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Broadening Democracy: Latin America’s Indigenous Peoples’ Movements

DONNA LEE VAN COTT

Indigenous peoples’ movements are not a new phenomenon in Latin American politics. They have been on the scene for three decades now, expressing the demands of the hemisphere’s most excluded population, garnering national and international media attention and, in some countries, gaining victories on important policy issues.

What is new is the transformation of indigenous movements in some Latin American countries from momentarily influential outsiders to powerful and effective collective political actors with a sustained presence in regional and national politics. In Ecuador, a national indigenous organization led a movement that ousted President Jamil Mahuad in January 2000. In Bolivia, a coalition of forces led by indigenous peasant organizations forced President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada to resign in October 2003.

In both countries, indigenous peoples’ movements formed political parties that credibly contested national power in 2002. Indigenous political parties and candidates have also won office in recent years at the national, subnational, and municipal levels in Colombia, Guatemala, Guyana, Nicaragua, Peru, and Venezuela.

What explains the growing effectiveness and importance of indigenous movements at a time when other civil society groups in Latin America have been relatively stagnant or have lost ground? Their success in part stems from the fragmentation and weakness of the political left and traditional parties, leaving indigenous parties to lead coalitions

against neoliberal economic policies. While sufficiently effective to oust two presidents and to block neoliberal policies, their obstructive political power has exceeded their ability to offer a coherent alternative to prevailing economic and political models. Even so, indigenous political parties have enhanced the quality of Latin American democracy, the alarms of conservative elites notwithstanding.

THE AWAKENING

Anthropologists estimate that indigenous peoples constitute approximately 10 percent of the population of the Americas, or roughly 40 million people. They are concentrated mainly in southern Mexico, Central America, and the central Andes. In Bolivia and Guatemala they comprise approximately 65 percent of the population; in Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru they account for between 10 and 40 percent. Elsewhere, although their national numbers may be minuscule, indigenous peoples may make up a significant minority or majority in particular regions. For example, indigenous people comprise 49 percent of the population of the Venezuelan state of Amazonas and more than 90 percent of the population of the Colombian states of Guainía and Vichada.

Contemporary indigenous organizations formed throughout Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s in response to an increasing number of incursions on their lands and government repression. In the 1980s, local and subnational groups joined to create regional and national organizations. These were able to mobilize hundreds of thousands of members for disruptive protests to demand the return of traditional lands and the expulsion of intruders. With the help of sympathetic social scientists, churches, and nongovernmental organizations, they then created transnational

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networks that pressed for international recognition of indigenous peoples' right to self-determination.

During this early phase, the most militant movements emerged in Bolivia, Ecuador, Chile, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. In Bolivia and Ecuador, indigenous organizations mobilized during and after the transitions to democracy that occurred in the late 1970s and 1980s to demand the return of agricultural land in the highlands, the protection of lowland territories from increasing incursions by extractive industries, and access to culturally sensitive public services, such as bilingual education. In Bolivia, the Unitary Syndical Confederation of Campesino Workers of Bolivia united indigenous peasants in 1979 to struggle for improved agricultural policies. The movement became increasingly dynamic after 1985 when coca growers' federations usurped its leadership and used it to oppose the government's stepped up efforts to eradicate the coca leaf. (Coca is a sacred element of Bolivia's Aymara and Quechua cultures and the sole livelihood of thousands of indigenous families.) In Ecuador, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador, which united highland and lowland organizations, pursued a broad array of demands in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Its greatest successes were securing control over the government's bilingual educational program and obtaining the return of more than 1 million hectares of indigenous territory.

Indigenous groups also mobilized under authoritarian regimes, whose harsh repression fueled their militancy. During General Augusto Pinochet's military rule in Chile from 1973 to 1990, the Mapuche led a movement of cultural and political awakening among the nation's indigenous peoples. Once democracy returned to Chile, the Mapuche were among the most militant opponents of proposed free trade agreements with the United States, arguing that these would lead to further infringement of their collective property rights. In Guatemala, Maya organizations formed in the 1970s to address social and economic problems caused by government inattention. Maya women were at the forefront of political organization in the 1980s, confronting the scorched-earth tactics of Guatemalan military regimes and the continued repression and neglect by the civilian governments that followed. In Nicaragua, with support from the United States, the Miskitu led other indigenous peoples on the Atlantic coast in a struggle for territorial autonomy against the Sandinista government.

