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On: 05 September 2012, At: 09:56

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Socialism and Democracy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csad20>

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Version of record first published: 31 Aug 2012

To cite this article: Marc Becker (2012): Building a Plurinational Ecuador: Complications and Contradictions, *Socialism and Democracy*, DOI:10.1080/08854300.2012.710000

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2012.710000>



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Building a Plurinational Ecuador: Complications and Contradictions

Marc Becker

On August 5, 2011, Ecuadoran president Rafael Correa appointed long-time Indigenous leader Ricardo Ulcuango as ambassador to Bolivia. Typically the nomination of an Indigenous ambassador would have been greeted with applause and should have marked an important milestone in the expansion of Indigenous rights for this South American country. Instead, the designation triggered yet another round of ongoing acrimonious charges and counter-charges between Correa's supporters and his opponents on the left. Foreign minister Ricardo Patiño claimed that the nomination was part of an irreversible process of social inclusion and the realization of a plurinational state that Correa's government and the progressive 2008 constitution had launched. Indigenous leaders, in contrast, denounced the nomination as a "war trophy" in Correa's battle with their movement that had been highly critical of his extractive policies on mining, land, and water usage. These activists discounted the government's version of plurinationalism as little more than a farce, and Ulcuango's nomination as just one more attempt to divide Indigenous movements.

Was Ulcuango's appointment a step toward implementing the ideals of a plurinational government that would incorporate all sectors of society? Or was it a token gesture, designed to divide and weaken the country's powerful social movements? Naming an important activist to a high-level post was one of the hardest blows that Correa could have dealt against his Indigenous opponents. In response, some activists labeled Ulcuango a traitor and called for his expulsion from the movement. But for so radical and deeply committed a leader as Ulcuango to join the Correa government also indicated that he had a reasonable expectation of being able to use the position to advance movement demands. Rather than clearly representing a step either forward or backward, what this nomination highlights is the complexities, contradictions, and tradeoffs inherent in

implementing profound social changes in a dependent and unequal society.

Ecuador moves left

Correa had campaigned for the presidency in 2006 on the promise of moving beyond neoliberal economic policies through a significant increase in social spending aimed at reducing poverty and inequality. He proposed a program based on five revolutions: an economic revolution that reestablished the government's redistributive role; a social revolution that favored equality for Ecuador's different social sectors and ethnic groups; a political revolution to reverse the privatization of state structures and enhance participatory democracy; a revolution for Latin American integration that would create new organisms to replace mercantilist structures; and an ethical revolution to combat corruption. In 2010 two more revolutions were added, one in favor of the environment and the other for judicial reform.¹

On taking office in January 2007, Correa promised to convoke a constituent assembly to implement what he termed a citizens' revolution. The new document that voters overwhelmingly approved in an October 2008 plebiscite rejected neoliberalism and embraced increased resource allocation to education, social services, and healthcare. It expanded democratic participation, including extending the vote to 16-year-olds, to foreigners residing in the country for more than five years, and to emigrés. Similar to Venezuela, it employed gender inclusive language. The constitution also defended the rights of nature, the *sumak kawsay* (an Andean concept of living well rather than living better, thus favoring sustainability over material accumulation and the commodification of resources), Indigenous languages, and, in a highly symbolic gesture, plurinationalism as a way to incorporate Indigenous cosmologies into the governing of the country.

In office, Correa implemented a series of financial reforms intended to subordinate private property to the public good. A July 2010 law increased the government's share of petroleum profits from 13 to 87 percent, in the process increasing state revenues by almost a billion dollars. The government also dramatically increased its collection of taxes, significantly adding to the available revenue for infrastructure investment and social spending without generating a debilitating budget deficit. These reforms provided funding sources

1. E. Virgilio Hernández and G. Fernando Buendí, a"Ecuador: avances y desafíos de Alianza PAÍS," *Nueva Sociedad* 234 (July–August 2011): 136.

to increase social services including tripling spending on education and healthcare, providing subsidies to poor people to lower their utility costs, and expanding access to credit. In the international realm, Correa refused to sign a free trade agreement with the United States and removed US forces from the Manta airbase that they were using as a Forward Operating Location in fighting against drug trafficking and leftist guerrillas in Colombia.

Despite all of these seemingly positive moves to the left, Ecuador's well-organized social movements became increasingly estranged from the Correa administration. His agrarian policies favored large-scale economic development and minimized aid for small farmers, alienating rural communities that formed the basis of Ecuador's powerful Indigenous movements. While his economic and social policies led to dramatic reductions of poverty and inequality, these gains were largely limited to urban areas that provided the base of his electoral support. In contrast, during his first five years in office poverty rates in Indigenous areas increased, declining only slightly in Afro-Ecuadorian communities. While urban poverty rates in 2011 had fallen to 17 percent, in rural areas they continued to linger above 50 percent.² When criticized for not making more rapid and radical changes, proponents of Correa's project argued that it was impossible to solve in five years problems that were a result of five centuries of exploitation and oppression. Others contended that how the government treated the most marginalized sectors of society was indicative of the administration's ultimate priorities.

