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Dynamics and challenges of the institutional crisis in Ecuador

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Abstract

In recent decades, Ecuador has faced periods of significant institutional crisis characterized by political instability, conflicts among branches of government, and a decline in public trust in institutions. This situation has sparked extensive academic interest in understanding the underlying causes, dynamics, and effects of such crises on democracy and governance in the country. The objective of this study is to analyze the dynamics and challenges of the institutional crisis in Ecuador through a qualitative methodology based on the documentary analysis of bibliographic sources. The findings reveal that the institutional crisis in Ecuador is examined from a broad perspective that integrates theories on institutional crises, democracy, governance, and political crisis analysis. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of understanding institutional destabilization and dysfunction by analyzing the interaction between these elements, emphasizing the impact of institutional uncertainty and the complex distribution of power on governance effectiveness and public policy implementation. The study concludes with the critical need to promote transparency, accountability, and citizen participation as fundamental strategies to overcome the institutional crisis in Ecuador.

Keywords: Institutional crisis; democracy; governance; institutional uncertainty; citizen participation.

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Dinámicas y desafíos de la crisis institucional en Ecuador

Resumen

En las últimas décadas, Ecuador ha enfrentado períodos de significativa crisis institucional, caracterizados por inestabilidad política, conflictos entre las ramas del gobierno y una disminución de la confianza pública en las instituciones. Esta situación ha generado un amplio interés académico para comprender las causas subyacentes, las dinámicas y los efectos de estas crisis sobre la democracia y la gobernanza en el país. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar las dinámicas y desafíos de la crisis institucional en Ecuador mediante una metodología cualitativa basada en el análisis documental de fuentes bibliográficas. Los hallazgos revelan que la crisis institucional en Ecuador se examina desde una perspectiva amplia que integra teorías sobre crisis institucionales, democracia, gobernanza y análisis de crisis políticas. Además, el estudio resalta la importancia de comprender la desestabilización y disfunción institucional mediante el análisis de la interacción entre estos elementos, enfatizando el impacto de la incertidumbre institucional y la compleja distribución del poder en la efectividad de la gobernanza y la implementación de políticas públicas. El estudio concluye con la necesidad crítica de promover la transparencia, la rendición de cuentas y la participación ciudadana como estrategias fundamentales para superar la crisis institucional en Ecuador.

Palabras clave: Crisis institucional; democracia; gobernanza; incertidumbre institucional; participación ciudadana.

Introduction

The institutional crisis in Ecuador emerges as a multifaceted and complex issue, marked by political destabilization, legal disputes, and evident administrative shortcomings. This phenomenon not only highlights deficiencies in governmental structures but also reveals deep-rooted social, economic, and cultural tensions within Ecuadorian society. In this context, various authors have addressed the issue of political instability in the Latin American region (Rodríguez & Arriagada, 2004; Oregioni, 2017; Huárac, Díaz & Cuba, 2022). However, there remains a notable gap in research specifically addressing the dynamics characterizing the institutional crisis in Ecuador.

According to Pérez-Liñán (2014), while political crises in Latin America have been extensively documented, there is insufficient understanding of the interplay between various conflicts and destabilization in the Ecuadorian context. Consequently, the urgency to address this complexity becomes evident, as the lack of

a comprehensive understanding hampers the development of effective strategies for conflict resolution and institutional reconstruction (Brinkerhoff, 2005).

In this regard, the instability of institutions in Ecuador has been exacerbated by the exclusion of key actors during the drafting of the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador (De la Torre & Ortiz, 2016). Additionally, institutional ambiguity and lack of cohesion, combined with electoral volatility and the fragility of the party system, have intensified the crisis (Mejía & Polga-Hecimovich, 2011). These factors have fostered a continuous cycle of paralysis and constant changes within governmental structures, contributing to a negative feedback loop that sustains and deepens the instability (Solimano, 2005).

