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Ecuador: Country Overview and U.S. Relations

Ecuador is an ethnically and geographically diverse country of 18.5 million people, encompassing portions of South America's Pacific coast, Amazon Basin, and Andean highlands (see **Figure 1**). Ecuador faces a security crisis, with gangs fighting for control of drug trafficking routes and prisons, and reportedly attempting to influence politics. In the 118th Congress, some Members called for increased U.S. assistance to Ecuador to address security challenges, with some voicing concern about human rights conditions and possible democratic erosion in Ecuador in late 2024. The 119th Congress may assess security, economic, and human rights conditions in Ecuador—including any implications for regional security efforts and unauthorized migrant and illicit drug flows to the United States—and consider legislative and other measures to shape U.S.-Ecuador relations.

Current Political Conditions

Ecuador held snap general elections in August 2023 to elect a new president and legislature (National Assembly). In November 2023, President Daniel Noboa, the head of the center-right National Democratic Action (ADN) political coalition, took office to complete the term of his predecessor, Guillermo Lasso (2021-2023), after winning an October runoff vote. Lasso, who called the elections but did not run, had pushed for market-friendly political and economic reforms but faced opposition from Indigenous movements and a legislature dominated by leftist parties that had repeatedly tried to impeach him. The assassination of a presidential candidate and other political figures, allegedly by criminal groups, marred the 2023 elections.

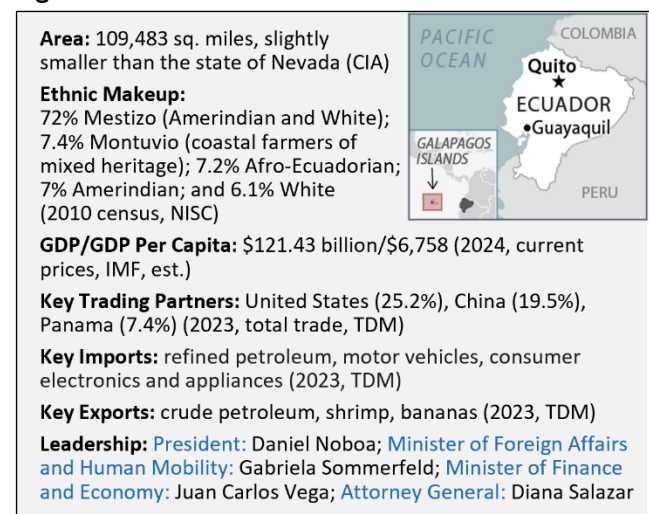
Voters also elected new members to the 137-member unicameral National Assembly and approved national and regional referenda to halt oil and mineral extraction in two ecologically sensitive regions. The leftist Citizens Revolution party (RC), tied to former President Rafael Correa (2007-2017), won the most seats (51) in the National Assembly, followed by the anti-corruption Build Ecuador Movement (26), the conservative Social Christian Party (CSP) and allies (18), and the ADN (14).

Unlike his predecessor, President Noboa formed a legislative majority through a loose political alliance that included his ADN, the RC, and the CSP. The alliance enacted several Noboa-backed economic and energy-related reforms but broke down after Ecuadorian forces invaded the Mexican Embassy in Quito in April 2024 to detain former vice president and RC member Jorge Glas (2013-2018) on corruption charges; Glas had received asylum from Mexico.

Ecuador is to hold presidential and legislative elections on February 9, 2025, with a presidential runoff to be held in April if the winner does not obtain either 50% of the votes or at least 40% with a 10-percentage-point advantage over

the next highest vote winner. Those elected are to take office in May 2025 for a four-year term. The Noboa administration and the political opposition have clashed over whether President Noboa is subject to electoral rules requiring officials running for reelection to take a leave of absence while campaigning. The rules would require him to temporarily confer power to the vice president, with whom he has an ongoing political dispute. Noboa has used his executive authority to designate an interim vice president and temporarily confer presidential powers to her for short periods while he campaigns, prompting legal challenges.

Figure 1. Ecuador at a Glance



Sources: Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) *World Factbook*, International Monetary Fund (IMF), Ecuador's National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (NISC), Trade Data Monitor (TDM).

Security Crisis

Violence has risen over the past four years, primarily because of increased competition among gangs affiliated with transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), including Mexican cartels and European crime groups. After decades of comparatively low homicide rates, homicides surged after the COVID-19 pandemic—reportedly reaching 44.5 per 100,000 in 2023, among the highest rates in Latin America (most recent data available). High-fatality riots in prisons, from which criminal groups reportedly run their operations, have plagued Ecuador since 2020. These groups also are alleged to have infiltrated Ecuadorian politics and institutions. In late 2024, a judge convicted 20 people—including former judges, government officials, and police—for their roles in an extensive corruption network linked to organized crime.

Rising insecurity in Ecuador has coincided with an increase in unauthorized migration from Ecuador to the United States. U.S. Customs and Border Protection encountered

about 124,000 Ecuadorians at a U.S. land border in FY2024—a nearly 400% increase from FY2022 levels.