In sum, a number of factors explain the growing militancy and effectiveness of indigenous organiza-

tions during the 1980s. The transition to democracy opened space for all opposition groups to organize and express their demands as the threat of violent repression diminished. The economic crises and structural adjustment policies that marked this decade in Latin America put increasing pressure on indigenous community economies. Pressure on inadequate indigenous lands by poor landless farmers seeking land and by extractive industries, particularly oil companies and gold miners, was most likely to generate protests. But indigenous peoples also mobilized against the loss of tens of thousands of mining jobs in Bolivia, and against the failure of governments to respond to the need for agricultural subsidies and marketing assistance in Mexico and Peru. Indigenous movements mobilized to prevent states from rescinding or restricting indigenous corporate legal rights. In Brazil, the government's announcement in 1978 of its intention to reform the 1973 Indian statute—a change that would have facilitated the confiscation of indigenous lands—provoked an unprecedented level of political mobilization among indigenous organizations and sympathetic NGOs. Similarly, in Colombia local and regional opposition to a government proposal to weaken collective land-holding rights unified a diverse indigenous movement and in 1982 led to the creation of the country's first national indigenous organization, the Colombian National Organization of Indians in 1982.

The UN's project to codify indigenous rights in international law facilitated the development of a transnational indigenous rights movement. A 1977 conference led to the establishment of the Working Group on Indigenous Peoples, which met regularly during the 1980s and 1990s. Interaction with this movement, and its emphasis on the right of peoples to self-determination, enabled indigenous movements throughout Latin America to converge on a common claim: autonomous control over their territories and culture, within the framework of existing states. Framing their demands in terms of a right to self-determination resonated with a population whose struggle was as much for recognition and dignity as distinct sovereign peoples as it was about substantive policy changes or political representation.

THE CONSTITUTION OF INDIGENOUS RIGHTS

In the 1990s a number of Latin American countries undertook constitutional reforms to address the severe crises of representation and legitimacy that affected many postauthoritarian governments. The reforms also responded to the need to mod-

ernize and strengthen legal systems and to give constitutional rank to internationally accepted human rights norms. Indigenous peoples' organizations took advantage of these reform efforts to insert their own rights claims, which they effectively linked to elite priorities.

In Colombia, the indigenous movement in 1990 and 1991 successfully tied its calls for recognition of a special set of indigenous rights to urgent national problems. For example, indigenous groups linked the absence or weakness of the rule of law in rural areas to the need to recognize the public authority of indigenous customary law; by acceding to this demand, Colombian elites extended the rule of law to the one-quarter of Colombian territory in indigenous reserves. Recognizing the public authority of indigenous community authorities also extended public authority into rural areas contested by guerrillas and paramilitaries. The participation of two elected indigenous delegates in the drafting of Colombia's constitution (a third was appointed to represent the demobilized indigenous Quintín Lame guerrillas) gave the new document a veneer of legitimacy it otherwise would not have had.

The success of Colombia's relatively small and weak indigenous movement in securing the most progressive set of constitutional rights in the region inspired indigenous movements in neighboring countries. In Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, indigenous movements mobilized successfully to secure rights similar to those codified in Colombia. In Argentina and Paraguay a more reduced set of rights was won. Elsewhere, despite similar efforts, indigenous movements experienced reversals. In 1993, Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari weakened constitutional language recognizing indigenous cultures in order to "modernize" the Mexican economy in advance of the North American Free Trade Agreement. The same year saw Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori preside over a constitutional reform that restricted indigenous territorial and language rights. In Guatemala in 1999, a referendum failed that would have codified a broad set of indigenous rights promised as part of the peace accords that ended the long-running civil war.

