as a particular interest. Thus, the bases were established to turn the public into a space of expression hegemonically controlled by the circumstantial representation of power. The follower was obliged to give proof of his/her faith, fanaticism becomes a charter of citizenship or public contracting.

In this resignification of the public sphere, the state recovery proposed for foreign policy is projected in a complementary manner in an international policy declared as one of sovereign relations. The accession to the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), the rupture of relations with Colombia as a result of the bombing in Angostura, the impasse with the U.S. Ambassador, Heather Hodges, regarding the Wikileaks publications, the diplomatic asylum granted to Julian Assange are part of the construction of a sovereign State's image.

In this way, the PAIS government discourse regarding the public political sphere manages to incorporate itself, beyond Ecuadorian borders, into a new regional imaginary where the identity of Latin American peoples is translated into a political proposal of autonomous national states with sovereign positions vis-à-vis the empire, solidarity among governments with apparently similar ideological discourses and joint action against the political oppositions that the winners of multiple electoral processes may face within each country.

The recovery of the state, which only occurred as a strengthening of the state system, in other words, of its capacity to control and monopolize legitimate violence. This resulted in a semiotic shift: if the political project proposed to recover the State, and the State is public, its recovery is linked to the property of the political project; therefore, it is the State's obligation to support the triumphant project. In other words, the governmental decision itself legitimizes the adopted policy, since it reflects the public. Finally, a sophist circle was created.

The dogmatic part of the Constitution of 2008 is based on the principle of "guaranteeism", which simultaneously guides an institutionalism based on the control of the state system by the Executive Power. By declaring it solely responsible for the fulfillment of individual and community rights, it turns the State into a benefactor whose policies, regulations and - above all - budget are given as handouts to individuals, communities, peoples, nationalities and groups that no longer require their own organization.

With this logic, "The State appears as guarantor and responsible for the realization of rights; in doing so, it modifies the sense that the Constitution has vis-à-vis the political process: it abandons its function as

a structure for the protection of society and becomes an instrument of political power for the realization of rights” (Echeverría, 2015: 135). Thus, the public sense of a government that, born from a democratic tradition, was strengthened in the paths of populism to end up demonstrating an authoritarian vocation, was decanted. It is not a discovery, literature rediscovers what history demands to remember: “the people always have some champion, whom they magnify above all else... This and no other is the root from which a tyrant is born, who at the beginning is a protector” (Bradbury, 2013: 195). The State watches, the watcher protects, protection is control; the controlled person is an individual protected from the enemy and, finally, also from him/herself; the State is in charge of protecting him/her from his/her own evil.

This capacity of the state administration forces the strengthening of the bureaucracy and the predominance of the Executive Power over the other State functions, in a process that -as stated before- can be described as neoinstitutionalism (Estrada, 2010).

Historical experience teaches that even the most deep-rooted social revolutions, once the required State has been organized, enter into a conservative phase; even more so processes that, initially anchored in popular mobilizations, are reduced to rejuvenating the political representation of a power whose hegemony remains unquestioned. In this second case, the legitimization mechanisms can quickly move from the phase of social movement inclusion to that of institutional consolidation.

In the case of Ecuador, the approval of the Montecristi Constitution fulfilled the role of a rite of transition. It enabled Correa’s first reelection and with it the consecration of his leadership which, at that time, was still invested with the inertia of inclusion manifested in the official slogan “La Patria ya es de todos” (The Homeland belongs to all).

#### *The Exclusionary Discourse of 30-S: With Me or Against Me*

On August 10, 2009, Rafael Correa resumed the presidency following his electoral victory in April of the same year, with 52% of the voting. During this period, the official discourse shows a remarkable shift from the inclusive position that led the first electoral campaign, in which the recognition of multiple interests that found in PAIS a space for an alliance of diverse interests prevailed, to a moment in which the new movement and its leader concentrate legitimate diversity in themselves. This adjustment is channeled from the objective of “deepening the Citizen Revolution” through legal reforms that were to be approved by the National Assembly at a time when PAIS had lost power in the legislative function. Therefore,

... in the months preceding the “explosion” of 30-S, and parallel to the summary and authoritarian approval of the neo-conservative package of laws and rules, the extra-parliamentary resistance was gaining vitality, despite its fragmented nature, which meant that “literally” politics descended/ascended to the streets (Báez, 2010: 20).

