

Peru and Ecuador: A Common Enemy

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They had been at war twice in the last century, but today they've found a common enemy: the governments of Peru and Ecuador have singled out their own citizens who resist extractive industry expansion.

“Something terrible is taking place,” says Father Marco Arana, a member of the executive committee of the Latin American Observatory of Mining Conflicts speaking at the Third Continental Meeting in Quito, “such that the discourse of 21st Century Socialism coincides with the logic and discourse of the most ultra-conservative governments like that of Peru.”

Presidents Alan García and Rafael Correa have been polarizing the internal clash over development vision in their respective countries with that of indigenous peoples, mestizo farmers, environmentalists and human rights activists, raising concern about possible future confrontations.

A leading metal producer with ambitions to exploit agricultural, wood, mineral, and water resources in sensitive regions such as the Amazon, Peru's most recent stand-off resulted in the deaths of at least twenty three police officers, five indigenous people and five residents from the town of Bagua when state forces cracked down on a 58-day protest by Amazonian peoples on June 5th, according to preliminary figures from the People's Ombudsman (Defensoría del Pueblo).¹ Independent investigators, however, were prevented access to the site by police for five days following the incident and local witnesses have testified that cadavers of indigenous people were dumped into the river indicating that the number killed was much higher.² At least two hundred more were wounded, the majority civilian, and eighty four face legal investigations of which eighteen are currently imprisoned. Police are subject to an internal police probe and an investigation by the office of the public prosecutor.³ Indigenous and human rights organizations have asked for a truth commission to carry out further investigations instead of the national police. The same month, the People's Ombudsman registered 128 social-environmental disputes across the country, almost doubled from the same time last year.⁴

Despite strong economic growth in recent years, García is paying a high political cost for favouring big capital investments and aggressive free trade policies over the well-being of his own people, resulting in recent cabinet changes and plummeting popularity ratings.⁵

In Ecuador, conflicts have not grown so violent, while Correa remains highly popular having just won a historic re-election with over 50 percent of the presidential vote after the first round in late April. However, Correa also faces differences with the country's social movements over resource extraction on the domestic front that some worry could become more serious should they go unattended.

Correa has expressed intolerance for public protests, especially those opposed to a new large scale metallic mining sector intended to substitute for declining oil production. Protests against a new mining law in early January 2009 faced a heavy-handed response. In the south-central province of Azuay, locals reported that police sprayed tear gas into their homes. In the southern Amazonian region, one man was found shot and wounded, while others face terrorism charges arising from these events.

In areas such as the Southern Amazon, where the biggest projects belonging to Vancouver-based Corriente Resources and Toronto's Kinross Gold are situated, recent election results at the local and regional level reflect a certain disillusionment with the government with the success of competing parties critical of Correa's economic development policies. This situation is further complicated for the government by key indigenous federations that maintain a firm stance against extractive projects on their territories.

The indigenous Pachakutik party won the presidency of eleven municipalities, as well as the prefecture and one national assembly member in each of the two south-eastern Amazonian provinces in April.⁶ As well, President Pepe Acacho of the Interprovincial Shuar Federation whose organization represents 500 Shuar indigenous centres and 50 such associations in the Amazonian provinces of Morona Santiago, Zamora Chinchipe and Pastaza states, “We have an irreversible position...no to any type of extractive industry on our territory which includes mining, oil, logging and hydroelectric generation.”

Sounding a lot like his conservative counterpart García, Correa insists that he cannot let a few people stand in the way of national development. Instead, he prefers to downplay the significance of these tensions while frequently insulting opponents and emphasizing promises to redistribute mining revenues and implement stronger state controls over the nascent sector.

Speaking to Amy Goodman at the end of June on the widely respected program Democracy Now!, he misrepresented election results saying, “We won, overwhelmingly so, in all the mining regions...So, clearly the population trusts us.” He denied calling protesters “nobodies” and concluded, “But three or four people are enough to make a lot of noise, to appear in the media, and so on. But, quite sincerely, they don't have the popular backing or the representation.”⁷

It is true that extractive industry critics have been marginalized given the current balance of power in Ecuador. However, Peru's experience suggests that economic growth does not automatically resolve conflicts and that they are likely to persist with costly outcomes unless a more democratic approach can be found.