Correa's tensions with social movements became most apparent in conflicts over state-centered development projects, particularly in mining, petroleum, and other extractive industries. Rural communities agitated for prior and informed consent before mining activities could proceed on their lands, while Correa wanted the government to decide on such matters. The constitution conceded that communities had the right to consultation, but extractive endeavors would not be subject to their consent or veto power. This decision was a major blow to the power of social movements. Given the dirty legacy of petroleum extraction in the Amazon, environmentalists readily recognized that those who bore the brunt of ecological impacts of extractive enterprises rarely realized their economic benefits. Tensions reached a high point

2. Juan Ponce and Alberto Acosta, "La pobreza en la 'revolución ciudadana' o ¿pobreza de revolución?" *Ecuador Debate* 81 (December 2010): 7–20; Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *Social Panorama of Latin America 2011* (United Nations: ECLAC, 2011).

in September 2009 when, in an echo of protests in June of that year in the Peruvian Amazon that resulted in dozens of fatalities, protests over water and mining in eastern Ecuador also grew deadly with the shooting of Shuar schoolteacher Bosco Wisum while dozens more were injured.³ In March 2012, Indigenous and environmental organizations led a two-week march across the country to pressure for the passage of laws to advance water rights and an agrarian revolution. Leaders denied that the march was trying to destabilize the government or that they would ever ally with the political right. Rather, their intent was to force Correa to match his rhetoric of building a plurinational society and a socialism for the twenty-first century with concrete policy initiatives. Ulcuango's nomination fell precisely into this gap between rhetoric and reality, and illustrated the tensions between abstract ideals and their material implementation.

An Indigenous ambassador

Ricardo Ulcuango represented the left wing of Ecuador's powerful Indigenous movement that had long fought against neoliberal economic policies but now found itself in a complicated relationship with what should have been a sympathetic government. Ulcuango was president of the community of Cochapamba in the parish of Cangahua in the northern highland canton of Cayambe, an area historically associated with militant social movements. Beginning in the 1920s, activists in Cayambe organized Ecuador's first peasant unions in order to challenge their political, economic, and social exclusion. Out of those early efforts arose some of the most important Indigenous leaders in Ecuador, including Dolores Cacuango and Tránsito Amaguaña, as well as the first country-wide Indigenous organization, founded in 1944, the Federación Ecuatoriana de Indios (FEI, Ecuadoran Federation of Indians). Many of these leaders also played important roles in Ecuador's broader political movements, including the Ecuadoran Communist Party.

Ulcuango emerged out of this political context,⁴ and in fact contributed to it with his long and distinguished career as a leader of Ecuador's militant Indigenous movements. In the 1990s, at the height of

3. Amazon Watch, "Indigenous Blockades Escalate After Police Violently Attack Protest in the Ecuadoran Amazon," *Amazon Watch* (October 1, 2009). On Peru, see Gerardo Rénique, "Law of the Jungle in Peru: Indigenous Amazonian Uprising against Neoliberalism," *Socialism and Democracy* 23, no. 3 (November 2009): 117–35.

4. Marc Becker, *Indians and Leftists in the Making of Ecuador's Modern Indigenous Movements* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

social movement activism, he was twice the president of the Confederación de Pueblos de la Nacionalidad Kichwa del Ecuador (Ecuadorunari, Confederation of the Peoples of the Kichwa Nationality of Ecuador). As leader of Ecuadorunari, he helped mobilize a mass uprising against President Abdalá Bucaram's neoliberal economic policies that led to the president's overthrow in February 1997. In July 1999, Ulcuango organized protests against President Jamil Mahuad's structural adjustment measures and forced the government to roll back gas prices. Ulcuango subsequently served as vice-president of the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE, Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador). As a leader of one of the most important social movements in the Americas, Ulcuango helped mobilize the January 2000 uprising that led to Mahuad's departure from office. A year later, he organized protests against his successor Gustavo Noboa's continuance of the same neoliberal economic policies.

Some observers noted that the most positive outcome of these uprisings was Indigenous unity. "The communities have always been united," Ulcuango responded. "It's the leaders who haven't always been able to agree."⁵ Seemingly foreshadowing his future role as a diplomat, Ulcuango said that he was always open to dialogue, "even at the most difficult points in the struggle." The movement resorted to protests because government refusals to listen left no other option, but, Ulcuango maintained, the preference in Kichwa communities was "to dialogue, to arrive at understandings, to resolve conflicts." As head of Ecuadorunari and CONAIE, Ulcuango emphasized a collective style of leadership and criticized egotistical leaders who acted in an individualistic and unilateral manner, questioning what were their true objectives, and whether they wanted to destroy the Indigenous movement.⁶ Through these struggles, Ulcuango earned a reputation as one of the most dedicated, sincere, and honorable movement leaders.

In 2002, Pachakutik's electoral alliance with Colonel Lucio Gutiérrez with whom they had joined in overthrowing Mahuad's government two years earlier helped propel the former coup plotter to the presidency. In that same election, Ulcuango won election to congress as

5. Luis Angel Saavedra, "Victory for the Indigenous Movement," *Latinamerica Press* 33, no. 5 (February 19, 2001): 4–5.

6. "Ricardo Ulcuango: Candidato a Diputado por la Provincia de Pichincha," <http://www.llacta.org/organiz/coms/com169.htm>, September 1, 2001; Marta Harnegger, *Ecuador: Una nueva izquierda en busca de la vida en plenitud* (Quito: Abya-Yala, 2011), 200.

a provincial deputy from Pichincha. His success was a double victory: it was the first time that an Indigenous activist had won a provincial-level election in Pichincha, and it was the first time someone from the predominantly Indigenous and rural canton of Cayambe had won election in a province overwhelmingly dominated by the capital city of Quito. Ulcuango campaigned as a member of the Movimiento Unidad Plurinacional Pachakutik (MUPP [Pachakutik Movement for Plurinational Unity]) that had formed in 1995 as a platform for Indigenous and other social movements to compete for electoral office. "Our presence in the National Assembly," Ulcuango stated, "is a new challenge on this long road of 500 years of searching for a more equitable plurinational Ecuador."⁷ His victory (together with that of Salvador Quishpe in Zamora Chinchipe) constituted a definitive shift in broader political discourse in Ecuador, and represented a high point in electoral strength for Indigenous movements. As a deputy, Ulcuango chaired the congressional committee of Indigenous Affairs and Other Ethnic Groups, and later the Indigenous Parliament of America. He also fought against neoliberal economic policies and for withdrawal of the US military from the Manta airbase. When conservatives attacked him because of his political activities, he called on the government "to defend the lives of all Ecuadorans, and especially those of Indigenous leaders who have been receiving threats for quite some time."⁸ Representing the left wing of Ecuador's Indigenous movement, Ulcuango proved to be a serious and dedicated politician.

