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Indigenous Movements Lose Momentum

DONNA LEE VAN COTT

Just a few years ago, the future looked bright for Latin America's 40 million indigenous people. Throughout the hemisphere and particularly in the ethnically diverse Andes, indigenous movements were converting protest into concrete policy gains. Most nations' constitutions had recognized some indigenous rights. Indigenous political parties had consolidated regional bases of support and were increasingly competitive at the national level in Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Guyana. Indigenous movements had become influential political actors, often with broad, cross-ethnic, and cross-class appeal.

Today the outlook is more muddled. Some indigenous parties have maintained their regional strength and expanded geographically, but others have become fragmented, lost public support, or failed to achieve their potential. A backlash against indigenous movements threatens to overturn historic gains in policies and rights and to sap movement momentum by forcing indigenous parties to adopt a defensive posture.

The increasing strains that many indigenous political movements today exhibit are partly attributable to their own success. That is, their success has convinced larger political parties to court popular indigenous candidates. Also, competition over newly accessible government positions has exacerbated internal tensions and produced organizational fragmentation. More fundamentally, incorporation into formal politics requires an adjustment to norms of competition and collaboration, and these norms can clash with the logic of social movement activism and traditional indigenous self-governance. In order to preserve success, indigenous political actors must main-

tain long-standing practices that sustain indigenous identity—and avoid the temptations of co-optation and corruption that accompany access to power.

LEFT BEHIND

In the 1990s indigenous movements emerged as electoral vehicles that embodied public dissatisfaction with neoliberal economic policies and US dominance in the region. In the absence of viable leftist parties espousing these views, indigenous vehicles most often succeeded as the fulcrum of alliances bringing together weak, fragmented, popular organizations and leftist political parties. However, resurgent leftist and populist parties have altered the political environment for indigenous movements. Indigenous organizations and parties have had either to compete against better-financed left-populist options or to formulate new alliances, in which they often have found themselves junior partners. For indigenous movements, moreover, it is harder to articulate a compelling opposition discourse against a popular left government than against a neoliberal one. It is also hard to find space within these populist-left governments, which may have sufficient electoral support without indigenous movements.

Resurgent leftist and populist parties have usurped indigenous movements' most compelling political appeal: opposition to neoliberalism and to US military and economic dominance. Indigenous movements had framed their oppositional claims within a discourse of cultural nationalism, one that had broad appeal for Latin Americans of diverse identities. In 1994 Mexico's predominantly indigenous Zapatista National Liberation Army became the Latin American face of anti-neoliberalism. But today Venezuela's Hugo Chávez more famously embodies the region's rejection of US policies and its drive for closer economic and political integration inde-

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pendent of Washington. After 20 years, indigenous movements have lost their novelty as fresh political faces with the ability to introduce new ideas to the political agenda.

Signs of progress for indigenous movements exist nonetheless. The global environment for indigenous peoples improved in September 2007 when the United Nations approved a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples after 30 years of debate. All Latin American countries with the exception of Colombia approved the declaration (Colombia abstained; the United States and Canada rejected it). The declaration increases Latin American governments' obligations toward indigenous peoples, particularly with respect to self-government and exploitation of natural resources.

In another positive development, a regionwide move toward municipal decentralization has enabled geographically concentrated and relatively homogeneous indigenous communities to achieve partial self-government. In Ecuador, the indigenous party Pachakutik has gained international praise for its innovative efforts in intercultural-deliberative local government. Local indigenous organizations in southern Mexico—some allied with the Zapatistas—are exercising power in de facto autonomous local and regional governments. Municipalities in Oaxaca have the option of electing authorities according to traditional customs.

The divergent paths that contemporary indigenous movements can take are highlighted by comparing conditions in Bolivia and Ecuador, two countries that are among Latin America's most ethnically diverse and that are home to the region's most electorally successful indigenous parties. In both countries, a populist-left president with significant public support governs in the face of opposition from a recently disenfranchised neoliberal elite. Both countries have just completed a tumultuous process of constitutional reform. Beyond that, however, Bolivia and Ecuador represent a study in contrasts.

BOLIVIAN HARDBALL

In Bolivia, the meteoric rise over two election cycles of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) represents one of Latin America's most dramatic political stories of the past decade. MAS was initially formed (under another name) by indigenous coca growers, in alliance with other indigenous groups, to contest municipal elections in 1995. In 1997 MAS sent to the Congress its charismatic

leader, Evo Morales, along with three other representatives. Over subsequent years conditions were created that allowed Morales to present himself as the only alternative to generations of venal elite rule, subservience to foreign powers, and crushing poverty. (Contributing to these conditions were the disintegration of the Bolivian party system, Bolivians' growing rejection of US interference in the country's affairs, and the persistent mobilization of peasants, unions, and urban popular organizations.) After Morales finished a close second in the 2002 presidential election, the seams of Bolivian politics unraveled.

