Ecuadoran Government Rescinds Property Loan, Sparking Confrontation with Indigenous Group

Luis Ángel Saavedra

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Ecuadoran Government Rescinds Property Loan, Sparking Confrontation with Indigenous Group

by Luis Ángel Saavedra
Category/Department: Ecuador
Published: 2015-01-30

The Ecuadoran government decided to terminate an agreement allowing the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE) to occupy a house it has used since 1991, a building that had become a symbol of the indigenous struggle. Important Latin American figures such as Bolivian President Evo Morales and the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez (1999-2013), among others, had visited the building during the time it housed the country’s leading indigenous organization.

The indigenous movement announced it would not abandon the house. Meanwhile, the government has used this new confrontation to test the loyalty of members of Alianza País (AP), a political movement led by President Rafael Correa, as well as to test the formation of a new national indigenous organization in line with government policies.

More than 25 years of history

On Dec. 11, CONAIE president Jorge Herrera received an eviction notice from the Ministerio de Inclusión Social y Económica (MIES) requiring directors of the indigenous movement to leave the building that had been their headquarters for 25 years. The document signed by the Coordinador General Administrativo Financiero Marco Cazco said the government urgently needs the site to create a center for addicted adolescents who have completed a detoxification process and who lack family support.

The government’s argument was weak and barely believable because there are dozens of abandoned public buildings that could better fulfill the function the government cites as the reason it needs CONAIE’s house.

The property claimed by the government was given to CONAIE in 1991 following the first indigenous uprising (NotiSur, June 4, 1991) under a free loan agreement (comodato) signed by Ecuadoran President Rodrigo Borja (1988-1992). According to the agreement, use of the property was made as an act of recognition of the existence of indigenous peoples and nationalities that until then had not been considered actors in the country’s social and political life.

The comodato is a legal concept by which a public institution turns over an asset to an organization for a specific goal. At the time this comodato was signed, there was a precarious structure at the site that functioned as a soup kitchen administered by the Ministerio de Bienestar Social. Under CONAIE’s administration, the building has been expanded to a three-story structure that is now the organization’s headquarters.

More than the economic investment that CONAIE has put into the building, what gives it value is its history. The site has been the epicenter of major social action, including demonstrations that toppled Presidents Abdalá Bucaram (1996-1997), Jamil Mahaud (1998-2000), and Lucio Gutiérrez.
(2003-2005) [NotiSur, April 22, 2005]. Similarly, it has been the seat of the leadership of Latin American movements opposed to the signing of free-trade agreements (FTAs) and the creation of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). During those events, meetings with Latin American leaders of the stature of Presidents Morales and Chávez and Rigoberta Menchú were held.

Correa was also in CONAIE’s house during his first presidential campaign. Ironically, now as president, he accuses CONAIE of using the building as a center of partisan political action and thus claims that CONAIE has broken the terms of the agreement and must return the property to the government.

Faced with this order, which gave a Jan. 6 deadline to vacate the CONAIE building, indigenous leaders asserted they would not give in. Moreover, they called for a series of demonstrations to defend their use of the building and filed a legal challenge calling for the MIES to reconsider its decision within two months. This means that the situation will not be resolved until the end of February. Nevertheless, the real goal of this new confrontation between the government and the indigenous movement will have already been accomplished by then.

**Tests of loyalty**

Governmental sectors did not explain the reasons for the presidential decision. Moreover, some ministers did not know about it beforehand and learned about it from the media because the president had worked on this issue directly with Minister of Social Inclusion Betty Tola, a person the Ecuadoran leader praised for her loyalty.

Even though President Correa said he made this decision more than three years ago but midlevel officials had been slow to follow through, it is still true that this action occurs at a complex political moment. To deal with the situation, the government needs to know what kind of support it can count on within its own ranks.

Once the event was made public, CONAIE immediately received expressions of solidarity from organizations and individuals from around the world who all questioned Correa’s reasons. Boaventura De Sousa Santos, a Brazilian intellectual close to the drafting of the 2008 Constitution, sent the president a letter labeling the decision senseless and politically incorrect (NotiSur, Feb. 23, 2007).

Meanwhile, regime supporters and officials also voiced disagreement with the decision. Within the Asamblea Nacional, a proposal to back CONAIE divided the Alianza País (AP) bloc, and 29 AP representatives voted for the proposal, which didn’t pass because the remaining 61 members from the bloc voted against it. This is the first time that a vote in the Asamblea revealed a division in the official bloc and allowed Correa to know how many unconditional votes he still maintains in that body.

This split in the Asamblea Nacional vote showed the true purpose of the presidential decision to evict CONAIE from its home. Beyond retaliation for political meetings such as the last ones held to coordinate protest marches last Sept. 17 and Nov. 19, the government’s intention was to know precisely the strength that the president has in the Asamblea for important votes for the administration such as adopting constitutional amendments and ratifying the FTA with the European Union (EU), two issues on which pro-government members have exhibited a division.
As is the custom when faced with any sign of disagreement with his position, the president branded those who abstained from voting against the legislative support of CONAIE as traitors. "I did not expect them to stab me in the back," Correa said.

**Major confrontation a unifying force**

Meanwhile, the indigenous movement took advantage of the confrontation to raise other topics that distance it from the regime, such as water management, the land law, territorial autonomy, indigenous justice, and the development model based on extractive industries the government has implemented. Along with the call to defend CONAIE’s house, leaders convened new days of resistance, both at the headquarters threatened by the government and at provincial and community sites.

CONAIE’s call also went out to indigenous sectors that had distanced themselves from that organization. Thus, at the same time that the confrontation about use of the property became the most important element dividing indigenous peoples from the government and causing divisions within government ranks, it also became a cohesive element for the indigenous movement.


Faced with CONAIE’s efforts to seek greater support, Correa, beyond ratifying the eviction, announced the creation of a new indigenous organization parallel to CONAIE and with organizations that have rallied to his political proposal. The new organization is built on a base of sectors from the central highlands that have benefitted from electoral posts supported by AP, and principally, the Confederación Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas, Indígenas y Negras (FENOCIN) formed in 1968 with the support of the Partido Socialista. FENOCIN has now joined the ranks of AP (*NotiSur*, Sept. 18, 1998, and Aug. 1, 2003).

It is not the first time that the government has tried to create a new national indigenous organization. The ultraright former President León Febres Cordero (1984-1988) and populist Presidents Bucaram and Lucio Gutiérrez (2003-2005) attempted to do so previously, but their efforts failed and CONAIE kept its position as the country’s largest indigenous organization. The challenge CONAIE now faces is to hold that place.

-- End --