



# Señora Minister

## Women on the rise in Ecuador's government

**J**UST LAST YEAR, THERE WERE only two women in the Cabinet of Ecuador's president—María Isabel Salvador as tourism minister, and Anita Albán as minister of environment. And that was hardly groundbreaking: "Ministries of tourism and environment have traditionally been under the direction of women, seen as the last wheels on the train," says Salvador.

Fast-forward to 2007, when newly elected president Rafael Correa promised gender equity in his Cabinet. Campaigning, he had pledged a "citizen's revolution," particularly for women, children and indigenous peoples. While presidents and Cabinets tend to get replaced frequently in this South American nation, one constant is male dominance. In the three years prior to Correa's election, the percentage of women Cabinet ministers ranged from 13 to 26 percent.

Correa named an unprecedented seven women to his initial 17-member Cabinet (he created an additional ministry in July, headed by a man). Hardly equity, but a significant change. He also asked three ministers to remain from the previous administration—including Salvador and Albán.

"Today there is recognition of the importance of these ministries [tourism and environment]," says Salvador. "And ratification of the work of two women ministers is a

very important sign that indicates not everything was bad under the previous administration. ... Naming seven women ministers sends a signal to society at large."

One of Correa's new appointments made international news: Guadalupe Larriva was the first woman in Ecuador's history to head the Ministry of Defense. Her death in a helicopter crash sparked rumors of foul play, but an investigating commission found no credence to such theories. Correa then appointed Lorena Escudero, but as *Ms.* goes to press, she has resigned to serve in another, as-yet-unannounced government position. Women were also named ministers of foreign relations, social welfare, urban development and housing, and public health.

Ecuador places 49th in United Nations gender-empowerment rankings, comparing favorably with its Andean neighbors, according to Lucia Salamea-Palacios of the regional office of the United Nations Development Fund for Women. The nation's quota law, passed in 2000, has been crucial in advancing women politically, establishing a percentage requirement for women candidates that starts at 30 percent and will increase gradually to 50 percent.

But the quota law does not apply to presidential elections, and in 2006 Cynthia Viteri was alone among 13 candidates, promising to govern with

▲ Foreign Minister Fernanda Espinoza (right) and former Defense Minister Lorena Escudero

"a woman's hand," placing "solidarity and people's rights before any economic, political or lobby-group interest." Viteri describes her political career as "breaking barriers and myths" based on gender and appearance (she is beautiful and blond). She lauds Correa's seven women ministers.

Salamea-Palacios sees today's challenge as ensuring that gender-focused legislation becomes a significant recourse for Ecuador's women. Too few mechanisms for implementation, plus corruption in the legal system, put the laws at risk of being *letra muerta*—dead letters.

Recently, Rocío Rosero stepped down as executive director of Ecuador's National Council of Women to be a candidate for the assembly. She shares Salamea-Palacios' concern over *letra muerta* and vows to fight for a gender-conscious constitution and other legislation (Correa has called for a constituent assembly this fall, where the constitution will be rewritten and government institutions re-evaluated). Perhaps Rosero describes Ecuador's situation best: "A moment of change, rupture, a historic moment...women's concerns have been put forth."

—AMY E. ROBERTSON

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