



Nationalism

Indigenous Identity in Latin America

Cultural Riches and Social Dynamite

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Indigenous identity in Latin America is fundamentally different from post-materialist identity politics in the West, but could benefit from the latter's rise. Deep-seated deficits in representation make the issue of indigenous policy-relevant in almost all countries in the region, however, to greatly varying degrees. Indigenous identity is a further manifestation of social inequality in the region's societies and a challenge to politics.

Preliminary Note

Latin America is a region with one of the highest proportions of indigenous population in the world – some 45 million people, or approx. 8.3 per cent of the population.¹ On the subcontinent, the question of how indigenous peoples are treated has long been politically toxic. It is no less significant in the 21st century, and remains an important factor in Latin American politics. The issue should not be obscured by the fact that, to date, there are only a few examples of indigenous politicians having assumed power. The combination of social demands and ethnic attributions (including self-attributions) has often ensured that left-wing movements and politicians have paid more attention to indigenous issues than the centre or right have.

Since its independence, Latin America's political systems have suffered from a tremendous representation deficit for the subcontinent's indigenous peoples. The promise of a liberal constitutional state – the guarantee of equal rights and obligations – has been only partially fulfilled to this day. The state – especially the constitutional state – has little or no presence in rural regions, where indigenous peoples benefit much less from health, education, and transportation infrastructure than residents of urban centres. The social indicators are worse in virtually every way compared to those of non-indigenous areas. Indigenous groups suffer more from the Latin American phenomenon of deep social inequality. Conflicts regarding land rights, some of them dating from the pre-colonial period, and rights to political and cultural autonomy are the order of the day.

As culturally diverse and organisationally heterogeneous as Latin America's indigenous peoples may be, they are united in central issues owing to their varying degrees of political, cultural, and social marginalisation. For these groups, who largely belong to the rural population, the intercultural view of education, health, internal mechanisms for jurisprudence and decision-making, as well as legal security for land titles are key demands. For the increasing number of indigenous people who live in cities, an additional guarantee of cultural rights is also of utmost importance. These issues are reflected in the classical definition of indigenous peoples propounded by José Martínez Cobo, Special Rapporteur for the UN Sub-Commission on Preventing Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations and Protecting Minorities.²

It should be added that the rural areas inhabited by indigenous peoples often serve to store raw materials such as natural gas, crude oil or minerals, or play an important role in generating energy from water power.³ This circumstance multiplies the conflict potential surrounding land rights among indigenous peoples, the state, and the private sector, especially as part of infrastructure and extraction projects. Ubiquitous phenomena in such conflicts are frustration at a lack of governmental attention, violent protests against the absent state or the unregulated private sector, criminalisation of these protests by the state, and rural exodus, which often goes hand in hand with identity conflicts and the risk of poverty. Efforts at integrating the interests of indigenous peoples and their traditional decision-making processes into nation states, have so far not proceeded past the initial stages.

Latin American legalism, too, which in many countries has led to progressive legislation, fundamentally fails with respect to the rights of indigenous peoples and individuals because of insufficient presence and independence of state institutions. There is often a lack of political will, understanding of indigenous peoples as citizens with equal rights, and competence in intercultural communication. The consequence is that individual legal instruments, such as the International Labour Organization's Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention of 1989, and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), are overwhelmed with unrealistic expectations or those that can scarcely be implemented in practice.⁴ Some progressive autonomy rights are in constant tension with the prerogatives of Latin American presidentialism, especially when the latter is coupled with a centralised state architecture that impedes effective implementation.

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This is fertile ground for identity politics, one would think. Yet, the starting point, the reaction by decision-makers, and thus the picture of individual countries in the region vary greatly. The achievements of indigenous parties in Latin America have also been disappointing. Generally, indigenous politics – that is, politics based on the ethnic or cultural characteristics and living conditions of indigenous peoples – in Latin America is at an entirely different stage of development than the post-materialist identity politics in Western societies. This is because it makes fundamentally different demands, namely for recognition of its own culture and for specific material needs. Despite the differences between the two phenomena, the demands of indigenous

identity politics may well benefit from the successes of identity politics in Western societies.

The Regional Situation

Indigenous political movements in Bolivia and **Ecuador** in the Andes are especially well organised. The Rafael Correa government came to power in Quito in 2007, also thanks to his promise to the indigenous peoples that he would pursue an inclusive policy commensurate with the intercultural nature of the state. But there were many indications that this rapprochement was merely tactical. Whereas the indigenous facade would soon be abandoned in favour of hard left-wing populist power politics, the illusion of an “indigenous” government lasted much longer in Evo Morales's 14-year term of office in **Bolivia** (2005 to 2019). In fact, the organisation of the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) is more reminiscent of a trade union than a movement based on the political traditions of the dominating Aymara, who, for example, regularly rotate offices – a sore point for many of Morales's early allies.⁵ In Bolivia, 6.2 million people, and hence 62.2 per cent of the population, are considered indigenous.⁶

The Morales government can boast successes in improved social recognition of the Aymara and Quechua in Bolivia, where structures exhibit high levels of ethnic segregation and are characterised by deeply entrenched racism. In fact, however, the Morales government has been dominated by the interests of the cocoa farmers and other informal unionised Bolivian industries. It was certainly not driven by the cultural or political practices of the Aymara or the Quechua. Even the Morales government's successful international marketing, which reached its first zenith with the naming of Morales as “World Hero of Mother Earth” by the United Nations General Assembly in 2009, cannot disguise that fact. There was certainly no question of fair treatment or respectful interaction, especially of the indigenous groups of the lowlands. Conflicts surrounding the exploitation of rainforest areas (a prime example being the conflict over the TIPNIS national park as of 2009), which



Potential for conflict: A lack of governmental attention can lead to frustration and protests.