In this context, the approval of the Public Service Organic Law, which violated the acquired rights of the Police and Armed Forces staff, was the trigger for the police revolt of September 30. A revolt that could have been limited to a union claim -atypical for its protagonists-, turned into a political crisis of complex consequences because “The charismatic leader does not feel tied to rules or institutions and personalizes the State. When a crisis broke out Correa felt called to personally solve it as he represents the nation and the state” (De la Torre, 2013: 48).

Disregarding institutional channels and feeling that he was the one called upon to solve any type of conflict, the president decided to go in person to the police headquarters in order to explain the benefits of the new law to the troops. He was accustomed to plebiscitary acclaim and trusted that his charisma would calm them down, but the calculation backfired. [...]

From a balcony of the police headquarters, he tried to give a speech with technical arguments about the virtues of the law but was booed. He lost his patience and, opening his shirt to show that he was not wearing a bulletproof vest, challenged them, “If you want

to kill the president, here he is. Kill him if you have the courage.” His questioning of the police masculinity outraged them even more and when the president came out he was attacked (De la Torre, 2013: 47).

Correa denounced to the country and the world that he was kidnapped by a group of insurgent police officers. In the afternoon he was “rescued” *manu militari* by a group of army officers from the Police Hospital. During this period, the president received visits from his collaborators, made decisions and signed decrees, one of which was the declaration of a state of emergency, which meant that from 2:00 p.m. onwards, the country could only receive information from the official media.

From that moment on, the coup d'état script -denied in the previous hours by the same government spokespersons- was imposed as mandatory reading for the sole communicator. Social monosemy was only possible under the condition of guaranteeing that the information disseminated was one and the same. The national television network controlled what the *mass-media* broadcast and simultaneously justified itself by pointing out that the private media were not trustworthy because they sponsored the coup d'état. Ironically, the most elementary communicational logic indicates that the media would not have complied with the transmission of the national network if a coup d'état had been underway.

These decisions made the retained president's voice the only authorized one and his understanding of the event the only acceptable and “theoretically” sustained political argument, as Rafael Correa pointed out in an interview with Ignacio Ramonet:

It turns out that it is not only me, but the countries of Ibero-America themselves who have stated, at the last summit meeting in Mar del Plata, their rejection of the ‘coup d'état of September 30 in Ecuador’ because there is no doubt about that. Only a blind man could deny it. Who doubts it is that corrupt press that does not seek the truth; it seeks to harm the government. If we say white, they have to say black, just to undermine the government. But in any case, based merely on Latin American political sociology, given the history of Latin America, a revolt by an armed force is already considered a coup d'état (Tercera, 2011, January 5).

Gradually, the sanctioning morality adopted by the official discourse becomes mandatory for all state institutions with the argument of protecting the political project recognized at the ballot box, legitimate in an exclusive and excluding manner. If morality is unique and truth is attributed to that morality, what is excluded is easily exposed as a lie and corruption, authorizing the use of state force for its repression and, eventually, for its annihilation.

Anyone who opposes the government is a criminal and this includes the “coup d'état” and “assassination attempt” organized after September 30, 2010, as well as the opposition to oil exploitation in the highly biodiverse Yasuní area, and the harassment of journalists, media and political opponents.

The best example of this exclusionary logic is the government's information management of the events of September 30 during the following seven years. On the third anniversary of the “coup d'état”, “Galo Mora, executive secretary of Alianza País, said that for the events of September 30 there cannot be a ‘cloak of shadow and oblivion’, ‘that is not possible’, he urged to fight impunity” (Ecuavisa, 2013, September 30).

