

PLURINATIONALISM AS DEMOCRACY: CONTEXTUALIZ- ING ECUADOR'S INDIGENOUS MOVEMENT

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Over the last two decades, Ecuador has come to be considered one of the most unstable democracies in Latin America. The Ecuadorian state has seen over ten different heads of state in just the last decade. At the heart of this tumultuous era lies the highly organized Indigenous Movement. Led by arguably the most effective indigenous social organization in the western hemisphere, CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador), the movement has seen both a drastic rise in international visibility and, more recently, a spiraling decline of influence within national politics. This paper attempts to contextualize the Indigenous Movement within the broader socio-economic portrait of the Ecuadorian state. I argue that the movement and the indigenous idea of 'a plurinational state' represent a dramatic, even revolutionary, new democratic force in Ecuadorian history with the potential to bring sustainable prosperity to the Ecuadorian Republic.

The many nations which represent the indigenous people of Ecuador have waged ongoing political and physical resistance against the state since the time of the Spanish crown. This reactionary warfare against the republic was necessary in order to preserve the democratic ideals that served as a basis for the traditional communal societies of Ecuador's

indigenous peoples. In the last two decades, CONAIE (The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador) has brought the indigenous struggle into the spotlight of national politics. Utilizing mass demonstration and political maneuvering, CONAIE and its political representative counterpart, Pachakutik, have begun to dictate broader constitutional reforms within the government. For the first time in the republic's history, the 1998 and 2008 constitutions included language that incorporates indigenous demands for sovereign recognition, bilingual education, and limited territorial claims. Still, one must concede the products of reform remain contentious. Indigenous poverty remains high, neoliberal policies continue to undermine cohesive nationalism, and democratic stability is not yet assured. The outward structural

adjustments that have taken place because of indigenous activism have failed to mask the correlative political impotency which followed. I argue that the Indigenous Movement of Ecuador represents a unique socio-political and economic approach that, although still in its formative stages, is revolutionary in nature and may be the solution to decades of democratic failures.

The late 20th and early 21st century Ecuadorian state is fractured and dysfunctional to the extent that it cannot properly provide for the welfare of its citizens. Runaway inflation, diminutive foreign investment, and high levels of poverty (even by Latin American standards) continue to persist even with the two-decade-long application of neoliberal economic policies.¹ The failure of the Ecuadorian government since its return to democracy is evident

when considering that nine different presidents have taken executive office between 1996 and 2006.² This instability seems out of place in a nation that is rich in natural resources, is exceptionally safe relative to neighboring countries, and acts as a regional tourist hub. The doctrines which CONAIE espouses represent the possibility of a sustainable democracy that could provide stability and economic welfare built upon the sovereignty of Ecuadorian citizenship, rather than the dependent market structure inherent in neoliberalism.

The core concept of CONAIE policy initiatives is the concept of plurinationalism. This concept is one in which the community controls its resources and maintains policy decisions on a local level through emphasis on a decentralized state structure. This process maintains economic

sustainability via community land rights which, in turn, are authenticated by genuine territorial claims. Within this framework, national identity, far from being ordained by state policies, is mediated by an individual's relationship with his community. The relationship is sovereign by merit of its bottom-up approach from which citizens can influence and direct policy. The interaction between various indigenous peoples, their dynamic identities, and the state apparatus has evolved into this unique, progressive concept. Even so, fundamental questions remain, however, as to what the Indigenous Movement of Ecuador has compromised after two decades of public inclusion. Inherent structural deficiencies continue to leave the indigenous people marginalized and the ability of the state system to accommodate both unitary citizenship and

sovereign plurinationalism remains uncertain.

What is clear is that the absorption of the movement by the state government, in the form of initiatives that co-opt CONAIE policy and selective ministry appointments of indigenous leaders, has compromised organizational congruency and diminished CONAIE's maneuverability in enacting real reform.³ During the height of CONAIE's consolidated influence, two new constitutions were passed (1998 & 2008) which included wording similar to what CONAIE had proposed in its own earlier drafts.⁴ Nonetheless, the movement has had to give concessions on a number of larger issues, such as economic and land reforms, in order to incorporate plurinationalism into these documents. The recent fallout between CONAIE and the current administration, led by

President Rafael Correa, is a positive step toward CONAIE's internal reconciliation and growth. Although it may stunt the acquisition of political currency in the short term, estrangement from the administration discontinues the unhealthy compromise of CONAIE's core mission.