As public anger toppled two presidents between 2003 and 2005, Bolivia's light-skinned elites were too busy fighting for power among themselves to accurately gauge Morales's popular appeal. Morales built pragmatic alliances with urban, middle class politicians, and he used a discourse that linked subordination of the indigenous majority to themes that resonated with most Bolivians—anti-neoliberalism, national pride, and disgust with traditional politicians. In doing so, Morales secured for the MAS in 2005 the most resounding political victory in modern Bolivian history. The party won 54 percent of the presidential vote and 84 of the 157 seats in Congress. (In local politics the party already had become the dominant force, having won one-quarter of municipal council seats in the 2004 local contests.)

Morales's popularity surged in 2006 after he renegotiated foreign oil and gas contracts, securing billions of dollars for the national treasury. He also forced implementation of stalled agrarian reform, albeit through questionable means that included the misuse of alternate votes in Congress and the mobilization of peasant supporters to intimidate opposition legislators. In 2007 Morales issued decrees protecting indigenous communities from the harmful effects of resource exploitation conducted by foreign companies in legally recognized indigenous territories. The president's personal prestige soared—and by association, so did that of Latin America's indigenous movements—as foreign countries and companies sought to secure warm relations with Bolivia and access to its energy markets.

From a liberal-democratic perspective, Morales's achievements have come at a price. As president he has flouted the law he swore to uphold and has openly challenged the courts. He taunts the political opposition and the independent media, allowing and even encouraging supporters to

intimidate them physically. He demands obedience from movement and party militants and expels dissenters. This “peasant-union discipline” is a feature of Bolivia’s highland indigenous organizational culture that weakens that culture’s democratic credentials in the eyes of observers. Morales’s political vision, and his party’s, emphasize economic equality and popular power at the expense of opposition rights and the rule of law. In addition, the image of indigenous political actors as an honest and accountable political alternative has been diminished by the nepotism, incompetence, and job buying that have characterized the MAS administration.

Morales’s manipulation of a 2006–2007 constituent assembly, which was charged with drafting a new constitution, is a case in point. Morales assumed the presidency with a mandate to advance the indigenous movement’s long-standing goal of rewriting the constitution to embrace Bolivia’s diverse indigenous cultures and shift power from the minority, light-skinned elite to the indigenous majority. His main obstacle from the beginning has been a well-organized, militant campaign for regional autonomy based in the economically dynamic, eastern, lowland departments where the country’s gas and oil resources are located. This movement’s partially foreign origin and outward economic orientation give racial undertones to its demands for autonomy. Lowland elites seek to retain their wealth, but they also reject being politically subordinated to groups that they perceive as uneducated, less industrious, and antimodern.

Morales and his party controlled 54 percent of the seats in the constituent assembly, but approving a draft constitution required a two-thirds supermajority. The president—through a campaign of intimidation carried out by police, the military, and thousands of armed supporters—imposed an absolute-majority rule, contradicting the two-thirds majority legal requirement. When MAS assembly members approved a draft constitution in December 2007—after 16 months of stalemate and several violent skirmishes around the assembly headquarters in Sucre—they did so in the neighboring department of Oruro, in the absence of the opposition, and in violation of legal stipulations such as one requiring that those who signed the draft must have had the chance to read it first.

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Morales’s maneuvers enraged opposition leaders and sparked a year of protests and hunger strikes. The opposition mounted an effort to recall the president. This failed when Morales registered the support of 64 percent of voters on August 10, 2008. His victory was tainted, however, by revelations that peasant and union organizations had threatened their members with sanctions if they failed to support Morales.

In the fall of 2008 Vice President Alvaro García negotiated an “adjusted and corrected” constitution that incorporated some opposition demands. A referendum on the draft charter was scheduled for January 2009, to be followed by national elections in December.

Among notable features of the proposed constitution is language declaring that the Bolivian state is founded on “plurinational communitarian law . . . intercultural, decentralized, and with autonomies. Bolivia is founded in political, economic, juridical, cultural, and linguistic plurality and pluralism.” The constitution recognizes

departmental, regional, municipal, and indigenous autonomies—but the powers and resources allotted to each are still to be specified and regulated by law. Government offices would be

required to operate in two languages, including an indigenous language, and all 36 indigenous languages would be recognized as official.

