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Ecuador

A revolutionary march versus a counter-revolutionary march

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The March of the Social Movements and the pro-government Countermarch of counterposed power to power on March 22, 2012 in the city of Quito, Ecuador.

The recent history of this event began on January 15 of this year. 2000 people mobilized from diverse parts of the country, representing various social and political organizations, decided, in Yanzatza, to launch the March for Life, Water and the Dignity of Peoples. Its departure point would be the canton of El Pargui in Zamora Chinchipe, an area that will be affected by the operation of open cast mining. Its start was planned for March 8, International Women's Day. The march started three days after the signature of the mining contract Project Mirador between the government and the Chinese owned transnational company ECSA (Ecuacorriente SA).

The march covered more than seven hundred kilometres, through provincial parishes and capitals where it received different shows of solidarity and incorporations to the mobilization. Along with the National Indigenous Confederation of Ecuador (CONAIE) representatives of the ECUARUNARI (Confederation of Peoples of the Kichwa Nationality of Ecuador), the Popular Front (UNITES, FEUE, FESE, CUBE, CUCOMITAE, UGTE, CONFEMEC, UNAPE, JRE and UCAE) and the Assembly of the Peoples of the South mobilized for the march.

On March 21 the march arrived in the south of Quito. About 2,500 marchers slept in Guamanã-, most of them unwell and very tired. They had over 14 days combined sections in vehicles with long walks, sleeping in sports pavilions, schools and public spaces.

The following morning the march started off from the south of Quito for the centre of the capital. Six hours more of marching. On this occasion, they marched accompanied by thousands of demonstrators who joined them along different sections of the route to participate in the indigenous and popular mobilization.

Leading the march was the CONAIE with its president Humberto Cholango. At his side, other indigenous leaders of the diverse peoples and nationalities of Ecuador, among them the prefect of Zamora Chinchipe, Salvador Quishpe, and others including social leaders from the neighbourhoods, unions, and organizations of women, students and environmentalists. Behind them, leaders and activists of the various left political organizations marched as part of the Plurinational Coordinator (a common front of organisations to the left of Correa: Pachatukit, Movimiento Popular Democrático, Participación, the Corriente Revolucionaria Socialista del Partido Socialista and Montecristi Vive).

Red flags were combined with the indigenous multicolour flag, standards with the face of Che mixed with placards against mega mining. In the same way, organizations of women walked next to young students, political parties next to professional organizations, while libertarian sectors jointly mobilized with organizations of Marxists and labour unions. The images of the march, reproduced by the Ecuadorian and foreign mass media, showed the many-coloured amalgam of social organizations.

On the other hand, the pro-government mobilizations conceived as countermarches against a supposed mobilization destabilizing the government, were congregated in four different physical spaces: the Plaza de San Francisco, Plaza de la Independencia, Plaza Sto. Domingo and the El Arbolito park. The positions had been taken days before by activist groups of Alliance PAIS and aligned organizations.

President Correa visited the four places in the course of the day, holding meetings and haranguing to his supporters in the diverse spaces, as they converged successively in the surroundings of the presidential Palace of Carondelet.

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The presidential discourse was articulated on the basis of the following points: the march of the social movements had a destabilizing character and was fomented by coup participants, there existed an alliance between the left and the right to overthrow the government, it had an electoral aim and the result of the social mobilization was a failure.

The President returned to the past using the rhetoric employed during the Popular Referendum campaign of May 7, again asking the people to “trust me”, indicating that this government had defended, among other things, Ecuador’s water.

According to the calculations made by various observers and media professionals the pro-government countermarch attracted a number more or less similar to those mobilized by the social movements, and there are even some who calculate that it was inferior, in spite of the declarations of president Correa that refer to an supposed “10 to 1” ratio in favour of the government or the figures issued by government minister Betty Tola which speak of 60,000 people on the pro-government march. Without a doubt, the pro-government expectations failed significantly although it did not want to recognize this in its discourse.

