

## History and Government

Early in the sixteenth century, after the discovery of America, Spanish explorers who were attracted by the legendary riches of El Dorado invaded the territory of what is today Ecuador. For many years this area had been part of the Inca Empire whose last emperor, Atahualpa, was born near Quito.

A Spanish colony was established in the Andean highlands and consisted mainly of large estates worked by *campesinos* (peasants). The coastal plains, due to a shortage of workers and an extremely unhealthy climate, were neglected during the colonial period, the only real activity being some shipbuilding and cocoa exports from Guayaquil.

Quito is reputed to have been the location of the first uprising against Spanish rule in 1809. In 1822, Ecuadorian rebels were aided by the armies of Simon Bolivar and Antonio Jose de Sucre, and Ecuador's independence was established when Sucre won the decisive Battle of Pichincha on May 24, 1822. From that date, until 1830 when it became an independent republic along with Colombia and Venezuela, Ecuador was part of the Confederation of Gran Colombia. Hostilities between the country's liberal element, centred in Guayaquil, and the aristocratic conservatives, centred in Quito, resulted in a history of political instability, hampering social and economic progress. Since Ecuador's independence, elected conservative, liberal, and middle-of-the-road governments have alternated with military regimes. Coups have produced leadership changes but they have generally been carried out quietly, with little or no bloodshed and few major policy shifts.

Ecuador, a republic with its central government in the capital city of Quito, is divided for administrative purposes into provinces, counties, and parishes. Cities are administered by municipal governments, whose chief executive is a mayor. The executive branch of the central government is headed by a president. The constitution in force provides for a chief executive officer, who is the president, and a one-chamber legislative body, or Congress. The judicial branch remains centred in a Supreme Court, various special purpose courts and lower courts.