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Ecuador

A new cycle of popular resistance to neoliberalism has opened

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A few hours ago [the article was written on 14 October], the dialogue between the government and the indigenous movement ended with the announcement that Decree 883, issued on 2 October 2019, was without effect, and would be replaced by a new decree, to be drafted by representatives of the indigenous movement and of the government. Consequently, the strike was lifted. A first, provisional, clear balance sheet can be made for now.

Popular resistance returns

Popular resistance, which had suffered years of repression and persecution under Rafael Correa, is back. In eleven days of paralysis, various social sectors were mobilized: initially, bus and truck drivers, indigenous people and workers. The transport workers announced a strike that lasted two days and ended after the negotiation of an increase in fares. But that did not stop the social wave: the indigenous movement and the trade union movement, which were already preparing actions against government policies, came to the forefront, and attracted the solidarity of students from several universities who organized health care brigades and shelters, especially for indigenous women and children; then feminist groups were activated and finally, in the last two days, broad sectors of the popular and middle classes of the urban population. As had happened before, the people were at the confluence of the struggle, some in an organized way, some spontaneously. Like any convergence of these characteristics, its future is yet to be defined, and it will be a central element of reality in the immediate future.

Convergences and fragmentation of the popular movement

The convergence in this moment presents certain differences with respect to the previous ones, which had been articulated around a social movement: students in the 1970s; the trade union movement in the first years of the following decade; the indigenous movement between 1992 and 2002; or the explosion of the urban middle class in 2005. Now, however, the axis is a difficult and incomplete convergence of indigenous peoples and workers.

One of the effects of the *Correa*-*smo* attack on social movements was the weakening of the proximity between them, the outcrop of suspicions and the predominance of particularisms. In these eleven days of struggle, a tendency towards approximation, as well as the limits it faces, could be observed. That is why the government, although defeated, managed to manoeuvre, even if only to gain time. Its tactic was always to divide the mobilization by taking care of particular demands: the rise in fares demobilized the transport workers. Then it tried to separate the indigenous peoples from the workers: at one point, the government and the media stopped referring to the demands of the trade union movement and concentrated on the offer of compensation for the countryside; at first they did not obtain results, but finally they managed to separate the two central actors from the popular movement in the dialogues: on Sunday they met with the indigenous people to discuss decree 883 and postponed until Tuesday a possible dialogue with the trade union movement, which will take surely place already without the heat of mass popular mobilization. At the same time, it sought to separate public sector workers from the rest of the trade union movement, announcing its willingness to review the measures that particularly affect them: wage reductions and holidays.

The government has thus shown its willingness to negotiate fragments of the package in order to maintain the possibility of implementing the central nuclei of the neoliberal model: privatization and the overexploitation of labour and nature. Time will tell whether or not they succeed in your endeavour. And time will also tell if the popular movements manage, after this intense day, to resume the necessary approaches and links to face the challenges that will come. The construction of a clear political horizon and an action program are essential to move forward on this path.

A first confrontation with the repressive and antidemocratic tendencies of the bourgeoisie

The Moreno government, after an initially hesitant approach, has become an expression of the neo-liberal will of the monopoly groups and the IMF. This happened in the middle of a series of tug-of-war episodes, in which the government gave more and more to the wishes of business interests, but without fully applying the requested measures, so that their actions were always considered by them as insufficient. The signing of the letter of intent with the IMF sealed the shift of the government towards neoliberalism but delayed the application of the required measures. The same letter of intent to the IMF explained the reason: Appendix 3 referred to the risks of unleashing social protests with the measures that would be implemented.

This allowed the deployment of two tendencies: the first, the rapid solidification of the bloc in power, with a single discourse used by the government and the IMF, business associations and their organic intellectuals, the US government and the mainstream press, all pointing to a rapid implementation of “painful but necessary” measures; this resulted in an intense campaign through the media in the last half year.