Although media reports commonly portrayed Ulcuango as Ecuador's first Indigenous ambassador, in reality, Nina Pacari, who in 2003 served as foreign minister in Gutiérrez's government and was the first Indigenous person to hold that post, named various people from the Kichwa nationality to ambassadorial posts. These include Mercedes Tixi (from the Puruwa people) to Russia, Rosa María Vacacela (Saraguro) to Guatemala, Jhon Alarcón (Panzaleo) to Panama, as well as Afro-Ecuadoran Antonio Preciado as ambassador to UNESCO in Paris. Furthermore, various others served as cultural attachés (Jorge Necpas, Kayambi, in Germany; Segundo Chaluis, Chibuleo, in Italy; José Lema, Otavalo, in Malacca; Vicenta Chuma, Kañari, in Peru; Cristina Gualinga, Kichwa Pastaza, in Switzerland; and Miguel Angel Carlosama, Otavalo, in Bolivia); as a political attaché

7. Ricardo Ulcuango, "Otro Congreso es posible," *Tintají* 16 (primera quincena de enero de 2003): 2.

8. Marc Becker, "Ecuador: Indigenous Movement under Attack," *NACLA*, February 2004.

(Walter Uyungara, Shuar, in Peru); and as a consul (Yolanda Teran, in New Mexico, USA).

When Gutiérrez quickly turned against his former allies, Ulcuango joined protests against his neoliberal economic policies and condemned the president who in targeting those who were critical of his government was “contributing to a wave of violence.”⁹ Indigenous leaders pledged to continue their pressure on the president until he resigned, which he finally did in April 2005. Correa, who until this point had been a relatively obscure economist teaching at an elite private university, first came on the public scene when Gutiérrez’s successor Alfredo Palacio named him as minister of finance. Palacio soon evicted Correa from his post because his socially progressive policies clashed with those of the president, but he left office as the most popular member of the government. Initially many activists dreamed of a shared ticket in the 2006 presidential elections between Correa and Pachakutik. Pachakutik wanted to run one of its own, perhaps a standard bearer such as long-time Indigenous leader Luis Macas, in the top slot, but in what many saw as an egotistical move Correa refused to play second fiddle to an *indio*. After the fiasco from the alliance with Gutiérrez, Pachakutik remained leery of once again entering into relations with someone from outside its ranks. Pachakutik had paid dearly for allying with Gutiérrez, and activists feared that Correa would similarly split their movement. Campaigning as opponents rather than allies, Correa soundly trounced Macas who won only 2 percent of the vote. Pachakutik’s defeat convinced Correa not only that Indigenous social movements were unreliable allies, but also that they represented an insignificant electoral force. Correa and CONAIE parted on less than amicable terms.

Ulcuango joined Ecuatorunari president Humberto Cholango in comparing Correa to Gutiérrez, complaining that his actions were deeply fracturing Indigenous movements. Sociologist Carlos de la Torre notes that Correa managed to accomplish what Gutiérrez could not do: “divide and weaken the Indigenous movement.” De la Torre criticizes Correa’s use of populist symbols and strategies, and argues that “Indigenous leaders do not have any reason to trust outsiders.”¹⁰ Lourdes Tibán, Pachakutik’s congressional deputy from Cotopaxi who was one of Correa’s most vocal critics, contended that the fact that several Indigenous peoples held ministerial and other high-level

9. Kintto Lucas, “¿El retorno de los ponchos?” *Tintají* 39 (segunda quincena de febrero de 2004): 8.

10. Carlos de la Torre, “Los indígenas y Correa,” *Hoy*, July 1, 2006, 4A.

posts in previous governments while Correa had made no such appointments indicated that the current president was only interested in folkloric gestures intended to bolster the government's international image even while exhibiting his attitudes of contempt and arrogance toward Indigenous peoples.¹¹

In office, Correa retained unusually high approval ratings, but for the most part this support did not come from Ecuador's well-organized social movements. Rather than having risen through the ranks of social movement organizing processes, Correa emerged out of the Catholic left. He shared general goals of social justice with the broader left, but often his specific policies, approaches, and ideologies clashed with this wider movement. Instead, Correa used the traditional mechanisms of populist governance that appealed to marginalized but unorganized sectors of society, akin to Juan Perón's working-class *descamisados* in Argentina. As had often been the case for populist leaders in Latin America, drawing on the poorest, least organized urban sectors as his base of support brought Correa into conflict with the organized left who also wanted to organize these sectors as a force for class struggle. Worse, his abrasiveness rubbed many of those on his left the wrong way, even as his machista style played well to a broader audience. Correa assumed the role of a *caudillo*, and he had all the qualifications: personable, articulate, handsome, and with a foreign education to boot. Although the unorganized urban poor provided him with a strong electoral base of support, questions remained whether they could provide an organizational structure that would keep him in power were he to face a direct confrontation with the country's oligarchy as did Hugo Chávez in Venezuela during the failed coup against him in 2002. In fact, a September 30, 2010 police uprising appeared to be a dress rehearsal for such an inevitable event. If Correa needed a strong and well-organized social movement in order to stay in power, then alienating such potential allies was doing the advocates of Ecuador's turn to the left an extreme disservice.¹² More than anything, social movement activists did not want another right-wing military or oligarchical government.

Despite tensions, movement leaders exploited openings in the government to press their agenda. Most notably, Mónica Chuji from the

11. "Lourdes Tibán niega que Ulcuango sea primer embajador indígena del Ecuador," http://ecuadorinmediato.com/index.php?module=Noticias&func=news_user_view&id=156167&umt=lourdes_tibe1n_niega_que_ulcuango_sea_primer_embajador_indedgena_del_ecuador, August 21, 2011.