The process was not investigated, the guilty parties were and are still being sought for a crime previously determined as such. There was no need for a judicial ruling; on television, “wanted” posters were broadcast regarding the participants in the 30-S, they are criminals of a political act, their guilt is predetermined. The 30-S Investigation Commission was created by Executive Decree to search for those guilty of “assassination attempt in the context of a failed coup d'état”. The inquisitorial persecution was served:

The government commission in charge of investigating the events of September 30, 2010 indicated that some political actors participated in the alleged conspiracy and coup d'état of that day. (...) The commissioners asked citizens to collaborate by identifying civilians,

police and political actors who participated in the events. The last category included leaders of Sociedad Patriótica (SP), Movimiento Popular Democrático (MPD) and other political groups that, according to the commission members, instigated the rebellion, coup d'état and assassination. They announced that in the coming days they will disseminate images so that interested parties can reveal the identity of certain participants" (El Universo, 2013, October 1).

In the subsequent years, the Prosecutor's Office processed about a hundred complaints, gave way to trials and obtained sentences for more than 250 accused persons of: murder, attempt against the State security, incitement to rebellion, insubordination, plagiarism, attempted assassination, sedition, etc.; to which must be added the casualties of hundreds of police and military officers who participated in the events of 30-S (Tibán, 2018: 73). Thanks to the judicial action, "President Correa victimized himself and sent to jail everyone who appears in the scenario of 30-S, involving us as 'author, accomplice or accessory' of the crime, not only of assassination but of regicide" (71).

The most emblematic case was the trial of journalist Emilio Palacio, opinion editor of El Universo, for publishing an article entitled "No a las mentiras" (No to lies), in which he asked to be informed who had given the order to shoot at the Police Hospital to protect the president's departure.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Ecuador Post 30-S. They Shall Not Pass*

The police revolt and its defeat were an argument that socially justified the radicalization policy of the PAIS regime. The obstacles that the presidential will had faced in the National Assembly elected in 2009 could be overcome thanks to the increase in Correa's popularity, as a result of the victimization resorted to by the official propaganda, which was expecting an easy victory in the Popular Consultation of 2011 and, with it, the government's control over social communication and the justice administration.

However, despite the efforts of official propaganda, in these two central issues for the government project, "the results obtained were not as convincing as the government expected. This led the regime to close in on itself, and to exacerbate political polarization, persecuting communicators and social leaders, who were accused of conspiracy" (Echeverría, 2015: 145). In short, "the call for a popular consultation meant entering forcefully into the plebiscitary logic to force the way out towards the consolidation of an even more closed model of power articulation around hyper-presidentialism" (144-145).

This trend deepened during the 2013 reelection campaign, where citizen approval of the changes proposed by popular consultation was used by Correa in order to emphasize "the need to continue managing the State, not for personal interests, but to continue deepening the social work, changing the unjust structures of the country" (Agencia Andes, 2012, November 12).

Within PAIS -the political base of the leader- it was also demanded to reaffirm loyalties, since it could only remain what was politically admissible, what was accepted as public interest. Those who were excluded were the defeated, those who lacked political destiny and whom the popular vote had already sanctioned with electoral failure.

"Ecuador has already changed", "we are not going back to the past" and "they are the same old ones", the official propaganda kept repeating. In that past there were the social organizations, the indigenous people, the workers. The Homeland that was progressing at the pace set by Rafael Correa demanded the denial of those interests -supposedly already overcome by the new era- therefore it was logical that the governmental policy promoted the dissolution of organizations that were not recognized as having a legitimate interest, which is why they should no longer be part of the public political sphere at the revolutionary moment.

The Manichean structure of the lie-truth binomial presupposes a moral exercise in collective communication; therefore, it enters into the individual's inner self and the State can and must prevent dissident opinion from materializing. As stated by Rafael Correa in his 2013 inauguration speech, "We will not allow the right to resistance, enshrined in our Constitution, to become a license for the groups that lost the elections to impose their agendas by force".