Source: © Gaston Brito, Reuters.

did not implement the constitutionally guaranteed consultation process, and the government's handling of the 2019 slash-and-burn clearing, highlight the problematic use of the "indigenous" label for the Morales government. That is why the promises of a state that has been officially plurinational since 2009, still cannot be considered fulfilled. The authoritarian power politics, and especially the propagation of racist stereotypes and confrontations by representatives of the MAS, have done a great disservice to the reputation of supposed "indigenous politics" both inside and outside of indigenous groups. For instance, Morales's overblown rhetoric made it easy for his opponents to re-assume a position of segregation or assimilation of indigenous groups into a supposed majority society. This political climate makes it difficult for liberal centrist reformers to advocate for indigenous rights.

Morales left behind an unstable political situation when he relinquished power in November 2019. The degree to which political elites have learned from past discrimination against indigenous peoples will become evident over the medium-term. The Morales government discredited indigenous politics in the eyes of the white population, but belonging to an ethnic group remains a very important factor in Bolivia as regards both identity-formation processes and political mobilisation, especially for highland indigenous peoples.⁷ Anyone failing to respect this cultural variety will have no success in Bolivian politics or will have to endure a high level of social conflict.

A high share of indigenous people in the population does not automatically imply successful representation. Despite its seven million



indigenous people, or 24 per cent of the population, **Peru** has no significant indigenous movement on a national scale. The economic upswing witnessed over the last few years has resulted in improved state presence in the highland regions, while rural exodus and urbanisation have promoted acculturation processes. By way of contrast, significant indigenous portions of the population of Peru's Amazon drainage basin suffer from insufficient organisational strength and pervasive corruption, to which indigenous umbrella organisations are of course not immune. The social separation into highland and lowland indigenous peoples, which also exists by definition and in the self-image of the people themselves, can be seen in Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia. In Peru, it is so pronounced that there is colloquial reference to farmers (highland *campesinos* that belong to the Quechua and Aymara ethnic groups) and indigenous groups (lowland *indigenas*).⁸ The peoples of the highland regions are much better integrated into urban centres and the state's decision-making processes and infrastructure. Levels of self-identification as "indigenous" are low in Peru, not least because of the social status associated with indigenous groups.⁹

The globalised drug business prevents the stabilisation of indigenous politics, especially with respect to education, health, and land rights.

Guatemala impressively demonstrates how an indigenous population does not automatically obtain representation even if it enjoys great cultural homogeneity and makes up a high proportion of the overall population. The urgent problems of indigenous peoples, which number 5.9 million and thus make up 41 per cent of the population, remain unsolved in Guatemala for a number of reasons. Neither the elites, who predominantly identify as "white", nor the traditional parties are aware of the plight of

indigenous peoples, nor is there a coherent Maya movement that could push for a breakthrough in addressing the specific problems of this ethnic group.¹⁰ Indigenous parties are unable to attract the majority of indigenous peoples, let alone non-indigenous voters. There have been no consistent electoral successes at the national level. The candidate for the most important indigenous party, WINAQ, received only 5.22 per cent of the vote in the presidential elections. Widespread violence arising from the drug trade greatly deters potential challengers for political office, even in rural regions. The globalised drug business thus prevents stabilisation of indigenous politics that is especially concerned with the issues of education, health, and legal certainty for land title rights. Here, too, corruption has a disintegrating effect on the political system, since such a system structurally favours corrupt elites and industries networked with the drug trade.

Brazil, the subcontinent's largest country, has yet to give rise to any effective indigenous movement despite its total of 305 indigenous groups. The 900,000 indigenous people in Brazil make up only 0.5 per cent of Brazil's population and, much like the low-country indigenous peoples of the neighbouring Andean countries of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru, suffer a much lower degree of organisation, greater marginalisation, and isolation from state decision-making mechanisms.¹¹

The list of countries with effective representation of indigenous peoples at least at the regional level, can be supplemented by Mexico and Panama. In **Mexico**, the federal states of Oaxaca (primarily because of the high number of indigenous mayors), Yucatán, and Chiapas stand out.¹² In many respects, Mexico's federal structure has the potential to better represent indigenous demands than other countries in the region. The principle of subsidiarity governing Mexico's federal states and municipalities allows concepts such as communal property, cultural rights, and land rights to be anchored to an extent which decisively reduces the potential for conflict among the state, businesses, and indigenous peoples. **Panama** in Central America deserves mention because the



well-organised indigenous population in the relatively small country is growing fast (it currently accounts for 12.3 per cent of the overall population). This significantly reinforces political leverage, and will greatly increase demands for adaptations to or abandonment of the country's upcoming large infrastructure projects. As in other Caribbean and Central American

states, the Afro-Panamanian population group views itself as most linked to the developments of Western identity politics. The proximity or, in the case of former British territories, the direct connection to the English-speaking world plays a role in establishing greater reception for post-materialist identity politics than is the case in large parts of Latin America.



