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INTRODUCTION

“Never again without us”: Indigenous movements shape the country

By Marc Becker

In June 1990, thousands of indigenous people took to the streets in Ecuador in protest of the government's economic, social, and political policies. Having a historically marginalized group dramatically insert themselves into political debates stunned the white elite of this small South American country. This uprising, subsequently called the *levantamiento indigena de Inti Raymi* because it took place just before the traditional June solstice “Sun Festival” celebrations, became a defining moment in that country's history. No longer could indigenous demands be ignored.

Ecuador is a small country on the Pacific coast of South America, and is divided into four geographic regions: the eastern Amazon forests, the high Andes mountains, the warm tropical coast, and the Galapagos archipelago located far from the coast in the Pacific Ocean. Historically these geographic divisions have been barriers to the creation of a unified national identity. Ecuador's largest city is the coastal port of Guayaquil, which traditionally had been seen as liberal, commercial, and outward-looking but now is the center for conservative neoliberal economic policies. In contrast, the capital Quito, located in the highlands, had a reputation as conservative, religious, and inward-looking but now is the home of leftist social movements.

About fourteen million people inhabit Ecuador. The wealthiest and most powerful people are the white descendants of the Spanish colonists. The largest part of the population are the mestizos, a mixture of European and indigenous cultures and peoples. About 10 percent of the population are Afro-Ecuadorians, descendants of escaped slaves who were brought to Ecuador during the colonial period. The percentage of people who trace their ancestry back to the original indigenous inhabitants is hotly contested. Census figures reveal that only 7 percent of the population wishes to identify

as such, whereas indigenous organizations claim that they represent many more people, perhaps as much as 45 percent of the population.

Ecuador has long been plagued by issues of political instability. Since independence in 1830, about two hundred different people have held presidential power, competing with Bolivia for the record of the number and frequency of extraconstitutional changes in government. In 2008, the country adopted its twentieth constitution. During the twentieth century, Ecuador only had three periods during which power passed peacefully from one elected candidate to another. The first was during the 1910s and 1920s in the midst of a cacao boom, the second came in the 1950s with a banana boom, and the longest and most recent was in the 1980s and 1990s in the aftermath of an oil boom.

Politics was traditionally the realm of wealthy white males. In 1929, Ecuador was the first country in Latin America to give women the right to vote in federal elections. Although sometimes assumed to be a liberal reform, conservatives favored giving women the vote because of their association with tradition and religion, and an assumption that women would support conservative candidates. Although Ecuador was the first country in Latin America to give women the right to vote, it was one of the last to give indigenous peoples citizenship rights. Not until 1979 as part of constitutional reforms when Ecuador emerged out of its last military dictatorship did indigenous peoples gain the right to vote. Even with the broadening of the franchise, political and economic power still remained largely in the hands of the same elite classes.

Popular movements including labor unions and leftist political parties repeatedly challenged elite hegemonic control over the country. On several occasions, the Left has come close to gaining power only to have the conservative oligarchy reassert their domination. Often the Left has lost out to populist politicians who spouted rhetoric in support of the poor to gain electoral support, only to impose policies that benefited the oligarchy once they were elected. The most famous and successful of the populist politicians was José María Velasco Ibarra. From the 1930s to the 1970s, Velasco Ibarra won election five times but only was able to complete one of his terms, his third one in the 1950s in the midst of the banana boom that brought more political stability to the country. His last two terms in the 1960s and 1970s led to Ecuador's last two military dictatorships in 1963 and 1972. Populist politicians have undermined the ability of the Left to consolidate support for a movement to challenge Ecuador's exclusionary political and economic structures.

Ecuador has small but powerful leftist movements, divided at different points into socialist, communist, Maoist, Stalinist, and Cuban wings.

The first socialist party was founded in Quito in 1926, one year after a modernizing military government had brought an end to a sequence of liberal governments. The formation of the party came in the aftermath of a powerful anarchist general strike in Guayaquil. The police suppressed the strike with a terrible massacre on November 15, 1922, that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of workers. Observers said that Ecuador's labor movements had been born in a baptism of blood.

At the same time that leftists were organizing labor unions and political parties in the cities, rural activists were building strong movements in indigenous communities. Jesús Gualavisi and Dolores Cacuango mobilized their indigenous comrades in the rural district of Cayambe against neighboring haciendas. Similar to the 1990 indigenous uprising seventy years later, a 1931 rural strike shook the wealthy capitalist class to its core. A month later when indigenous activists in Cayambe called for a country-wide meeting to organize an indigenous federation to advance their interests, the military stepped in, arrested the leaders, and shut the meeting down. After the frustrated attempt in 1931 and another failed effort in 1935, indigenous activists with their leftist allies finally managed to create a national-level organization in 1944. For the next two decades, the Ecuadorian Federation of Indians (FEI) led struggles for land rights that eventually led to agrarian reform legislation in 1964 and 1973. Once they achieved their main demands, however, the Federation began to decline.

