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Ecuador

Leonidas Iza: “Elections are an extension of the people’s struggle”

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In this interview with Jacobin América Latina, Leónidas Iza, Indigenous leader and presidential candidate in Ecuador, analyses the profound economic, social and institutional crisis that the country is going through, marked by the advance of neoliberal policies, state repression and the precariousness of living conditions.

Iza reflects on the impact of the demonstrations on the electoral situation and the need to build a political project from the grassroots, defending plurinationality, the public sector and national sovereignty. He also addresses the tensions and challenges of the Ecuadorian left, the role of the Citizen Revolution and its strategy for the elections.

Faced with a political scenario dominated by the right, the rise of drug trafficking and the fragmentation of progressive forces, the Indigenous leader is committed to an alternative that does not abandon street protests, but rather integrates the electoral dispute as part of a broader social and political struggle to transform Ecuador.

IAIN BRUCE: Over the last year, Ecuador has faced a series of difficult situations – rising levels of gang violence and state repression, drought and an electricity crisis, deepening poverty and mass migration. Could you describe what the context of the country was like at the start of this campaign, a little over a year after Daniel Noboa became president?

LEONIDAS IZA: Since the idea of an ‘overweight state’ and excessive bureaucracy was introduced, the model imposed by the International Monetary Fund — successively implemented by the Moreno, Lasso and now Noboa governments — has resulted in a fragile state, lacking in social policies to strengthen key sectors of the Ecuadorean economy and society. Education, health and employment have been seriously neglected, as has support for the grassroots and solidarity economy. This has led to a drastic deterioration in the living conditions of ordinary Ecuadoreans.

As a consequence, in the most impoverished areas, many have ended up seeing drug trafficking, organised crime or illegal activities as their only way out. For the majority of Ecuadoreans, this represents a problem, but for the political and economic elites, for the oligarchies, it is an opportunity: they have exploited this suffering to promote their usual projects.

We now find ourselves in a painful situation. After President Noboa’s declaration of a ‘state of war’, which is now a year old, these elites have managed to establish a hegemony in public thought and discussion. The so-called Phoenix Plan, to tackle gang-related violence, does not really exist and there any real intention to put an end to the lack of security; what we are seeing is the use of this crisis as a mechanism of control.

In economic terms, the declaration of war has hit the country hard. It has scared off investment and has affected strategic sectors such as tourism, which has declined both on the coast and in the highlands and the Amazon. Furthermore, due to the energy crisis, we have recorded losses of more than 8 billion dollars, according to estimates by the business groups concerned.

On the other hand, we are experiencing a serious violation of human rights. Cases such as that of the four children in Maldivas (where four afro-Ecuadorean boys were detained by the army and later found dead) are just one example of a systematic policy. It is estimated that, under the state of war, more than 20,000 young people have been prosecuted, but the data indicates that only between 350 and 500 of them had any real involvement in illegal

activities. What happened to the rest? We don't know.

Added to this is a climate of structural racism. In Ecuadorean society today, if a white or mestizo person sees someone of African descent, they assume they are a criminal; if they see an Indigenous person, they label them a terrorist and a ‘Quito arsonist’ (in reference to the Indigenous-led uprisings of 2019 and 2022); if they see a poor person, they stigmatise and racialise them. This is the scenario that the Ecuadorean right has been able to take advantage of, and it is one that we have to confront.

Today we face systematic violations of human rights, a State that operates with a monarchical logic, the breakdown of the basic conditions for democratic coexistence and the failure to comply with the Constitution and the Code of Democracy. The four branches of government have subordinated themselves to the Executive, and the latter, in turn, is subject to the conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund.

In the last year, Ecuador has agreed to a new loan of 5.5 billion dollars, not yet disbursed, but destined exclusively to pay previous debt. Meanwhile, the economic and political elites continue to control the national scene, deepening a crisis that increasingly affects the majority of the Ecuadorean people.