CONAIE and the Indigenous Identity:

A Brief History

CONAIE is a national indigenous organization that represents a fusion of over a dozen separate indigenous nationalities. It is an instrument that serves both identity and class and, like all revolutions before, exhibits the buried sentiments of previous struggles. CONAIE came into being as a result of a merger between the largest regional Amazonian and Highland Indian organizations in the early 1980's.⁵ Fueled by the oil boom surplus of that decade, the government, in a failed attempt

to incorporate Andean highland communities into the modern state, created mechanisms by which local communities could benefit from national social policy. This inadvertently created local autonomy rather than incorporation, and, alongside the transition to democracy in 1979 and the drop in world oil prices, communities were left with unfulfilled promises. On the other hand, the autonomy of the eastern Amazonian region was largely unchallenged throughout the history of Ecuador due to the area's inaccessibility.⁶ The location of oil reserves in this bio-diverse region created an existential threat to Amazon communities. The state's push for drilling and extraction can be considered the genesis of community activism and politicization for these neutral indigenous nations. More recently, the demands of reparations for the

unethical environmental policies enacted by transnational oil companies have consolidated identity within these communities. A class-action lawsuit on behalf of 30,000 indigenous inhabitants of the Ecuadorian Amazon was brought against Texaco in 1993 because of three decades of environmental abuse. The drawn out legal process garnered international recognition for Indigenous rights and truly united these once separate indigenous nations into a distinct identity empowered by its potential extinction.⁷

The voice of the indigenous population of Ecuador had never been as loud as it was in the sweltering heat of June 1990. Outside the famous Santo Domingo church in Quito's storied colonial historic district, representatives of CONAIE, alongside thousands of indigenous supporters, stood in protest.⁸ The

leaders of the protest introduced sixteen demands that encompassed the diversity of the movement itself. The list opposed IMF economic policies, called for basic services to be provided by the government, and proposed the tenet of plurinationalism be enshrined in a refashioned constitution. This was the first of many highly visible public demonstrations that catapulted indigenous rights and, perhaps more importantly, the concept of plurinationalism onto the stage of national politics.

After the uprising in 1990, the organization continued to gain footholds within the state apparatus. Uprisings in 1992, 1994, and 1996 were launched in response to various neoliberal policy initiatives of the executive branch. As power became consolidated within the organization, the decision to launch a political party was made by certain elements

at the regional level.⁹ Although not fully behind this initiative, CONAIE had no choice but to co-opt it and was moderately successful in gaining seats in the 1996 elections.¹⁰ The refurbished constitution of 1998 was soon undermined by policies which implemented economic austerity measures. Mass dissent led CONAIE to garner vast support from among the popular classes. CONAIE's knack for mobilization put the organization at the forefront of the 2001 coup of President Jamil Muhsen.¹¹

For a few hours on January 21st, 2001, leaders of CONAIE, in conjunction with the military, held the highest seat of power in the government. The brazen participation of CONAIE in an undemocratic, albeit widely popular, coup caused many non-indigenous supporters in the socially liberal sectors of the political elite to call CONAIE's authority

into question. The subsequent logistical support of the unpopular Lucio Gutierrez administration led many within CONAIE itself to question its position as the dominant representative of the Indigenous cause.

The demise of the political potency of CONAIE coincided with the rise of populist president Rafael Correa in 2007. In order to marginalize groups that acted outside of what Correa believed were the democratic processes of the state, President Correa made an effort to undermine CONAIE and publically ostracized the organization for using extra-legal instruments such as mass mobilization and road blocks. In response to the waning leverage of the government, CONAIE took a reactionary policy stance and cut ties with the current administration. Increasingly, local indigenous communities that buy into Correa's

corporatist policies (federal funding in exchange for compliance with state initiatives) without the consent of CONAIE risk the ire and reprimands of the national delegation. This recent bottom-up insubordination has fractured the legitimacy and direction of CONAIE. Although the core message of the Indigenous Movement had been compromised by CONAIE in the past in order to exact gains on a national level, many leaders now find it hypocritical that CONAIE expects local passivity even if communities lose out on beneficial governmental policies.¹²

Plurinationalism as

Economic Policy

The sovereignty of the Ecuadorian state is challenged by continued economic liberalization. Neoliberal policies externalize control of the economy not only to global markets but to specific supra-national

organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank. The effects of these policies most certainly lead to far-reaching domestic social and political changes, which themselves can be attributed to supra-national influence. Furthermore, the instability of the sluggish Ecuadorian economy can be attributed, in part, to economic repression by global markets.