Moreover, the interaction between political exclusion, institutional discrepancies, and electoral instability has significantly undermined the effectiveness of national institutions, triggering a series of disruptive events (Resina, 2023). Despite the existing literature on political and institutional

instability in Latin America, notable gaps remain in understanding the specific institutional crisis in Ecuador during the analyzed period. The relevance of this study lies in its contribution to a comprehensive perspective of this crisis, highlighting key elements that have influenced its evolution and proposing an analytical framework for future research.

The hypotheses formulated in this research consider that the exclusion of relevant actors during the constitutional drafting process, institutional uncertainty, and political instability have influenced the current institutional crisis. Therefore, to address these issues, the objective of this study is to analyze the dynamics and challenges of the institutional crisis in Ecuador.

1. Methodology

This research is grounded in a qualitative methodology, focusing on the interpretation and comprehensive documentary analysis of a wide range of bibliographic sources. This methodological approach prioritizes the collection and analysis of qualitative data, encompassing detailed descriptions of characteristic elements, interactions among actors, significant contexts, behavioral

patterns, and their concrete manifestations.

According to Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza (2018), the application of this approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of the intrinsic dynamics and particularities that define the institutional crisis in Ecuador. By emphasizing qualitative analysis, the research aims to unravel the complexities and nuances characterizing the current situation, transcending mere data accumulation to achieve a holistic and contextualized interpretation of the facts.

This methodological framework involves a systematic and rigorous process of selection, review, and synthesis of information gathered from the chosen sources. Consequently, the qualitative methodology adopted in this study allowed not only the identification of patterns and trends but also the interpretation of the meanings and implications of these phenomena within Ecuador's specific context.

To ensure the relevance and specificity of the analyzed information, clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established for selecting bibliographic sources (see Table 1). These criteria ensure that the research is based on relevant, current, and academically robust sources, enabling a comprehensive and objective analysis of the institutional crisis in Ecuador.

Table 1
Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Description	Type
Thematic Relevance	Documents that directly address the institutional crisis in Ecuador and related factors.	
Recency and Relevance	Sources published within the last twenty years to capture the recent evolution of the situation in Ecuador.	
Academic Credibility	Works published in peer-reviewed scientific journals, books by recognized academics, and reports from reputable institutions.	Inclusion
Diversity of Perspectives	Sources representing a variety of viewpoints to ensure a balanced analysis.	
Irrelevant Theme	Documents that do not directly or significantly address the institutional crisis or related factors.	
Outdated Information	Sources published more than twenty years ago, except those with historical value for the topic.	
Lack of Academic Rigor	Sources without academic review, such as opinion articles or non-specialized blogs.	Exclusion
Unilateral Perspective	Sources representing a single perspective or affiliated with partisan interests.	

Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

2. Results and discussion

The study of the dynamics and challenges of the institutional crisis in Ecuador encompasses various theories and perspectives. In this regard, the research is structured around three main axes: theories of institutional crisis, the analysis of democracy and governance in contexts of instability, and the study of political crises.

2.1. Theories of institutional crisis

The concept of institutional crisis encompasses periods of significant destabilization and dysfunction within the structures and processes that comprise a nation's political and administrative system. Boyer (2013) defines institutional crisis as a state characterized by acute conflicts among different branches of government, a marked inability of institutions to address the social and economic demands of the population, or a pronounced loss of legitimacy and public trust in these entities.

The specialized literature in political science and sociology provides various perspectives for understanding the causes and consequences of institutional crises. Duit & Galaz (2008); and Ansell, Boin & Keller (2010), They have pointed out how the breakdown of mechanisms of political representation and the inefficacy of governmental structures to adequately respond to societal needs can lead to a state of crisis. Consequently, the importance of structural factors, such as the organization of the state and the distribution of political power, is emphasized in precipitating crisis situations (Carment, 2003).