IB: Last month there was a major mobilisation in the Amazon against the construction of a super prison. Do you think this marks a reactivation of the social movement after the impact of Noboa's security policy? And, in that sense, do you think this has influenced the campaign, generating a new political climate?

LI: Look, Ecuadorians are, by nature, a fighting people. Throughout history, all governments have tried to curb this rebelliousness and dismantle organisational processes in different ways: criminalising and persecuting leaders, inventing parallel organisations or trying to link us to organised crime and drug trafficking. We have seen these strategies time and time again. But popular resistance is stronger, and they will never succeed in breaking it.

When we have mobilised, we have done so forcefully, as happened in 2019 and 2022. Leading up to the uprising of June 2022, there were 28 protest events; leading up to October 2019, there were 38. Currently, we have already had between 5 and 10 mobilisations, which indicates that concrete actions from different sectors are accumulating. First, there are scattered struggles, then they are articulated and, finally, they lead to social outbursts. This is a cyclical process, so I am not worried: governments can continue trying to repress, but sooner or later the issues come together and the struggle arises again.

What happened in the Amazon is a blow to Noboa's government. He governs with arrogance, with a monarchical vision, as if he were the landowner on a big estate. And in this case, he had to back down because the resistance affected him electorally. He didn't suspend the construction of the prison because he was concerned about life in the Amazon—for him, that region represents only 3% of the national electorate, he is not interested—but because he feared that this would impact his image in other parts of the country.

For now, the project is suspended and they have promised not to resume it. However, they have not provided any official document to confirm this. We will continue to pay close attention to what happens.

IB: How have these protests influenced the mood of the campaign?

LI: I think that all mobilisations end up leading to a stance being taken. The first thing we must understand is that the political and economic elites have managed to implant the idea that politics is something negative for the popular sectors and their leaders. They have constructed the discourse that if we participate in politics, we do so for our own

individual interests, that we are ‘taking advantage’ of the mobilisation to run for office.

They say, for example, ‘There they are again, the golden ponchos, using the struggle to get into elections’. But when they stand for election, then it is democratic, then it is legitimate. And unfortunately, many people have fallen into that trap.

We, on the other hand, have been clear: without abandoning the streets, we are going to contest the elections as a further extension of the struggle. We are not abandoning the mobilisation, but complementing it with electoral participation. That is why the organised rank and file who have been on the streets are now taking a stand in this electoral situation.

A concrete example: our comrades who have been defending the hills and highland moors from extractivism. Yesterday I saw a statement that said: ‘We’re going with Leónidas Iza’. Not because they believe that the elections are an end in themselves, but because they understand that the electoral arena is another tool for channelling the strength built up in the streets.

Our struggle is not reduced to electoral politics; it is another dimension within a broader process. We fight in the streets, in national and international courts, in the construction and reform of laws, in local governments. What we have not yet fully achieved is to consolidate all these struggles under a unified project. We are on the way to doing that.

That is why I firmly believe that in time we will succeed in aligning the struggle towards a proposal that represents the interests of the people in this process.

IB: And what are the main planks of your programme for government?

LI: Well, when I am asked about ‘my’ government platform, we return to the same old stories that I have been fighting against these days. What is Leónidas Iza's government programme? No, because that is to individualise politics, to make people believe that it is about a personal interest. It is not about my programme, but the government programme of the people, the programme of the Indigenous peoples, of the cholos, of the Indians, of the mestizos, of the stigmatised Afro-Ecuadoreans.

Our government programme is not produced from behind a desk, but from grassroots struggle. It is the result of what we stood up for in 2019, of what we took to the streets in 2022. And that was clear: financial relief for the people, no mining in watersheds and fertile areas, real and deep implementation of plurinationality, and total rejection of privatisations.

In our government, we will strengthen the productive capacity of Ecuadorean state-owned companies and defend national production. What does this mean? That we are going to promote policies to support small farmers - those whom the state has abandoned but who were the first to take to the streets when the crisis hit. This is a government programme built from the people and for the people.

