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Fernando Villavicencio and the Self-Destructive Collaboration Between China and Populist Regimes

R. Evan Ellis | August 15, 2023



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I knew Fernando Villavicencio Valencia, a [crusader against corruption](#) and candidate in Ecuador's August 20 presidential elections, who was assassinated on August 9 as he was leaving a [political rally in the auditorium of a high school](#) in the northern suburbs of Quito. Although for some the magnitude and complexity of Villavicencio's accusations could strain credibility, for me, he was a good man, driven by a passion to [call out endemic high-level corruption](#) in Ecuador, no matter who he offended or [how many enemies he made](#) in the process.

I first met him in Washington, D.C. in July 2013, where he was promoting his new book [Ecuador: Made in China](#). Fernando's book provided detailed data on how elites tied to the populist anti-U.S. regime of Rafael Correa in Ecuador had made millions of dollars in bribes and illicit earnings from shady deals with Chinese companies in the country's petroleum and energy sectors. My

thinking about the tragic results when well-resourced PRC-based companies, open to conferring “personalistic benefits,” engage in non-transparent business with corrupt politicized governments whose policies have eliminated more attractive options.

The Correa regime persecuted Fernando for what he exposed. In 2014, an Ecuadoran court sentenced him to 18 months in jail for insulting the president, forcing him into hiding in the Ecuadoran Amazon. In 2016, another incarceration order for publicly revealing Correa emails he had secretly obtained obliged him to flee to Peru until Correa departed from the presidency in 2017. Once Correa was out of office, evidence vindicating Fernando’s crusade poured forth for years. In 2020, Correa was sentenced to eight years in prison for corruption in a wide-ranging case involving his Vice President Jorge Glas and 19 of the former president’s other government and business associates.

With respect to public works projects, the Sinohydro-built Coca Coda Dam arguably came to stand as a pharaonic monument to shady deals that Fernando had decried, benefitting Correa and his cronies but a disastrous waste of money for the nation. China’s Coca Coda Sinclair, which ultimately led to the prosecution of Correa’s then Vice President and later successor Lenin Moreno for bribery, was so poorly designed and built that it was diagnosed by an independent audit with thousands of structural cracks, preventing it from generating at full capacity. Meanwhile,

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erosion leading the Coca River to reroute itself. They led to the rupture of the country's main oil export pipeline, which traversed the affected area.

For me, following his persecution by Correa, it was fitting that Villavicencio was elected to the National Assembly in May 2021 following Correa's departure and came to serve as the head of its anti-corruption commission. Ironically, the enemies that Fernando made in his anti-corruption crusade make it difficult to establish who killed him.

Villavicencio pushed "rooting out the mafias" that had come to dominate the Ecuadoran political system and economy at the center of his presidential campaign. In the immediate aftermath of his murder, six Colombians and a Venezuelan were arrested for suspected involvement, suggesting a link to the Colombia-based narco-groups who, in conjunction with the Mexican Sinaloa and Jalisco Nueva Generacion (CJNG) cartels, had exported their cocaine through Ecuador's Pacific ports. In the days prior to his murder, Fernando had received death threats from the Choneros, one of the local gangs working with Colombian and Mexican narcos which have terrorized Ecuador. Individuals supposedly representing the Chonero's rival, the Lobos, also claimed responsibility for Villavicencio's deaths—although others, also claiming to represent the Lobos, denied the claim.

Fernando's anti-corruption crusade had led him to accuse 21 candidates in Ecuador's February 2023 local elections of ties to narco-trafficking. Just days before his assassination, Villavicencio made public photos associating Raisa Vulgarin, legislative candidate for Rafael Correa's *Revolution Ciudadano* party, with Nicolas Petro, the son of Colombia's president, who is cooperating with Colombian authorities after being caught taking money from narco-traffickers. Fernando had also denounced the alleged involvement of radical leftist Colombian Senator Piedad Cordoba and criminally convicted Venezuelan Chavista Tarek William Saab in money laundering involving

In the days before his assassination, a poll put Fernando number two in the race with 13 percent of the vote, behind Luisa Gonzalez with 27 percent. He thus had a significant chance to make it to the second round, where Villavicencio's focus on Correa administration corruption and Gonzalez's ties to the former president would likely have given Villavicencio a real chance of winning, rallying Ecuadorans fed up with the scourge of narco money and narco violence in their country, similar to what has occurred in Guatemala with previously unknown anti-corruption candidate Bernardo Arevalo, now leading in the polls there.

Fernando thus had a plausible path to the Ecuadoran presidency, creating a risk of him working from a position of authority to dismantle webs of corruption involving not only Rafael Correa, his cronies, and the Chinese companies he built his presidential administration around but also the broader penetration of the Ecuadoran economy and political system by international criminal organizations.

Fernando Villavicencio's murder will likely significantly impact the outcome of Ecuador's election in a country already traumatized by an explosion of violence as local gangs, backed by foreign narco-trafficking organizations, have gone to war against each other and launched a campaign of terror against the Ecuadoran state. President Lasso's declaration of a 60-day state of emergency, and the suspension by many of the presidential contenders of their campaigns just 11 days before the election, has already affected its dynamics.

Ecuadoran Senator Luisa Gonzalez, closely tied to Rafael Correa, stands to benefit from Fernando's "absence" and his drumbeat of declarations of the corruption and malfeasance of the exiled populist Godfather, who he called "the fugitive" for his flight to Belgium to avoid incarceration in Ecuador, and whose legacy Gonzalez wishes to continue. Law and order candidate Jan Topic, who has built his campaign around social media calls for a heavy-

Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele, also stands to benefit from Ecuadoran outrage over Fernando's assassination and the focus it puts on violence in the country. Yet the implications of a victory by Topic are also troubling. The Topic family businesses [Telconet and Netlife](#) are tied to documented bribes paid by the Brazilian construction [firm Odebrecht through Chinese banks](#), possibly also linking Topic financially to Correa's Vice President George Glas.

The outcome of Ecuador's presidential election will be strategically significant for the region. The country is one of only three remaining in South America with center-right governments disposed to collaborate with the United States on major strategic issues. The return to power of Correa's "Citizen Revolution" movement, or candidates financially or ideologically tied to him, would complement the consolidation of power by anti-U.S. authoritarian regimes in Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Cuba. It would also turn to more radical, China-friendly policies by regimes in [Brazil](#), [Honduras](#), [El Salvador](#), and others to profoundly erode U.S. influence in the region to which we are intimately connected by bonds of geography, commerce, and family.

As I have watched the unfolding tragedy of Latin America these past years, the bad news has seldom been so personal as Fernando's assassination. He was a colleague who profoundly shaped my thinking on the corruption and disastrous results when populist regimes such as Rafael Correa embrace business with China in non-transparent, politicized deals which are "win-win" only for the populist elites who sign the deals and their Chinese counterparts. For me, that tragedy would turn to farce if Fernando's murder paved the way for the return to influence of the very malevolent figures he spent his career and repeatedly risked his liberty and life seeking to expose.

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institution or the U.S. government. The author would like to thank Santiago Najera, among others, for their input to this work.

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