

# Ecuador : Marching for Life, Water, Dignity

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THOUSANDS OF INDIGENOUS protesters carrying a giant rainbow flag arrived in Ecuador's capital Quito on March 22 (World Water Day), culminating a two-week Plurinational March for Life, Water, and Dignity of the Peoples. The march was in opposition to government plans to commence with large-scale mining, as well as to defend Ecuador's new progressive 2008 constitution against neoliberal attacks and to demand the passage of water and agrarian revolution laws. The protesters contended that mining will siphon off and contaminate water supplies, and that communities were not properly consulted about the environmental impacts of the projects.

The march began on March 8, International Women's Day, in the canton of El Pangui in the southern province of Zamora Chinchipe, traveling about 700 kilometers to Quito. Marchers stopped in towns and cities along the route to build support for their demands. Feeder marches from across Ecuador as well as other leftist activists in the capital city joined the March 22 demonstration.

The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), Ecuador's largest Indigenous organization that played a significant role in leading anti-neoliberal protests in the 1990s, led the marches.

President Rafael Correa's government organized counter-demonstrations on both March 8 and March 22. On March 22, the government organized rallies in different parts of the city to oppose the Indigenous march, including one in El Arbolito park that is a traditional gathering point for Indigenous protests in Quito.

Over the course of the day, Correa gave speeches to his supporters in the Independence, San Francisco, and Santo Domingo plazas. He repeated common themes that the CONAIE march was a failure, that his supporters had defeated coup plotters and were defending democracy, as well as repeating the slogan from the Spanish civil war : No Pasarán.

On March 5, just before the CONAIE-led march started, Correa had signed a \$1.4 billion contract with the Chinese-owned company Ecuacorriente to begin open-pit strip mining of copper. The planned Mirador mine will measure two kilometers across and 800 meters deep, and will be the country's first such large-scale mining project.

While Correa labeled the contract as one of the best ever negotiated, protesters were concerned about the negative environmental consequences of expanding resource extraction. Correa says that the mining projects will help fund development projects, including roads, schools, and hospitals. "We cannot be beggars sitting on a sack of gold," Correa said when he signed the contract.

## **Mining, Environment and Privatization**

Ecuacorriente's Mirador mine is expected to extract 2.1 billion kilograms of copper. Ecuador hopes to take 52% of the profits, about \$4.5 billion over 25 years. The Ecuadorian government is also in the process of negotiating contracts with Canadian gold mining companies Kinross, International Minerals, and IAMGOLD, as well as a second deal with Ecuacorriente. The mines could extract an estimated \$6.4 million ounces of gold, for a value of \$10.6 billion. Some estimates place the value of Ecuador's untapped mineral reserves as high as \$200 billion.

A contentious debate in Ecuador's 2008 constitutional assembly was whether communities would need to give prior consent before mining operations would begin on their territories, a provision that ultimately was not granted. Nevertheless, former Correa ally Alberto Acosta contends that the mining contracts violate the rights of nature that the constitution recognizes.

Even though mining contracts stipulate that 10% of the royalties should fund projects in local communities, activists claim that this will not compensate for the environmental damage. The contract with Ecuacorriente provides for \$100 million for economic and social projects in the affected area of Zamora Chinchipe, including building roads and an electrical generating plant.

A second contentious issue is whether these mining contracts amount to the privatization of water resources, which the new constitution outlaws. Correa claims they don't, but activists contend that large-scale mining requires access to massive amounts of water. From the perspective of rural communities, diverting water from personal and agricultural purposes to commercial use is equivalent to privatizing that resource.

Correa, however, contends that it is possible to have both mining and sufficient water, and that the revenue from mining will help fund improvements to the water system. He also claims that some of the leaders of the march have interests in small-scale artisanal mines that would be displaced by these large-scale mines. According to the president, these small mines are much more harmful to the environment than the more closely regulated large-scale mines.

Correa also hopes that the new mine will create thousands of jobs that will translate into electoral votes, an important consideration in an area where his support has been declining. Opponents contend that Correa's plans will simply leave the country exporting another raw resource with no added value accruing to Ecuador or fostering development in the country.

While the deals help diversify the country away from a reliance on petroleum, critics complain that the economy will still be based on resource extraction (the copper will be refined in China), and that dependency is simply shifting from the United States to China. Furthermore, opponents question the ultimate legitimacy of the profit figures.

For example, the negotiated 52% of earnings includes a 12% value-added tax (VAT), but if Ecuacorriente purchases few domestic goods and extracts most of the copper as raw material they will not pay that tax and Ecuador's earnings will be lower. If a resource extractive project generates more profit for an international company than for the government, it could be in violation of the country's constitution.