Under the influence of liberation theology, in the 1960s the Catholic Church helped organize new indigenous rights federations. They started with the Shuar Federation in the southeastern Amazon in 1961, and subsequently helped launch the National Federation of Peasant Organizations (FENOC) in 1965 and ECUARUNARI, an organization taking its name from the Kichwa phrase meaning the awakening of the Ecuadorian Indians, in 1972. All of these federations were meant to counteract the more radical FEI, but they also began to drift leftward in their political orientation.

In 1980, the Shuar Federation helped found the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE), and then together with ECUARUNARI the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) in 1986. CONAIE consciously structured their organization around the construction of some fourteen indigenous nationalities and eighteen indigenous pueblos (peoples). CONAIE attempted to present itself as the unified representative of all indigenous peoples in Ecuador, but FENOC (now known as the National Confederation of Peasant, Indigenous, and Black Organizations, FENOCIN) and the Ecuadorian Federation of Evangelical Indians (FEINE) contested that designation. Sometimes these

organizations worked together for common goals, and at other times they fiercely competed with each other for grassroots support.

A long-running debate within indigenous organizations was whether activists should press for political changes as a social movement or as a political party. This ongoing dance between different organizing strategies led to the formation of Pachakutik in 1995 to contest for local office. Pachakutik achieved a fair level of success in placing their candidates in power in local races in indigenous communities, but were frustrated in their attempts to achieve broader political traction.

While Pachakutik contested for power at the ballot box, CONAIE continued with a policy of using street-level mobilizations to pull down neoliberal governments who ruled against their economic and political interests. In 1996, Abdalá Bucaram won election on a populist platform that, much like Velasco Ibarra before him, promised to aid the poor but once in office he proceeded to implement policies that benefited the oligarchy. After half a year, in February 1997, CONAIE mobilized large protests that forced Bucaram from office. But rather than CONAIE taking power, Fabian Alarcón, the president of the Congress, took over the presidency and continued with similar types of policies.

Four years later, once again CONAIE mobilized against the presidency of Jamil Mahuad that was implementing neoliberal economic policies that were particularly crushing for rural indigenous communities. In highly symbolic moves that struck against nationalist notions of sovereignty, he replaced the national currency, the sucre, with the U.S. dollar, and lent the Manta Air Base rent-free to the U.S. military for purposes of intervening in the drug and guerrilla wars in neighboring Colombia.

On January 21, 2000, in what some people called the last and shortest coup of the twentieth century, indigenous militants allied with lower-ranking members of the military to remove Mahuad from power. For a brief period of time, CONAIE president Antonio Vargas together with Colonel Lucio Gutiérrez held power in a Junta of National Salvation until an army general pulled rank on Gutiérrez and collapsed their provisional government. Gutiérrez emerged from this failed coup attempt as a political leader, and two years later won election to the country's highest office in alliance with the indigenous political movement, Pachakutik. At the time, some observers interpreted his actions as a repeat of those of his colleague Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, who initially led a failed military coup but then returned to win the presidency through the ballot box.

In a seeming repeat of previous populist politicians, Gutiérrez quickly allied with the capitalist and neoliberal interests that he had pledged to

fight, and CONAIE and Pachakutik soon broke from his government. After two years of increasingly conservative policies, another popular uprising forced Gutiérrez from power. This time, instead of being led by indigenous activists, it was middle-class urban dwellers who pressed for his removal. In fact, the conservative evangelical indigenous federation FEINE which was now allied with Vargas came to his defense. Subsequently, evangelical indigenous communities as well as those in the Amazon would support Gutiérrez, drawing a significant amount of support away from Pachakutik.

In the lead up to the 2006 presidential elections, activists urged an alliance between Pachakutik and Rafael Correa who had gained reknown as minister of finance in the successor government to Gutiérrez. Some proponents dreamed of a joint ticket between Correa and a historic indigenous leader such as Luis Macas. In what many interpreted as an egotistical and perhaps racist move on Correa's part, he refused to play second fiddle to an indigenous leader with decades of experience leading political struggles. Nevertheless, Correa gained popular support and defeated banana magnate and Ecuador's richest man Álvaro Noboa to win the presidency.

Once in office, Correa quickly won a series of elections that deeply entrenched his hold on power. First he won a plebiscite to hold elections for a constituent assembly, then created a new political party that won the majority of seats in the assembly, then won approval for the new constitution that had been drafted under his guidance, and finally won reelection and a dominant presence in Congress under the new constitution. The decade before assuming office had been a particularly unstable one in Ecuador's history with about ten people moving through the presidential palace, but now Correa was positioned to remain in power for ten years.

Correa's ascendancy came at the cost of social movements who felt that he had taken over their political issues and monopolized the spaces that they had previously enjoyed. In addition, indigenous communities repeatedly challenged Correa for his desire to build the economy on extractive industries, particularly petroleum and gold mining, which had especially harsh impacts on historically marginalized communities. Even though this resentment led to a falling out with leftist activists, Correa maintained a strong degree of popularity from the mestizo urban middle-classes and as a result retained dominant control over the country.