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Ecuadoran President Correa Faces Discontent from Indigenous Communities

by LADB Staff

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Ecuador's indigenous protest, despite its weaknesses, has managed to challenge the political policies of President Rafael Correa's administration. The president says he has begun a revolution favoring the country's most vulnerable sectors, but the indigenous communities say he has not, in the slightest, changed the neoliberal model implemented in the country during the last 30 years of democracy.

Despite the government's series of social-compensation measures, it shows no clear signs that it intends to modify the basic tenets of neoliberalism. On the contrary, it has enacted measures favoring large-scale mineral-extraction projects, renewed concessions to private companies to sell water, despite a constitutional prohibition, and signed several decrees undermining collective rights, indigenous-peoples' rights, and the rights of nature.

Indigenous movement offers suggestions to Correa

Faced with the government's increasingly notable ambivalences, the indigenous movement, led by the Confederacion de Nacionalidades Indigenas del Ecuador (CONAIE), declared its opposition to the government and, on Sept. 7, established a seven-point mandate intended to guide government action based on the new Constitution.

Two of the document's seven points prompted a nationwide protest in late September: defense of water and opposition to large-scale mining. The action did not have the strength of earlier protests and seemed headed for failure after the first day, when CONAIE president Marlon Santi and Confederacion de Pueblos de la Nacionalidad Kichwa del Ecuador (ECUARUNARI) president Humberto Cholango called off the unusual indigenous uprising.

Ignoring leaders, Amazonian indigenous continue protest CONAIE affiliates in the southern Amazonian region, home of the Shuar and Achuar peoples, decided to ignore the leadership's pronouncement since it had acted without consulting its base. The Shuar and Achuar, who consider theirs a warrior culture, were met with a strong repressive response by the national police in the Amazonian city of Macas.

Shuar professor Bosco Wisuma died in the confrontation, and 29 police officers and a reporter were wounded. Wisuma's death forced the indigenous leadership to reverse its announcement ending the protest, which then focused on the southern Amazonia. This region, on the border with Peru, is the most threatened by future mining projects because of the discovery of extensive deposits of copper and other minerals.

Following those discoveries, the government announced the creation of the Empresa Nacional Minera (ENM) and authorized it to begin exploitation. The government announcement led to a

challenge from area residents, who question the logic behind the president's vindication of the right of the majority who elected him president last June to benefit from the nation's natural resources.

The logic of the majorities lost force in the Amazonian provinces of Morona Santiago and Zamora Chinchipe when, parallel to Correa's re-election, indigenous leaders who had mounted a campaign based on defending the environment and opposing large-scale mining won the local elections. "The president said that we had to win the elections if we wanted to govern differently, and we won the elections throughout the Amazonia, which means that our people are saying that his extractive policy is wrong," said Tarquino Cajamarca, mayor of Limon Indanza, a small Amazonian town that would be destroyed by the mining activity.

Cajamarca had been on the Limon Indanza town council but was kicked off for opposing mining exploration in that canton of Morona Santiago province. He was later tried for allegedly defaming the council members who supported the mining operations, forcing him to leave town and go into hiding.

The Asamblea Nacional Constituyente granted him legal amnesty, along with 384 other leaders of social organizations, considering him an environmental activist rather than a criminal. Cajamarca returned to his hometown and was elected mayor in the same election in which Correa won a second term. In his regular Saturday radio broadcast, Correa accused Cajamarca of instigating the anti-mining protest.

Indians Marcelino Chumpi, prefect of Morona Santiago province, and Salvador Quishpe, prefect of Zamora Chinchipe, find themselves in similar straits. President Correa has accused them of being instigators and of opposing the country's development, despite their having won elections in their respective provinces.

Dialogue with Correa does not help indigenous cause

Wisuma's death radicalized the indigenous protest and, when it seemed about to explode, Correa sought to dialogue with the leaders. Although the Shuar and Achuar bases did not accept the dialogue, they were forced to accept a truce. Thus, on Oct. 5, the government and indigenous leaders agreed to a dialogue whose only outcome was the decision to continue the dialogue. Once the crisis had passed, the president again attacked indigenous leaders and insisted that he had given up nothing in the face of the indigenous protest.

However, the president signed Decree 96, "institutionalizing" a permanent dialogue with the Indians. A post-neoliberal model? For analyst and university professor Pablo Davalos, everything that has happened demonstrates that Correa tinkers with details but has no intention of changing the government's direction.

"The executive decrees that benefit the timber industry, weaken public-sector labor relations, allow biofuel production, give the Catholic Church the task of evangelizing the Indians, and end the autonomy of indigenous-development institutions (see NotiSur, 2009-08-14) confirm that with this government we are entering a new stage of capitalist accumulation," said Davalos.

Davalos' premise is that the new process, which has been labeled post-neoliberal, provides for small advances in social benefits, based on subsidized programs and vouchers, but leaves intact the neoliberal root of natural-resource exploitation and undermines social organizing. In this new situation, the indigenous movement seems to have fallen into the trap, since it has directed its efforts toward forming dialogue committees to deal with each point on its agenda: the water law, the mining law, the land-use law, the abolition of decrees that violate its rights, etc. However, the government has appointed only people from the Secretaria de Pueblos, Movimientos Sociales y Participacion Ciudadana to participate in the dialogue rather than the policymakers responsible for each point raised by the Indians. Everything indicates that indigenous environmentalist Lourdes Tiban is right when she says, emphatically, "The dialogues don't lead anywhere. I don't believe in the dialogues."

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