Still, in the presence or absence of national constitutional reforms in favor of indigenous peoples,

13 Latin American countries between 1989 and 2003 ratified an International Labor Organization convention on the Rights of Tribal and Indigenous Peoples. The convention committed states to respect a broad set of rights, albeit with weaker protection of autonomy and political rights than is found in the Colombian, Ecuadorean, or Venezuelan charters.

FROM OUTSIDERS TO INSIDERS

Participation in constitutional reform processes during the 1990s, and the successful results achieved in some countries, provided the impetus for intensified indigenous political activity. Indigenous organizations that had mobilized their members to press for indigenous rights now sought to lead them in favor of other important goals. After electing representatives to constituent assemblies—in competition with better financed and more experienced traditional politicians—indigenous

organizations sought to elect their leaders to national office.

Although indigenous peoples had previously participated in elections, they

usually had done so as members of leftist or populist parties, with mostly unsatisfactory results, and mainly at the local level. Having successfully occupied public space in the streets and plazas outside the halls of power, they now sought to advance a two-pronged strategy of political pressure by also occupying the spaces within. And they had an urgent reason to do so: to play a role in drafting legislation implementing indigenous constitutional rights. As Bolivian indigenous leader Marcial Fabricano said in 1996 as he observed with frustration the debate on indigenous land rights from the balcony of the National Congress, "Someone of us must be there below."

The Colombian indigenous movement again led the way. It first formed political parties in 1990 to compete in constituent assembly elections. Although indigenous people represent less than 3 percent of the total population, their parties took advantage of new constitutional provisions guaranteeing indigenous representation in the Senate and providing campaign funding and media time for all registered political movements. The most successful of their parties, the Indigenous Social Alliance (ASI), has elected senators, national deputies, gov-

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ernors, dozens of mayors, and hundreds of municipal councilors since 1991, in part by incorporating nonindigenous candidates and activists and by focusing on issues of general concern.

Ecuador's United Plurinational Pachakutik Indigenous Movement (Pachakutik) has been the most successful indigenous party. The party formed in 1995 following constitutional reforms that made it easier for small new parties to register for elections. In 2002 it made an alliance with a new party formed by Lucio Gutiérrez, a former army officer, and the alliance went on to win the presidency. Policy conflicts between Gutiérrez and Pachakutik leaders (particularly over a proposed change to social security) caused a rift in the alliance that led to the expulsion of three Pachakutik members from Gutiérrez's cabinet in August 2003. But the indigenous party remains a significant force in regional offices and the national legislature.

Bolivia is the only Latin American country in which important indigenous parties were established before the 1990s. They did not fare well, however, until local elections in 1995, after a new law established direct election of municipal governments. Coca growers who belonged to the indigenous Unitary Syndical Confederation of Campesino Workers of Bolivia formed a political party to put forward candidates for local offices with the hope of gaining autonomous control of their regions. In 1997 the party elected four indigenous-peasant representatives to the Bolivian Congress, including coca growers' leader Evo Morales, the national deputy who received the largest share of the vote in the country.

Morales has since 2000 gained popularity beyond the coca growers' movement as the most articulate and vehement opponent of the governing elite's political and economic policies. He also has opposed heavy-handed US pressure to eradicate coca leaf crops, the base ingredient for cocaine. In the 2002 presidential election, Morales, now at the head of the Movement toward Socialism, captured, along with the candidate of the Indigenous Pachakutik Movement, more combined votes than the winner, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. Their success has literally changed the face of politics in Bolivia, while inspiring indigenous movements in neighboring countries to consider forming their own political parties.

In Venezuela, an indigenous party, the United Multiethnic People of Amazonas, in alliance with other leftists, helped win the region's most progressive regime of indigenous rights, including the right to guaranteed representation at national, state, and local levels. Indigenous peoples also have started

political parties against formidable odds in Peru and Guyana. In Peru, no indigenous party—despite the existence of a large indigenous population—has collected enough signatures to register at the regional or national level, but an Amazon-based indigenous party has formed alliances with registered parties for local contests.