The Communication Law, approved in June 2013, strengthened the legal framework necessary to control what communication demands from the building of the public oriented by the vision of a government turned into a supreme communicator. In this way a sophist circle was closed: if the public is the state, the public interest is the interest of the state and its representative is the interest of the public. This is expressed more clearly by Catalina Botero, rapporteur for Freedom of Speech of the IACHR, who analyzing the situation in Ecuador stated: “in that country, all media, written, digital, radio or television, are expressly obliged to publish all information that the Government considers to be of *public interest* and, at the same time, they can be sanctioned for publishing information that the Government considers irrelevant” (El Universo, 2014, July 26, 2014).

In the words of then President Correa, that was justified because:

...information must be adequately regulated, because bad information could collapse society. ‘Communication as a public good does not imply anything more than what we have already been doing: regulating the activity of communication because social cohesion depends on it and it does not imply the loss of any freedom as some mercantilist media point out, but it does imply the responsibility to rectify if any information is not truthful’ (Agencia Andes, 2014, July 14).

Finally, the official discourse confirmed that the main guilty party was the mass media, since the press “became a mastiff that rounds up the political power and even the citizens themselves, in defense of its mercantile, class and political interests”. With this logic, according to the president, the journalists:

... do not report about conflicts: they seek them, induce them, create them, desire them, in order to sell more newspapers and, in the case of insubordinate governments, such as ours, to subjugate them. This is irresponsible in any society, but even more so in Latin America’s fragile democracies. Remember 30-S, it is not allowed to forget, review those who promoted it with their false news (Correa, 2013).

In the subsequent years, Correa reinforced this notion until it became a general reference for the population: “September 30 was caused by a disinformation campaign,” said the triumphant leader, adding: “But who were the ones who carried out that disinformation campaign,” he asked, “where are they? These are the questions that should be answered, but some press is turning a blind eye to them”. As a dramatic closing he exhorted: “They know that their microphones and inkwells have caused innocent blood to flow” (Ecuador inmediato, 2015, January 20). In summary, it seems that the deaths of 30-S were not the result of bullets fired; the journalistic pen was the killer.

### **The 2014 Elections: The First Defeat for Alianza PAIS**

More than one analyst has wondered whether populist politics has a chance of developing in conditions of economic crisis or, at least, of reduced tax revenues that force a decrease in clientelist tactics. This may weaken the social base of the project, while at the same time, given the need to increase the extraction of resources from other social groups, increase resistance to the government.

A populist political project requires ensuring the necessary material resources to strengthen the client base that supports its vote and the official discourse justifies it from a moral standpoint: favoring the poorest and punishing the richest”. As Rafael Correa (2013) said at the inauguration speech of his third presidency: “For us, this is the most important change in these six years: the Homeland now belongs to everyone and especially to the poorest”.

These words were pronounced in May 2013, when Ecuador was experiencing a period of high revenues for the tax authorities, which went into crisis in the following years. The international fall in oil prices caused the plebiscitary legitimization, which accompanied the PAIS government during Correa’s first two terms in office, to show a social breakdown, which led to the loss of electoral space suffered by the government in the renewal of sectional authorities in February 2014.

PAIS's first electoral defeat marked a new turning point in the building of public spaces, the second after the restrictions already imposed as a result of 30-S. Although the distancing with the indigenous organizations had increased in these years, it was the action of urban middle class groups that revealed the inconsistency in the guaranteeing proposal of the Montecristi Constitution and the resignation of PAIS to the initial postulates that gave it the confidence of broad social sectors.

This explains why Quito and Cuenca became the main scenarios for the rejection of the official candidates in a process that the leader described as "dark clouds" that darkened his unquestioned rise and threatened to weaken the cohesion of the ruling movement itself. In order to recover his base, Correa adopted frontal Manichaeism: "Saint Ignatius used to say: 'in a besieged fortress, all dissidence is betrayal'. Any differences between us will be dealt with the day after the victory. Quito must remain the capital of the Citizen Revolution" (Ecuador en vivo, 2014, February 12).

