

Indigenous Movements (Ecuador)

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Indigenous movements in Ecuador exploded onto the public scene in massive protests in June 1990 that shut down the country for a week over unresolved land disputes and in opposition to neoliberal economic policies. While economic issues mobilized many grassroots activists, organizational leaders advanced larger political demands to have the country's constitution modified to recognize Ecuador's plurinational nature. For a period of time, the movement's success gained Ecuador a reputation as home to one of the best-organized social movements in the Americas. A careful analysis reveals that the strength of the movement emerged in the context of militants engaging with three interrelated themes that have long run through social movements. First, such movements never emerge in isolation, but success is predicated on building alliances with other movements. Second, opposing a class consciousness with ethnic identities (and increasingly nationalist claims or gender) is a red herring that is largely an academic construction that has little to do with lived realities. Furthermore, rather than intersecting or multiplying in a "triple oppression," class relations, racial discrimination, and gendered violence operate on different levels that marginalized peoples must navigate in order to advance their political agendas. Finally, activists of any political stripe generally have three ways they can advance their concerns: massive street mobilizations (that traditionally take the form of a general strike), electoral politics, or armed struggle (either in the form of a military coup or guerrilla warfare). Again, in an isolated academic environment these methods are often assumed to be mutually exclusive and counterpoised against each other. Particularly in Latin America, however, activists are generally less concerned with the specific nature of their tactics but instead will willingly and openly switch between them in pursuit of their larger and ultimate goal of transforming society. Over the course of the twentieth century, Indigenous movements in Ecuador confronted all of these issues. Their success in doing so both provides insights into how social movements need to engage those multiple issues and also illustrates how doing so successfully can advance their objectives.

An earlier generation of scholarship simplistically and mechanically interpreted Indigenous movements in Ecuador as progressing from a reliance on the political left to working with the Catholic Church until finally emerging as their own independent force. This narrative alleged a parallel shift from class or economic demands to ethnic claims and finally to proclamations that, rather than ethnic groups or tribes, Indigenous movements are comprised of autonomous Indigenous nationalities with their own languages, cultures, religions, and territory. Similarly, strategies supposedly shifted from a reliance on social movement activity designed to stop unfavorable policies to engagement with electoral politics in order to implement their agenda. (Fortunately for Ecuador, and unlike in the cases of FARC in neighboring Colombia and the Shining Path in Peru, the country has largely been spared the bloody violence of insurrectional warfare.) One slogan illustrating this change at the beginning of the twenty-first century was "from protest to power." A more careful analysis, however, reveals that across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, all of these issues were present and at the forefront of the minds of activists as they continually struggled with how best to advance their agendas.

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Ecuador is not particularly unique nor an outlier in terms of their importance, or in how social movement activists engaged with them. Nevertheless, Ecuador does present a useful and illustrative case study for how to navigate what at points can be a colossal trainwreck in an attempt to achieve larger and often elusive goals.

Alliances

The Shuar Federation, founded in 1964 in the Ecuadorian Amazon, has often been presented as the first Indigenous organization in Latin America. What this ignores, however, is the foundation of the Ecuadorian Federation of Indians (Federación Ecuatoriana de Indios, FEI) 20 years earlier. Some scholars claimed that the FEI was simply a communist front organization and as such lacked legitimacy. True, the Communist Party of Ecuador (Partido Comunista de Ecuador, PCE) did assist in the organization of the FEI in 1944, and party members assumed key leadership positions in the federation. In fact, communists had been working in rural communities for decades. The earliest organizations emerged in the 1920s in the largely Indigenous canton of Cayambe under the guidance of local leaders Jesús Gualavisí and Dolores Cacuango. Gualavisí participated in the founding the PCE, and Cacuango later served on its central committee. It is only in a simplistic and binary academic mindset where an assumption emerges that a person cannot be both an Indigenous person and a communist militant at the same time.

Not entirely unlike the history of the FEI, the Catholic Church and Peace Corps volunteers provided significant logistical support for the founding of the Shuar Federation. If a similar standard for the FEI were applied to that federation, it would be seen as a front group for the Catholic Church, with participants operating as stooges for United States imperialism. Doing so, however, would be dishonest and a disservice to the significant advances that the federation provided for Shuar and subsequent pan-Amazonian organizations. Similar points could be made about subsequent organizations that received funding from Oxfam, the Ford Foundation, and other international bodies. Rather, the point is that successful movements never operate in isolation from a broader environment, and if activists are smart and wish to realize success they will embrace and build on those alliances. While Martin Luther King Jr., for example, presented civil rights movements in the United States as black-led, he never eschewed alliances with those who could help him advance their agenda. It was those alliances that contributed to the success of his movement, and similar factors were at play with Indigenous movements in Ecuador.