Peru: Majority rules and repression reigns

On June 28 shortly after the tragedy in Bagua, President Alan García published a lengthy treatise called “With the Faith of the Vast Majority” in which he disregarded protesters concluding that they represent a small minority of the population. “They threaten and block roads,” he wrote, “because they know that they are few in number and that they have lost the game.”⁸ He calculated that about 50,000 Peruvians are involved, and purported that foreign governments, understood to include Presidents Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales, 9 have helped spark the unrest.

But Father Marco Arana, a native of Cajamarca, Peru where the largest gold mine in Latin America has been radically transforming local life since the early 1990s, suggests that there is another reason why indigenous people, as well as peasant and mid-scale mestizo farmers, block roads. It is that they lack real political representation in Peru and that channels that should work for their complaints do not.

“The result is a very complicated and polarized scenario,” comments Arana, “which is exactly what should be avoided in order to stem further violence and such that democratic and respectful solutions can be brought about.” He believes that current signals from the government favouring dialogue with indigenous groups are merely an attempt to “buy time” and that there is little indication that such efforts “will be beneficial or address the demands of indigenous peoples.”

Indigenous peoples participating in the recent mobilization at Bagua protested numerous presidential decrees enacted last year by President García in order to implement the free trade agreement with the United States that would, amongst other things, enable sale of their lands. The decrees are also consistent with Alan García's thesis outlined in a 2007 editorial called "The Dog in the Manger,"¹⁰ in which he describes indigenous peoples and peasant communities as poor, uneducated, and lazy. He suggests that they are the main obstacle preventing Peru from benefiting from natural resources found on their territories.

But strong economic growth has not been benefiting Peru's poor. "Companies and the government have confused economic growth with development," says Nicanor Alvarado from the Vicar's Office in Jaen, not far from the Devil's Curve where protests took place in early June. "It's meant growth for the transnationals and industry, but not for local peoples."

Between 2004 and 2008, Peru sustained an economic growth rate averaging 7.5%, largely driven by mining.¹¹ However, as a recent report from OXFAM America underlines, poverty rates in the Andean highlands of Peru continue to soar above 70% and despite greater redistribution of mining revenues to certain regions of the country, institutional weaknesses often prevent them from being channelled into local development.¹²

Instead of addressing such issues, President García has not only polarized the country, he has also been criminalizing dissent. Father Arana, also founder of the Training and Information Group for Sustainable Development (GRUFIDES), which helps communities monitor environmental impacts of mining on their lands and take peaceful action, describes various changes García has made to the criminal code including an extended definition of extortion. The new definition includes any act that could be interpreted as extracting economic benefits under pressure, such as impeding flow of traffic, public services or the construction of legally-authorized public works. Sentences have been boosted to up to 25 years in jail. Also, authorities who "support their people by participating in protests can now be disqualified from their posts," adds Arana.

The overall conclusion is that "the protests will continue," says Nicanor Alvarado who accompanied the indigenous uprising in Bagua and who has also been accused of terrorism as a result of participating in a popular referendum concerning mining activities in the northwestern department of Piura in 2007. He forewarns, "The communities who I have been accompanying have a culture of defending their territory, their language and way of life. They live from the land and they will fight to the end, I swear to you."

The steady rise in social-environmental conflicts in recent years as tracked by the People's Ombudsman suggests that conflicts are likely to persist in many parts of the country. For Alan García, his popularity is seeing a reverse trend indicating that protesters are perhaps not as politically illegitimate as he would like to believe.

Ecuador: A strong state solution?

Although a forty year veteran of oil production, Ecuador is at a much earlier stage in the development of a new large scale mining sector that will affect parts of the country as of yet untouched by extractive industry. Similar to García, Correa has polarized conflicts by defining activists as self-interested political opponents instead of human and environmental rights defenders. Without the same history of large scale mining, however, he has gained support from certain sectors by promising to reinvest

mining profits in social programs and local development. But observers see warning signs that Correa's current trajectory could aggravate disputes.

At the conclusion of a visit to Ecuador in July, investigator Anthony Bebbington from the University of Manchester, who is leading a major research project into extractive industry expansion and social conflict in the Andes, says that even those “that don't have a particular axe to grind [with Correa],” are concerned that “things could spill over and conflicts be serious” particularly in the southeast Amazonian region. Reflecting on the President's reluctance to admit this publicly, he says, “One presumes that [Correa] knows what's at play....So in not recognizing it, if something spills over he can cultivate it and say – like Alan García did – that this was something cultivated by darker or foreign interests as a way to ignore the political implications and to use repressive measures to try and diffuse the conflicts.” Allusions have already been made to foreign conspirators supposedly manipulating rural peoples in government propaganda.¹³

Considering Correa's arguments around greater state control and redistribution of mining revenues, Bebbington says these might buy the President time, but they will not resolve existing tensions.