12. Carlos de la Torre, "Corporatism, Charisma, and Chaos: Ecuador's Police Rebellion in Context," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 44, no. 1 (January/February 2011): 25–32.

Amazonian community of Sarayaku that was long known for its militant protests against petroleum extraction, joined the government first as Correa's communication secretary and then as a deputy to the 2008 constituent assembly where she played a leading role in pressing for environmental legislation. Like Chuji, rather than assuming a position of hardcore opposition, Ulcuango was willing to collaborate with the Correa administration on issues of common concern. Despite his earlier criticism, Ulcuango noted that society favored the strong leadership that Correa provided. Ulcuango also noted that the government gained support because of its implementation of long-standing Indigenous demands, most notably in redefining Ecuador as a plurinational state in the 2008 constitution. As a result, Ulcuango found it to be advantageous to work with the government on specific issues. In fact, his last political post before becoming an ambassador was on a commission convened during Correa's first year to study the public debt. Personally, Ulcuango argued that the government and Indigenous movements should stop criticizing each other because he saw no good coming out of these constant attacks and insults.¹³ Rather than moving into a position of entrenched opposition, Ulcuango advocated continual reflection within social movements in order to better understand how to realize their objectives. Nevertheless, neither CONAIE nor Pachakutik formally joined Correa's government, even though they wanted to participate in the revolutionary changes sweeping the country. It was these broad political changes that Ulcuango fought for, and not just a post in government.

Ulcuango had been out of politics for more than three years when Foreign Minister Patiño asked him to assume the diplomatic post in Bolivia. In the meantime, he had returned to his home community in Cayambe where he played the role of a community activist and organic intellectual. He dedicated himself to local projects, including agricultural endeavors (in particular the production of onions) and resumed his efforts to halt high rates of out migration from Cochabamba. In addition, he had long been involved with intercultural communication projects, including working as director of the Indigenous radio station Inti Pacha in Cayambe that he had launched in 1995.¹⁴ In 2008, Ulcuango joined Cholango and other local activists in a new cable television project. Several months before being named

13. Harnecker, *Ecuador: Una nueva izquierda* (note 6), 289, 203.

14. Ricardo Ulcuango, "La comunicación alternativa en los pueblos y nacionalidades del Ecuador, una lucha que se la tienen que liberar a diario, muestra de ello la radio indígena Inti Pacha," *Boletín ICCI-Rimay* 10, no. 114 (September 2008).

ambassador, Ulcuango inaugurated Luz de América (Light of America) to bring 65 channels to Cayambe. In addition to including the Venezuelan channel Telesur, Ulcuango planned to emphasize programming that would help reinforce local community identities.¹⁵ He believed in the power of the media to raise political consciousness and to inform and shift political discourse, a view that had come to be shared broadly among South America's leftist governments as they embraced radio and TV broadcasts as a tool to defeat the oligarchy.

Significantly, it was vice-minister Kintto Lucas who formally offered Ulcuango the position. Lucas's presence in the foreign ministry was itself an example of the complexities and contradictions in the relations between social movements and Correa's government. Lucas, an Uruguayan-born journalist who had long accompanied and given voice to Ecuador's social movements through his work with publications such as *Tintají*, was known for his sympathetic portrayals of Indigenous struggles. Until joining the foreign ministry, he had remained very critical of Correa's divisive policies toward their organizations.¹⁶ The foreign ministry seemed to be a hotbed of leftist activism, as evidenced by Ecuador being the only holdout in the June 1, 2011 vote to readmit Honduras to the Organization of American States (OAS) after the coup against Manuel Zelaya had led to the country's eviction from that regional body. Similarly, in April 2012 Ecuador was the only country to boycott the sixth Summit of the Americas in Colombia because of Cuba's exclusion from the meeting. Ecuador also took a leading role in organizing new regional organizations such as the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR, Union of South American Nations) and the Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (CELAC, Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) that provided a counterpart to the US-dominated OAS. Even as social movements pressured Correa to move leftward, in terms of international policies his administration seemed to be staking out the most leftist position of any American government.

Ulcuango was inaugurated as ambassador on August 9, 2011 in Cayambe's central park. Hundreds of people attended the ceremony

15. "Ricardo Ulcuango es el propietario de un canal de Televisión en Cayambe," http://confirmado.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6902:ricardo-ulcuango-es-el-propietario-de-canal-de-television-en-cayambe&catid=295:politica&Itemid=543, August 29, 2011.

16. See, for example, Kintto Lucas, *We Will Not Dance on Our Grandparents' Tombs: Indigenous Uprisings in Ecuador* (London: Catholic Institute for International Relations [CIIR], 2000); Kintto Lucas, "Indigenous Groups Protest Government Policies," <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=45513>, January 22, 2009.

that was painted with the colors of the *wiphala*, the Indigenous movement's rainbow-colored flag, and was surrounded with the sounds of folkloric music. Foreign minister Patiño announced that the government had decided to change its way of doing politics, and that it would begin to draw on the country's diversity by incorporating representatives from Ecuador's various nationalities into the diplomatic corps. He recognized that increasing the numbers of women, Indigenous people, *montuvios* (coastal peasants), and Afro-descendants inevitably would alienate those from the oligarchy who long had held a dominant role in those positions, but creating a more inclusive society was an irreversible goal of the foreign ministry. Patiño did not see Ulcuango's appointment as a token act but rather as recognition of his skills and qualifications. Ulcuango's long relationship and historic ties with Bolivian president Evo Morales through their common involvement in social movement organizations uniquely positioned him to consolidate transnational alliances. The appointment of Ulcuango represented a significant move toward realizing the objectives of the 2008 constitution. "Only a democratic and independent Ecuador can make irreversible changes toward justice," the foreign minister proclaimed. Patiño called on Indigenous organizations and government officials to overcome their divisions in order to work toward common goals.

