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Afro-ecuadorans Cheer New Anti-discrimination Law

by Guest

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[The following article by Luis Angel Saavedra is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It appeared in the July 20, 2005, edition of Latinamerica Press.]

Ecuador's black communities, discriminated against for centuries, are trying to change their socioeconomic realities and spur development. On May 22, the Collective Rights of Black and Afro-Ecuadoran Peoples law (Ley de los Derechos Colectivos de los Pueblos Negros o Afroecuatorianos) went into effect, establishing rights protections for Ecuador's black citizens. But the law has brought up a debate on discrimination, a trend that a law cannot halt.

Afro-Ecuadoran community ignored, say activists Peter Segura, director of the group Red Nacional de Ecologistas Populares, en Defensa de la Naturaleza, Vida y Dignidad (REDIVINA), says that the constitutional framework for such a law was in place since 1998, when Ecuador recognized itself as a multicultural and multiethnic state. But he notes that this did nothing to eradicate discrimination against the country's black communities. "Our history is intertwined with slavery, and that's the only thing that they teach in school. Our identity is associated with football, dance, and music, and that's all we know about our people. People think that to be black is to be a criminal, or to be black is to be associated with prostitution," Segura says.

Poverty-stricken: seven of every 10 Afro-Ecuadorans are poor

The history of the Afro-Ecuadoran population is one of economic, social, and cultural discrimination. According to the 2001 national census, 5% of the population, or 600,000 people over the age of 15, considered himself or herself Afro-descendant. There are also 300,000 Afro-descendant children. Of this group of 900,000, seven of every 10 people live on less than US\$2.50 per day. According to 2004 figures from Ecuador's Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos (INEC), 42% of the country's population lives in poverty, while 9% lives in extreme poverty, meaning the poverty level of Ecuador's black population surpasses the national average.

Discrimination in the education system has greatly impacted Ecuador's Afro-descendants. Faulty school infrastructure and lack of access to higher education is coupled with the fact that Afro-Ecuadoran social and cultural history is not included in the school curricula.

"Professors are not trained in black culture. It's necessary to work on 'ethno-educational' proposals that promote interculturalism," says Alexandra Ocles, a young Afro-Ecuadoran researcher at the Centro de Estudios e Investigaciones para Afrodescendientes-Ecuador. For Juan Garcia, another important black leader and community organizer in the northern coastal province of Esmeraldas, ethno-education means placing significance on black history, "valuing black identity and its spiritual, cultural, linguistic, social, political, and economic traditions." The new law aims to fulfill

this principle and include it in primary and secondary education programs, while guaranteeing Afro-Ecuadoran ethno-education.

But stereotypes of black Ecuadorans remain firmly in place in Ecuador, and some are even reinforced by government authorities. "There is a race that is inclined to delinquency...and it's the black race," Quito's police chief Col. Edmundo Egas told various television stations in September 1995. With the exception of the Confederacion Nacional Afroecuatoriana (CNA), founded in 1999 and legally recognized in 2003, and the Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Negras de Ecuador, also created in 1999, there are no nationwide black organizations.

Other organizations are independent from one another and, at the largest scale, work on a regional level, in areas with high percentages of Afro-Ecuadorans, such as in the province of Esmeraldas, in El Chota in the mountain province of Imbabura, and in Quito and Guayaquil. "The local level is very important as a space to construct an independently managed community, linked to [black] identity, that's why it's so difficult to create a big national organization to represent the entire Afro-Ecuadoran community," Garcia said.

Concerns over hegemony of indigenous model

The absence of national organizations has not led governmental agencies to intervene in the problems facing the country's black population, causing another type of discrimination, "hegemony of the indigenous vision," Garcia said. Development needs in black communities have been examined through the lens of indigenous thought, because government development programs for Ecuador's indigenous population have also been applied to the Afro-descendants. But the new law means to stop this discrepancy and separate the shared development perspective of indigenous and black communities in the Proyecto de Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indigenas y Afroecuatorianos (PRODEPINE), now a predominantly indigenous-focused institution.

The law established the Consejo Nacional de Desarrollo Afroecuatoriano (CONDAE), which will design policies and strategies for the development of black Ecuadoran communities. "We hope that it won't be just another thing in writing," says Segura, adding that he trusts social movements to defend human rights over any of the existing laws.

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