On the other hand, beyond the technical question of numbers, the differences between both mobilizations were remarkable in diverse aspects:

- In the first place the social mobilization lasted 15 days, that is to say, from when it left El Pangui until its arrival in Quito. The official march also mobilized - in buses paid for by the state on the day of the beginning of the march in Quito and the day of its arrival in Quito. The strategy of generating a countermarch in each one of the different localities through which the march advanced had to be abandoned due to the shortage of participants and the remarkable numerical inequality between those answering the government appeal and the demonstrations of sympathy and solidarity that occurred in locality after locality along the route of the march. The disoriented pro-government forces had to change strategy several times during the long march.
- While the mobilization of the social organizations experienced several obstacles to its accomplishment (negation of the official safe-conducts for the buses to travel, police controls, infiltration of members of the public forces, boycotts by local authorities allied with the government and a strong negative propaganda from the public or government controlled media); the pro-government official march counted on bountiful state support.
- The participants in the two mobilizations were clearly different. While the official march mobilized, voluntarily or not, public employees, local governments, and organizations dependent on the Policy Coordination Ministry, mainly originating from outside Quito, the March for Life was supported by indigenous peoples, social sectors and unions that have been breaking links with Correa’s.
- Finally, while the marches of the social movements showed political initiative, the countermarch was clearly reactive. To this it is necessary to add the enormous strategic error on the part of the government, which locked itself in the centre of Quito (the historical heart of the city), whereas the social mobilization went through the popular districts of the south and centre of the capital, gaining the sympathy of a great part of the population. Thousands of people applauded the social mobilization as it passed, giving fruit, water and even chicha to the marchers.

In summary, given the significant disparity in relation to resources available to the two marches, it would be possible to describe the results of the official march as representing a fully blown failure.

The March for Life had won the dispute with the government days before arriving at Quito

The social demands were summarised in 19 points, which included opposition to the extension of the oil frontier, defence of the ITT, agrarian reform, respect for labour rights, rejection of the signature of the free trade agreements, respect for the exercise of sexual and reproductive rights, and opposition to social criminalization among others; but the key element at the origin of the social mobilization was the defence of the water and opposition to mega-mining.

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The social mobilizations, reproduced along the route of the March in various points of the country, made the question of water and large scale mining a social debate that took on a national scope from before the mobilization arrived at Quito. A group of women activists was violently evacuated and jailed after entering the Chinese Embassy to hand in a letter against mega-mining on March 8th. The authoritarian position of president Correa, who has become a great defender of mega-mining, facilitated this circumstance.

In Ecuador the propaganda that is habitually developed by the great mining transnational companies in the countries where they operate is not necessary, as the president of the Republic has personally been elevated as the main spokesman of the benefits offered by the great extractive multinationals (in particular oil and mining) of foreign capital.

The fact that a mobilization of these characteristics generated the national sympathy that occurred during the long march before its arrival in Quito, faced with state media proclaiming day after day against a supposedly pro-coup march financed by the extreme right and a president who insulted the marchers, referring to them as a few people with "pens and ponchos", worked like a boomerang against the official discourse. The Ecuadorian citizens showed their sympathy for the weakest, rejecting to a great extent the presidential rhetoric and demanding the right to protest and resistance.

This situation was demonstrated in the mobilization that took place in Cuenca on March 10, when approximately 30,000 demonstrators mobilized in defence of water and showed their sympathies with the March for Life. The pro-government countermarch only attracted 2,000 people in a city which was once the bastion of Correa's rule. That same day the March arrived at the locality of Saraguro, to the south.

Before this circumstance, the government launched a great campaign across the national territory, whose strategy consisted in promoting local works and other benefits of Correa's rule, with the intention of building indigenous support for the government and especially its Head of State. The Policy Coordination Ministry drew on the support of leaders who are highly suspect in the indigenous world, like Miguel Lluco in Chimborazo or Antonio Vargas in Pastaza. This type of manoeuvre was to a great extent rejected by indigenous communities and organizations.

Two days before the mobilizations in Quito the organizations of the Agrarian Network (not aligned to the CONAIE) which could be defined as the indigenous and peasant base of Correa's rule, presented in the National Assembly 41,000 signatures endorsing their proposed Law on Lands. There they expressed their disappointment with the government and its so-called "agrarian revolution". On March 22, Luis Andrango, president of the FENOCIN, one of the two biggest organisations in the Agrarian Network participated in the march of the social movements in Quito, although keeping a low profile.

Finally, it should be emphasized that when the march arrived in Quito the government was forced to make consecutive concessions in the field of labour and economic policy: retroactive wage increases for teachers, the same for the Army, freezing of an already truncated measure for a 25% increase in the cost of interprovincial travel, among others.

Scenarios and reflections for the future

The weakening of the government is evident from day to day. The polls and commissions showing 80% support for president Correa are not credible. The fact that on the morning of March 23 Correa gave a one hour interview on Gamanoticias (a government channel) to a mediocre journalist today in the service of the regime and previously an employee of the government of Lucio Gutiérrez, is one more indication of this weakness. President Correa and other

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ministers hogged the media on the morning of 23-M, clumsily maintained the thesis that the social mobilization had been a failure and its support "very poor". Lamentably for the official discourse, the televised images and the fact that a great part of the population of Quito attended the mobilization made the governmental argument untenable.

