

Swinging from the Right Correa and Social Movements in Ecuador

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On April 26, President Rafael Correa became the first Ecuadorian president in thirty years to win a new mandate after only one round of elections. A day later, the popular leader announced that he will accelerate his so-called Citizen's Revolution and prioritize change for the poor. However, prominent civil society organizations say that Correa's 21st Century Socialism favors powerful economic groups and bodes poorly for Ecuador's most-excluded.

“From the point of view of the social movements and the indigenous movement in particular,” says Marlon Santi, President of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), “Correa's socialism is not socialism at all...He waves the flag of socialism, but he does other things.”

During his first two years in power, Correa made key decisions reflecting social movement demands, such as not to renew the contract for the U.S. military base in the coastal city of Manta, to declare a large part of the country's external debt illegitimate, and to create a National Constituent Assembly to rewrite the political constitution which was overwhelmingly approved last September. The 2008 constitution declared water a human right, gave rights to nature, and made Ecuador the second country after Bolivia to be declared a plurinational state—a central proposal of the indigenous movement for decades.

But since then, new laws pertaining to mining and food sovereignty, combined with open insults and threats against organizations such as the CONAIE and Quito-based environmental organization Acción Ecológica (Environmental Action), have led these organizations to conclude that Correa is governing from the right while squeezing their ability to participate on their own terms.

Acción Ecológica President Ivonne Ramos refers to the new food sovereignty law as evidence of how Correa's policies concentrate economic power. The legislation finalized after a presidential veto in April, she says, promotes agro-industry and favours powerful economic groups who will benefit from new subsidies. It also opens the door to Terminator seeds, agro-fuels and legalization of shrimp farming in coastal manglar forests.

Even the solidarity vouchers provided to the poor are tied with monopolistic economic groups who she says control nearly the entire national food chain.

“When the people receive their vouchers,” she explains, “they can buy products in the big supermarkets at a reduced price. So the benefit is ultimately channeled to these powerful economic groups.”

She also points out a phenomenon of assassinations and a new wave of criminalization affecting environmental and human rights defenders at the local level. Many of those now facing charges are from the hundreds previously granted amnesty by the National Constituent Assembly in March 2008. In particular, community leaders affiliated with the National Coordinator for Life and Sovereignty who are opposed to large scale metal mining have been targetted. Various members face charges of organized terrorism.

Overall, Ramos foresees a much more “restrictive” environment for groups like hers in the coming period.

Accion's Closure, a Red Flag

Acción Ecológica first drew international attention to tighter restrictions for NGOs and grassroots organizations when it sought solidarity for what it called “a clear act of censorship” in March. The Health Minister, under whose ministry the organization is registered, closed its doors by withdrawing its legal status saying that the organization had not fulfilled the objectives for which it was created.

Acción attributed the move to its recent participation in protests against the new mining law, which favors Canadian-financed transnational mining companies which are well-positioned to develop gold and copper mines along the Western Andes and in the Southern Amazon. Such projects have generated tremendous controversy especially within affected communities.

A tremendous outpouring of support for the 23-year-old environmental organization resulted in a quick retraction of the minister's initial statement. The Minister denied possible political persecution and explained the decision as part of an administrative procedure in order that Acción Ecológica become registered under the Ministry of the Environment, which did not exist when it was founded.¹

However, although their legal status has been temporarily reinstated and Ramos is confident that a definitive decision will be made in their favour later this month, she is still worried about how the government is reorganizing NGOs and grassroots organizations.

New conditions include that organizations should orient their actions and programs according to the National Development Plan which is in the hands of the National Secretariat for Planning and Development (SENPLADES). She calls this “terrible,” saying, “we might differ with the National Development Plan.”

She further adds that President Correa has mentioned several times that organizations like hers should not carry out any political activity. But, she challenges, “We are political beings and we view working in the interests of nature and the common good as a political act.”

“However,” she affirms, “we have never engaged in party politics and we are not at all interested in holding positions of power. Rather, we believe that there is a power that exists outside of this: freedom of speech and freedom of action to defend what we consider worth defending.”

They are energized by the support they received in March which made them realize that they have what Ramos calls an “irreproachable reputation” upon which to continue working.

Plurinationality, Only on Paper

However, prior to the closure of Acción Ecológica, indigenous institutions were also being threatened, coupled with regular insults that the CONAIE leadership were nothing but “a few good-for-nothings.”

The indigenous movement first arose as an important political force in the early 1990s and has led key mobilizations against neoliberal policies such as US free trade agreement negotiations, while resisting expansion of extractive industries at the regional level, especially in the south and south-central

Amazon.

The rift with Correa first developed a year ago for various reasons including Correa's emphatic opposition to the inclusion of free prior and informed consent for indigenous peoples over activities taking place on their territories in the new constitution.² More than half a dozen indigenous nationalities could be affected by planned oil and mining expansion.

More recently, in late January, on the heels of indigenous-led protests against the new mining law, President Correa surprised indigenous leaders when he announced during one of his Saturday radio programs that the Development Council of the Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples of Ecuador (CODENPE) would be closed. He alleged that the Executive Secretary was misusing funds in favor of her home province. Several days prior, the Minister of Economy stopped CODENPE's funds.