Given Morales’s popularity, the constitution was expected to win approval. But how will its vague language be implemented without sparking renewed conflict? Opposing visions of democracy and the state have yet to be reconciled. And much is at stake: If Morales, as Latin America’s most prominent indigenous leader, is unwilling to embrace liberal-democratic ideals, the effects will be felt by indigenous movements elsewhere that are trying to establish themselves as democratic alternatives. Their challenge is made more difficult by openly disregarding procedural rules, competitive institutions, and individual rights—even in the name of cultural diversity.

ECUADORIAN DISORIENTATION

Just as intriguing as the MAS’s rise in Bolivia is the rapid disintegration in Ecuador of what five years ago was Latin America’s most successful indigenous movement. The movement’s troubles

provide important lessons to indigenous movements in those Latin American countries—that is, most of them—where the indigenous constitute a minority.

Ecuador's largest indigenous organization, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), formed the United Plurinational Pachakutik Movement (Pachakutik) in 1996. At its peak in 2002, Pachakutik was an influential alliance of indigenous and popular organizations and urban intellectuals. It boasted a far more consolidated and mobilized electoral operation than did Lucio Gutiérrez, the presidential candidate whom Pachakutik helped bring to power that year. Soon after becoming president, however, Gutiérrez turned on the movement and fractured it by co-opting leaders and organizations that were more conciliatory toward him than were Pachakutik's principal leaders.

In 2004 local and regional elections, a number of candidates supported by Gutiérrez defeated Pachakutik in its historic bases after the president liberally distributed patronage to impoverished rural communities. This strategy reduced the number of Pachakutik mayors to 16 from 23. Pachakutik lost three municipalities to Amauta Yuyay, a tiny evangelical indigenous party on whose behalf Gutiérrez had campaigned vigorously.

But the attacks on Pachakutik by Gutiérrez and, later, by President Rafael Correa, are not the only reason for the party's decline. First, Pachakutik is a victim of its own success. It has delivered many of the goods its constituents had sought, such as recognition of indigenous territories, bilingual education, and political inclusion. Second, current and former militants accuse Pachakutik of behaving like a traditional party. They point to alliances that Pachakutik has made with neoliberal parties to secure for its congressional representatives leadership positions and favorable electoral rules. These alliances with sworn enemies have confounded supporters and diminished the legitimacy and prestige of national indigenous leaders, causing grassroots organizations to abandon Pachakutik and seek other electoral partners. Third, persistent divisions among the party's regional organizations, its highly public personal rivalries, and

its insufficient renewal of leadership have sapped the movement's energy and prestige.

Another explanation for Pachakutik's decline is its decision after 2003 to focus more narrowly on the indigenous identity and agenda. Many indigenous leaders perceived the Gutiérrez debacle as a direct result of overextending the movement socially and ideologically, compromising principles, and diluting indigenous identity—always the movement's most valuable resource. One former leader told the daily *El Comercio* in February 2007 that Pachakutik “converted itself into another political party and forgot the true character of *pachakutik*”—a term that connotes transformational change. The result was severe movement fragmentation and a distancing between long-standing leaders and their base.

The new ethnocentric strategy meant there was less space in the party for nonindigenous militants. Prominent mestizos abandoned Pachakutik, costing the party representation in urban areas. Others were expelled for failing to toe the indigenous line. Important organizations—peasant, urban, and Afro-Ecuadorian—left the alliance in 2005, citing an increasing emphasis on indigenous candidates.

Even prominent indigenous leaders have left, accusing Pachakutik of having abandoned its original goal of promoting social justice and solidarity in favor of capturing political power. For example, the popular Otavalo mayor Mario Conejo left the party in 2006, along with three municipal council members. Observers concluded that Conejo's willingness to seek consensus with mestizos conflicted with the more radical stance of local indigenous organizations. Indigenous voters also feel alienated: They appear to be more interested in access to local development resources that promise immediate improvement in welfare than in a radical discourse evoking a utopian future.

In the 2006 presidential election Pachakutik chose not to pursue its usual strategy of allying with a viable mestizo presidential candidate, nor did it support the three-term indigenous mayor of Cotacachi, Auki Tituaña, who had demonstrated cross-ethnic appeal. Instead Pachakutik chose CONAIE leader Luis Macas, a 20-year veteran of indigenous politics. Macas attracted barely more

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than 2 percent of the vote. According to a study by East Tennessee State University social scientists Kenneth Mijeski and Scott Beck, only 25 percent of indigenous voters chose Macas, while approximately half supported Gutiérrez's brother, who extended the family legacy of patronage in rural communities. Pachakutik candidates also reportedly suffered an anti-indigenous backlash among mestizo voters. The indigenous movement's use of roadblocks and other coercive protest measures in preceding decades had given it an image as radical and undemocratic. Pachakutik's congressional delegation, which had consisted of 11 deputies in 2002, shrank to 6.

