

Ecuador: Behind the 'Indigenous Uprising' against Correa — divided left weakens struggle for change

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Ecuador's President Rafael Correa is facing the most important challenge yet to his self-styled "Citizens' Revolution".

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A range of indigenous groups, trade unions and leftist parties mobilised across the country on August 13. Their long list of demands included calls for land reform, opposition to mining, support for bilingual education and the shelving of the government's proposed water and labour laws.

In Quito, the "Indigenous Uprising" — as protest organisers dubbed it — lasted nine days, with organisers vowing to return this month.

These were just the latest in a series of mobilisations starting almost a year ago.

Late last year, trade unions organised two national protests against changes to the labour law proposed by the Correa government, which expanded social security to cover "housewives" and strengthened job security.

However, unions were unhappy that it also sought to absolve the state from having to contribute 40% of workers' retirement funds.

This was followed by mobilisations on May 1 that brought together a range of protest groups, each with their own specific demands. The protests were supported by Ecuador's largest indigenous federation CONAIE.

Correa responded by alleging those protesting wanted to destabilise his government, which has sought to redistribute wealth and pursued a range of anti-imperialist foreign policies.

He called on his supporters to participate in various counter-demonstrations.

Another round of protests in June brought a different segment of society onto the streets. These anti-Correa protests were concentrated mainly in middle-class areas of Quito, and in Guayaquil, the wealthiest city in the country. Right-wing opposition parties govern both cities.

The main focus of these protests was opposition to new laws raising taxes on the rich. The government pushed these measures to compensate for falling revenue due to the drop in global oil

prices.

These protesters opposed a supposed bid by Correa to take Ecuador down the road “of Cuba and Venezuela”. They demanded he withdraw his proposed “authoritarian” constitutional reform, which if approved would allow him to stand again for president in 2017.

Surprisingly, CONAIE and other groups generally considered to be part of the left called on their supporters to join the protests against the new tax and organised their own march in Quito.

In turn, right-wing forces rallied in Guayaquil in August on the same day as indigenous marchers arrived in Quito.

Opposition politicians called on Correa to listen to the country’s indigenous people and expressed outrage at police repression of protesters. Right-wing media outlets provided permanent coverage of the protests and frequent interviews with its leaders, who focused their discourse on Correa’s “authoritarian” practice and called on him to drop his proposed constitutional reform.

How can we explain these latest protests that on the surface appear to be bringing the left and right together against Correa?

Citizens’ revolution

That the right opposes Correa is not surprising. Correa’s election in 2006 was the result of a near complete collapse in support for Ecuador’s traditional right-wing parties and their neoliberal policies.

Since then, Correa has implemented several key demands that social movements such as CONAIE made popular through years of street demonstrations.

This includes rejecting a free trade agreement with the US, a restructuring and partial default on the country’s illegitimate foreign debt, closing down the US Manta military base, and adopting a new constitution declaring Ecuador to be a plurinational state.

Progressive economic policies have also led to a huge expansion in social spending and investment in infrastructure projects that have benefited the poor.

As a result, Correa has presided over a drop in poverty rates. His government has also overseen a drop in inequality and a rise in workers’ share of overall national wealth at the expense of the capitalist class.

However, Correa has also triggered conflicts with various social movements and groups over policies such as his proposal to open new mines and drill for oil in the Yasuni national park, his support for a free trade agreement with the European Union, his socially conservative positions on abortion and the lack of advances in promised land redistribution.

Perhaps his biggest weakness, however, has been his hostility to social movements with a critical stance towards his government. Autonomous social movements have increasingly been portrayed as an obstacle to government policies, rather than a vital component of any serious process of change.

Pointing to consistent majority support for his Citizens’ revolution, Correa has lumped together right-wing parties, business groups, indigenous groups and trade unions that oppose his government’s policies.

Correa has argued these “minority groups” simply seek to defend their own sectoral interests at the expense of the majority.

Unable to differentiate between irreconcilable class enemies and potential class allies, Correa’s attitude has played a role in opening the door to the kind of street politics Ecuador is now experiencing.

All of this poses serious challenges for a left that bears little resemblance to the one that dominated street politics in the 1990s.