Economic instability carries over to the political sphere when dire economic conditions foster political opposition and popular unrest. The neoliberal policies pursued by Ecuador during this time have minimized the citizens' leverage to change their conditions since neoliberal economic policies rely on foreign investment, market demands, and many factors not under Ecuadorian state authority. State economic policies enacted during this period, particularly in the late 1990's, prioritized the

demands of the global marketplace over the demands of the Ecuadorian people.¹³ State insulation from domestic popular pressure, which often boils over into mass unrest, resulted in the erosion of the presidential stability that Ecuador had witnessed in the past decade. Austerity measures, which included slashing state spending, correlated with the strengthening of executive powers and the loss of political currency that the legislative branch had wielded in the past. Without state coffers from which congressional representatives could siphon 'pork' in order to please a legislative constituency, congressional alliances broke down and, in a multiparty democracy such as Ecuador, compromise ground to a halt.¹⁴ This legislative obstruction perpetuated the cycle of unrest that continues to plague the country and, more significantly, the conditions of democracy.

The Indigenous Movement, built upon the foundations of plurinational sovereignty, is opposed to neoliberalization. Of the Latin American countries that held anti-neoliberal protests between 1995 and 2001, Ecuador was one of the most active in terms of the numbers of protests, campaigns, arrests, and injuries.¹⁵ Although at the forefront of these protests in late 2000 and 2005, the indigenous peoples are only a small percentage of the Ecuadorian citizens who feel these sentiments toward the failed policies of neoliberalism.¹⁶ The desire for community control over decisions concerning community matters is the purest expression of democracy, and the emphasis on a decentralized state structure reflects this. James Bowen, in his article, *Multicultural Market Democracy: Elites and Indigenous Movements in Contemporary Ecuador*,

explains how the existing economic elite marginalizes indigenous demands for real structural changes by making concessions that do very little in the way of actual change. The inclusion of pluriculturalism and indigenous land rights in the 1998 constitution is a great example of these insubstantial concessions as it helped incorporate CONAIE into the existing apparatus with vague wording and no concrete promises.

Among other tactics, the existing political elite has used state funding to undermine CONAIE's ability to leverage the interests of Ecuador's indigenous population. In 1999, President Jamil Muñuzugue exploited CODENPE (Council for the Development of Nationalities and Peoples of Ecuador), a World Bank funded development project, to undermine CONAIE authority.¹⁷ CODENPE allocated over \$50

million to indigenous causes, under the condition that CONAIE concede to President Muñuzugue's authority on certain economic policies and allow three other NGOs to coordinate the allocation of funds.¹⁸ Today, President Correa continues his 'citizen's revolution,' which is essentially an attempt to deemphasize the multinational nature of Ecuador, at the expense of collective rights. The lure of state funding has led several local indigenous communities to break with CONAIE policy and allow private development of community land.¹⁹ Furthermore, the current administration finds loopholes in its own constitution to exploit land rights in the name of economic welfare and equal opportunity.²⁰ President Correa has even aligned himself with certain economic tenets of indigenous plurinationalism but solely in rhetoric. He espouses the idea of a 21st century

socialism as an "...economic model [that] aims to give individuals - particularly the poor - freedom within a socialist system to assert themselves politically and economically."²¹ Yet, in practice, the violation of constitutional land rights, restriction of the press, and sale of non-renewable resources look and act much like the neoliberal agenda of the past and fail to achieve the ends envisioned for 21st century socialism.²²

