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## Viewing cable 09QUITO225, PRESIDENT CORREA REJECTS CRITICISM FROM INTERAMERICAN PRESS

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Reference ID	Created	Classification	Origin
09QUITO225	2009-03-31 20:46	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Quito

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C O N F I D E N T I A L QUITO 000225

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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT CORREA REJECTS CRITICISM FROM INTERAMERICAN PRESS SOCIETY

REFTELS: A) 08 Quito 616; B) Quito 108; C) 08 Quito 499

Classified by Amb. Heather M. Hodges for reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: At its midyear meeting in Paraguay March 13-16, the Inter American Press Association (IAPA) criticized President Rafael Correa and his government's attitudes and actions toward the Ecuadorian media. On March 17, Correa responded to the IAPA's declarations by rejecting its legitimacy to question his actions, saying it has no "moral authority" and should "win an election" first before commenting on his government. Though Ecuadorian media commentators pointed out the fallacy of this response, civil society seemed to shrug off the President's latest dismissal of criticism against him as another example of one of his main governing tactics - to attack any criticism. End Summary

¶2. (SBU) The IAPA made a number of critical points about the current state of freedom of the press in Ecuador in the documents it published during its March 13-16 midyear meeting in Paraguay. Among them are these points: "The government continues to systematically threaten and insult the press and journalists. On his Saturday radio and television program, the president constantly depicts journalism as causing all the country's problems." The IAPA also stated that Correa, and other Latin American leaders, have taken up President Hugo Chavez's tactic of "actively fanning the flames of hatred (toward the press) through rhetoric," and that the GOE should abandon its threats to not place government advertising as retribution against media outlets that criticize it.

¶3. (C) The IAPA midyear report on Ecuador also said: "The government's general attitude toward the press was summarized by President Correa himself, who told the state-controlled Ecuadorian newspaper El Telegrafo on March 9, 'Very few governments have had an opposition as primitive and bloodthirsty as ours. The thing is that it doesn't express itself through political parties...but they use the press.' Meanwhile, the government has been consolidating a block of state-controlled media outlets. So far the government has three broadcast (UHF) television channels (out of six), one VHF channel and one cable station (out of dozens), in addition to a national daily newspaper and several radio stations." These actions are inconsistent with Correa's comments to former Ambassador Jewell in June 2008, when he complained about the lack of professionalism in the Ecuadorian media, but also recognized the need for a free press and that no one can be a neutral arbiter of what is "good or bad reporting." On the other hand his attacks against some media outlet owners, designed to undermine the credibility of their reporting, have included allegations that they are tax dodgers.

¶4. (SBU) In public remarks on March 17 and March 23 Correa responded

to the IAPA's criticisms. He said on March 17 in Guayaquil, "What moral authority does the IAPA have, an association of media outlet owners? Who gave them any authority or moral right? They should know their place. If they want to criticize the government or recommend government policies, they should win an election first. What legitimacy do they have?" On a visit to Paraguay on March 23 he added, "What often exists, and not just in Ecuador, is a corrupt, mediocre press that performs a political role. Where can I go to complain about the press' harassment of the Ecuadorian government? Just as the press can say many things, the president and the government have the right to respond, based on (the principle of) free speech." In Paraguay, he also alleged that the IAPA was founded by someone with links to the CIA.

¶5. (SBU) Editorialists, op-ed commentators and columnists in Ecuador quickly reacted to President Correa's counter-attack. One pointed out that according to Correa's logic, no civil society entities could ever protest government abuse because they never won an election. Another said that Correa does not think that a free press is essential in a democracy as a check on government power. A third pointed out that regional Latin American governments are using state advertising campaigns to discredit the independent media in their countries. More than one contrasted Paraguayan president Lujo's pledges, made at the IAPA meeting, not to restrict press freedom in his country with Correa's rejection of the IAPA's authority to comment on press freedom in Ecuador. Curiously, no civil society groups in Ecuador spoke out publicly to defend the media or point out that a free press is society's best defense against a government trying to monopolize power.

¶6. (SBU) There is more than a grain of truth to Correa's observation that the Ecuadorian media play a political role, in this case the role of the opposition. Many media outlet owners come from the elite business class that feels threatened by Correa's reform agenda, and defend their own economic interests via their outlets. In addition,

Ecuador's weak political parties have left a political vacuum, which has been filled in part by criticism of Correa by some of the large Ecuadorian TV stations and newspapers.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: Correa's categorical rejection of the IAPA's criticism, and its right even to comment on his government, follows a familiar pattern of lashing out at the media and other critics and brooking no dissent. It also is in line with his past criticism of the Ecuadorian media and betrays an intolerance for free speech and a free press. His statement that only those who have won an election have the legitimacy to comment on his government reveals an even deeper rejection of the give and take of modern politics than he has shown in the past.

HODGES