In accepting the designation, Ulcuango noted that the constitution recognized Ecuador as a plurinational state, and that as such it was important to incorporate all sectors of society, including Indigenous people, African descendants, women, and others, into the political process. As ambassador, he pledged to work not only toward an integration of the two states of Bolivia and Ecuador, but also for an integration of the people in both countries. "We should move towards integration," he stated, "towards greater participation in this process of new winds of change that are currently sweeping the region."¹⁷ He called on Indigenous leaders to rethink their oppositional strategies in fighting for a plurinational state, and to press Correa to incorporate Indigenous peoples into high governmental offices, particularly as ministers and in other decision-making positions. Rather than rejecting such opportunities, they should embrace them as a way to advance the movement's agenda.¹⁸

17. "Ricardo Ulcuango nuevo embajador de Ecuador en Bolivia," <http://www.mmrree.gob.ec/2011/bol758.asp>, August 5, 2011.

18. "Nuevo Embajador de Ecuador en Bolivia," <http://www.mmrree.gob.ec/2011/bol765.asp>, August 9, 2011.

On October 13, 2011, Ulcuango formally presented his credentials to Bolivian president Evo Morales in La Paz. As the leader of Bolivia's powerful *cocalero* (coca growers) union, Morales was no stranger to the types of struggle to which Ulcuango had dedicated his life. The two leaders promised to incorporate Indigenous concerns into multilateral mechanisms. Furthermore, Ecuador and Bolivia would engage in a type of "citizens' diplomacy" based on health, cultural, and educational exchanges. Work projects would be rooted in a common agenda of cooperating on themes of health, education, plurinationalism, interculturalism, and the *sumak kawsay*.¹⁹ Both symbolically and concretely, Ulcuango's acceptance of the ambassadorial post pointed to the possibilities for making new kinds of policies in South America.

Discord

Despite all the seemingly positive aspects of Ulcuango's appointment and his pledges of loyalty to the Indigenous peoples, his designation elicited a good deal of criticism among his social movement allies, many of whom were notably absent from the inauguration ceremony in Cayambe. These leaders were quick to denounce Ulcuango's acceptance of the post, condemning the Cayambe celebration as a folkloric event in which the government exhibited a trophy from its "battle to co-opt Indigenous leaders at any price."²⁰ Such criticisms came from grassroots through national-level leaders. In what became a common charge, Carlos Alcasiga, president of Ulcuango's base organization Corporación de Organizaciones Indígenas y Campesinas de Cangahua (COINCCA [Corporation of Indigenous and Peasant Organizations of Cangahua]), called Ulcuango an opportunist, and expressed regret that a renowned leader was placing personal ambitions over the interest of his community. Turning Correa's rhetoric against him and placing the president squarely in the classes against which he had campaigned for office, Alcasiga denounced the current government as relying on the same corrupt system of *partidocracia* that the president had previously criticized.²¹

The cantonal Confederación del Pueblo Kayambi (Federation of the Kayambi People) which Ulcuango had helped found in the 1990s

19. "Embajador Ricardo Ulcuango presentó cartas credenciales en Bolivia," <http://www.mmrree.gob.ec/2011/bol1025.asp>, October 14, 2011.

20. Humberto Cholango, "CONAIE ante el País por designación de Ricardo Ulcuango como Embajador," Quito, August 8, 2011.

21. Carlos Alcasiga, "Boletín informativo," Cochapamba, August 8, 2011.

darkly threatened that they would not be responsible if anything bad happened during the coronation ceremony that was taking place on their home turf. President Guillermo Churuchumbi accused Correa of attempting to co-opt Indigenous leaders as part of a desperate attempt to recoup his fading political image, and denounced Ulcuango's designation as a "cowardly" attempt to divide the movement.²² Ecuarrunari president Delfín Tenesaca declared that the new ambassador "represents no one" and was no longer accountable to the Indigenous movement.²³ Ecuarrunari resolved to expel the former leader from the movement "for having violated and betrayed the principles and collective decisions of the organization" that he had previously led.²⁴

As president of CONAIE and a close collaborator of the new diplomat, Humberto Cholango was even more direct in his criticism of Ulcuango. "It is unfortunate that a former leader of the Indigenous movement," he declared, "is helping to consolidate a divisive government plan that from the beginning has destroyed popular organizations." Cholango said that Ulcuango accepted this post despite being warned not to join the government, and in violation of "the political authority, ethics and history of our organizations." He accused Ulcuango of having "fallen into the temptations of power and having become an instrument of government." At the same time, he condemned Correa for following the same strategies as the previous government that attempted to destroy Indigenous movements. CONAIE's president advised their "brother president Evo Morales Ayma that Ricardo Ulcuango does not have our support or endorsement."²⁵ Cholango and Morales were hardly strangers, having collaborated for years on common political projects, even though they were now divided over the nomination of a fellow activist as ambassador to Bolivia's government.

Not everyone agreed with Ecuarrunari's move to expel Ulcuango from the movement. The idea of labeling him a traitor struck journalist Gerard Coffey as ludicrous. First, Ecuarrunari and CONAIE were not political parties with voluntary membership lists, but organizations comprised of communities. As long as Ulcuango remained a member

22. Guillermo Churuchumbi, "Pronunciamiento del Pueblo Kayambi frente a designación de Ulcuango como Embajador en Bolivia," Cayambe, August 5, 2011.

23. "Delfín Tenesaca dice que Ricardo Ulcuango 'no representa a nadie,'" *La República* (Quito), August 9, 2011.

24. "Acuerdos y Resoluciones de Asamblea extraordinaria de ECUARRUNARI," Ibarra, August 16, 2011; Carlos Armas, "Ecuarrunari resolvió expulsar a Ricardo Ulcuango," *El Universo* (Guayaquil), August 16, 2011.