One of the central issues is insecurity. They have led us to believe that the solution is to put more weapons and more police on the streets. No. And in our government plan we have been clear: yes, there are some young people who have fallen into criminal networks and who we may not be able to rehabilitate socially, and we will have to face up to that. But insecurity cannot be combated with repression alone, but with a solid social policy linked to neighbourhoods, communes and territories.

We need to strengthen education and healthcare and create minimum employment conditions. Why? To prevent 12- or 13-year-olds, whose parents work in precarious conditions and cannot look after them, from being recruited by organised crime. This is the vision of the popular sectors, not of those who think that insecurity can be solved with a warmongering mentality, with more weapons and repression.

And what has happened? The state has been deliberately weakened, its capacity reduced under the pretext of combating its supposed 'obesity'. But when you dismantle the state, you dismantle the basic policies that sustain any society, be it in the first, second or third world.

In terms of the institutional framework, we are going to respect democracy. Why do we write democracy in the Constitution if each government then interprets it as it pleases, turning us into a monarchy? No!

Democracy cannot be a concept manipulated by political and economic groups as they see fit. It must be a democracy rooted in the people, not in the interests of an elite that uses it as an instrument to perpetuate its power.

IB: Halfway through last year, in Pachakutik, in CONAIE, I believe you tried to unify or at least bring together the different left-wing currents and groups. I understand that at least a minimum agreement was reached: not to attack each other and to support whoever reaches the second round. Is that agreement, even if minimal, still in place? How do you see the current situation and what is your position towards a possible second round?

LI: Yes, there is a general government programme that some sectors accepted, assuming that it should be the basis for an agreement. However, there are central issues that many of those who call themselves progressive are still not willing to stand firm on. Issues such as mining, bilingual education, redistribution of wealth, defence of national production and the public sector continue to be points of dispute.

For example, on the mining issue, some people ask: 'Where are we going to get the money from?' The answer is clear: we have to collect it from those who aren't paying what they should. But many sectors lack the necessary determination to face these debates. These are pending issues that remain open and which, in the event that we are an option in the second round, could serve to unify the struggle even more from the perspective of the popular sectors.

Now, why have more pragmatic and long-term agreements not been reached? Precisely because of the history of how certain sectors have governed. They have not understood what plurinationality really means, nor have they accepted that the rights of Indigenous peoples are not a concession from the state or a favour from governments, but fundamental collective rights.

Free, prior and informed consent, the application of Indigenous justice, bilingual intercultural education, the defence of food sovereignty, of our culture and our languages... all these issues have been left at the mercy of the political will of the government in power, without any real commitment. And this historical debt has prevented true unification in this process. These are issues that still need to be resolved in any space for debate.

Until now, the non-aggression pact has been respected. But in political and ideological terms, we must take as a reference the structural problems that any government must overcome, regardless of who comes to power.

At the moment, there are candidates who claim to represent the left and others who present themselves as right-wing. They all try to present themselves as 'new'. But the real question is how much sensitivity and how much

memory people have to recognise who can really be a real option for Ecuador.

IB: Sorry, Leónidas, but specifically, if you make it to the second round, you're obviously going to want the other left-wing parties to support you. Now, if the scenario were different and the final contest were between Luisa González (the presidential candidate of Rafael Correa’s Citizen Revolution movement) and Noboa, would you call for a vote for the Citizen Revolution?

LI: At the moment, I can't say what will happen in a second round. We are focused on building our option in the first round. If we start discussing hypothetical scenarios now, people might end up voting in this first round for an option they don't really agree with.

That is why the responsible thing to do at the moment is not to speculate about the second round, but to consolidate our proposal and our strength at this stage. Now, if we reach the second round, as I am sure we will be one of the options, at that point we will have to assess our capacity to integrate the different sectors of Ecuador and move forward based on that scenario.

[Jacobin Latin America](#). 3 February, 2025

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