What explains the formation and success of indigenous parties in recent years? In addition to the favorable effects of constitutional changes, most of the new parties have benefited from institutional reforms that give new parties, social movements, and indigenous populations a better chance to register for and win elections. For example, decentralization has enabled new parties to compete at a geographic level where fewer resources are required, where indigenous peoples are more likely to constitute a majority or a significant minority, and where indigenous organizations and identities are strongest. Reduced barriers to ballot access, such as lower signature requirements, have enabled a host of social movements to enter electoral politics. Electoral rules over-representing sparsely populated rural areas have eased the election of indigenous parties and candidates.

Indigenous parties also have taken advantage of the weakness of traditional parties and party systems, a problem that plagues many countries in the region. Party system fragmentation has increased throughout Latin America in the past decade, while the vote shares for traditionally strong parties have declined. The collapse of party systems in Peru and Venezuela is an extreme example of this phenomenon. Indeed, the formation of indigenous political parties in the 1990s was as much the result of the weakness and volatility of party systems as it was a demonstration of the maturity of indigenous social movements. The indigenous parties have been particularly successful where the electoral left has suffered a collapse in support, leaving indigenous people and their parties to lead anti-neoliberal coalitions. The most successful indigenous parties—Ecuador's Pachakutik, Bolivia's Movement toward Socialism, and Colombia's ASI—combine a discourse of multiculturalism and ethnic tolerance with opposition to neoliberal economic reforms. These reforms threaten indigenous collective landholding regimes and reduce agricultural subsidies and social services on which poor communities, both indigenous and nonindigenous, depend.

SOUND AND FURY?

What results have these intensified political activities produced? What impact has the mobi-

lization of indigenous populations had on political systems in the region? Substantive effects have been most impressive in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela. They have occurred during democratic periods, under relatively stable civilian regimes, where political and legal processes are relatively responsive and transparent. All five countries have created or are in the process of creating indigenous-governed zones the size of municipalities or larger, with a varying range of autonomous powers. Millions of hectares of collective land have been titled to indigenous peoples. Indigenous organizations also have succeeded in altering or blocking public policies that negatively affect them. For example, Ecuadorean and Bolivian indigenous groups forced the rewriting of agrarian reform legislation in 1994 and 1996, respectively.

In both countries, national indigenous organizations have been at the forefront of successful efforts to impede a host of neoliberal economic reforms in the past five years. Among the most dramatic examples were movements in Bolivia to block privatization of water in 2000 and to prevent the export of natural gas in 2003. Indigenous organizations have helped oust presidents who made the mistake of ignoring their concerns and the resonance that these concerns increasingly have with nonindigenous citizens. Even in Peru, where the indigenous movement has been relatively weak, regional indigenous organizations constituted a significant part of the movement to oust President Alberto Fujimori.

Mexico's indigenous guerrilla movement, the mostly Mayan Zapatista Army of National Liberation, captured widespread media attention in the late 1990s. The Zapatistas made an armed attempt to reverse economic policies that hurt indigenous farmers and coffee growers; they also fought for constitutional reforms to allow the creation of politically autonomous indigenous zones. For the most part, they failed. The Zapatistas' plea for democracy resonated, however, with a broad cross-section of Mexican society and forced political elites to dramatically improve the competitiveness and transparency of the electoral system. The Zapatista movement's failure to achieve its most important goals—its members are currently surrounded by the Mexican army—demonstrates the futility of

armed indigenous struggle and explains why so few contemporary indigenous movements have chosen this path.

Although the obstructive power of indigenous movements is well established, they have yet to articulate a clear alternative to the prevailing political and economic model that can generate consensus within diverse indigenous populations while also appealing to the nonindigenous public. Moreover, indigenous movements have been least effective in matters that are perhaps most essential to their survival. In Panama, Kuna communities in autonomous reserves struggle to eject colonists seeking empty lands for small-scale agriculture, as well as guerrillas from neighboring Colombia. In Brazil, the Yanomami try to expel gold miners who bring diseases and violence. In Ecuador, indigenous communities struggle to remove oil companies and the environmental devastation they bring to fragile Amazonian environments. In Colombia, they must battle guerrillas,

paramilitaries, and drug traffickers, all seeking to dominate the remote mountain and jungle regions where indigenous people are settled. With few exceptions, indigenous organiza-

tions have failed to dislodge the polluters, colonists, guerrillas, and criminals from their lands.

