

Ecuadoreans see humor in U.S. election dilemma

By Tom Tracy
Catholic News Service

QUITO, Ecuador — In a South American country that has had two of its last two presidents removed from office amid charges of corruption, Ecuadoreans are laughing at the U.S. presidential election dilemma.

"It is a case of general manager [George W. Bush] and his private company in the U.S.," said Father Moncayo, a priest in Quito, after 20 years of democratic rule. "The people of South America had seen the U.S. political system was corrupt."

"Now you have a strange problem," said Carlos Carrasco, who was celebrating his birthday in Quito amid court challenges and political challenges in Florida.

"Somebody from Peru sent me a joke by e-mail saying they need a special agent from South America to come inspect the vote," Carrasco said.

"Being serious, the businessman added that the election standoff will be a lesson for the United States.

"Maybe you must change the (voting) procedures; you had many mistakes. The hand count is a joke; you must use computers," he said.

Father Wilson Moncayo Jalil, who works in the Ecuadorean bishops' social affairs department, said his first impression was the irony that the most powerful country in the world, with all the technological means at its disposal, cannot choose its president.

"But in looking further into it, there is

no perfect system," Father Moncayo said from his office in Quito. "This could be a useful experience for the U.S. as to how its elections are held, especially regarding respecting the popular will. But thank God corruption on a large scale has not really entered into it. Thank God people are not buying electoral votes."

If the same situation occurred in Ecuador, he added, you would expect to see politicians trying to buy the electoral votes.

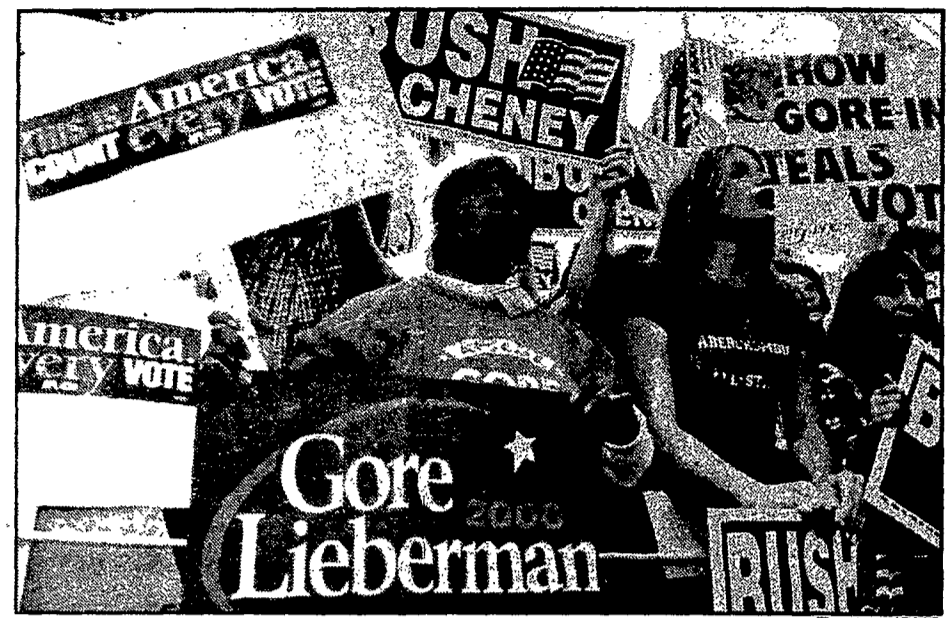
Regardless of who is elected president, Father Moncayo said, he expects U.S. relations with Latin America to remain status quo, with America placing its greatest emphasis and resources on NATO, Europe and Asia.

Cristina Mogollon, 30, a lawyer who studied for one year in California, said the U.S. election standoff underscores the point that Ecuadoreans think every vote should count and that the Electoral College is a strange mechanism for choosing a president.

"How can you have this mistake in the United States where somebody wins and they have to recount it and all those problems now three weeks later — and with all your technical advances?" Mogollon asked. "I could understand that in any other country, but not the U.S."

The situation has been an opportunity — like the Monica Lewinsky affair — for a little levity at the expense of the United States, she added.

"We were bowling last week and we were even in the score throughout the game and we said, 'We are worse than Bush and Gore,'" she said.



Reuters/CNS

Partisan protest

Supporters for both presidential candidates demonstrate outside the Florida capitol in Tallahassee Nov. 26 prior to the 5 p.m. recount deadline. State officials later certified Florida's votes for president, naming Tex. Gov. George W. Bush, the Republican candidate, the winner there.

President Clinton visits Vietnam

By Benedicta Cipolla
Catholic News Service

HANOI, Vietnam — In the wake of U.S. President Bill Clinton's visit to Vietnam, a Vietnamese archbishop said human rights must not be sidelined amid economic reform and greater openness to the West.

"Attention needs to be paid not only to rebuilding the economy," Archbishop Jean-Baptiste Pham Minh Man of Ho Chi Minh City told Catholic News Service in a Nov. 21 written statement.

"Human rights," he said on the heels of Clinton's Nov. 16-19 trip, "make up the foundation on which the dignity and happiness of every human being and people are built."

The first U.S. president to visit a united Vietnam, Clinton met with the Vietnamese president, prime minister and Communist Party chief in Hanoi, promising to "open a new chapter" in relations between the two former foes.

Clinton, who opposed the Vietnam War as a young man and avoided the draft, announced the establishment of U.S.-Vietnamese diplomatic relations in 1995.

Urging the country to push forward with more economic and political reforms, Clinton told a group of Vietnam National University students in a nationally televised address to "remember our history but not to

perpetuate it."

He also traveled to the commercial hub of Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, where he praised a recent U.S.-Vietnamese trade agreement as helping to "develop a more open, sophisticated free market."

In his statement, Archbishop Man called for legislation that encourages all religions to contribute to the life of the country, especially in a spiritual sense.

"If human development is arrested at the physical, instinctual and intellectual level," he said, "without developing the heart, the spirit and dignity, it will be, in the long run, catastrophic for individuals, the nation and the human race."

According to Vatican statistics, about 6.4 percent of Vietnam's 78 million people are Catholic.

Though talks have been under way for several years, the Vatican and Vietnam have not established diplomatic relations. One major obstacle still to be surmounted is the Vietnamese government's insistence on approval of episcopal appointments.

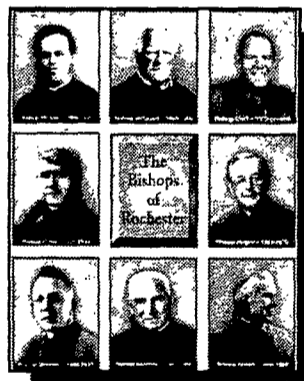
Despite the low-key coverage accorded the trip in local newspapers, crowds turned out by the thousands in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to cheer on the president, who was accompanied by his wife, Sen.-elect Hillary Rodham Clinton, and their daughter, Chelsea.

Many ordinary Vietnamese said they were thrilled by the visit — not least because of the economic power the United States wields.

"I'm very happy. American is a rich country," said Tranh Tinh Hui Huong, 22, who is studied hairdressing and English.

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