

Ecuador, left and popular movements, 1940s to present

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Ecuador's political left is a broad front of progressive organizations that has experienced brief moments of success, most notably the "Glorious May Revolution" of 1944 unifying workers, students, peasants, indigenous peoples, women, and junior military personnel into a broad

movement. However, with internal divisions, government repression, and a failure to offset the strong military, Ecuador's left historically failed to consolidate opposition to the conservative state. The left has also succumbed to the appeal of populist movements using progressive rhetoric, but once in power defending the country's oligarchic upper class.

Ecuador's political left represents multiple historic movements of utopian socialism, radical liberalism, anarchism, revolutionary Marxism, and an indigenous tradition of millenarian struggles. In May 1925 these currents converged in the founding of the Ecuadorian Socialist Party (PSE). With the establishment of the Third or Communist International (Comintern) the party became the Ecuadorian Communist Party (PCE), and the left alliance fractured.

Another group of socialist soldiers formed the Ecuadorian Revolutionary Socialist Vanguard (VSRE), which gained strength in the 1940s. These three parties sometimes collaborated in popular fronts, and at different historic periods clashed. The PSE was the most successful of the three groups in elections, becoming in the 1930s the third significant political force in the country behind the liberals and conservatives. The PSE was instrumental in drafting social legislation, yet remained largely an urban middle-class party with most members belonging to professional classes. The political base of the communists, a smaller party, has been among the laboring classes and in indigenous communities.

Ecuador's limited industrial base hindered the development of strong labor unions based in manufacturing. Instead, in the late nineteenth century, artisans in the urban centers of Guayaquil and Quito organized mutual-aid societies. Many early working-class organizations were affiliated with the Catholic Church and a conservative political party that emphasized issues of individual morality rather than structural issues of class struggle. National Worker Congresses in 1909 and 1920, and the 1938 founding of the Ecuadorian Confederation of Catholic Workers (CEDOC), followed traditional patterns of mutual aid and individual organization. In the early twentieth century, anarchists organized strikes that culminated in a 1922 general strike in Guayaquil that the military brutally suppressed.

On May 28, 1944 a broad array of workers, students, peasants, indigenous peoples, women, and lower-ranking military personnel unified

in a broad front, known as the Glorious May Revolution. The unification of movements created euphoric optimism and seemed to signal the emergence of new social relations and the end of exclusionary state structures. Popular movements created the leftist Ecuadorian Confederation of Workers (CTE) that became a dominant force for labor rights. Socialists and communists dominated a Constituent Assembly and wrote the most progressive constitution in Ecuador's history. The perennial populist military caudillo José María Velasco Ibarra transformed the wave of discontent to power, and once elected, excluded leftists from power and abrogated the progressive constitution.

The 1959 Cuban Revolution triggered an intensification of activism in Ecuador. At the same time, the Ecuadorian left splintered into pro-Soviet, pro-Chinese, and pro-Cuban camps. In 1963 a radical pro-Cuba wing split with the PSE to form the Revolutionary Socialist Party of Ecuador (PSRE). Under military governments in the 1960s and 1970s, the PSRE faced severe repression. In 1964 Maoists formed the Ecuadorian Marxist Leninist Communist Party (PCMLE). The PCMLE operated largely as an illegal and clandestine party, but in 1977 formed the Popular Democratic Movement (MPD) as a legal electoral front. The MPD secured significant support from among university students and school teachers, and controlled the powerful National Educators' Union (UNE). In the 1970s and 1980s additional smaller leftist groupings emerged, including the Trotskyist Revolutionary Workers Movement (MRT) and the Left Revolutionary Movement (MIR). When Ecuador returned to civilian government in 1979, many of these groups unified their electoral efforts within the Broad Left Front (FADI).

In the 1960s, in the context of the Cold War, the United States helped establish the Ecuadorian Confederation of Free Trade Union Organizations (CEOSL) as a bulwark against leftist movements. In the 1970s both CEDOC and CEOSL moved leftward and joined the socialist CTE in an umbrella Workers' United Front (FUT), taking a leading role in organizing general strikes. In the 1990s indigenous movements more commonly organized street protests that led to the removal of several unpopular presidents.

Guerilla movements in Ecuador have not flourished and have been quickly crushed by the military. In 1962 the Revolutionary Union

of Ecuadorian Youth (URJE) organized guerilla cells, but the government quickly overpowered the group. Following the 1963 Ecuadorian coup, a small and disorganized guerilla group comprised mostly of students formed near Santo Domingo de los Colorados on the western slopes of the Andes and was quickly defeated by the military. In the 1980s two guerilla groups emerged, Alfaro Lives, Dammit! (AVC) and the Free Homeland Montoneros (MPL). As with 1960s movements, the new organizations were dominated by urban student leaders and others breaking from legal leftist parties. Another small and marginal group called Red Sun emerged in 1992 with close ties to Peru's Shining Path guerillas, apparently as a radical break from the PCMLE.

SEE ALSO: Ecuador, Indigenous and Popular Struggles; Ecuador, Popular and Indigenous Uprisings under the Correa Government; Ecuador, Protest and Revolution

References and Suggested Readings

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