It is obvious under these circumstances that further 'free-market' reforms are not the answer for an underdeveloped nation whose only growth is tied to the ebb and flow of world commodity prices. The numbers are hard to ignore; according to the Center for Latin American Monetary Studies, the equivalent of 5.6% of Ecuador's GDP is received in the form of remittances from the estimated 1.6 million Ecuadorians

living abroad.²³ This indicates a country in which employment and capital are not easy to come by. Remittance figures generated in 2006, the year President Correa took power, indicate 80% of the emigration out of Ecuador was for employment. The trade balance, not including oil, is close to a \$4.5 billion deficit and fails to break even when oil revenue is included.²⁴ These figures depict an externally dependent economy on both the macro and micro level. Thousands of families rely on relatives abroad to sustain life above the poverty line while their government pursues foreign capital to keep a barely balanced budget in check. A sovereign and economically healthy nation must generate revenue not externally but from its own citizens within its own geographical borders. Alberto Acosta, the president of the 2008 constitutional assembly and former mining minister under President Correa, sees the recent push for mineral development as broadly unconstitutional. Acosta's interpretation of the constitution prioritizes public access to clean water and sustainable agriculture over control of resource extraction. He goes on to lament the short-sightedness of promoting an export dependent economy, noting that sustained economic growth without domestic industrial infrastructure would be impossible.²⁵ The government of Ecuador cannot reasonably ensure the welfare of its citizens based upon projected remittances provided by those who were unable to find work in the place of their birth. Sustainable development must be had from the ground up, creating an economic structure which is dependent on domestic investment and production. Foreign investment cultivates reliance on exporting not

only the precious minerals that belong to the Ecuadorian People but, more significantly, the profits that are generated by those resources.

The genesis for a reformed economic political structure is to be found in the 2008 constitution, which provides the framework for decentralized economic planning. The document is a major step toward reconstructing fiscal policy around a plurinational state. Decentralized planning, as written in the constitution, is still governed by a national planning board and must be amended to include more powerful community control.²⁶ The power of CONAIE lies in its ability to draw on the dozens of readily available local affiliates in directing macro-level policy concerning indigenous rights. As witnessed in the middle years of the last decade, when national interests become divergent, the local

centers of power freely assert autonomy in their own best interests. The architecture of this economy would start with local control over local economy and with regional organization from the bottom-up, eventually dictating national policy. Yet the Ecuadorian constitution does not grant indigenous nations full control of their own non-renewable resources. Although this would be a major concession for any modern state, it is a guarantee that must be made if national policy is to truly reflect the interest of all citizens. In order to gain validity within this new framework, any far-reaching centralized economic policy, including foreign capital and the extraction of mineral resources, would have to be mediated by the affected local municipality.

Plurinationalism as Political Policy, Identity, and Citizenship

President Correa's self-proclaimed

'citizen's revolution' individualizes Ecuadorian citizenship and grants legal and social equality under the constitution. This presumption essentially deemphasizes the role of multiple identities in the concept of Ecuadorian citizenship, allowing for the enactment of reformist policy agendas. The belief that every Ecuadorian is granted equality under citizenship, no matter his race or creed, is far from the reality. The indigenous peoples continue to trail the rest of the nation in literacy, mortality, and poverty rates. Indigenous access to quality education, healthcare, and political voice is and always has been disproportionately lower than that of other sectors of the population.

According to Deborah Yashar, author of *Contesting Citizenship in Latin America: The Rise of Indigenous Movements and the Postliberal Challenge*, "effective citizenship is a

necessary condition of democracy" and a nation cannot build effective citizenship without properly enforcing the rights of every individual.²⁷ The most effective way to assert the right of individuals, as Ecuador has shown, is to recognize the need for flourishing collective identities. The authoritarian stance that the Correa administration has taken sacrifices collective identity for the benefit of individual equality and a 'citizen's democracy'. Indigenous resistance to the individualism espoused by neoliberal democracy is the indigenous reaction to community endangerment. This sentiment is best expressed by the Peruvian philosopher and activist Jose Mariategui:

The Indian, in spite of one hundred years of republican legislation, has not become an individualist. And this is not because he resists progress...it is because individualism...does not find the necessary conditions to gain strength and develop...Individualism

cannot flourish or even exist effectively outside a system of free competition. And the Indian has never felt less free than when he has felt alone.²⁸

The Indigenous Movement embraces community identity as the most suitable voice for indigenous democracy. Democracy which truly reflects the voice of the Ecuadorian people is one which recognizes that the individual is inseparable from his community.