Intersectionality

Scholars have been tempted to present the history of Indigenous movements in Ecuador as a logical progression from the class-based FEI in the 1940s to the ethnic-based Shuar Federation in the 1960s, and finally culminating with the nationalist discourse of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador, CONAIE) in the 1980s. While that is a nice model, it is far too reductive. In reality, both ethnic and nationalist constructions were present in these movements from the beginning, and economic demands based on a Marxist understanding of class relations never disappeared from the later organizations. In the 1920s, under the influence of the Communist

International, the PCE agitated for the rights of Indigenous nationalities and never dropped that language. In the 1960s, as new “ethnic” organizations such as Ecuarrunari (from the Kichwa phrase “Ecuador Runacunapac Riccharimui” or Awakening of the Ecuadorian Indians) became more powerful they shifted left and more aggressively advanced class-based economic demands. The 1990 Indigenous uprising that placed the CONAIE at center stage effectively merged a class consciousness with ethnic realities wrapped up in nationalist discourse. Part of the legacy of these interactions, as José Antonio Lucero (2008) has observed, is that Indigenous movements effectively “Indianized” the Left in Ecuador.

A gendered consciousness has never been distant from Indigenous movements, even as male chauvinism has plagued organizational structures. Women have long provided key leadership roles in the different stages of these movements, from Dolores Cacuango with the FEI, to Blanca Chancoso with the Ecuarrunari, and Nina Pacari with the CONAIE. Nela Martínez, an early leading feminist and communist militant, was a close collaborator with Cacuango. Rather than understanding race, class, and gender to be in tension with each other, they represented different experiences that militants needed to navigate to be able to achieve their dreams.

Strategies

If early Indigenous organizations in Ecuador relied on social movement strategies to advance their agendas, it was because it was the only option left open to them. Literacy restrictions excluded the vast majority of Indigenous peoples from the franchise until 1979, so participation in electoral politics was off the table. For much of Ecuador’s history, those engaged in armed struggle were politicians who remained distant from the concerns of rural communities and engaged in military coups to short-circuit larger political processes. Indigenous peoples had little to gain with involvement in such palace intrigues.

The emergence of the Indigenous-led Pachakutik Movement for Plurinational Unity (Movimiento Unidad Plurinacional Pachakutik, MUPP) as an electoral vehicle in 1995 was by no means without controversy or complications. Often Indigenous militants found themselves to be more successful when organized as a social movement than a political party that necessitated messy and contradictory compromises. But while street protests effectively pulled down unpopular governments that ruled against their economic, ethnic, and gendered interests, enacting positive policy initiatives required gaining a seat at the table where decisions were made. This included codifying significant advances into the 2008 constitution, including recognition of Ecuador as a plurinational country. Longtime and well-respected leaders such as CONAIE president Luis Macas found themselves running for political office, including for president of the country, under the banner of Pachakutik before shifting back to their previous roles in the social movements. As with many other activists around the world, militants in Ecuador came to realize the importance of an “inside–outside” strategy where simultaneously operating as a social movement and an electoral force could slowly but effectively move their demands forward. (At other times and in other places, as with Emiliano Zapata in the Mexican Revolution and the latter-day neo-Zapatistas in Chiapas, activists discovered that a very real threat of violence could similarly force unsympathetic members of the ruling class to pay attention to their key demands.)

One thing that activists have learned is that there is no one road map or owner’s manual that will assure success for a movement. Rather, as with all of us, advancing a political agenda is a matter of experimentation that can result in reversals and losses as well as the occasional

victory. In that way, Indigenous movements in Ecuador are no different from those anywhere else. Nevertheless, their struggles provide an interesting case study and even an inspiring model for how it is possible to navigate multiple issues and factors on the road to success.

SEE ALSO: Indigenous Movements (Latin America); Indigenous Protest in Bolivia Against Evo Morales; Indigenous Rituals as Cultural Forms of Collective Action; Intersectionality and Social Movements.

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