

Ecuador's New Indigenous Uprising

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Ecuador's Indigenous movements have launched an uprising to challenge the government's opposition to bilingual education and its support for an extractive-based economy.

On August 2, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) began a march from the southeastern Amazonian province of Zamora Chinchipe that will arrive in the capital city of Quito on August 13. Upon its arrival, the Indigenous march will join a general strike called by the Workers United Front (FUT) in opposition to the government's labor policies.

The CONAIE march and FUT strike are separate actions from conservative protests that the wealthy and previously dominant oligarchy organized in June 2015 against proposed increases in inheritance and capital gains taxes. In that situation, Ecuador's leftist president Rafael Correa backed down in the face of the right wing's defense of their class interests, and called for dialogue rather than protest.

The CONAIE declared that during his almost decade in power Correa had never shown an interest in talking to them and that the time for dialogue was past. Rather, they said it was time for action.

Correa has denounced the Indigenous uprising and general strike as an attempt to destabilize his government. The activists deny that this is their intent, but instead claim that their goal is to make the government more responsive to social movement demands.

Although politics can make strange bedfellows and introduce opportunistic alliances, for the most part the left and right opposition to Correa's government follow different strategies and seek different goals.

Some conservatives have made open calls for a coup against Correa. Any such extra-constitutional move against the president is unlikely to succeed without the military's support. At present it appears that the army prefers the social gains and stability of Correa's government to the disruptions that a conservative government would introduce.

The left opposition to Correa, on the other hand, appeals to the government to implement the promises of the progressive 2008 constitution to defend the rights of nature and the plurinational nature of the Ecuadorian state. These are not demands that appeal to conservatives.

Some radicals accuse Correa of governing as a conservative, and of defending entrenched economic interests. They would like to replace him with a true leftist, and have run candidates against him in presidential elections. In most cases, principled leftists refuse to ally with conservatives and do not want to return to previous neoliberal governments.

Moderates in Ecuador, as well as Correa's international supporters, contend that the global capitalist order constrains the Ecuadorian government from taking more radical action. Correa's supporters argue that if he attempted to implement the left's political agenda it would destabilize the country and threaten to undo the dramatic socio-economic gains of the last ten years.

A history of protest

In the 1980s, the FUT organized a series of powerful general strikes against conservative governments that implemented neoliberal economic policies that shifted public resources from the poor to the wealthy. In 1990, the CONAIE brought the country to its knees with a powerful uprising

in support of rural land demands.

In the 1990s, the CONAIE emerged at the head of well-organized social movements that removed a series of unpopular conservative governments from power. One of the CONAIE's most significant gains was control over the country's bilingual education programs, an agreement that the Correa administration later rolled back.

Social movement protests created political space that Correa used to win election as president in 2006. Correa quickly had a falling out with the CONAIE over the question of whether the executive or social movements should define the policies that the government would implement.

In office, Correa overturned previous neoliberal economic policies as he shifted significant resources to previously marginalized and impoverished sectors of society. Dramatic increases in social spending significantly lowered poverty and inequality rates, and increased access to social services. His success earned him the highest approval ratings of any chief executive in the Americas and repeated reelection to office.

Social movement activists complain that Correa's success has been due to a continued reliance on extractive industries, in particular petroleum and gold mining, to fund social programs. Such policies, according to the activists, harm the environment and require vast amounts of water that would otherwise be used to meet human needs. In addition, the extractive policies fail to break from a capitalist mode of production.

Since Correa took office almost ten years ago, the CONAIE has organized a series of protests against extractive enterprises and in support of water rights. The current march departed from an area that has been the site of intense protests over gold mining. Over the past year, the FUT has also organized a series of strikes against Correa's proposed revisions to the sacrosanct 1938 labor code. None of these actions, however, has gained the size or public presence of previous protests in the 1980s and 1990s.

Divisions

Correa claims that the CONAIE does not speak for the majority of the Indigenous masses in Ecuador, and instead has allied with discredited conservative politicians against his leftist government. In reality, Indigenous movements are rent with divisions that have always been present, both within the movement and between the bases and their leaders. It is a mistake to think that Indigenous communities, as with any group of people, would speak with a single voice.

Even in the 1990s when the CONAIE held a dominant position in social movement organizing, despite its best intent it never gained a hegemonic voice. Rather, the CONAIE leaders generally staked out a center-left position generally associated with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and liberation theology influences in the Catholic Church.

The CONAIE occasionally collaborated and sometimes competed with three other Indigenous organizations. The Ecuadorian Federation of Indians (FEI) is the oldest federation and worked closely with the communist party. The National Confederation of Peasant, Indigenous, and Negro Organizations (FENOCIN) was identified as a more "peasant" organization associated with the socialist party. The Council of Indigenous Evangelical Peoples and Organizations (FEINE) often takes more conservative positions in line with its religious orientation, but also has collaborated with the other Indigenous federations around common economic interests.

On occasion Correa turns to other federations, in particular the FEI and the FENOCIN, to claim that Indigenous communities support his policies. Correa has also attempted to create new organizations

with dissidents from the CONAIE, a strategy that previous conservative governments also implemented in an attempt to undermine independent social movement organizing efforts.

Despite Correa's efforts to defeat the CONAIE, it still remains the largest and best organized Indigenous federation, even though it has never achieved its goal of speaking for all Indigenous peoples and nationalities with a single united voice. At the same time, very clear political divisions have emerged within the CONAIE.

In a break from previous declarations that Indigenous movements would never collaborate with their historic enemies in the oligarchy, a conservative wing in the CONAIE has engaged in opportunistic alliances with Correa's opponents on the right. They viewed these alliances as the best option to challenge the president's authoritarian and anti-democratic policies.

The conservative wing condemned a competing left wing for their openings to the Correa administration. Some leftist activists have called for a "third line" approach in which they criticize Correa for his policy failures even as they are open to collaborating with the president on his positive policy initiatives. While this position does not have majority support among the CONAIE leadership, if polls are to be believed it is perhaps a more common position among the bases in rural communities.

In a July assembly at which the CONAIE decided to organize a mobilization against the government, the leadership condemned both those who collaborated with the conservatives and those who were open to working with Correa. Rather, the federation decided to continue a policy of open opposition to the government's policies on bilingual education and extractive industries.

Other demands that the CONAIE and the FUT are making of the government are to archive a set of constitutional amendments that would expand executive power including permitting Correa's reelection, limit pensions for retired people, limit free access to higher education, expand oil drilling in the Yasuní National Park, and challenge the rights of nature.

Meanwhile, the FUT no longer has the power it had in the 1980s, and the CONAIE has lost much of the coherence and force it enjoyed in the 1990s. Neither organization is likely to be able to shut down the country as they previously were able to do.

At the same time, despite the presence of a conservative tendency within the diverse Indigenous movements, Correa is wrong in attempting to paint all opposition to his government with such broad strokes. Correa has excelled at making electoral calculations that assure his continued hold on power, and is unlikely to be removed from power.

Rather than representing a threat from a resurgent rightwing, as was the case with the June protests against inheritance and capital gains taxes, the current protests illustrate that a leftwing government and leftwing social movements often operate at divergent and incompatible sets of logic and policy objectives.

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