This cleansing was not limited to the opposing side, within the ranks of PAIS -at a time of anxiety- it was demanded to raise the demonstrations of loyalty to the leader, for which the fourth convention of the ruling movement was called under the slogan "reform or die". In essence, the reform was based on the removal of Galo Mora and the appointment of Vinicio Alvarado, a member of the President's inner circle. (Ecuador en vivo, 2014, May 1). The exclusion stage in the building of the political public had been institutionalized reaffirming that -according to the timely words of Doris Soliz, PAIS leader- "someone who is a leftist or socialist cannot be against the citizen revolution" (Telerama, 2015, June 17).

The state repression that followed was predictable; it is sufficient to point out a few examples. States of exception such as the one imposed on the inhabitants of Intag for opposing the entry of large-scale mining in that territory (Teleamazonas, 2014, May 20). Authorization for the police to enter schools with the argument of combating drug micro-trafficking (Ecuador en vivo, 2014, July 15). Separation of students from their schools in Quito for "destroying private property" during popular demonstrations. Prosecution of union leaders accused of rebellion (Ecuador inmediato, 2014, July 18). Arrest of a high school student for making obscene signs to "his superior" during an officialism demonstration (Ecuador en vivo, 2015, May 9). Repression of indigenous leaders, questioning of the union leadership, creation of a pro-government "Unique Workers' Center" supported by self-employed workers (El Comercio, 2014, November 15), etc. etc. etc.

The government's fear came to assume legal form both in the signaling of what was to be criminalized and, in the repression, called for to combat it. In May 2014, the National Assembly approved the "draft reforms to the Public and State Security Act, according to which the Armed Forces, in order to ensure internal protection, maintenance and control of public order in citizen security, may support in a complementary manner the operations that in this area are the responsibility of the National Police" (El Telégrafo, 2014, May 15). Some time later, with the approval of the new Penal Code, which came into force in August 2014, the State was accepted as a subject of rights, guaranteeing its security over that of the citizen.

The election results of February 23 left another no less important lesson. PAIS confirmed what the political forces of Ecuador already suspected, that is, the inexistence of a collective leadership in the government movement and the exclusive projection of the leader as the only constituted figure. Therefore, his permanence was a *sine qua non* factor to guarantee the continuity of the political project and that led him to propose the indefinite reelection, a project that did not prosper and forced Correa to sponsor the Lenin Moreno-Jorge Glas binomial in the 2017 elections.

## CONCLUSIONS

Talking about democracy and silencing the people is a farce.

Talking about humanism and denying men is a lie.

Ovidio

*"I know well that I am no longer me, I am a whole people."*

Betting on the support of the public can be understood -among other things- as providing the space for the expression of the political public. This was the gamble of PAIS that led to its electoral triumph in 2006 and, in this context, Correa's victory required a discourse of denial of the socially questioned institutionality, of a Constitution whose limitations made its modification necessary and of a party system that had demonstrated its inefficiency. The new movement refused to take part in the parliamentary elections, denouncing these structures as excluding the diversity of sectors and interests that make up Ecuador.

For the 2014 elections, the consolidation of a reverse process is evident. The exclusion of those who differ from the pro-government orientation is imposed and, with it, the transition from the discourse of the democratic candidate to that of the representative of power who claims himself as the only spokesman of what is legitimate. The group that presented itself as an *outsider* in 2006, once the Ecuadorian institutionality was redesigned and controlled -part of which is the "partisan" management of the parliamentary majority- discovered that it is unnecessary to open common scenarios, that consulting the people is useless and that, once the governmental interest has taken over the public space, it should be closed to the different ones.

The State, representing the nation, can unify the collective and exclude the different, always individualized. Exclusion is a metaphorical death. In this context, the official discourse tends to Manichaeism and looks at the concept of the public as a synonym of the State, which in turn is equivalent to government identified with a triumphant political project and, finally, with its representative, the president, as a synonym of leader. This sophistic formulation leads to present the word of the leader identified with the formulation of the general interest and, thus, of the public. Hence, Correa has assumed his electoral triumph as the confirmation that "The Homeland has returned" and his government demonstrates that "The Homeland already belongs to everyone". Anyone who does not feel represented by *that* homeland -by that representative- is simply anti-homeland, is not a patriot, is an enemy.