CODENPE was established through implementation of the 1998 constitution which recognized the right of indigenous peoples in Ecuador to participate in decision making and to determine their own development priorities.

The decision led Monica Chuji, former Assembly Member and past Communications Secretary for Correa, to write that it is hardly a coincidence that the decision would take place following the mining law protests. She concluded that “like all neoliberal governments, for Correa, we indians represent 'an obstacle to development'.” She indicated that this was also a message to other social movements “to be advised: no protests or dissidence against the neoliberal politics of the Government of Rafael Correa—or else.”³

But this was only the beginning. A month later, President Correa issued a decree retracting the autonomy of the National Directorate of Intercultural Bilingual Education (DINEIB), placing it under control of the Ministry of Education. More recently in the lead up to the April election, the indigenous justice system has come under heavy criticism.

CONAIE President Marlon Santi says “In the preamble of the new constitution, it says that this is a plurinational state, but the government does not really want to recognize this.” Plurinationality is the recognition of multiple nationalities coexisting within the same state. The concept also encompasses proposals such as autonomous control of health care, education, and justice.

Santi sees what is taking place as a racist process of “disaccreditation,” such that “the movement loses representation and participation in whatever agenda or economic process are taking place through the state.”

Funding and operations at Codenpe have begun again, but the CONAIE now has several cases before the Constitutional Court as a result of these decisions, and another that it is preparing against the President's Office to be presented before the Inter American Human Rights Commission.

An Extension of World Bank Policies

Economist Pablo Dávalos, a professor and former advisor to the CONAIE, was critical of Correa even before he was first elected in November 2006. He says the distance between social movements and Correa is comparable to the relationship between the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil and President Lula.

Dávalos is concerned about the growing concentration of power and growing state influence over social organizations, especially the CONAIE, as part of efforts to advance the government's economic program.

He comments that Correa is building upon accumulated efforts to weaken the CONAIE, which is still recovering from a failed alliance with the government of Colonel Lucio Gutierrez (2003-2005), who came to power with the help of the indigenous movement and then quickly proved itself a closer friend of former US President George W. Bush. However, he suggests that Correa's approach is closer to “intervention strategies developed by the World Bank toward social movements in the 1990s through projects geared at specific groups including women, peasant farmers, youth and indigenous.”

From Dávalos' perspective, particularly with regard to the CONAIE, the goal is “to neutralize the ability of the indigenous movement to mobilize and to destroy it as a historic social actor.”

Although much has been made of the new 2008 political constitution—and notwithstanding social organizations including the CONAIE that are actively defending their constitutional rights as they were voted upon last September—Dávalos says that in contrast with the constitution of 1998 “the new political system is more vertical, more hierarchical, and more dependent on the president than before.”

He adds that while certain rights have been obtained, “such as the right to water, the untouchability of indigenous territories and some collective rights, economic planning prevails over these rights. So if a right comes into tension with the planning process, then planning will come first. So the rights are there, but they are neutralized at the same time.”

Change from Below

Dávalos says the first step for social movements, before rebuilding capacity to mobilize and developing strategic alliances, is to “take back the [socialist, revolutionary] discourse because it permits resistance and locates the government with respect to social groups. But right now this has been kidnapped and assimilated into the government.”

Lastly, he says, “an international lobby needs to be developed to indicate that this government is far from a leftist government and corresponds more closely to the interests of powerful groups that are emerging with the new mining and agro-fuels sectors.”

From the perspective of the CONAIE's Marlon Santi, it is all part of a lengthy process for inclusion that the indigenous movement has been fighting for decades and living through for centuries.

“We have been in this process as an indigenous organization through left wing governments and right wing governments. Neither really suits us because the left does not take into account the full dimension of every sector...That is why the CONAIE has life plans strategically developed to last for twenty years.

Stressing that it has been as a result of their past struggles rather than state programs by which they have achieved their currently recognized rights, “about 0.2%” of what they are aiming for, Santi says, he considers that change will continue to come from below despite Correa's discourse. “Our challenge is to develop public policies from us for the government to meet the needs and requirements of the most abandoned sectors.”

Ideally for Santi, their involvement will be a 21st Century priority: “We are in the century in which we

as human beings with our range of races, customs, cultures, and ways of thinking, have to respect these various differences that we have.”

Under the current conditions, however, this will be difficult.

Notes

1. Daniel Denvir, 16 March 09 “Ecuadorian government shuts down leading environmental group” <http://www.grist.org/article/ecuadorian-government-shuts-down-leading/>
2. Daniel Denvir, 16 May 2008 “CONAIE indigenous movement condemns President Correa” <http://upside-down-world.org/main/content/view/1288/49/>
3. Monica Chuji, 27 January 2009, “El cierre del CODENPE: Otro ejemplo del racismo y autoritarismo del presidente Correa” <http://www.llacta.org/notic/2009/not0127a.htm>