Drawing on years of research in Peru, he comments, “Unless you have all of your organizational, institutional and bureaucratic ducks lined up in order to be able to translate that money into local development, there's no reason that that will happen and there's no reason to believe that that approach is going to free you from local conflict dynamics.” He concurs with Nicanor Alvarado and says that despite enormous fiscal transfers to certain areas of Peru results “have been immensely disappointing both in terms of real investments and also in the ways that local politics get distorted and new leadership and movements emerge to try to get access to those resources.” He is not convinced that outcomes in Ecuador will be much different.

But Correa seems to be avoiding other issues as well; issues closer to the heart of current disputes with indigenous peoples and mestizo farmers.

“For example, how do you align a commitment to extractive industry with a commitment to indigenous people's territorial rights and other collective rights to exercise control over the life paths that they want to build? How do you align this commitment to constitutional rights and to the environment having rights? Those seem to me to be important discussions that lay at the heart of making Ecuador a healthier democracy,” says Bebbington, recalling new gains in Ecuador's political constitution approved last September which recognizes rights for nature and declares the country a plurinational state.

“It seems to me that that conversation is not happening. And it's being blocked through this argument that we're going to have a state industry, and we're going to increase revenues that accrue from extraction, and therefore this must be a good thing.” It is also being blocked by a strong industry lobby backed by the Canadian Embassy in Ecuador that is wary of any measure that might exclude mining from certain areas.

Risky business

Affected communities bear the greatest risks of avoiding such debate, whether through the environmental and social impacts of extractive industry or when they are subject to severe repression for defending their rights like in Bagua or as is feared might happen in the Southern Amazon. But singling out one's own citizens also has political ramifications.

It has yet to be seen what will happen as various indigenous, farmer, environmental and human rights groups become distanced from Correa. In the case of Peru, Father Arana believes that they have reached the point at which a new political option is essential in order to avoid greater “chaos, violence and authoritarianism.”

Now in the process of seeking the thousands of signatures necessary to run for president in 2011, Arana is leading a new movement called Land and Liberty. They will aim to advance an economic model based upon ecological sustainability and plurinationality in which extractive industry expansion should be subject to land use planning and ecological zoning. They also propose to legislate the right to free, prior and informed consent for indigenous and peasant communities as outlined by the International Labour Organization's Convention 169. While many details of their program remain unclear and achieving such goals will entail serious challenges, they are central issues to making peace once again within these Andean nations.

Notes:

1. All figures based upon research carried out by the Defensoría del Pueblo between June 5th and June 30th 2009: <http://www.defensoria.gob.pe/modules/Downloads/informes/varios/2009/informe-adjuntia-006-2009-DP-DHPD.pdf>
2. <http://www.politicaspUBLICAS.net/panel/noticias/america-latina/318-peru-comunicado-mision-fidh.html>
3. <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=47454>
4. The 64th Report on Social Conflicts from the Defensoría del Pueblo of Peru: http://www.defensoria.gob.pe/conflictos-sociales/objetos/paginas/6/44conflictos_-_reporte_64_-_junio_2009.pdf
5. <http://www.coha.org/2009/07/garcia's-decline-in-peru/>
6. “Hacia la segunda fase de la revolucion ciudadana” Mario Unda, <http://alainet.org/active/30562>
7. http://www.democracynow.org/2009/6/29/ecuadoran_president_rafael_correa_on_global
8. http://www.ediciones.expreso.com.pe/2009/jun/28/index8fa6.html?option=com_content&task=view&id=57434&Itemid=1
9. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8106248.stm>
10. http://www.elcomercio.com.pe/edicionimpresa/html/2007-10-28/el_sindrome_del_perro_del_hort.html
11. <http://www.economist.com/countries/PERU/profile.cfm?folder=Profile-Economic%20Data>
12. “Mining Conflicts in Peru: Condition Critical” March 2009, OXFAM America

13. For example, see “La Minería en el Ecuador: Una Fuente de Esperanza” from the collection “La Patria es de Todos” available here:

<http://secretariadepueblos.gov.ec/Web/Joomla/MATERIAL%20SPPC/COMICS/COMIC8.pdf>