A constituent assembly convened by President Correa in 2007–2008 to rewrite the country's constitution further divided the indigenous movement, as some of its prominent leaders participated in the assembly as part of the populist president's delegation. In 1997, Pachakutik had accounted for 7 of 70 delegates in that year's constituent assembly, and the party was a key partner in a center-left bloc. But this time the party was marginalized, accounting for only 5 of the assembly's 130 delegates (including 2 in alliance with leftist parties). Correa, who controlled 80 seats and benefited from simple-majority rules, largely controlled the outcome. As in Bolivia's case, however, the Ecuadorian assembly suffered the stigma of an illegitimate birth. Correa engaged in questionable legal and political maneuvering when he convened the assembly over legislative opposition, and he deposed the legislature to give the assembly that he dominated law-making powers.

The weakness and division of the indigenous movement were revealed in the debate over whether voters should approve the new constitution that the assembly produced. Pachakutik leaders, as well as CONAIE's highland and coastal affiliates, publicly favored approval, but CONAIE itself hesitated to do so, fearing that this would give the impression of support for Correa. CONAIE issued a statement calling Correa racist and authoritarian. Finally on September 4, 2008, CONAIE announced support for the constitution based on its stance against neoliberalism, but emphasized that support for the charter did not imply support for the president. The new constitution received 64 percent approval in a referendum.

The 2008 constitution describes Ecuador as "intercultural, plurinational," whereas the 1998 constitution had only called it "pluricultural and multiethnic." This semantic change holds great

meaning for the indigenous. But Ecuador's indigenous people failed to achieve strong recognition for indigenous languages or a right to "previous informed consent" with respect to exploitation of natural resources in indigenous territories.

Correa initially attracted prominent indigenous leaders to his political project, but he has angered others by making derogatory comments about Quichua, Ecuador's most common indigenous language, and by insisting that the indigenous constitute only 5 percent of the Ecuadorian population. Indigenous leaders claim that he has stolen ideas and proposals from CONAIE and Pachakutik. The newspaper *El Comercio* concluded in a July 2007 editorial, "A decade ago, the [indigenous] movement embodied the discontent of the leftist sectors with structural adjustment. However, today, the Correa government has assumed these claims, which has demobilized the organization." Since the constituent assembly, some of Correa's allies from the indigenous and other social movements have distanced themselves from the president, citing his increasingly authoritarian style.

In November 2008 Pachakutik leaders met to discuss strategy and to regroup. CONAIE continues to launch protests against the government, such as a 24-hour strike in November to oppose a new mining law. Although Pachakutik and CONAIE continue to meet at assemblies, it is unclear which organization is steering the indigenous movement, and each blames the other for their mutual decline.

UNDER THE RADAR

Elsewhere, in countries receiving less international attention, indigenous movements are posting mixed results. In Chile, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru, indigenous organizations still struggle to launch viable parties. But in Colombia and Venezuela—although indigenous populations account for barely 2 percent of the total population—indigenous parties have achieved some political gains and made modest policy progress.

In Colombia, the Indigenous Social Alliance (ASI) and Indigenous Authorities of Colombia (AICO) have been regional political forces for 18 years, a remarkable achievement given the size and geographic dispersion of Colombia's indigenous population and also the proliferation of new parties since 1991. (In 2006, 45 Colombian parties lost their legal registration for failing to run candidates or to win 2 percent of the vote.) In the 2006 national elections, ASI and AICO each won a seat in an indigenous Senate district. However,

neither gained representation in the lower chamber, as they had in the past, and ASI failed to win a seat in the national Senate district, as it had in 1998 and 2002.

Both parties are strong competitors in local and regional races and, in alliances, have captured departmental governorships. ASI recognizes its minority status and so reaches out to nonindigenous organizations and voters as part of a strategy to expand its political support nationally. Indigenous parties have a clear advantage to offer voters: Their elected officials are not under investigation for connections with drug traffickers or armed groups. This is a claim that many Colombian parties cannot make.