But this failure does not diminish the movement's larger accomplishment: helping to promote democratization in Latin America. Indigenous parties have increased the participation of indigenous voters in elections and debates on public policy issues. Improved political representation of the region's most excluded group enhances the legitimacy of democratic institutions. There have been episodes of authoritarianism and violence—such as an attempted coup involving indigenous leader Antonio Vargas in Ecuador in January 2000, and the efforts by supporters of Bolivian indigenous leaders Evo Morales and Felipe Quispe to prevent other candidates from campaigning for president in their strongholds. Most indigenous leaders and organizations, however, have demonstrated admirable restraint.

In addition, indigenous political parties have followed a model of linkage between party and society that political scientists consider healthy for democracy. They have done so in a region marked by a steady deterioration of ties between distant, centralized, elitist political parties and the disaf-

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fect, poorly organized masses. When serving in national office, for example, indigenous leaders often have been among the most important crusaders against corruption. Pachakutik deputies in the Ecuadorean Congress have refused to participate in clientelism and vote buying, and have expelled members failing to follow this norm. In Bolivia, indigenous parties refused to participate in postelection horse-trading that could have secured party leaders senior paid positions in government and access to abundant resources. At the local level (especially in Ecuador), indigenous mayors have built more participatory models of government, following indigenous customs of consultation and consensus building. These efforts have helped reelect indigenous mayors by wide margins, even where indigenous voters are in the minority.

This positive impact on democratization in the region belies the assertions of conservative elites, who view indigenous movements as a threat to their way of life. A startling example came in October 2003 at an international seminar in Bogotá on "The Threats to Democracy in Latin America" when Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa criticized indigenous movements, arguing that the "political and social disorder that they generate" poses a serious threat to democracy, civilization, and development.

Remarks like Vargas Llosa's are not unusual: they are found in the region's editorial pages after every major indigenous mobilization. However, it is the remnants of political systems designed to exclude ethnic majorities and minorities, not indigenous political mobilization, that pose a threat to political, social, and economic progress. And it is likely that further "disorder" will be necessary to sweep away the exclusionary structures and discriminatory attitudes of the past.

Incorporating indigenous peoples into Western political institutions presents hard challenges. Electoral participation has caused severe divisions within already fractious indigenous organizations as leaders compete for candidacies and government employment. Moreover, this participation creates conflicts between traditional cultural authorities—who typically are older, have less formal education, and less contact with Western culture—and the younger, more acculturated indigenous leaders who run for political office and serve in government.

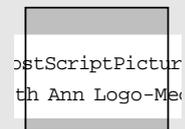
Once elected, indigenous politicians must balance the need for permanent, experienced leadership and rapid decision-making with indigenous cultural norms of leadership rotation and the

painstaking construction of consensus through public assemblies—practices that are especially difficult to preserve above the municipal level.

The political prospects of Latin America's indigenous peoples depend on several factors. Where their parties won office by promising to block neoliberal economic reforms, they must now show that they can govern more effectively than traditional parties, under the same domestic and international constraints, while constructing a viable alternative model. Where they gained support in the absence of a center-left electoral force that could challenge their hegemony within a popular coalition, they must, in some cases, now cope with more serious competition from a revived political left.

What is clear is that, in many Latin American countries, indigenous peoples' movements have transcended their status as objects of government policy, or as a passing fad that grabbed attention as a colorful cultural phenomenon. They have converted themselves into a resilient, cohesive political force with the power to determine political outcomes. ■

A Current History Snapshot . . .



"What will be the attitude of the United States toward these new-style revolutions? Clearly a policy has not yet been formulated. If the peace and unity of the hemisphere are to be preserved, Washington will have to find a way to encourage social reform, by financial and other means, and to live with occasionally irritating nationalisms. In that way the Communists can be fended off and with luck the hasty improvisations of a Castro can be avoided. This will be one of the biggest tasks facing United States statesmen in the next ten years."

"Cuba: Evolution of a Revolution"
Current History, March 1960
 Harry B. Murkland