

News

Ecuador

Ecuador's Election Sees President Accused of Drug Trade Ties

by Gavin Voss

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Drug trafficking accusations levied against a banana company owned by the family of Ecuador President Daniel Noboa may be politicized but raise important questions about the role of powerful business interests in the country's wider security crisis.

In a March 23 [debate](#) held for candidates in forthcoming presidential elections, challenger Luisa González and incumbent President Daniel Noboa exchanged accusations of corruption and ties to organized crime.

After Noboa accused González of links to money laundering, González repeatedly questioned her rival about Noboa Trading, a banana exportation company owned by the president's family.

"They export drugs in banana boxes belonging to Mr. Daniel Noboa's company to Croatia and Italy," González said of Noboa Trading.

Noboa responded by tacitly admitting that there have been cases of drug trafficking through the company's shipments but denying any wrongdoing.

“If the company itself cooperates and alerts the police... it means that it is a cooperator, which is not what you are alleging,” he said.

González, an ally of controversial former President Rafael Correa, based her claims on information later published in a March 26 [investigation](#) by Colombian outlet Revista Raya. The investigation highlighted multiple cocaine seizures totaling 700 kilograms between 2020 and 2022. Police reports cited in the publication show that authorities seized these loads at Guayaquil’s Naportec port terminal in containers holding banana shipments belonging to Noboa Trading.

According to the investigation, on three separate occasions, José Luis Rivera Baquerizo, a contractor for Noboa Trading in charge of overseeing anti-narcotics checks on the shipments, was arrested in connection with the seizures. Each time, however, he was later freed.

***SEE ALSO:** [Ecuador: A Cocaine Superhighway to the US and Europe](#)*

Andrés Durán, the journalist who compiled the investigation and who formerly [served](#) as an advisor and National Assembly candidate for González and Correa’s political bloc, said he was forced to leave the country because of threats he received after publishing.

The investigation’s findings have sparked a wave of misinformation in the lead up to the election. In one example, Correa, who himself has faced [accusations](#) of links to drug trafficking, [shared](#) an article on X that included a fake US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) report. The report appeared to provide further details on seizures in Noboa Trading’s shipments, but a DEA official confirmed to InSight Crime that the report “is not a legitimate DEA intelligence report” and the article has since been deleted.

In a March 25 [statement](#), Ecuador’s Banana Marketing and Export Association (Asociación de Comercialización y Exportación de Banano – ACORBANEC), a trade association representing companies that account for nearly half of Ecuador’s banana exports, rejected statements by “certain political actors,” calling them “malicious,” while adding that they “unfairly affect the image of Ecuador’s banana producing and exporting sector.”

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Though traffickers have used Noboa’s family company to ship cocaine, claims by political opponents linking the president directly to drug trafficking are likely overblown. Still, the findings do expose major

contradictions between the government's security strategy and the economic interests of Ecuador's business sector, including Noboa's family.

Banana companies are a major employer and economic driver in Ecuador, accounting for some 250,000 jobs and 66% of all activity in Ecuador's ports, according to figures from ACORBANEC. Even as the country has experienced an ongoing organized crime and security crisis, banana exports remain high.

The quantity of banana shipments leaving Ecuador means the industry has become a major target for drug traffickers seeking to stow cocaine within these shipments, which reach a range of destinations in Europe, Asia, and North America. In 2024, multi-ton shipments of cocaine hidden in bananas and coming from Ecuador were seized in or en route to **Spain**, **Russia**, and the **United States**, among other countries.

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While **trafficking networks may** set up front export companies then conceal drugs in the products themselves, it is more common for them to use threats and bribes to corrupt workers all along the supply chain to sneak drugs into shipments undetected. This can happen on banana plantations, as shipments are in-transit, or in ports, and even after cargo ships leave ports en route to their destination. In some cases, the drugs are concealed in the structure of the container itself rather than in the product being shipped.

“There are countless mechanisms through which they seek to contaminate,” Lieutenant Colonel Guillermo Palacios, head of the Ecuadorian police's anti-narcotics unit in the Guayaquil metropolitan area, told InSight Crime in May 2024.

In one of the cases documented by Revista Raya, the drugs were found in a sack on top of the bananas, while in the other two, they were concealed within the structure of the containers. Such trafficking methods do not require and commonly do not involve the complicity of the companies, as it is much simpler and easier to gain access via corrupting individual employees.

However, the repeated arrest and subsequent release of the Noboa Trading employee contracted to oversee the company's security does raise serious questions about the company's commitment to ensuring its operations are not hijacked by traffickers, which could have political ramifications for a president who has pursued a zero-tolerance policy to organized crime.

Traffickers have targeted shipments of bananas belonging not only to Noboa Trading, but to dozens of companies. A 2023 Connectas **investigation** found that authorities uncovered contaminated banana shipments belonging to 127 different companies in the previous five years, adding that cocaine shipments were seized on multiple occasions in the containers of 60 companies.

In response, the banana industry has **committed** millions of dollars of their own funds to reinforce security efforts, and industry leaders have called on authorities to do more. But as the problem persists, further state scrutiny of the banana supply chain in the form of inspections and regulations could cut into the profits of the country's economic elite — including the president and his family. This creates a major dilemma for Noboa.

“It’s a massive conflict of interest,” Jake Johnston, Director of International Research at the Center for Economic and Policy Research, told InSight Crime. “We know cocaine is going in banana shipments, so to combat that you would put those shipments under greater scrutiny. But that’s likely to hurt the bottom line of his family’s company.”

Featured image: Police in Turkey seize cocaine hidden in a banana shipment bearing Noboa Trading’s brand in October 2023. Credit: X @AliYerlikaya