

Indigenous People in Ecuador. Living between Institutional Influence and Street Fighting

Nina Schierstaedt

Executive Summary

In Ecuador, political daily routine has for a long time been characterized by road blockades, protest marches, and uprisings of the indigenous population. In March of this year, the indígenas organized violent demonstrations to express their protest against the policy of the Palacio government. Most of the 14 indigenous ethnic groups registered in the South American country, which make up 30 to 40 percent of the total population, live close to the subsistence level.

When Pachakutik, the political arm of the indigenous organisations, was founded in 1995, the marginalized indigenous population established itself on the democratic stage of Ecuador. In 1937, the Ley de Comunas permitted even the indigenous people to engage themselves politically for the first time – within certain limits. Because of the reform policy of the military government which ruled from 1963 to 1966, the highland indígenas were able to organize themselves further. Later, an agrarian reform was implemented; the Huasipungo system, which tied the highland population to the landowners, was abolished, and a corporate citizens' regime was founded which granted the citizens civil and social rights. In 1972, the regional indigenous organization ECUARUNARI came into being, which fought for a partial expropriation of the landowners and was supported by the Catholic church, several leftist political parties, and other civil-society groups. The period of military rule was less favourable to the lowland indígenas who joined forces in the CONFENAIE organisation in 1980. The tensions between the indígenas of the highlands and those of the lowlands continue and find their expression in the leadership of the foremost national indigenous organization CONAIE as well as in the formerly communist FEI, the protestant FEINE, and the FENOC, which propagates the class struggle.

The transition to democracy in Ecuador took place in 1979. The new constitution and a change in minority policy motivated the indígenas to intensify their endeavours to organize themselves. The circumstances were favourable: Illiterates, a group to which most indígenas belonged, were no longer excluded from the right to vote, the government renounced the military's strategy of assimilation, and a multilingual education system was included in the constitution.

The indigenous insurrection of 1990 placed special importance on the street as new forum in the dispute between indigenous organizations and the government. From then on, the CONAIE organized protest marches, road blockades, and sitins in public buildings: CONAIE members occupied the congress building in 1991 and protested against the neoliberal policy of president Sixto Durán Ballén in 1992. However, the conflicts were resolved through negotiations. Yet the mass protests that arose in the late nineties were also backed by civil society groups. In 1997, the nation mobilized against president Abdalá Bucarám, bringing about his dismissal. Jamil Mahuad's term in office was ended by a coup in 2000 in which the CONAIE was involved, which by now has impressively demonstrated its ability to mobilize. The organization's ideology, which has its roots in the construed image of an indigenous identity but not in the class struggle, similarly aids mobilization. The indígenas' ethnic-cultural individuality offers sufficient scope for articulating specific indigenous concerns.

Indigenous rights include self-determination, i.e. the right to control indigenous land and its natural resources; autonomy, i.e. the recognition of indigenous territories with their own jurisdiction; and participation, i.e. access to all political decision-making levels.

However, the political engagement of the Ecuadorian indígenas is expressed not only outside but also within the framework of the political institutions themselves. Thus, for the first time, six Pachakutik candidates won seats in congress and three were elected mayors in 1996. The increased political importance of the indígenas also appeared during the negotiations on a new constitution in 1998. With the inclusion of collective rights for ethnic minorities, i.e. the right to a multi-lingual education system, participation on all political decision-making levels, and ownership of indigenous territory, an important indigenous concern was answered. In this, the country's indigenous organizations were supported not only by numerous INGOs but also by the World Council of Churches, the International Work Group on Indigenous Affairs, the World Bank, and others.

Its cooperation with the Gutiérrez government had a negative impact on Pachakutik in 2003. The president who, during the elections, acted as if he belonged to the radical left, made a turnaround towards neoliberalism after his inauguration. This turnaround was backed by the indigenous members of his cabinet but opposed by the CONAIE. The tensions resulting from it and the withdrawal of the Pachakutik representatives from the government in no way strengthened the clout of the movement.

It is problematic that the indígenas do understand democracy not as a representative but as a direct principle of participation. They reject the current representative model in Ecuador because political decisions are not made to suit the intentions of the people but rather those of a small elite that holds the reins of power. However, the indígenas' much-criticised marginalisation does not result from the existence of a representative system but from the defects of the Ecuadorian democracy. Moreover, it is alarming that the institutionalization of indigenous collective rights, which certainly is a great success for the movement, led to two parallel legal systems, namely official law and indigenous customary law, a fact that conflicts with the code of human rights, which itself is a part of Ecuador's constitution.

Despite its positive effects on the country's democracy, the indigenous movement destabilizes the system at the same time. The stability of the current balance of power is threatened by the fight of an ethnic group that has been suppressed for a long time and now demands equality, challenging the supremacy of the ruling elite. Since the indigenous protest and blockade initiatives, moreover, skirt around parliament and the political parties, they merely aggravate their legitimacy crisis.

The deposition of the authoritarian president Gutiérrez, which was supported by many social groups, showed that Ecuador's population definitely is sensitive towards the relevance of democratic principles. However, it is deeply sceptical towards the democratic regime whose institutions, such as congress and the parties, it experienced as inept. Where organizing mass protests and removing elected presidents from office is part of everyday life, the principle of reaching an agreement within the political institutions deteriorates into mere ad-hoc negotiations between protesters and the government.

The country's traditional elites especially feel threatened by the organization process of indigenous and other interest groups, as they are not willing to abandon their traditional supremacy. Other problems include the concentration of power in the executive branch, and the fact that the national powers are entangled in corruption. Both hamper the indigenous

organizations in their attempt to influence the political decision-making process and promote the expansion of initiatives outside the institutions. Moreover, the country's presidents have been using their right to issue decrees for a long time to circumvent the legislative branch. In this way, the executive established itself as legislator, deprived parliament of its influence, and promoted political corruption. All this confirms the indígenas' belief that they can enforce their interests only in the street.

The political situation in Ecuador is complex and precarious. The development of an indigenous movement and the recognition of indigenous nationalities certainly are historically important achievements, but so far they have not brought about any political results. A longer-term cooperation between indigenous organizations and other social groups would be necessary to counterbalance the elites, who are not willing to recognize the indígenas as an equal class and are, therefore, partly responsible for any political instability. The country's dependence on the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the International Development Bank, and foreign investors enhances the importance of foreign debt settlement, which demands austerity measures that victimize the indigenous population while it calls for a fairer economic policy. In fact, Ecuador's democracy is threatened by a policy which ignores the poverty of large segments of the population, thus provoking mass protests, insurrections, and forceful dismissals of elected presidents. Yet the frequent repetition of these actions not only challenges the minimum criterion of democracy, it also implies the risk of the military coming into power and, consequently, of the country returning to an authoritarian regime.