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After Centuries Of Submission, South American Indigenous Groups Demand Recognition, Inclusion

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From the Southern Cone to the Caribbean coastline, indigenous groups are making a clear push to overcome the state of cultural, social, and economic submission into which they were forced beginning more than five centuries ago with the bloody conquest of Latin America by the Spanish and Portuguese crowns.

Since 1492, when the conquistador Christopher Columbus set off for what was then called the East Indies and ended up, by accident, on the island of Guanahani (in the Bahamas), communities throughout the Americas have fought for their independence. In no case however, did those struggles benefit the original owners of the land.

It is only now, in the 21st century, that the emergence of progressive South American leaders such as Presidents Evo Morales (Bolivia) and Rafael Correa (Ecuador) has finally opened a door to sectors of the population that had previously been the targets of systematic extermination policies. External factors, however, have limited how quickly the two presidents can act. As a result, native groups have at moments turned on both Morales, himself an indigenous man, and Correa, whom Ecuador’s indigenous people hailed early on as one of their own.

In recent weeks, events throughout South America have pushed indigenous issues back to the regional forefront. In Colombia, representatives from 18 different indigenous peoples gathered for three days of policy talks in the historic coastal city of Cartagena de Indias. In Brazil, indigenous groups demonstrated in defense of the country’s 1988 Constitution—which guarantees many of their rights—as a way to challenge large multinational companies that promote the use of genetically modified seeds. They have also taken the opportunity to denounce the extermination policy and slave system imposed on them during the period when Brazil was still under Portuguese control.

In Chile, ethnic Mapuches, the country’s largest indigenous group, are again challenging the conservative government of President Sebastián Piñera, demanding that the country’s anti-terrorism law—used to subject indigenous people to discriminatory legal procedures (NotiSur, Sept. 10, 2010)—be scrapped. The Mapuche made the same demands on Piñera’s post-dictatorship predecessors (NotiSur, Nov. 13, 2009).

In Bolivia and Ecuador, indigenous groups have begun challenging the "friendly" governments of Presidents Morales and Correa. And in the Venezuelan capital of Caracas, member states of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) recently sat down with indigenous organizations to analyze an anti-discrimination initiative put forth by Venezuela.

Challenges for the region’s "friendly" governments

The emergence of progressive governments in Ecuador and Bolivia was seen as milestone advances for the respective countries’ indigenous populations. When Correa assumed the presidency for the first time, on Jan. 15, 2007, he was honored in an Andean ancestral ritual. The following year
he instigated a constitutional reform that incorporated one of the Andean indigenous culture’s key concepts: sumak kawsay, which means "well-being" in the Quechua language and alludes to a way of life that is in harmony with nature.

Now, however, the Ecuadoran president is being questioned for authorizing oil extraction in the one-of-a-kind Yasuní national park, declared in 1989 as one of UNESCO’s world biosphere reserves (NotiSur, Sept. 27, 2013). Indigenous groups have demonstrated against the decision, unconvinced by government claims that only a small percentage of the park will be used for oil production and that revenue generated from the activity will be used to "combat poverty and misery."

In 2009, Morales not only pushed for the inclusion in Bolivia’s Constitution of suma qamaña, an Aymara concept very similar in meaning to sumak kawsay, he also changed the country’s official name to the Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia (Plurinational State of Bolivia) in recognition of the 36 indigenous peoples who live there (NotiSur, Feb. 13, 2009). Nominally, at least, the move challenged the civilizing perspective that accompanied the founding, in the early part of the 19th century, of the region’s various nation states. And yet, like Correa, Morales later found himself at odds with indigenous groups over an ambitious development project—a highway, in his case—which was slated to cross an Amazonian nature reserve (NotiSur, Oct. 14, 2011).

The governments of Ecuador and Bolivia blame outside influences for their current difficulties with indigenous communities. They draw a parallel between late-20th-century religious missionaries, who undermined native cultures by introducing foreign religious concepts, and 21st century nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which are funded from abroad and—with their strong environmental discourse—have exacerbated the worship among Andean indigenous groups of Pachamama (Mother Earth) to the point of inciting conflict with the only governments in history that have made a commitment to those communities and respected their rights.