25. Cholango, "CONAIE ante el País" (note 20).

of his community, he would automatically belong to those larger organizations. Aside from this technical question, Coffey criticized the rhetoric of denouncing a leader as a traitor and the action of expelling people from a movement as something similar to what Rafael Correa would do. He asked if there was no space for a plurality of opinions within these organizations. The presence of deep divisions within CONAIE was well known; they had become publicly visible in CONAIE's congress earlier in the year when the vote for Humberto Cholango as president broke the organization into three distinct tendencies.²⁶ CONAIE had never been a homogenous organization, and splits often arose along regional and class lines. Now, a new and younger generation also emerged that was more connected to the outside world than were the rural Indigenous communities. Perhaps more serious was a tendency for the left to ally with the right in attacking Correa. Were ideology and political convictions, Coffey asked rhetorically, no longer relevant in these disputes? If CONAIE were to begin evicting members, perhaps they should start instead with those such as Lourdes Tibán who appeared to be openly courting relations with the traditional oligarchy and imperial forces in her attacks on Correa's government.²⁷

Much more than an isolated issue of whether a movement activist should accept a government position, Ulcuango's designation pointed to underlying debates over how social movements should make their presence known in the political arena. Observers questioned the appropriateness of an Indigenous leader representing Correa's government when the latter was pursuing legal cases against militants from his movement who opposed its extractive policies. Soon after Ulcuango arrived in Bolivia, Marco Guatemala, the president of CONAIE's provincial affiliate the Federación Indígena y Campesina de Imbabura (FICI, Indigenous and Peasant Federation of Imbabura), was arrested on charges related to leading protests against a proposed water law in April 2010 and against a June 2010 summit of ALBA (Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América) on culture, racism, climate change, and international trade with an emphasis on Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples. Rather than welcoming the attention that the ALBA summit brought to their concerns, CONAIE and

26. Floresmilo Simbaña, "La CONAIE: entre el tiempo largo y la coyuntura," <http://lalineadefuego.info/2011/07/20/la-conaie-entre-el-tiempo-largo-y-la-coyuntura/>, July 20, 2011.

27. Gerard Coffey, "Ricardo Ulcuango: ¿traidor?," <http://lalineadefuego.info/2011/08/18/ricardo-ulcuango-%C2%BFtraidor/>, August 18, 2011.

its member organizations resented that they had not been invited to the event or been represented in its discussions.²⁸ After spending 17 days in prison, on November 10, 2011 Guatemala was declared innocent of the charges. Greeting his release, Ecuatorunari president Delfín Tenesaca declared that the movement would remain vigilant until 203 other activists facing charges were also released.²⁹

Ulcuango took an independent line from the government, emphasizing that he was not in agreement with the criminalization of social protest, and that it was wrong that numerous Indigenous activists were facing charges of terrorism and sabotage for participating in demonstrations. "The situation that the accused face is unjust," Ulcuango stated. He denied that Indigenous movements were terrorist organizations, and argued that the constitution protected the right to dissent.³⁰ His position was consistent with that which he had articulated before accepting the nomination, in hoping that the government would drop these charges and collaborate with social movements to achieve deep and radical changes.³¹ Even in accepting the ambassadorial post, Ulcuango remained quite honest in his criticisms of the Correa government that he shared with the broader movement. "As historic leaders," he noted, "we approach this as a process of fighting for a constitution that recognizes the collective rights of Indigenous peoples, fighting so that Ecuador maintains its sovereignty." He considered Correa to be an ally in these struggles. On the other hand, Ulcuango was openly critical of Correa for pursuing criminal cases against activists who had protested his policies favoring mineral extractive industries. "I hope that an Indigenous presence in the government," Ulcuango stated, "will help create spaces for reflection, both for the Indigenous movement and for the government."

Ulcuango viewed favorably Correa's gesture in reaching out to the historic leader of an organization that had moved deeply into opposition. He saw it as providing an opportunity for the movement to develop concrete policy objectives. "Confrontation is not good if there are not also points of dialogue," he argued. Pulling down governments achieves little if activists are never able to construct positive alternatives. But neither was Ulcuango hesitant to speak his mind to

28. Marc Becker, "The Children of 1990," *Alternatives* 35, no. 3 (July–September 2010): 299–304.

29. "La Conaie vigilará los juicios en contra de 203 dirigentes," *El Comercio* (Quito), November 11, 2011.

30. "Ulcuango condena que se judicialice protesta de indígenas," *El Comercio* (Quito), August 22, 2011.

31. Harnecker, *Ecuador: Una nueva izquierda* (note 6), 303.

power. Reportedly before leaving for Bolivia he had a frank conversation with Correa about the tense relations between Indigenous movements and the government.³² Whether Ulcuango could push the government in a positive direction remained an open question. But if Correa assumed that in naming Ulcuango he had coopted him and gained a loyal “yes man,” he had calculated badly wrong.

Meanwhile, leftist opponents contended that if the Correa administration was truly interested in achieving a plurinational society, someone of Ulcuango’s stature should not be appointed to South America’s poorest and most Indigenous country but rather to Colombia, which was Ecuador’s closest and most important trading partner, or even to a post in Europe or the United States. Instead, Correa named as ambassador to the US one of his most loyal supporters, Nathalie Cely, the Minister of Coordination for Production, Employment and Competitiveness (one of only four ministers to have served continuously in his government since 2007). Ulcuango retorted that relations with Bolivia were also important, and he called on the foreign ministry to give the Bolivian embassy the same level and type of attention given to those in the US and Colombia.³³ Nominating an experienced leader to Bolivia, a country that also has a very strong Indigenous movement and is advancing a plurinational state, points to the importance the Correa administration placed on building strong alliances within South America. Rather than viewing Bolivia as a marginal post, Ulcuango’s embrace of the position pointed to his dedication to those struggles. Presenting the post as a marginal position says more about the interests of those criticizing the appointment than about the appointment itself.