## **Competing Marches**

Supporters and opponents of the government gave competing estimates on their respective marches, contending that each one was larger and more significant than the other. Correa boasted

that the government had defeated the Indigenous protesters because the pro-government march was much larger. To be sure, CONAIE's march was much smaller than its massive protests in the 1990s that shook Ecuador's conservative, established political system. But Correa's promises to mobilize 100 times as many of his supporters as those in the CONAIE march fell far short of that goal.

In another sense, CONAIE's march was more significant because it persisted for two weeks rather than only rallying its forces on March 8 and 22 as the government did. Furthermore, the government was able to mobilize its forces thanks to the support of its infrastructure, including the provision of buses to transport its supporters. Meanwhile, CONAIE faced numerous obstacles, including government refusal to grant permission for buses to deviate from their assigned routes to transport the marchers, police controls and infiltration of the march, and a strong propaganda offensive.

Correa alternatively belittled the march as insignificant and framed it as the largest challenge to his government. In what many protesters took as a derogatory and racist characterization, Correa denounced the march as one of "feathers and ponchos." When Azuay's governor Paúl Carrasco received the march in his province with a symbolic drink for leader and Zamora Chinchipe governor Salvador Quishpe, the government newspaper *El Ciudadano* responded with racist undertones that after 520 years of colonization Indigenous peoples were still motivated by alcohol.

On March 20, peasant organizations grouped into the Red Agraria presented the National Assembly with a petition in support of their proposed agrarian legislation, which would limit the size of rural estates in order to address problems with unequal land distribution. The main force behind the Red Agraria is FENOCIN, the National Confederation of Peasant, Indigenous and Negro Organizations. Initially FENOCIN supported Correa, but has become increasingly estranged from the government because of its agrarian and water policies. FENOCIN planned to hold its own demonstration calling for an agrarian revolution, but in the end quietly supported the CONAIE march.

At the March 22 rallies, Correa claimed that radical Indigenous movements were allied with the extreme right, bankers, and the corrupt media. This discourse implied that the Indigenous marchers were allied with fascist coup plotters, if not coup plotters themselves, in organizing a demonstration against the government. In lumping all opponents together despite their radically different political perspectives, Correa attempted to discredit his opponents and divert attention from serious concerns.

CONAIE president Humberto Cholango adamantly denied that the march was trying to destabilize the government, or that it was allied with the political right. In fact, CONAIE had refused to collaborate with conservative political parties that also opposed the government. "We wish to say to the president of the republic," Cholango declared, "that our struggles are genuine and revolutionary struggles of the people, and they are absolutely not financed by any fascist nor any company, since we will never join with the sectors of the right in Ecuador" [1].

Rather than destabilizing the government, CONAIE's goal was to force the government to listen to their protests against mining and in defense of water rights. "We are not coup leaders, we do not want to overthrow the government," Quishpe reiterated, "but we're going to flood Quito with people who do not want our water polluted" [2].

## **Movements and Democracy**

Upon their arrival in Quito, the marchers delivered to the National Assembly a petition that concluded with nineteen demands [3]. Broadly, these demands were grouped around four themes : (1) resistance to mining and a defense of water and life ; (2) opposition to political repression and

the criminalization of social struggles ; (3) denunciation of the government's authoritarian tendencies and a demand for prior consultation before commencing mining in communities ; and (4) the demand for an agrarian revolution.

Above all, however, the march insisted on compliance with the stipulations of Ecuador's constitution to defend the rights of nature, something that Indigenous and environmental activists contend the government is violating in pursuing its policies of large-scale mining.

In organizing the march, CONAIE attempted to regain its once hegemonic role at the forefront of social protest movements. While it did not come anywhere close to challenging president Correa's grasp on power, it did occupy an important role that social movements play in a functioning democracy : it opened a debate, put serious issues on the table, and pressured the government to respond to the concerns of those whose voices otherwise would not be heard.

The fact that Correa was forced to mobilize extensive governmental resources to respond to the march indicates that social movements were able to articulate the interests of marginalized populations. In this sense, CONAIE did recover its historically important political role in raising political themes that are important to the country. In the process, its Plurinational March underscored the central importance of social movements in pushing a country beyond neoliberal economic policies.

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\* From Against the Current (ATC) n°159, July/August 2012.

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**Notes**

[1] <http://upsidedownworld.org/main/ecuador-archives-49/3498-1-conaie-and-social-movements-mobilize-in-ecuador>

[2] <http://www.lapress.org/articles.asp?art=6584>

[3] see <http://marchaporlavidanet/>