ASI and AICO maintain close relations with affiliated social movements. In conjunction with peasant farmers, sugar workers, and other supporters, indigenous organizations sponsored a massive march in October 2008 to protest a pending US trade agreement, a regressive new land statute, the “criminalization of social movements,” and the assassination of indigenous leaders and elected public officials. (In the month before the march alone, 17 such assassinations had been carried out by guerrillas, paramilitaries, and government forces.) Protesters were shocked when security forces with bullets, tear gas, and machetes assaulted approximately 40,000 marchers on their way to Bogotá. Two protesters were killed and dozens were injured. The mobilization sparked angry denunciations by conservative newspapers. Conservatives accuse indigenous movements of assaulting Colombia’s territorial integrity, a charge that incites paramilitary attack.

As the October incident demonstrated, the Alvaro Uribe administration has been a disaster for indigenous peoples. Violence against indigenous leaders is carried out with impunity, particularly in rural areas, where an estimated 1,500 have been assassinated. A dialogue on human rights in 2006 aimed at implementing indigenous constitutional rights ended in frustration. Uribe, conspicuously, was the only Latin American president who refused to sign the UN declaration on indigenous rights.

In Venezuela, on the other hand, indigenous movements benefit from long-standing support from President Chávez, from the opportunity to ally with leftist parties in the president’s coalition,

and from the decline of the clientelist and elite parties that Chávez destroyed. These parties had previously dominated indigenous votes through patronage relationships.

In the state of Amazonas, where the population is 49 percent indigenous, indigenous parties are major players. In 2005 the United Multiethnic People of Amazonas won two of the state’s seven mayoral offices and, as a result of an alliance with Chávez’s Fifth Republic Movement, sent an Amazonian indigenous leader to the National Assembly (as an alternate). A rival party, the United Movement of Indigenous Peoples, also won a seat in the National Assembly representing Amazonas. Indigenous organizations control an additional three seats in the assembly’s designated indigenous district.

With support from Chávez’s congressional coalition, indigenous movements in 2006 secured the approval of an Organic Law of Indigenous Peoples and Communities, as well as a municipal government law establishing the “indigenous municipalities” that were envisioned in the 1999

constitution. (Venezuela’s constitution is Latin America’s most progressive with respect to indigenous rights, at least until Bolivia’s new constitution takes effect.) Chávez also expelled from the country conservative US missionary

groups that had exploited indigenous communities and denigrated their cultures.

The president’s hostility toward the United States partially protects Amazonian Indians from incursions by multinational corporations. Nevertheless, indigenous rights activists complain that many indigenous constitutional rights have yet to be implemented and that Chávez’s policies often fail to protect human rights or take into account indigenous communities’ cultural sensitivities. Moreover, as in Colombia, the militarization of border areas facilitates the violation of indigenous human rights by soldiers.

MORE RETRENCHMENT THAN PROGRESS

In some Latin American countries, the political influence of indigenous movements may have peaked. Although isolated victories do occur—in November 2008 a remote Paraguayan tribe won a court ruling that stopped Brazilian companies from bulldozing its land—contemporary indigenous politics is marked more by retrenchment

A backlash against indigenous movements threatens to overturn historic gains.

than by progress. Indigenous parties, having failed to meet the (perhaps unrealistic) expectations of indigenous and non-indigenous voters, in most countries find their support leveling off or decreasing.

The decline of ethnically defined parties may have an upside from a democratic standpoint: The incorporation of indigenous candidates and concerns into multiethnic parties is an indicator of political incorporation, provided that indigenous representatives are not co-opted or subordinated to mestizo leaders. At the moment, however, indigenous parties may be best able to impose conditions that hold representatives accountable to indigenous voters. Thus they continue to perform a vital representative function.

Indigenous organizations today face the challenge of maintaining their role as independent social movements while assuming elected and appointed offices and representing diverse constituencies. To reestablish their democratic credentials, they must do more to facilitate the formal political

participation of women, who often remain relegated to auxiliary roles. They must promote greater internal pluralism and avoid resorting to violence against dissidents and opponents. To maintain the momentum achieved in the 1990s, the region's indigenous peoples' movements will also have to reassess the political environment, heal internal divisions over leadership and ideology, and formulate a coherent strategy for the future.

Although indigenous peoples will likely gain greater constitutional rights in Bolivia this year, they are struggling elsewhere to implement rights gained on paper a decade ago, particularly rights concerning control of territory and natural resources. These are violated routinely in even the most hospitable legal and political contexts. Enforcing such rights may be the most daunting challenge facing the region's indigenous peoples—particularly now, when Latin American publics may view exploiting natural resources as their best response to the ongoing economic crisis. ■