For their part, the social organizations and parties of the left have retaken the political initiative, which was lost even before Correa became president. In addition, they have, at least conjuncturally, marginalised the right, which by all means tried to become involved in the march and was not accepted at any moment by its convenors.

Conservative assembly members of such as Caesar Montufar and political organizations like the Partido Sociedad Patriótica tried on repeated occasions to get involved in the mobilization, something that the CONAIE and the other organizations never allowed. During the fifteen days of mobilization the only political action from the conservative political parties was to install a pathetic monument in memory of ex-president Leon Febres Lamb.

The political conflict at this moment is defined in the ambit of the social and political left of Ecuador. On the one hand a caricature of "revolution" supported by a government of social democratic profile with very many contradictions in its economic, labour and international policy; faced with an opposition to its left that begins to show mobilization capacities, a common agenda and principles of understanding.

President Correa has two options. He can choose to turn to the left and to demonstrate greater capacity of consensus with the communities affected by his extractivist and neo-developmental policy, and with the social movements and the organizations to his left; or make more and more evident the conservative turn of the executive, consolidating and establishing new alliances with business sectors and political organizations to his right.

The governmental erosion, worsened by a strong international loss of prestige after the sentence against the newspaper "El Universo", as well as the popular displeasure at the rise of prices of basic products, while business sectors record unexpected profits at a time of international crisis, does not allow too much room for manoeuvre to a government which is ten months away from a new electoral battle.

In Ecuador, 62 economic groups concentrate 41% of the GDP of the country; the non-oil wealth remains in the hands of importers, financial intermediaries and the commercial sector; the utilities of the economic groups of the country grew between 2006-2009 at 54% more than in the previous period (immediately prior to Correa's becoming president) and the bank gained in the past year alone 51% more with respect to the previous year.

In the case of the indigenous world, the main protagonist of the March 22 mobilization, the Index of Poverty by Income was quantified at 59.4% at the closing of the 2011 financial year and the illiteracy rate at 20.4% (data from INEC, Census of population, 2010).

Ecuador has one of the highest indices of inequality in the access to land, the Gini index on land is at 0.81, and governmental action has been practically zero during more than five years of Correa's government; indeed, Correa has pronounced time and time again against agrarian reform. The monopolizing tendency of water in agriculture is also well-known. The peasant population, mainly indigenous, with communal systems of irrigation, represents 86% of users. Nevertheless, this group has 22% of watered areas and has access to barely 13% of the volume. In this way the big consumers, who represent barely 1% of productive units, concentrate 67% of the water volume for irrigation. Until now the Correa government has not signalled any desire to reverse this situation and to fulfil the constitutional mandate that in its article 312 says clearly "all form of privatization of the water is prohibited". And not only that, after approval of the Constitution, the government extended the term of the concession of water to the private company Interagua, in the city of Guayaquil.

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Returning to the possible scenarios, although the first is the one desired by the social organizations who convened the march, the governmental attitude, refusing political dialogue with the social organizations in struggle and the parties to the left of the regime, makes it a very remote possibility,. However, with respect to the second scenario, already we have seen the amnesty to former vice president Alberto Dahik, charged with corruption, which was advocated personally by president Correa, and that to former president Gustavo Noboa Bejaran; the incorporation into Alianza PAIS of local authorities originating from the conservative parties; and the increasingly probable signature of a free trade agreement with the US. Meanwhile, the banker Guillermo Lasso, leader of the Movimiento CREO, who was considered as a potential candidate for the right in the elections, has practically lowered to zero his public appearances while his banking organization continues being one of the fundamental tools for the distribution of the Human Development Bond and other subventions given by the state to popular sectors. And there is the fusion of Madera de Guerrero and the Partido Social Cristiano, and their apparent will to present their own presidential candidate, ignoring the possibility of unifying around a common right candidacy.

The government is on the attack against the convening organizations of the march or the local parties and authorities that in one or another form have supported it. Hence the aggressive rhetoric used by president Correa against the Movimiento Popular Democrático (MPD), an organization of Marxist-Leninist profile that supported the social mobilization, or the different punitive actions undertaken against the Prefecture of El Azuay,

In these conditions, the social and political organizations of the left have the responsibility of generating a common agenda common of minimum demands that have as departure point the plurinational mandate of the 19 points vindicated by the March for Life, the Water and the Dignity of the People, sustained in the constitutional principles of Montecristi. From this a politically coherent platform of demands can emerge, which must articulate a coordination of common struggles, open to new incorporations, where electoral protagonisms and ambitions are in the background. There is no doubt that 22-M marks a new political era in Ecuador.