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Ecuador Rejects Referendum on Rain Forest Oil Drilling

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The Ministerio de Recursos Naturales No Renovables gave the go-ahead for oil drilling in an Amazon rain forest preserve following Ecuador’s election authority’s rejection of a petition for a referendum on the issue May 8 (NotiSur, Jan. 19, 1993, Sept. 3, 2010, and Sept. 27, 2013). The Colectivo Yasunidos, a group made up of young people against the drilling, had tried to block oil exploration in the Parque Nacional Yasuní by presenting the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE) with petitions calling for the referendum.

The CNE said many of the 756,000 signatures on petitions to stop the development of the Tiputini Field were invalid. Yasunidos responded by blockading CNE offices, saying that not allowing citizens to vote on the project violates a basic principle of democracy.

Oil or biodiversity: a fictitious debate

At the beginning of his administration in 2007, President Rafael Correa proposed a debate on oil exploitation in the national park that is home to at least three indigenous groups living in isolation by choice (NotiSur, Aug. 19, 2005). The region is one of the most diverse environments in the world. Correa had proposed Ecuador forego drilling for oil in the Ishpingo, Tambococha, and Tiputini (ITT) fields, protecting Yasuní’s biodiversity in exchange for payments from the international community equivalent to half the estimated US$7.2 billion value of the oil reserves.

The government spent millions publicizing this initiative and carried out numerous forums at home and abroad to debate international responsibility for the conservation of Yasuní as a way of protecting the planet and doing something to mitigate climate change. Nevertheless, every time any real possibility of obtaining the needed resources neared, Correa changed his negotiating team, putting the process back to zero.

Finally, in September 2013, Correa announced his decision to exploit Yasuní and blamed the international community, accusing it of not responding to his call. At the same time, he upped the estimated value of the Yasuní reserves to US$18.2 billion.

Response of the youth

Correa’s decision was seen as a betrayal of constitutional guarantees to protect the rights of nature. In defense of nature, thousands of young environmentalists accepted the difficult challenge of calling for a referendum that would allow the people to decide whether the Yasuní oil should be exploited.

In the next seven years, Correa cemented his popularity with a democratic discourse that included citizen participation as the base for democracy. He set up three referendums: one to legitimize the need for a change in the Constitution, another to ratify the 2008 Constitution, and a third to propose constitutional amendments. All three gained wide approval (NotiSur, July 4, 2008, Oct. 10, 2008, and June 10, 2011).
He rejected the young peoples’ request for a referendum on Yasuní. Instead, he challenged them to collect enough signatures to put the matter on a ballot. “Collect signatures; don’t be a bunch of bums,” he said sarcastically.

The president seemed confident the task of collecting enough signatures would discourage the young people. A citizen referendum would need 584,323 signatures, equivalent to 5% of the 2013 national electorate. Nevertheless, the youth rose to the challenge of getting enough signatures in six months and reached their goal.

With the support of environmental organizations and community leaders, the youth created an organization called Colectivo Yasunidos, a name (created from the words Yasuní and united) that encouraged unity in the defense of the Parque Nacional Yasuní. On April 11, they ended their unprecedented campaign by turning in 107,088 petitions with a total of 727,947 signatures. Indigenous organizations had gathered nearly 200,000 of the signatures.

The joy and satisfaction of the young people fell when they begin to see the CNE’s manipulation. Yasunidos lawyer Dr. Julio César Trujillo said the chain of custody of petition boxes was broken. Efforts to defend the signatures failed. CNE officials physically attacked the young people who tried unsuccessfully to defend the signatures, and protestors cried as they told the media what had happened. The utopia of their first political involvement had crumbled in the face of CNE actions ordered by Correa.

Blackmail and arbitrary government and the Consejo Nacional Electoral

The government used boycott, blackmail, and arbitrariness against the Yasunidos campaign. Correa repeatedly made public statements that he had no intention of allowing a Yasuní oil-exploitation referendum and constantly denigrated the young people in Yasunidos.

A phantom organization calling itself the Frente de Defensa de la Amazonía called for a referendum to eradicate all extractive industry from Ecuador. When an established organization that has been involved in a suit against Chevron Texaco for environmental damages for the past 20 years protested that the new organization had taken its name, the phantom group renamed itself the Frente de Defensa Radical de la Amazonía.

The new organization gathered signatures and presented petitions similar to the ones used by the Yasunidos. However, no one ever saw them on the streets, though they had seen members of the Colectivo Yasunidos collect signatures. The phantom group also plagiarized a Yasunidos brochure and distributed it in the same Quito daily the Yasunidos had used.

Next, a coalition of Amazon mayors popped up with a referendum proposal supporting Yasuní oil exploitation. The main leaders of this group were running for re-election in February of this year, but most of them lost (NotiSur, March 14, 2014). This coalition also plagiarized the Yasunidos petition and distributed it in the same newspaper.

Both groups presented petitions to the CNE before the Yasunidos did, but their requests were thrown out for a lack of signatures. The CNE, which had eliminated high percentages of signatures in both cases, announced the same thing would happen with the Yasunidos signatures.

Following the CNE’s actions, the Yasunidos verified its more than 700,000 signatures and numbered its petitions before submitting them. In this process they threw out nearly 90,000 signatures to be
sure that the petitions they presented the CNE would be correct and meet all the requirements established in the Código de la Democracia.

The CNA responded with a string of arbitrary actions. First, it threw out 9,271 petitions with 74,168 signatures. Reasons were questionable: petitions were stained or torn, they said. Some allegedly didn’t have signatures of responsibility, and, finally, some petitions differed from regulation size by a few millimeters or were on paper of a heavier weight.

Still, some 599,103 signatures made it to the last stage of the verification process, but 239,342 were thrown out, leaving the Colectivo Yasunidos with just 359,761, or 224,562 fewer that the number needed to call for a referendum. The CNE thus followed presidential orders to not allow a referendum on the Yasuní.

The CNE presented a report with copies of some of the rejected petitions. When Yasunidos members observed that some of the copies did not have page numbers, they again protested that the CNE had manipulated the documents. The Yasunidos said they suspected officials had substituted their petitions with those presented by the other groups as a way of boycotting the Yasunidos effort.

Observers were not allowed to be present during the signature verification process even though the CNE had allowed the formation of an observer commission made up of prestigious Ecuadorians. The commission, however, never was allowed access.

The young people of Yasunidos, having lost faith in the country’s institutions, are now demanding the government overturn the CNE decision. They want officials to publish a list of the rejected signatures so that each person who signed can validate their signature. Without any hope that this will happen, the Yasunidos are looking to outside help from international organizations. But they don’t know exactly who could help in the demand for a referendum. Meanwhile, they have begun a series of marches and other demonstrations such as a symbolic closure of CNE offices by sticking a note saying "closed" on the front doors.

The CNE has called on national television networks to justify the unjustifiable in an effort to silence the Colectivo Yasunidos. It has threatened to prosecute them for allegedly making a mockery of the democratic process and ridiculing the institutional image of the CNE.

Meanwhile, the afternoon of May 8, the Ministerio de Recursos Naturales No Renovables announced the work would begin in the Tiputini Field in the Yasuní, thus assuring the referendum was off the table and bypassing any obstacle the Yasunidos might come up with.

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