This generated a new moment in the political scenario: the project that has triumphed at the ballot box can only be implemented under the leadership of the president-elect. The leader becomes such by his personal condition and -thanks to a new semantic carambola- his legitimacy exceeds the electoral process; the representation is that of the individual, the latter is not replaceable, eternity awaits for him.

The discourse that identifies the leader with the Homeland means that any questioning of his actions or legitimacy can be read as an attack against democracy itself, thus laying the foundations for the transition to an authoritarian government based on personalized control of the state system. In this context, it was assumed as normal that "the trials derived from the protest of 30-S were manipulated from an external office of the Presidency of the Republic, which operated in the north of Quito" or that the "Use of public funds for the celebrations and expenses related to the commemoration of 30-S by the Presidency of the Republic and related entities" was contemplated, as evidenced in the trial followed to Correa and his closest officials prosecuted in the "Bribery case" between 2019 and 2020 (La Hora, 2019, July 8, 2019).

Why did Ecuador identify itself, self-recognize itself in the distorted mirror of PAIS? At first, because the symbolic network that power weaves makes it invisible because it was a mirror -therefore, a distortion of reality- of the discourse developed by popular organizations for decades. Correa gave face to a relegitimization process of the system that restored the invisibility of power broken with the constitutional ruptures of the 1996-2005 decade. In a mirror, only one's own face can be seen. Correa's speech restored unity to the broken glass and thereby concealed what remains behind it, the very representation of power, while the other side reflects the image of the people.

Candidate Correa's speech was the product of the accumulation of requests, proposals and even political projects articulated by different social and political organizations. This multiplicity was returned to society thanks to a mirror that projected the image with which PAIS was born. In conditions of absence of their own organizations, social subjects can allow corporate representation to assume the representation of all; in other words, of the collective, of the public. In this way, the mirror that reflected identity could be a binding factor.

When he became president, that same reflection became a disguise and fulfilled the function of projecting the genuine general interest, emptying it of content and turning it into a simulacrum. This is

possible if we consider that the field of mass social communication is not only an informer of the political process, it is a generator of form, a connotator of facts, a fact that is added to reality; it is, in itself, a space for the construction of politics, for the generation of the political fact.

But discourse is not enough to achieve reality, the performative vocation of the word finds a limit in the maturity of social organization, therefore, it is dressed in requirements historically formulated by organized social sectors and leads the flow of popular will towards the legitimization of a representation of power that conceals its particular determination in the rhetorical formulation of “the public”.

Far from being the catalyst for the breakdown of the traditional political parties, Correa took advantage of this process in his electoral triumph and, subsequently, the nationalization of public space made possible by the 2008 Constitution, generated conditions to reconstitute the institutional absorption capacity of social conflict, establish new channels to process demands and rebalance the balance of power and its hegemony.

The public discourse formulated by the representative of power became a strategy to legitimize a specific direction of the State, where electoral victory is distanced from the organization of social movements and corporate representation makes popular organization dangerous. The promise of a “socialism of the 21st century” was reduced to a rhetorical formulation, it was the publicity of the same State that pretended to overcome neoliberalism with a word that protects the replication of the practice.<sup>4</sup>

With the reduction of the plebiscitary legitimization space, PAIS lost interest in alliances, took refuge in itself and thus built its own diversity. Within it, the unquestioned leadership replaces ideological cohesion, the State system replaces the party system, the bureaucracy is a sufficient expression of the social base. As a whole, the self-purification of the regime is towards conservatism, to become more similar to the leader, to homogenize, to become uniform.

Throughout this process, the public concept, its understanding and building from the official discourse was permanently reconstituted and redefined, swinging back and forth from an initial point of democratic inclusion, to the acquisition of the public by the State and, finally, to the exclusion of those who were different from it.