Divided left

CONAIE’s first indigenous uprising in 1990 thrust the country’s indigenous peoples into the centre of public debate. Over the next decade, CONAIE led several rebellions and positioned itself at the centre of an emerging new left capable of mobilising broad popular support.

CONAIE’s twin focus was on bringing together indigenous groups with an explicitly ethnically-orientated focus while working with other social movements. This meant it quickly filled a leadership role left vacant by a debilitated trade union movement and weakened left parties.

By 1996, CONAIE decided to launch a new political movement, Pachakutik. While the new group was open to everyone seeking progressive change, it was acknowledged by all that CONAIE was the heart of the new project.

Within a few months, Pachakutik came third in presidential elections, securing 20% of the vote nationally and about 40% of the vote in indigenous-majority electorates in the highlands region.

Although it took part in the overthrow of two presidents, CONAIE, Pachakutik and the left in general suffered a series of debilitating splits.

The first round of splits, which divided groups vertically, was over whether to support former colonel and populist politician Lucio Gutierrez in the 2002 presidential elections.

Some CONAIE leaders, including the group’s then-president Antonio Vargas, decided to run against Gutierrez. But most of CONAIE and Pachakutik decided to support Gutierrez, and then joined his government when he won.

Although elected on the back of an anti-neoliberal platform, Gutierrez quickly backtracked on his main policy proposals.

In response, highland indigenous groups affiliated to CONAIE broke with Gutierrez’s government six months into his term in office. Ironically, Vargas — who had become a minister in the Gutierrez government — stayed in, furthering divisions.

The reverberations of this failed alliance also shook Pachakutik. Many of its mestizo (ethnically mixed) leaders left or were pushed out after recriminations over who was to blame for the decision to support Gutierrez.

By the time of the April 2005 forajido (outlaw) rebellion, in which middle-class sectors and urban groups brought down Gutierrez, CONAIE was so disorientated and debilitated, it was largely relegated to the sidelines. Some of its base, led by Vargas, came out to support Gutierrez.

With Gutierrez gone, progressive urban forces that had previously looked to CONAIE for leadership, joined with former Pachakutik mestizo leaders to throw their support behind Correa's bid for the presidency.

Although Correa and Pachakutik discussed the possibility of running a joint presidential ticket, Pachakutik ultimately decided to stand its own indigenous candidate in a bid to rebuild its base.

Yet, if support for Gutierrez had split CONAIE vertically, the decision to run against Correa served to divide it horizontally.

Despite almost unanimous backing from CONAIE, Pachakutik candidate Luis Macas only won 2% of the national vote. Macas was relegated to third position in indigenous-majority electorates — trailing both Gilmer Gutierrez (Lucio's brother) and Correa.

Correa went on to consolidate his support among indigenous voters and forged alliances with local indigenous groups and Ecuador's other nation-wide indigenous and peasant federations.

Division among indigenous groups has also been reflected in a drop in numbers in CONAIE's membership base. Many local and regional affiliates have distanced themselves from the national confederation over its stance towards Correa.

CONAIE president Jorge Herrera says the indigenous group has lost about 40% of its membership

All of this has led many to say that the unorganised majority support Correa, while the organised minority do not. Although perhaps an exaggeration, the statement sums up the left's dilemma.

Challenges

The August mobilisations were a long way from the scale of protests that social movements could generate in the 1990s.

At the same time, the recent demonstrations have drawn into sharp relief just how far Correa's polarising discourse and practices towards sections of the left have gone towards rehabilitating the right.

This has undermined his popularity, forcing him to back down on the new tax laws. The protests appear to reflect his government's inability to regain the initiative with new radical reforms that could win popular support and advance the citizens' revolution.

Perhaps conscious of this weakness, some CONAIE leaders and Pachakutik parliamentarians have argued for openly working with right-wing politicians as a way towards removing Correa from power. Most CONAIE leaders have rejected this road.

The question remains as to which road they will take. Will CONAIE prioritise a strategy that seeks to unite all indigenous and social movements — regardless of their position on Correa — in support of their popular demands, while isolating the right?

Or alternatively, will they seek to reach points of agreement with forces that today are mobilising against Correa, irrespective of their ideological differences.

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P.S.

* <https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/59984>