Furthermore, Törnberg (2021) has explored the relevance of political transitions in generating institutional crises, arguing that moments of change in political regimes are particularly prone to destabilization due to the uncertainty and power vacuums that may arise. In the Ecuadorian context, this perspective is especially pertinent given the series of political transitions experienced by

the country and their impact on institutional stability (Mejía, 2009; Herrera, 2018).

Additionally, the concept of legitimacy crisis proposed by Nordin (2014) provides a valuable framework for understanding the sociopolitical dimensions of institutional crises. According to Majone (1999), a legitimacy crisis occurs when there is a significant decline in the acceptance and justification of norms and policies established by the state. This theory is applicable to the analysis of Ecuador's crisis, as the loss of trust and the erosion of institutional legitimacy have been central factors in deepening the institutional crisis in the country.

Finally, it is essential to consider theories related to the role of social movements and civil society in institutional crises. Della Porta & Kriesi (1999) examined how the mobilization of social actors and the formation of coalitions can challenge the authority of established institutions and provoke significant changes in the political structure. In Ecuador's case, the role of indigenous movements and other social groups has been fundamental in shaping political dynamics and generating pressures that have contributed to the institutional crisis (Silva, 2015).

2.2. Democracy and governance in contexts of instability

The interplay between democracy and governance plays a critical role in understanding and analyzing institutional crises. Olsen (2013) suggests that democratic governance is characterized by the capacity of the political system to establish clear and enduring norms, ensure compliance, and effectively address citizens' needs and demands. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Ecuadorian context, where the transition to democracy and the resulting tensions between different state powers, as well as between the government and society, reflect the obstacles to democratic consolidation and effective governance (Bowen, 2015).

Within this framework, various

theories have been developed to explain the relationship between democratic stability and governance. Moreover, the legitimacy of democratic institutions and the effectiveness of governance are fundamental to political stability and economic development (Feng, 1997; Huang, Chang & Chu, 2008; Heper, Kazancigil & Rockman, 2019). This theory resonates in the case of Ecuador, where repeated crises of legitimacy and governance have undermined efforts toward democratic consolidation (Boelens, Hoogesteger & Baud, 2015; Laebens & Lührmann, 2021).

Additionally, Benz & Papadopoulos (2006) emphasize the importance of institutionalizing democracy as a means of ensuring governance. Without strong and credible institutions, democratic systems are vulnerable to instability and inefficiency. In Ecuador, institutional weakness has been a constant factor contributing to the frequency and severity of institutional crises, underscoring the need to strengthen democratic structures to improve governance (Solimano, 2005).

The conceptualization of governance in terms of state capacity is also relevant. La Porta et al. (1999) argue that the quality of governance is measured by the state's ability to implement policies effectively and without corruption. In Ecuador, governmental effectiveness has been undermined by corruption and inefficiency, which erode trust in institutions and, consequently, democratic stability (Pontón, 2007).

The relationship between democracy and governance is also examined through the lens of inclusion and citizen participation. According to Masabanda & Mayorga (2023), a full democracy requires not only free and fair elections but also ample opportunities for citizens to engage in political debate and decision-making. Ecuador's experience suggests that the exclusion of significant sectors of the population from political processes has generated tensions and weakened social cohesion, which, in turn, affects democratic governance (Ortega & Pino, 2021).

Finally, governance in contexts of instability requires effective mechanisms

for accountability and corruption control. Biermann & Gupta (2011) identify transparency and accountability as essential components for building stable and legitimate political systems. In Ecuador, the lack of transparency and the challenges in implementing accountability mechanisms have been key factors in perpetuating the institutional crisis (Finol, Galdames & González, 2021).

2.3. Approaches to political crises

Adopting a political crisis approach is imperative for the comprehensive analysis of institutional crises, particularly in complex contexts such as Ecuador. Marks & McAdam (1996) emphasize that political crises transcend political processes, being significantly influenced by economic factors, social movements, cultural identities, and the historical trajectory of the country in question. This analytical framework enables the understanding of Ecuador's crisis not as an isolated incident but as the culmination of diverse interactions and tensions across multiple dimensions.