Foreign ministry vice-minister Kintto Lucas denied charges that Ulcuango’s appointment was an attempt to divide the Indigenous movement. The government contended that the nomination was a positive move toward implementing the progressive aspects of the new constitution, including its plurinational character. Arguably, if the government’s objective had been to divide the movement it could have attempted to name an even higher profile and more active leader such as CONAIE president Humberto Cholango or longtime leader Luis Macas. Nevertheless, from the perspective of many activists, naming only a select few individuals to positions of power was a joke and did little to alter underlying structural inequalities.³⁴

32. B. Julia Chávez, “Ricardo Ulcuango: ‘Hasta ahora no me responde Cholango,’” *El Telégrafo* (Quito), August 10, 2011.

33. “Nuevo Embajador” (note 18).

34. Mayra Aguirre, “Ricardo Ulcuango,” *La Hora* (Quito), August 21, 2011.

Activist Natalia Sierra contended, “the plurinational nature of the state cannot be reduced to a multi-ethnic image of its officials, a multicultural fair of different ethnic phenotypes and traditional costumes, let alone an insolent folklorization of the nationalities and peoples who make up Ecuadoran society.” While the government may be able to buy out a couple of leaders, Sierra stated, “they can never mislead the deep wisdom and conviction that emerges out of the Indigenous peoples’ struggles.” Rather, she pledged that the fight against the neocolonialism, racism, and authoritarianism of the government would continue.³⁵ Deep disagreements divided movement leaders over how to advance a plurinational state.

In an interview with the government newspaper *El Telégrafo*, Ulcuango gave a quite different version of the story of how he had joined the government. According to Ulcuango, he was happily involved in his local community and dedicated to the production of onions when he received a call from Patiño informing him that Correa would like him to assume this post. “In truth,” Ulcuango said, “it was a surprise for me that the government would have considered me for a diplomatic post.” Ulcuango maintained that a month before the formal announcement, he had informed current Indigenous leaders that he was in conversations with the government about taking the job, but that they were not interested in analyzing the possible impact of such a step on the broader movement. According to Ulcuango, he did not accept the post for careerist reasons, but out of a sense of duty and as a way to advance the interests and concerns of Indigenous peoples. He called for Indigenous leaders to direct their energies against the oligarchy that was their common enemy, and to promote the real needs of local communities, including education, healthcare, land, and water. He denied that he was allying with the Ecuadoran right, arguing instead that he could help push Correa’s project leftward.³⁶

The conundrum that faced Ulcuango over whether or not to accept the diplomatic post highlights broader debates and divisions confronting Indigenous activists in their interactions with a seemingly sympathetic government that did not emerge out of their ranks. In part, these debates traced back to 1995 (and even before) when Indigenous communities discussed whether to engage the electoral process. Organizations

35. Natalia Sierra, “Un argumento cínico sobre la designación de Ricardo Ulcuango como Embajador en Bolivia,” <http://lalineadefuego.info/2011/08/25/un-argumento-cinico-sobre-la-designacion-de-ricardo-ulcuango-como-embajador-en-bolivia/>, August 25, 2011.

36. “Nuevo Embajador” (note 18).

and their leaders tended to view these concerns from an institutional perspective. Would working with existing political parties mean that they would lose their separate identities, and would they have to make too many compromises that would limit the power and cohesion of their ongoing mobilizations? If Indigenous militants formed their own party, would it draw off too many resources and energy from ongoing social movement organizing? Which type of organizational strategy would be most effective to achieve their goals for a more equal and just society: putting pressure on the system from outside and maybe never implementing any policy objectives, or working from within the system but having to make unsavory compromises that are inherent in the political process? These tradeoffs triggered serious debates that seemingly had no easy resolution.

From a community perspective, the issue was much simpler: why would activists not want to avail themselves of *all* tools at their disposal in a struggle for social justice? How was protesting the government incompatible with voting for positive alternatives? If the government gave Ulcuango the chance to make positive policies from inside the system, should he not take advantage of that opportunity? Previously as an organizational leader, Ulcuango had condemned joining the government as an opportunistic move. But now from the perspective of a community member rather than representing an organizational position, it made sense to exploit the opportunity the government was giving him. He knew that he was solidly committed to the movement's goals, and he remained convinced that rather than only benefiting one person his participation as ambassador would have strategic importance in helping social movements in both Ecuador and Bolivia push their governments in a positive direction.

FENOCIN

Ulcuango's nomination as ambassador played into divisions between various wings of Ecuador's Indigenous movements. Ulcuango represented CONAIE, and even though it was the largest and best known it was only one of various Indigenous organizations. The Evangelical organization FEINE typically embraced a more conservative position on Ecuador's political spectrum. In 2002, FEINE supported former and by then disgraced CONAIE president Antonio Vargas who campaigned for the presidency on the platform of the political movement Amauta Jatari (Kichwa for "teacher rise up"), the first Indigenous person to contest for the country's highest office. Ulcuango, who at the time was campaigning for congress on the competing

Packakutik ticket, urged FEINE to “distance itself from the manipulation to which it has been subjected” in supporting an egotistical and opportunistic candidate – perhaps not so ironically the same criticism that he would face a decade later.³⁷

More significant than FEINE was the Federación Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas, Indígenas y Negras (FENOCIN, National Federation of Peasant, Indigenous, and Negro Organizations) which traditionally had staked out a more “peasant” position than CONAIE and was now allied with the Socialist Party and firmly supported Correa’s government. When Ulcuango was named to the diplomatic post in Bolivia, FENOCIN in particular was miffed that Patiño, instead of promoting a representative of a loyal and supportive organization, had turned to a member of a competing federation that had moved deeply into opposition. In response to FENOCIN’s complaints, Patiño asked for patience and announced that the government would soon designate more Indigenous ambassadors. Why the government would first nominate a CONAIE loyalist, however, was never clear. Perhaps it had to do not so much with Ulcuango’s organizational ties as with his connections to Morales; who else could be as effective in that position?

