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A year after Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa suffered his first electoral defeat in the country’s main cities, various opposition sectors met to try to consolidate political unity hoping to repeat this triumph in the 2017 presidential elections (NotiSur, March 14, 2014). Nevertheless, consensus on issues that could unite these dissimilar forces is unlikely, and it’s possible they won’t be able to overcome the ideological visions that separate them.

What is democracy?

The three main leaders who won regional elections on Feb. 23, 2014—Jaime Nebot, in Guayaquil; Mauricio Rodas, in Quito; and Paúl Carrasco in the province of Azuay—met in the city of Cuenca, in country’s southern highlands, to try to form a political alliance that would allow them to confront the concentration of power achieved by Correa’s government.

Even though various political sectors applauded the gathering as the first time political movements ranging from the far right to the far left approached each other, topics that have to be clarified to create a political alliance for the 2017 elections were left on the table. One of them was the concept of democracy.

"We should explain what we understand as democracy; we should ask Mr. Nebot what his concept of democracy is," said Mónica Chuji, an indigenous leader who attended the meeting as part of Prefect Paúl Carrasco’s Azuay delegation.

Chuji’s concern, shared by Marcelino Champi, a Shuar Indian who is the prefect of the Amazonian province of Morona Santiago, relates to the concept of political participation. The right—represented at the meeting by Guayaquil Mayor Jaime Nebot of the Partido Social Cristiano (PSC) and Quito Mayor Mauricio Rodas of the Sociedad Unida Más Acción (SUMA)—limits itself to citizen electoral participation within the framework of a monocultural state and with an institutional structure inherited from Anglo-Saxon culture, while the indigenous sector proposes a democracy within the framework of a plurinational state with representation by all nationalities and social sectors in Ecuador.

Reaching an agreement in this sense implies the Ecuadorian right should accept the idea of a state that it is not comfortable with since plurinationality also involves administrative autonomy and territorial control by indigenous nationalities—something that runs counter to rightist sector interests of free access to indigenous territories and the exploitation of natural resources in those territories.

On the other hand, the task for the indigenous movement is how to become part of the Asamblea Nacional (NA) without participating in the general electoral process as they have not managed to get more than 7% of the votes in all elections in which their political arm, the Movimiento Plurinacional Pachacutik, has participated (NotiSur May 24, 1996, and Aug. 16, 2013). The Constitution does not provide for direct appointment of deputies, as proposed by the indigenous peoples.
If the concept of democracy separates them now, more distance arises when it comes to analyzing which economic model to implement if they win the elections because the concept of good living (buen vivir) that indigenous groups and the Ecuadorian left propose contrasts with the capitalist model that characterizes the right. So then what is it that can unite them?

**An alliance for institutionality**

For Carrasco, who hosted the Cuenca meeting and identifies himself as a leftist, possible agreements that could come from this unity project are related to recovery of the country’s institutionality; to first recover the independence of state functions and then think about an electoral process with participation independent from the political forces and their ideological proposals.

What Carrasco suggests can be seen more as a utopia. He proposes a halt in the economic administration of the state, which would reduce it to simply fulfilling the ongoing commitments left by the current government. "We should implement a transition model that sets aside the ideological implementation of the government administration and focuses on recovering the independence of the state functions and, once that has been achieved, go to a new election in which the political project that has the approval of the Ecuadoran citizenry would win, whether it be of the right or of the left," Carrasco said.

The independence of state functions is a key element in the current political battle because the judiciary, the legislature, control of citizen participation, and the electoral system are in President Correa’s hands. To beat Correa in 2017, the opposition must overcome his having control of the electoral system, and that is a task that all political forces not aligned with President Correa’s project must take on, regardless of their ideology.

**Call to unity criticized**

The Cuenca encounter ended with three general agreements: promote and defend democracy, freedoms, civil rights, pluralism, and respect for all persons regardless of their point of view; have both national and local levels of government promote effective steps to stimulate investment and productive development; and undertake joint work in the context of ideological, territorial, and cultural diversity to consolidate a democratic and unified space.

Despite it being a general agreement, the government responded quickly, criticizing the meeting, and, in what has become a classic response, current governmental officials made personal attacks against the main participants of the meeting in an attempt to affect them nationally.

Carrasco’s response was to emphasize that everyone has the right to talk with anyone and, if appropriate, to join forces with them politically. "We have come to the point that it is thought that only they can meet, only they can speak," Carrasco said in reference to the criticism offered by Doris Soliz, former minister of political coordination, who had branded leftist and indigenous leaders participating in the meeting as traitors.

However, other leftist groups also expressed surprise about the meeting but have not rejected it directly although they have questioned that the resulting agreement was so general. "It is a positive and necessary initiative that can be seen as a first step. It must now be made more concrete. If they speak about unity, the first step is to clarify for what end," said César Montúfar, director of the Movimiento Concertación Democrática.
Despite criticism, the call has been made. What is needed now is to overcome differences if the goal is recovery of state institutions. Should things fail now, in the future it will be difficult to identify another objective strong enough to unite disparate positions such as those held by the forces on the right, the left, and the indigenous movement.

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