From a political perspective, the stability of institutions and the legitimacy of democratic processes represent crucial axes. According to Acemoğlu & Robinson (2016), the consolidation of inclusive institutions and the balance of power play fundamental roles in preventing political crises. This theory applies to the Ecuadorian context, where the concentration of power and institutional weakness have exacerbated vulnerability to political instability.

In the economic dimension, institutional crises are often interrelated with issues of economic inequality, instability, and unsustainable development policies. In this regard, Østby (2008) argues that the lack of economic equity and opportunities can trigger social discontent and challenges to state authority. This aspect is particularly relevant for Ecuador, given the fluctuating economic conditions and the widespread perception of inequality and economic exclusion (Breilh &

Tillería, 2009).

Social movements and cultural identities constitute another critical dimension in the analysis of crises. As Klandermans (2014) points out, the mobilization of groups based on collective identities and social discontent can result in significant pressures on the political system. In Ecuador, the active participation of indigenous movements and other social collectives has been a determining factor in shaping the political sphere and in the emergence of specific demands that challenge the institutional status quo (Jima-González & Paradela-López, 2019).

Furthermore, the historical dimension provides an essential framework for understanding the roots and evolution of political crises. A country's history sheds light on existing power structures, entrenched political practices, and unresolved historical conflicts. Crawford & Lijphart (1995) highlight the importance of historical legacies in shaping nations' political and economic trajectories. Ecuador's history of political transitions, internal conflicts, and reforms contributes to a deeper understanding of the current dynamics of its crisis.

2.4. Specificities of the institutional crisis in Ecuador

The institutional crisis in Ecuador is distinguished by singular characteristics that warrant a detailed and contextualized analysis. The nation's political evolution, marked by democratic alternations, coups d'état, and severe economic fluctuations, provides an ideal framework for exploring the institutional instability that has persisted. Baxter (2019) offers detailed analyses of how political polarization, the structural fragility of political parties, and the significant influence of social movements have shaped Ecuador's political landscape, revealing a complex scenario of constant tensions and reconfigurations.

Political polarization in Ecuador has intensified due to ideological divergences and

conflicts between visions of development and democracy (Handlin, 2014). This polarization has not only created a confrontational environment among political actors but has also contributed to the erosion of public trust in institutions an essential factor identified by Kilinç (2014) as a catalyst for political and social destabilization.

Additionally, the structural weakness of political parties in Ecuador, characterized by low institutionalization and a high tendency toward personalism, has hindered the development of a robust and stable democracy. According to Domingo (2001), this partisan fragility limits the ability of parties to act as effective mediators between the state and society, weakening political representation and compromising governance.

Social movements in Ecuador, particularly indigenous groups, have played a prominent role in national politics. Andrews & Caren (2010) argue that these movements have significantly influenced political agendas and challenged the status quo, driving social and political change. However, institutional responses to these demands have often been inadequate or confrontational, exacerbating tensions and contributing to institutional instability.

The interaction among these factors is further aggravated by the historical legacy of political and economic instability in Ecuador, which has left a deep imprint on the country's institutional structure and political culture (Sánchez & Granados, 2023). This historical legacy shapes citizens' perceptions and expectations of institutions and democracy, playing a critical role in the current institutional crisis.

2.5. Uncertainty and incongruence in Ecuadorian institutions

Institutional uncertainty in Ecuador is characterized by the difficulty in anticipating governmental decisions and actions, which adversely affects both public trust and foreign investment attraction. According to

Kownatzki et al. (2012), this phenomenon creates an environment of unpredictability that undermines the effectiveness of strategic planning and long-term decision-making. Institutional coherence and predictability emerge as crucial elements for fostering a favorable environment for economic and social development.

On the other hand, institutional incongruence understood as the discrepancy between the objectives and actions of institutions poses a significant challenge in the Ecuadorian context. Stone (1993) argues that this phenomenon arises from the lack of synergy among different governmental entities, resource insufficiencies, and political influences that divert public policies from their original purposes. The direct consequence of this incongruence is a reduction in the efficiency of implemented policies and a deterioration of public perception regarding governmental management.