Semiotics can be a locus of power, its reproduction space and the performance, as a form of religious ritual, ensures the diffusion of the dominant ideology. The semiotics of domination is always a form that symbolic power assumes - according to Bordieu (1995) - it is the privileged form for the reproduction of hegemony in the power structure; therefore, the strengthening of hegemony reduces the possibility of expression of discordant social interests.

The political public is a space for the construction of power, but also of potential counterpowers. If the public is the visible, the “hard light” that shows what everyone must see, the intertwining between the construction of the public space and its media exposure is forced. The public is also a scenario of the panoptic realization of power, the space of the one who sees everything and everyone sees, and as an unavoidable complement, of the generation of the “shadow” in which what should not be seen is immersed, where the hidden is kept, the resistance spaces that preserve interests that can escape the public to the extent that they are not part of the collective that is organized from the representation of power that highlights the visible.

As a summary, it can be pointed out that the political public - as a symbolic territory - can share a function of inclusion as well as one of exclusion of social interests. This explains, in a partial and limited way, the importance attributed by social movements, as organized actors and carriers of social and historical interests, to the struggle to re-signify the public sphere by generating new spaces where their interests adhere to the collective imaginary as a factor in the construction of a new symbolic power with the potential to build general interest, in other words, to become a political counter-power and guide a new State.

Louis XIV, the monarch under whose reign France was established as an absolutist and centralized regime, is credited with the phrase *L'État, c'est moi* (the State is me). Ecuador has not lived a similar experience, however, the spots elaborated by the PAIS publicist show a not very distant path. “The Homeland already belongs to everyone”, it was said during the inclusive phase; “The Homeland is moving forward” was the slogan at the time of the nationalization of the public sector, “They shall not pass” summarizes the exclusionary position.

But the leader also seeks to represent the future, in the words of Correa (2015): “Ten years ago we were the first indignant ones, we were the outlaws who were in the streets fighting against inept and corrupt governments. On April 21, 2005, my life changed forever, when I was appointed Minister of Economy. The rest is history. I know very well that I am no longer me, I am an entire nation”.

However, PAIS was only a temporary moment in Ecuadorian politics, although it determined it for a decade with Rafael Correa and influenced the government of Lenin Moreno from an inertia that has not been overcome. Hence the importance of analyzing the discourse that contributed to its strength, determining its limitation and identifying its place in the collective memory, a fundamental factor to avoid the fulfillment of what literature has predicted when authoritarian governments consolidate: “a nation that when looking back is unable to recognize its own footprints, soon forgets that it can walk” (Santillán, 2014: 30).

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## ENDNOTES

1. For César Montúfar, this first phase corresponds to the constituent moment of the Citizen Revolution government, “to the phase of refoundation; to the moment of birth and demolition of the old institutionality and the attempt to rebuild the institutional and normative bases of the Ecuadorian society”. As of September 30, “his political project enters into a de-constitutional logic. In this new moment, which shortly after resulted in the Popular Consultation of May 2011, the government entered an authoritarian drift and concentration of power without mitigating factors” (Montúfar, 2012: 158).
2. A valuable synthesis of the most representative scholars in this field is offered by the research of Marco Navas Alvear (2012).
3. In the presentation of his book, *Testimonio de un comandante* (Testimony of a commander), General Ernesto González (2014), former chief of the Joint Command of the Armed Forces, who was in charge of the operation that took Correa out of the police hospital, said: “Indeed, I heard the president’s voice of uneasiness. He told me that he was the President of the Republic, that he had been vexed, outraged and retained for more than ten hours; that he could not continue in this situation and ordered his rescue as soon as possible”. <http://www.larepublica.ec/blog/politica/2015/01/12/presidente-estuvo-secuestrado-jefe-operativo-militar-30s/>
4. As an example, regarding the dialogue tables created to counteract popular demonstrations, in August 2015, Carlos Marx Carrasco, Minister of Labor Relations stated: “It must be clear that the collective contract for the private sector has every reason to exist, because there the capital-work conflict is present all the time, while in the public sector the capital-work conflict does not exist.” (El Telégrafo, 2015, August 28).

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