On the other hand, it seems that the bloc in power came to the early conclusion that its programme could only be imposed violently. As time went by, virulence, inflexibility, threats and scare tactics gained space in their pronouncements. The climax came in these days of conflict, and the nakedly repressive and antidemocratic nature of the bourgeoisie and neoliberalism was clear. It was not only to accuse the protesters of being vandals, criminals and terrorists, but to threaten them with application of the penal code invented by Rafael Correa, which provides for three-year jail sentences for participating in protests. Defence minister Oswaldo Jarrán launched an open threat with fascist connotations: he spoke of using lethal weapons against the mobilized people and recalled that the military is prepared for war. With this, the National Federation of Chambers of Industry of Ecuador circulated a manifesto in which it demanded from the government “immediate action by the Armed Forces and the National Police to restore order and social peace in strict application of the state of emergency” as well as “the prosecution of the perpetrators, accomplices and enablers, as well as the material and intellectual perpetrators of the crimes that have been committed, under the protection of the Comprehensive Organic Criminal Code”.

The governmental actions went in the same direction: a few hours after the protests were initiated, a state of emergency was decreed for 60 days (reduced to 30 by a complacent Constitutional Court), followed by militarization and curfew. It was not just bravado, as the figures provided by the ombudsman show: between October 3 and 13, government repression caused at least seven deaths, 1,340 wounded and more than 1,150 detainees. This is the greatest violence against social protest in the last 30 years.

However, neither repression nor threat managed to stop the mobilization. The last curfew measure, set by the Armed Forces between 3 p.m. on Saturday and 3 p.m. on Sunday, could not even be applied: the *cacerolazo*, turned into true popular festivals in the neighbourhoods of Quito, in fact prevented its application. We should note however that the implementation of the neoliberal model will resort to the application of the most brutal violence and the groups in power have revealed their violent and criminal nature. In addition, this violent mentality has begun to permeate in certain groups of middle sectors.

Populism and the crisis of democracy

Two more issues should conclude these first reflections. The first: it seems that the return to neoliberalism will not be able to easily stabilize its reign, and the “structural crisis” of the state, which Agustín Cueva was talking about at in his time, is once again facing us as an unavoidable horizon. [1] If the crisis of 25 years of the previous neoliberal stage brought us Correist populism, the crisis of populism throws us back to neoliberalism; but this new neoliberal wave is already born in crisis: the increasingly rampant violence of the ruling classes and their governments is the first sign; social resistance is the answer that is already brewing. The result cannot be other than fragile and restricted democracies.

The second: as this day of intense struggle showed us, the construction of the people will also be a field of conflict. The right will compete there, combining its rediscovered violence with mass mobilization attempts. There will also be competition with *Correista* populism, which has demonstrated in these days that it still has the capacity to influence popular urban sectors, as it had recently shown in the local elections of March this year. And the popular movement will also compete, that is to say the autonomous social movements, probably around the workers and the indigenous peoples, who will be placed at the centre of the conflict in the attempts to implement the neoliberal model. Which tendency prevails will mark the tone and colour of the times to come.

The right and neoliberalism have lost the first battle, but can we assume that they will stop there? It's unlikely. Just after the dialogue, the dispute opens on the content of the new decree that will replace 883: that will tell us something. Will the government dialogue with the workers offered on Tuesday be fulfilled? What outcome will it have? What will be the next movements for the ruling neo-liberal bloc? Will they support Moreno or prefer to get rid of him? Will the popular movement find and build paths for approaches and articulations or will it go astray within the narrow limits of corporate interests? The only certain thing seems to be that a new cycle of popular resistance against neoliberalism has begun. It has started with great strength, but it will have much harder work ahead.

Quito

14 October 2019

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[1] Agustín Cueva (1937-1992) was an Ecuadorian sociologist and historian and a leading figure in the debates on the “theory of dependency”. In his book “El desarrollo del capitalismo en América Latina” (“The development of capitalism in Latin America”) he offered, from a Marxist viewpoint, an analysis of the Latin American transition to capitalism in the 19th century, via the “Junker” road, exploring the social formation “as coexistence of various modes of production”.