Overcoming these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes promoting transparency, accountability, and coherence in public administration. Implementing participatory governance practices and effective systems for monitoring and evaluating public policies are key strategies to mitigate institutional uncertainty and incongruence (Head & Alford, 2015). These measures would not only foster greater citizen involvement in decision-making processes but also facilitate the timely identification and correction of deviations in policy implementation.

2.6. Uncertain distribution of power in Ecuador

The distribution of power in Ecuador presents a complex and fluctuating landscape marked by structural challenges that affect the stability and functionality of its political and social systems. This scenario is characterized by ambiguity in the mechanisms for allocating authority and responsibility among different levels of government and state entities, which directly impacts the effectiveness of

governance and the implementation of public policies.

Uncertainty in the distribution of power is evident in the difficulty of clearly defining the competencies and functions of the various state bodies, often resulting in overlapping roles and jurisdictional conflicts. This phenomenon can be attributed to the absence of precise delineation in legislation or the variable interpretation of such legislation by the institutions involved. As Tilly (2004) points out, ambiguity in the distribution of power not only complicates coordination and cooperation among different governmental entities but also undermines public trust in state institutions.

Moreover, the fluctuating dynamics of power in Ecuador reflect a political context in which alliances and confrontations among various actors and sectors play a decisive role in shaping the governmental landscape. According to Stiglitz (2002), these constant shifts in power relations hinder the achievement of lasting consensus and the formulation of a long-term vision for the country, thereby affecting political stability and sustainable development.

To address these challenges, it is essential to advance toward greater clarity and transparency in defining the roles and competencies of the various governmental bodies and entities. This would involve reviewing and, if necessary, reforming the legal framework governing the distribution of power in Ecuador, with the aim of establishing clearer and more efficient mechanisms for assigning responsibilities and resolving jurisdictional conflicts. As Bergh (2004) suggests, strengthening decentralization processes and promoting greater citizen participation in decision-making could significantly contribute to improving governance and strengthening democracy in the country.

Conclusions

This study has explored the dynamics and challenges characterizing Ecuador's

institutional crisis through a multidimensional theoretical perspective. This approach enabled the integration of analyses on democracy and governance, theories of institutional crisis, approaches to political crises, and the specificities of the Ecuadorian context, particularly regarding institutional uncertainty and incongruence, as well as the distribution of power.

The research has uncovered the inherent complexity of the institutional crisis in Ecuador, identifying its roots in both the political and administrative structures and the interactions among various social and political actors. It was revealed that factors such as ideological polarization, the structural fragility of political parties, active participation of social movements, and shifting power dynamics significantly contribute to the exacerbation of institutional instability. Furthermore, the study emphasized the importance of analyzing political transitions, legitimacy crises, and social mobilization as central axes for understanding this crisis in the Ecuadorian context.

The study also highlights how the interplay between democracy and governance serves as a cornerstone in analyzing the crisis, underscoring the urgent need to strengthen democratic institutions and ensure effective governance. These elements are fundamental for achieving political stability and fostering sustainable development. The findings indicate that institutional instability, uncertainty, and incongruence undermine public trust and governmental effectiveness, hindering progress toward a robust and stable democratic regime.

To address these challenges, a multifaceted approach is proposed to promote transparency, accountability, and coherence in public administration. Adopting participatory governance practices, along with establishing effective systems for monitoring and evaluating public policies, emerges as fundamental strategies to counter institutional uncertainty and incongruence. Additionally, advancing toward a clearer and more transparent definition of the roles and competencies of governmental entities, through a review and,

if necessary, reform of the legal framework governing power distribution in the country, is recommended. This proposal aims not only to mitigate the identified issues but also to lay the foundation for a stronger democracy and sustainable development in Ecuador.

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