At its core, CONAIE is the manifestation of the idea that cultural recognition and effective democratic governance are inseparable concepts, especially in a nation with a diverse socio-economic population such as Ecuador. Recognition by the state should respect the communitarian identity from which indigenous persons approach citizenship. The road to functioning democracy cannot discard this identity in favor of the individualized identity of an

Ecuadorian citizen. A true democracy must allow for both identities to operate freely; this is the essence of plurinationalism. CONAIE has been the arbitrator of these identities and will remain as such until plurinationalism is realized, not just as an element of constitutional wording, but as a reality of Ecuadorian citizenship.

The 2008 constitution, in name, recognizes Ecuador as a politically plurinational state. This cannot be enforced while corresponding political conditions remain prohibitive. The indigenous peoples of the Ecuadorian state are removed, both geographically and economically, from the centers of power in the country. After 1996, access to state power, on the surface, opened up for the Indigenous Movement when its first political party, Pachakutik, won elections at both the municipal and national levels. In the 2006

congressional elections, Pachakutik won seven seats at the national level. The essential republican principle of compromise requires one party to give up certain inherent ideological interests in order to gain some concrete footholds. It is under this doctrine that, as a party, too many of the essential interests of the indigenous peoples had been lost in the fight for power.²⁹ Representative government that remains inaccessible fails to accurately reflect the will of the people.

The existing state apparatus, although democratic by definition, falls far short of the representation inherent in a purely decentralized state system. Luis Macas, longtime CONAIE President, concisely articulates this idea:

For us, modernization obviously is the changing of structures that don't currently serve to advance the economic, social and cultural development of peoples...I think that what we

fundamentally have to begin here is revising everything related to the political system, the decrepit structures, the incompetent institutions that exist and that don't really allow them to be much more agile and functional...³⁰

Moreover, Macas claims that those who have the constitutional sovereignty over the land are unable to leverage its resources for their own benefit. The current structure is one controlled by the elite and is inherently unstable due to the economic policies that allow the elite to grant external forces control of local resources. The people inhabiting the land, not just the indigenous peoples but also the urban working class, are clearly not the same people who control access to the economic benefits offered by the plush Ecuadorian environment. Macas believes this contradiction is the source of inequity and of the disparate living conditions that ravage the indigenous sectors of the population.³¹

CONAIE, itself drawing strength and vitality from both the individual and the diverse identities which give it substance, becomes a player that is impartial to existing norms and power structures. CONAIE has become an external threat to the mechanisms of a state structure modeled after a foreign European blueprint. CONAIE has the potential to become a viable model for what plurinational governance should look like and how it should operate, for it remains essentially plurinational itself.

The Indigenous Movement as Post-Liberal Revolution

Every modern state must take into consideration the many mechanisms and institutions of which it is composed, for they are reminders of a unique national history of birth, struggle, progress, and reform. The most advanced states yield institutions that reflect the very ideals

from which the country grows and to which it aspires: justice, liberty, and democracy. As one takes stock of the political, social, and economic institutions of Ecuador, and the mechanisms that govern it, the reflections appear quite distorted. The vestiges of a racist republic contained within the institutions of the Ecuadorian state do not begin to fill the illustrious framework that was wielded from the 2008 constitution.

Most striking of all is not what is left behind but what is missing. The struggles of the indigenous peoples of Ecuador and the ideals to which they aspire cannot be found within the recorded ledgers of the state apparatus. These groups, their struggles, and the universal ideologies which they represent must fill the empty framework of modern Ecuador, a constitutional democracy that has yet to actualize the identity of its citizens

in the functioning of its government.

CONAIE is in the midst of its natural birth pangs. Over the last two decades, CONAIE has been on both the outside and inside of the existing state framework. The Indigenous Movement succeeded in penetrating the once exclusionary instrument yet could not properly maneuver once inside due to the inherited boundaries rigidly constructed by the ruling elite. The refashioning of the 2008 constitution must be regarded as a necessary battle for, but not a finished goal of, the indigenous people of Ecuador. The greater Indigenous Movement, emboldened by five centuries of experience, will continue to struggle for a truly plurinational Ecuadorian state.

Indigenous Movements contribute to the democratizing trend in Latin America to the extent that hands, thoughts, and voices of the multitudes are used... to build more dynamic and inclusive political communities.³²

This is only possible through the tenets of plurinationalism, a way of life most uniquely suited to bringing Ecuador into its brightest future.

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