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Ecuador: Turning a Deaf Ear and Repression

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Results of the uprising Ecuadoran indigenous peoples organized in August tallied 201 persons arrested by national police or Army, 130 taken to prison, and 111 legal action opened against people charged with aggression, resisting arrest, blocking public spaces, and sabotage, according to data from the legal department of the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE). Some 62 people were put under preventative detention for 30 days although sentences were reversed with alternatives to incarceration. Those in custody will have to stand trial, and one has already been sentenced to two months in prison. CONAIE also reported 168 persons wounded, 48 of whom needed surgery or sutures. Two people each lost an eye. (NotiSur, May 2, 2008, Nov. 9, 2012, July 18, 2014, and Jan. 30, 2015)

Meanwhile, the Ecuadoran government issued a report saying that the national police reported 113 in their ranks were injured; six needed surgery because of their wounds, and the rest reported moderate or minor multiple injuries. However, elsewhere in the report it said nine people had multiple injuries and fractures of hands or legs.

The same governmental report says 373 protests took place in 24 provinces in Ecuador between Aug. 10 and Aug. 21. The most intense occurred in Pichincha, Loja, and Morona Santiago where there were 160 picketing demonstrations, 141 roadblocks, and 72 marches. This list gives an indication of the intensity of the indigenous uprising in Ecuador. Nevertheless, protestors failed to get the government to listen to them or to get the social organizations to stay mobilized in Quito during the 20 days that the indigenous people responded in the provinces and their communities.

Besieged indigenous movement

President Rafael Correa continues determined to ignore protests in the country (NotiSur, July 17, 2015, and Aug. 21, 2015). He activated his propaganda machine in an effort to convince the citizenry that the news disseminated by independent media is false. The government now owns four of the 10 national television networks. Two are owned by Mexican magnate Ángel González, who, according to his own statements, is only interested in the business aspect, even though the Constitution prohibits foreigners from owning national media or also owning other nonmedia businesses (NotiSur, July 19, 2013). Of the four remaining media outlets, only two question government actions and disseminate news about the magnitude of the indigenous uprising. The other two are aligned with the government.

Only the effectiveness of social media and foreign press coverage has made possible an image of the Ecuadoran political scenario and the size of the indigenous battle. That’s why Correa is also trying to discredit foreign media such as The Economist and The Guardian of Britain and Le Monde of France or The Washington Post and The New York Times of the US that he accuses of falsifying the truth and giving the indigenous uprising too much importance.

Correa undoubtedly won the information war and was not affected by new demonstrations on Sept. 16, despite their size and nationwide reach. He again ignored the protests, saying that they involved only a small group who wanted to impose their political agenda through violence.
Meanwhile, to minimize the impact of the marches and prevent them from growing, the government organized events in the plazas where they historically take place. For example, in Quito’s Plaza San Francisco, a traditional place for social movements to gather, the government organized a trade fair, forcing demonstrators to march in a circle to a departure point after walking through the center of the city.

Simultaneously, Correa continues to try to break up CONAIE. Failing his first attempt to split the organization’s national leadership, he turned his actions toward regional affiliates. On the coast, he managed to impose a leadership subject to his control, and thus the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Costa Ecuatoriana (CONAICE) passed into the hands of the government.

He made a similar move on Sept. 15 by holding a meeting with Amazonian organizations that back the regime and naming a parallel leadership in the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonia del Ecuador (CONFENIAE). A presidential decree stipulated that directors of indigenous organizations must be registered with the Secretaría de la Política, which means that it can be expected that the leadership named irregularly a day before the indigenous protest will be recognized even though the marches in Amazon cities have attracted large numbers of protestors and the communities have recognized the leadership of Franco Viteri, acting president of CONFENIAE.

In this vein, the only thing CONAIE appears to have won is to have a clear map of its power and influence: in the central and southern Amazon it retains its strength, as it does in the provinces of Cotopaxi and in the southern highlands. It has lost power in the northern Amazon, the mountains to the north and central part of the country. It also lost power in the northern Amazon and the northern and central highlands, and even in the province of Pichincha where the capital of the country is, it no longer has the force of the past.

**Fragmented unions weakened**

The union movement also appears divided and unable to carry out acts of resistance with long-term impact. In the August uprising, the unions were only able to organize a major march on Aug. 13, but they did not appear later. Meanwhile, in the provinces, the indigenous movement maintained the fight despite costs they had to bear.

Quito groups waited a month to mobilize again with any degree of strength. On Sept. 16, union members again joined the march convened by the indigenous people but not in great numbers.

At the moment there are three major union groups: one that remains part of the opposition and is critical of governmental action; another significant group, led by the Partido Comunista del Ecuador, is totally aligned with the regime; and a third, with less impact, says it will remain independent of both the opposition and the government but has accepted to join the dialogue organized by Correa.

The same government strategy used to divide the indigenous movement has been used to split the unions. That effort has had greater success because now the unions can only carry out sporadic demonstrations and no longer have the ability to call general strikes.
Mestizo society adrift

Mestizo society, especially the middle class, has mobilized for specific demands, such as opposing inheritance and tax laws that extended this sector’s tax base and sparked major demonstrations in the days just before Pope Francis’ visit (NotiSur, July 17, 2015).

The government now has decided to amend both laws, broadening nontaxable income, which eliminates taxes on the middle class set by those two laws. Without another reason to fight, the softening of these two laws has broken up middle-class protest.

Similarly, the change in these laws has ended protest demonstrations by the rightist opposition that now has a one-item political agenda—stopping a legislative change that would allow presidential re-election. Meanwhile, the broad agenda of the social movements—that includes eliminating constitutional amendments, respecting free association, rescinding water and land laws, and re-establishing bilingual education—is losing support.

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