In January 2024, President Noboa declared the first of several states of emergency and “internal armed conflict” after the leader of Ecuador’s *Los Choneros* gang escaped from prison and a wave of violence swept the country. The order limited some constitutional rights, designated 22 criminal groups as terrorist organizations, and enabled the armed forces to conduct public security functions and take control of some of the country’s prisons to disrupt criminal operations. Ecuadorians voted to formalize the armed forces’ role in public security in an April 2024 referendum, approving eight additional security-related measures, including the extradition of Ecuadorian citizens.

Noboa’s security efforts appear to have had mixed results. According to the government, homicide rates declined by nearly 16% in 2024, while kidnapping and extortion increased. Since January 2024, security forces have arrested several high-profile criminals; several politicians also have been assassinated. Military control reportedly has restored order in some prisons, but the prison system continues to grapple with deadly riots and the murder of prison officials. Human Rights Watch has alleged that some security forces have committed serious human rights violations. In December 2024, the disappearance and deaths of four children who had been detained by members of the armed forces sparked protests. The attorney general’s office has brought charges against 16 soldiers in connection with the children’s disappearances and has announced additional investigations into other alleged abuses by security forces.

Economic Situation

After a recession in 2020 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the economy recovered in 2021, growing by 9.8% (in part because of rising oil prices) before slowing to 6.2% and 2.3% growth in 2022 and 2023, respectively. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects that growth will slow further to 0.3% and 1.2% in 2024 and 2025, respectively, amid security and energy challenges.

The Noboa administration has taken steps to improve Ecuador’s fiscal situation, including implementing reforms to increase tax revenue and reducing energy subsidies. In December 2024, IMF officials enabled the disbursement of about \$500 million after a review of the country’s four-year, \$4 billion financing agreement (approved in May 2024) to support structural reforms and Noboa’s policies.

Economic growth has been impeded by recurring power blackouts, due in part to severe drought (hydroelectric power generates nearly 80% of the country’s electricity) and aging infrastructure. Noboa declared an energy emergency in April 2024, and the National Assembly enacted two laws intended to improve efficiency and foster private investment in the energy sector. In late 2024, the energy crisis eased, aided by improved weather and resumed electricity imports from Colombia, which had paused exports to address its own energy shortages.

U.S.-Ecuador Relations

During his decade in power (2007-2017), President Correa’s populist rhetoric and self-styled “anti-imperialist” policies contributed to friction in an otherwise historically

close U.S.-Ecuador relationship. Among other actions, Correa shuttered U.S. counterdrug operations at Manta Air Force Base in 2009 and expelled the U.S. ambassador in 2011. Closer bilateral relations resumed under Correa’s successors, including President Noboa.

In 2022, Congress enacted the United States-Ecuador Partnership Act of 2022, as Title LV, Subtitle B, of the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for FY2023 (P.L. 117-263). Authorized for five years, the act includes measures aimed at strengthening bilateral security cooperation and commercial ties to promote democracy and regional stability and counter malign foreign influence.

The Biden Administration expanded U.S. security cooperation with Ecuador. In 2023, the two countries launched the U.S.-Ecuador Defense Bilateral Working Group. In February 2024, President Noboa ratified two military cooperation agreements with the United States, establishing a framework for U.S. military personnel to operate in Ecuador and allowing for joint naval operations to combat drug trafficking and other illicit activities. Noboa has also advocated for reversing a constitutional ban on foreign military bases to enhance efforts to counter transnational crime. The U.S. Department of the Treasury also has imposed asset-blocking sanctions on *Los Choneros* under Executive Order 14059, which levies sanctions on foreign persons involved in the global illicit drug trade.

U.S. assistance to Ecuador aims to build capacity to counter TCOs, drug trafficking, and corruption and improve economic integration for marginalized groups, among other activities. The Biden Administration allocated an estimated \$49 million to Ecuador in FY2023. Congress did not designate an overall funding level for Ecuador in the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2024 (P.L. 118-47, Division F). The explanatory statement accompanying P.L. 118-47 specifies \$17.5 million in International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement aid for Ecuador. It also directs the Secretary of State to work with the Secretary of Defense to submit an integrated security assistance strategy for Ecuador within 90 days.

The U.S.-Ecuador goods trade totaled \$16.6 billion in 2023, making the United States Ecuador’s top trading partner. In 2020, the United States and Ecuador signed a protocol to strengthen the 1990 U.S.-Ecuador Trade and Investment Council (TIC)—the primary mechanism for discussing bilateral trade and investment issues. In the 118th Congress, some Members called for increased U.S. engagement with Ecuador to help counter China’s commercial influence in the country. A free trade agreement between Ecuador and China entered into force in May 2024.

The 119th Congress may assess U.S. efforts to improve Ecuador’s security conditions and strengthen economic ties as it considers options to authorize and fund foreign aid, security, and trade policy initiatives. Congress also may oversee the Trump Administration’s approach to bilateral relations through hearings and other oversight mechanisms.

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