A month after Patiño named Ulcuango to the Bolivian post, he made good on his promise to name a second Indigenous person as ambassador while at the same time appeasing FENOCIN by designating a person from their ranks. On September 23, 2011, Segundo Andrango Bonilla, from the canton of Cotacachi (north of Cayambe) and father of current FENOCIN president Luis Andrango, was named as ambassador to El Salvador. Segundo Andrango was a professor of textile engineering and had coordinated a project on the prevention and eradication of Indigenous child labor with the International Labor Organization (ILO). He had also been a director of the Proyecto de Desarrollo para los Pueblos Indígenas y Negros del Ecuador (PRODEPINE, Development Project for Indigenous and Black Peoples of Ecuador), a World Bank-funded program that promoted participatory development projects designed to strengthen cultural identities. Its approach could be termed one of “social neoliberalism” that provided market-oriented solutions to poverty³⁸ – perhaps more suited to the relatively moderate Salvadoran government of Mauricio Funes.

37. Luis Angel Saavedra, “Indigenous Candidates Aim for Congress,” *Latinamerica Press* 34, no. 21 (October 21, 2002): 6–7.

38. Robert Andolina, Nina Laurie, and Sarah A. Radcliffe, *Indigenous Development in the Andes: Culture, Power, and Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 46–47.

In accepting his post as ambassador to El Salvador, Andrango said he was willing to advance the political project of the citizens' revolution. "Even before entering into an alliance with the government," Andrango stated as an indication of his loyalty, "we perceived this project as going in a positive direction, and since day one, in good times and bad, we have supported it." He applauded the foreign ministry for engaging in an inclusive citizens' diplomacy that embraced plurinationalism and interculturality: "This government is implementing policies enunciated in the constituent assembly...to improve equality and the participation of Indigenous peoples." Andrango pledged to advance the *sumak kawsay*, including using his post to implement measures that would favor rural communities.³⁹ Since he was a member of FENOCIN, Andrango's appointment never triggered as much controversy as did that of Ulcuango, even though their stated goals were quite similar. Their strategies, however, were different.

Andrango and Ulcuango were allegedly just the beginning of creating a more inclusive diplomatic corps, and the foreign ministry was reportedly seriously considering at least two other Indigenous people for diplomatic posts. Such nominations, of course, also led to reactions from Ecuador's conservative opposition, which challenged the nominations of Ulcuango and Andrango on the grounds that unqualified and inexperienced people should not be placed in such high positions, and that their designations were unfair to the career diplomats who were being displaced by political appointees. And, in fact, Ulcuango's appointment could be seen as a clear attempt by Correa to undermine the oligarchy that had traditionally held sway over the diplomatic corps and had become his sworn enemies. While members of the diplomatic corps had traditionally gained their positions through personal or family connections, now the government engaged in a type of affirmative action to draw in people from historically underrepresented sectors of society. In naming María Fernanda Espinosa as his first foreign minister in 2007, Correa challenged the ministry's elitist and machista culture that resisted innovative moves toward creating a more inclusive citizens' diplomacy.⁴⁰ By joining Correa's government, Ulcuango expanded participatory forms of rule and struck a blow at the roots of power that had kept Indigenous peoples oppressed for 500 years.

39. "Otro dirigente indígena a la embajada de Ecuador en El Salvador," <http://www.mmrree.gob.ec/2011/bol929.asp>, September 23, 2011.

40. Harnecker, *Ecuador: Una nueva izquierda* (note 6), 230, 224.

How to move leftward

Emir Sader cautions social movements against launching frontal attacks on friendly governments, and denounces an “ultra-leftism” that endlessly criticizes center-left governments as traitors to the social movement agenda. Rather, Sader maintains, these governments are demonstrably better than their right-wing neoliberal predecessors if for no other reason than their rejection of free trade treaties and their embrace of redistributive social policies. The task, Sader contends, is to criticize the government for its mistakes but also support its positive moves and to make a common front against the right. He advocates that leftists should build alliances with progressive sectors within the government to strengthen those sectors in their moves against the hegemony of finance capital.⁴¹ The contradictions and tradeoffs that Ecuadoran activists faced were part of a broader dilemma that much of the rest of the Latin American left, as well as others around the globe, confronted. A constant difficulty was how to push Correa leftward toward more inclusive and participatory forms of governance without strengthening a common enemy on the right.

In promulgating many favorable policies, including most significantly a new and progressive constitution that embraced CONAIE’s long-held goal of having Ecuador declared a plurinational state, Correa arguably did more for marginalized communities than any other president in Ecuador’s history. This led to the ironic situation in which CONAIE felt a lack of influence and fought to be heard in a government that seemingly should have been its best ally. Dialogue was never one of Correa’s strengths, but he was positioned to bring other benefits to Ecuador’s social movements. Had the president’s unwavering commitment to an extractive economy and resistance to participatory decision-making processes not so alienated those on his left, Ulcuango’s designation as ambassador would have been embraced as a step toward a more inclusive and plurinational society. In the current political environment, however, Ulcuango’s decision to join the government was arguably simultaneously the best and most rational choice as well as unquestionably the worst possible path to take. Working from inside the government, Ulcuango was best positioned to make new and better policies, but this came at a danger of the cooptation of a longtime social movement leader. It was this quandary into which Ecuador’s social movements, as well as others committed to South America’s drift to the left, inevitably fell as they sought to make new and better politics.

41. Emir Sader, *The New Mole: Paths of the Latin American Left* (Verso Books, 2011).