

Ecuador's April 2024 Plebiscite on Security Measures: Implications for Congress

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On April 21, 2024, Ecuador held a [plebiscite](#) on 11 proposed reforms that seek to address the country's ongoing security crisis. According to preliminary [results](#) released by Ecuador's electoral body, voters voted in favor of 9 of the 11 questions, approving all of the reforms aimed at increasing the government's ability to fight organized crime and corruption. Some measures require legislative action to take effect, but several reforms—including those that formalize the armed forces' role in public security functions and enable the [extradition](#) of Ecuadorian citizens—are set to take effect as soon as the official results are published. Voters rejected two economic proposals related to recognizing international arbitration and permitting hourly work contracts. Many [analysts](#) interpret the plebiscite's results as a political victory for President Daniel Noboa, who took office for a 17-month term in November 2023 following a snap election, although voter [turnout](#) was lower than in past electoral processes.

Congress has acted to strengthen security cooperation and broader bilateral ties with Ecuador, including through the United States-Ecuador Partnership Act of 2022 (P.L. 117-263, Division E, Subtitle B). Some Members of Congress also have expressed [concern](#) about the deteriorating security climate in Ecuador and offered [statements](#) of support to the Ecuadorian government. As Congress continues to monitor the U.S.-Ecuador partnership, it may assess the plebiscite results and their implications for bilateral security cooperation.

Ecuador's Security Situation

Since 2020, Ecuador has experienced a [surge](#) in organized-crime-related violence as local gangs affiliated with Mexican, Colombian, and Balkan transnational criminal [organizations](#) have competed for control of drug trafficking routes to ship cocaine to markets outside South America. The homicide rate in Ecuador [reportedly](#) increased by over 500% from 2019 to 2023, reaching 44.5 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, amid a historic increase in cocaine [seizures](#). Some political figures and government officials have been assassinated, including a 2023 presidential [candidate](#), an anti-crime [prosecutor](#), and local [politicians](#).

In January 2024, President Noboa [declared](#) a state of emergency and “internal armed conflict,” limiting some constitutional rights, designating 22 criminal groups as terrorist organizations, and enabling the armed forces to carry out law enforcement operations, among other actions. The state of emergency expired on April 8, ending some extraordinary [measures](#), but a court order determined the armed forces

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may continue to perform public security functions [indefinitely](#). During the state of emergency, security forces conducted over 272,000 [operations](#), resulting in over 18,700 [arrests](#). Some analysts [assess](#) these efforts have had mixed results, as homicide rates have declined while other crimes, such as kidnapping and extortion, have increased; some local human rights groups have [accused](#) security personnel of using excessive force.

Through the plebiscite, the Noboa administration received the Ecuadorian electorate's support for several policy changes intended to increase the government's ability to counter organized crime. Among other changes, the nine approved constitutional and legal reforms will formalize the armed forces' role in public security functions; enable the extradition of Ecuadorian citizens; increase sentencing for crimes including terrorism and drug-trafficking; and [designate](#) special judges to oversee due process measures, such as habeas corpus petitions, which the Ecuadorian [government asserts](#) some judges have used improperly to benefit criminals.

Implications for U.S. Policy and Congress

The results of the plebiscite could have several implications for U.S. policy goals and bilateral relations. For example, the approved measure to allow the extradition of Ecuadorian nationals wanted for crimes in other countries could enhance U.S.-Ecuadorian law enforcement cooperation. The United States and Ecuador agreed to bilateral extradition treaties in 1872 and 1939, but Ecuador's constitution had [prohibited](#) the extradition of its nationals. Enabling extradition could increase the likelihood that criminals wanted in the United States are brought to justice, given that Ecuador's security forces have struggled to control the country's prisons, resulting in several high-profile prisoner [escapes](#). Congress could monitor how the Biden Administration approaches extradition activities with Ecuador and assess whether the U.S.-Ecuador extradition treaty framework should be updated.

Other approved measures could lead U.S. agencies to reexamine how they engage with their Ecuadorian counterparts. For example, one approved reform formalizes the Ecuadorian armed forces' role in supporting the national police to counter organized crime, terrorism, and other crimes. In some cases, similar policy changes elsewhere in Latin America have been followed by alleged human rights [abuses](#). Congress could monitor implementation of the reform and consider policy options to enhance the capacity of Ecuador's security forces while safeguarding human rights.

Congress could evaluate how the plebiscite results might affect the objectives of the [U.S.-Ecuador Partnership Act](#). Among other actions, the act directed the Secretary of State, in coordination with the Secretary of the Treasury, to develop and implement a strategy and related programs "to increase the capacity of Ecuador's justice system and law enforcement authorities to combat illicit economies, corruption, transnational criminal organizations, and the harmful influence of malign foreign and domestic actors." The act directed the agencies to report to selected congressional committees on implementation progress "not later than 2 years and 4 years after submitting" the strategy.

Congress also could take into account the results of the plebiscite and the broader security situation in Ecuador when making funding decisions. Consecutive U.S. presidential Administrations have sought to increase U.S. support to strengthen Ecuador's security forces and counter organized crime in the country. According to a [joint statement](#) following the U.S.-Ecuador High-Level Dialogue in March 2024, the United States has provided Ecuador with over \$42 million in "capacity building, training, and equipment" since 2019 and plans to provide an additional \$10 million in "counternarcotics, civilian security, and rule of law programming, subject to completion of congressional notification procedures." In addition to evaluating potential executive branch obligations, Congress may assess the Biden Administration's FY2025 budget [request](#) for Ecuador, which would provide \$49.2 million in bilateral assistance, including \$15 million of International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement funding to build Ecuador's capacity

to fight transnational organized crime. Some [experts](#) have called for a more robust U.S. assistance plan for Ecuador.

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