

Ecuador, indigenous and popular struggles

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Indigenous organizations in Ecuador have long provided the foundation for popular struggles in the twentieth century and a model to the rest of Latin America for organizing social movements. In the 1920s Jesús Gualavisi, a leader in the municipality of Cayambe, led a community protest against a neighboring hacienda that expropriated their lands. Gualavisi searched for urban allies to support his fight, and attended the founding of the Ecuadorian Socialist Party in the capital city of Quito in May 1926. Subsequently, urban socialists and communists became strong supporters of rural indigenous struggles.

In 1930 indigenous workers on the Pesillo hacienda in Cayambe went on strike for higher wages and improved working conditions. For the next several decades, Pesillo became a zone of fierce indigenous protest. Dolores Cacuango, one of the strike leaders, became known as a leading Ecuadorian indigenous rights activist. In February 1931 Cayambe activists organized a national conference for peasant and indigenous rights. The specter of thousands of marginalized people congregating to fight for their rights unsettled the government, which quickly sent police to end the protest. The indigenous movements have promoted their cause with help from educated urban communists, publishing a newsletter called *Ñucanchic Allpa* (Our Land) that appeared occasionally from the 1930s to the 1960s.

On May 28, 1944 (“May Glorious Revolution”) a mass uprising overthrew an unpopular government. Taking advantage of this political opening, Gualavisi and Cacuango founded the Ecuadorian Federation of Indians (FEI). For the next several decades the FEI led struggles for agrarian reform and greater political representation for indigenous peoples.

The triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 led to a dramatic increase in political mobilization for social change. Popular pressure finally forced elites in 1964 to implement modest land reforms to undercut calls for more radical changes. Concurrently, progressive sectors of the Catholic Church organized alternatives to the communist-affiliated FEI. The first such local organization was the Salesian-affiliated Shuar Federation that

subsequently provided important leadership to national indigenous struggles.

In 1968 a conservative Catholic labor union founded the National Federation of Peasant Organizations (FENOC) with the goal of assisting hacienda workers in their transition to a new land tenure system following the country’s agrarian reform program. Although initially organized as a bulwark against the leftist FEI, rural activists quickly gained control of FENOC, converting the organization into a force for revolutionary change. In the 1980s and 1990s the federation explicitly incorporated indigenous peoples and Afro-Ecuadorans into its mission, changing its name to the National Federation of Indigenous, Peasant, and Black Organizations (FENOCIN).

Struggles within the Catholic Church for control of FENOC led progressives to found an alternative, more “ethnic” organization named Ecuaurunari, from a Kichwa phrase “Ecuador Runacunapac Riccharimui,” meaning “awakening of indigenous peoples.” Similar to FENOC, Ecuaurunari was quickly radicalized as indigenous activists gained control over the organization.

Parallel to FENOC and Ecuaurunari located in the Andes highlands, Catholic missionaries formed ethnic organizations in the eastern Amazon basin. Most significant were the Federation of Indigenous Organizations of Napo (FOIN) and the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of Pastaza (OPIP). Together with the Shuar Federation, in 1980 these local organizations founded the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE). CONFENIAE and Ecuaurunari quickly joined forces into the National Coordinating Council of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONACNIE). In 1986 this body was reconstituted as the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE). The new organization’s goal was to combine all indigenous peoples from throughout the country into one large pan-Indian movement dedicated to defending indigenous concerns and agitating for social, political, and educational reforms.

In the 1980s evangelical Christians founded the Ecuadorian Federation of Evangelical Indians (FEINE) with its base in Chimborzo as an alternative to the more “leftist” FENOCIN and more “Catholic” CONAIE. Sometimes these organizations, along with FEI, now only a shadow of its former self, coordinated protest

actions and at other times desperately competed for the allegiance of the same people.

In June 1990 CONAIE led a powerful indigenous uprising that shook the country's white elite power base. It placed CONAIE firmly on the map of social movements, providing a model for how civil society should organize itself. The June uprising introduced a remarkable decade of intense and greatly heightened indigenous activism. In 1992 OPIP led a march from the Amazon to the capital city of Quito to demand land titles and the definition of Ecuador as a plurinational state. Two years later, indigenous activists took to the streets in a Mobilization for Life in protest of a new agrarian law. In 1995 diverse sectors of civil society formed the indigenous-oriented political movement Pachakutik to compete for political office. In 1997 and again in 2000, indigenous activists played key roles in ousting presidents who had implemented unpopular neoliberal measures.

SEE ALSO: Ecuador, Left and Popular Movements, 1940s to Present; Ecuador, Popular and Indigenous Uprisings under the Correa Government; Ecuador, Protest and Revolution

References and Suggested Readings

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