No support: Indigenous peoples in Latin America suffer from marginalisation and a lack of inclusion in the political process. Source: © Ueslei Marcelino, Reuters.

assessment reveals that there are specific foundations for, and in some cases, solidified organisational forms of indigenous politics in many Latin America countries. Whether and how these group interests develop in future – as anti-system protests or productive participants in political competition whose goal is to achieve a liberal democracy – greatly depends on the political systems and the course set by current decision-makers. The decisive factor for Latin American politics will be whether they continue to reinforce indigenous people’s latent anti-system, strategic essentialism by continuously underestimating and disregarding issues outlined above – with all the risks that entails – or implement suitable measures to allow indigenous peoples to participate and contribute as a productive force within intercultural societies. There is also the question of whether Latin America’s very strongly centralised presidential systems, in place everywhere but Mexico, can be reformed enough so that certain autonomy rights, in part already provided for, can be implemented.

Realising improved indigenous participation must follow a number of paths. The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung’s regional Indigenous Political Participation programme, together with party representatives, scientists, and its indigenous experts, promotes the following points:

- The region’s political parties must work harder to integrate indigenous peoples – especially in urban areas – and address their central concerns.
- The state must acknowledge the intercultural reality and recognise the rights of its citizens of indigenous descent by serving as a protective presence and effectively promoting indigenous peoples, even in remote regions.¹³

Diagnosis and Conclusions

Indigenous politics is a diverse Latin American reality to which the politics of the nation states must find answers. Academic discussions about whether indigenous identity in the 21st century is cultural essentialism will not be discussed further here. A regionally differentiated

- The poor capacity of decision-makers in education, politics, business, and the media to conduct an intercultural dialogue and their lack of knowledge regarding the situation in indigenous areas, means that prejudices that have grown over time remain strong. Great efforts in intercultural education and communication will be necessary to change this situation over the medium-term. Such educational efforts can play a key role in reducing the traditionally large number of conflicts in Latin America linked to political, economic, and social forces.
- Opportunities to integrate jurisprudential and decision-making mechanisms into the nation state need to be found, especially for indigenous peoples who live in their original settlement areas. Above all, this will require practical implementation of effective legal pluralism, autonomy rights,¹⁴ and facilitation of party structures for independent indigenous candidacies.
- The effective, free and informed prior consultation undertaken with honest intentions (*buena fe*), is an extremely well-established method of regaining lost trust and successful implementing major policy changes.¹⁵ The state must plan useful consultation processes, use them to disseminate information, and impartially monitor their use by indigenous peoples and the private sector.

Politics characterised by cultural idiosyncrasies and that pursues group interests should not be rejected as negative per se, however its confrontational nature and divisive potential may be greatly mitigated by recognising intercultural societies and civil rights and duties. The history of Latin America shows that ethnic parties are not a successful long-term approach, even if there is a high share of indigenous peoples in the population. Yet, it does seem certain that if the points outlined above are not respected, indigenous identity politics that may have an anti-system character is likely to be strengthened in the long run. Unlike post-materialist identity politics of all shades, indigenous identity politics

has a solid basis in the historically-rooted understanding of indigenous minorities as separate peoples or nations. It therefore poses a political and ideological challenge to the stability of Latin American democracies. Politicians are left to determine whether indigenous identity will become socially explosive, move towards re-strengthening politics based on ethnicity,¹⁶ or be able to manifest itself as cultural wealth.

—translated from German—

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- 4 For information on the “implementation gap” see Martínez Martínez, Juan Carlos/Juan-Martínez, Víctor Leonel/Hernández Andrés, Violeta 2018: Derechos indígenas entre la norma y la praxis, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Rule of Law Programme Latin America, in: <https://bit.ly/2Wg9PwO> [29 Apr 2020].
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- 6 ECLAC 2014, n. 1.
- 7 Gutierrez Callisaya, Yamila M. et al. 2016: Identidad Indígena, género y masculinidades en un mundo globalizado, Proyecto PARTICIPA, EU / KAS-PPI, pp.17 ff., in: <https://bit.ly/2Yq9Qkq> [29 Apr 2020].
- 8 Ibid., pp. 146 ff.
- 9 The 2017 census was the first to ask about “self-identification with an indigenous group”, to which 60 per cent of Peruvians answered *mestizos*, 22.3 per cent Quechua, and 2.4 per cent Aymara.
- 10 Gutierrez Callisaya et al. 2016, n. 7, pp. 95 ff.
- 11 Cárdenas et al. 2011, n. 5, pp. 65–90.
- 12 Cárdenas et al. 2011, n. 5, pp. 248 f.; Gutierrez Callisaya et al. 2016, n. 7, pp. 117 ff.
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