"To do away with the internal colonialism that has plagued the [region’s] original peoples, the state must recognize indigenous autonomy," said researcher Nadia Schandeler, director of the Centro Argentino de Estudios Internacionales in Buenos Aires, Argentina. "But at the same time, these groups must acknowledge that the ‘indigenous question’ has arisen with such force because of the efforts of these South American governments, which challenged the hegemonic capitalist discourse by opting for the creation of multicultural and pluriethnic states able to respond to the demands of segments of the populations that have been historically displaced."

**Protests in Chile and Brazil**

On Oct. 12, a group of Chilean Mapuches demonstrated in the streets of Santiago calling for restitution of their ancestral lands—controlled for the most part by large multinational timber companies—and demanding that the country’s anti-terrorism law be annulled. The controversial law was decreed during the civil-military government of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) but kept in place by the five democratic administrations that followed. It has been repeatedly invoked against Mapuches involved in a movement to reclaim ancestral lands.

The anti-terrorism law was questioned in late July by the UN’s special rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights Ben Emmerson, who described it as unnecessarily harsh: it stiffens jail sentences and allows judges to convict people using testimony from anonymous witnesses.
The protestors also asked Chile’s two leading presidential candidates—former President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010), a progressive, and her conservative rival Evelyn Matthei—to incorporate Mapuche demands in their respective political platforms. Bachelet responded days later by coming out against the anti-terrorism law, acknowledging that its application during her first term in office (2000-2006) was a "mistake." Matthei took the opposite approach, saying she "will not hesitate" to use the controversial law. Chile’s election will be held on Nov. 17. A runoff, should it be necessary, will take place Dec. 15.

Indigenous groups have been making their voices heard in Brazil as well. In São Paulo, the country’s largest city, protestors demonstrated against efforts by a powerful bloc of rural legislators to impinge on indigenous rights. The Brazilian Congress is set to consider several bills and proposed constitutional amendments that, if approved, could give the Senate power to demarcate indigenous lands. Up to now, only the federal government has been allowed to make such decisions.

This has placed indigenous groups on a collision course with the government of President Dilma Rousseff. The administration does not have a reputation as being particularly anti-indigenous rights. But it does have close ties with the rural legislative bloc, according to the Coordenação das Organizações Indígenas da Amazônia Brasileira (COIAB), an organization of native Amazonian groups. "There are members of the government working to get the proposals approved," said Kléber Karipuna, one of COIAB’s leaders. "We’re not happy about what the government is doing or saying. It’s clear that the indigenous aren’t a priority for Dilma."

**Talks in Colombia and Venezuela**

In Cartagena, Colombia, meanwhile, indigenous delegations from 18 countries held meetings. Together those countries are home to roughly 60 million indigenous people representing 670 different ethnicities and 420 languages. During the talks, participants agreed to meet annually and to come up with coordinated strategies to take a more active role in deciding political policies that affect their respective communities.

Meetings were also held Oct. 10-12 in neighboring Venezuela, where representatives from various governments and indigenous groups—first separately and later together—discussed ways to make South America more inclusive. The encounter took place within the official framework of MERCOSUR. Participating countries included Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Paraguay opted out of the meetings because of an ongoing diplomatic impasse with Venezuela. Relations between the two countries have been frozen since June 2012, when the government of democratically elected Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo was ousted in a parliamentary coup (NotiSur, July 13, 2012).

"I think we’re seeing an extraordinary event take place," said Venezuela’s Indigenous Affairs Minister Aloha Núñez. "This is a real first. Until now, the biggest advance had been including Guaraní as an official language in the customs union. Now we’re talking about going much further, taking concrete steps that can really impact the situation of original peoples by promoting their effective insertion into the integrationist dynamic."

Despite its billing as an official MERCOSUR summit, the event drew little attention from the media. Only the Venezuelan television station Telesur, the Bolivian daily Cambio, and the Brazilian news site Operamundi followed the day-to-day details of the talks.

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Once the debates ended, the indigenous participants presented a list of demands that may have had something to do with why the South American press opted for silence. The group called for policies aimed at protecting native seeds, which are being swapped throughout the region for genetically engineered seeds patented and sold by large agrobusiness multinationals. The participants also said governments should commit to defending historic indigenous lands. In cases where private companies control and use such lands to extract natural resources, the state should intervene and return the territories to their original owners, they said. The group talked as well about the need to preserve indigenous identities. Among the list’s less-controversial demands was a call to exchange information related to health care.

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