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Ecuador

# Ecuador after the October strike

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**This contribution was written by the Feminist and Ecosocialist Network, a sympathizing group of the Fourth International in Ecuador.**

## **1. A change of course in Ecuador, changes and limitations**

October's powerful popular strike in Ecuador surprised not only the right, but also the social movement itself. No one foresaw an explosion of this size, which even took on an insurrectionary character (especially on the weekend of the 12th and 13th). Nor did the Indigenous movement, which discovered that its historic capacity for mobilization and struggle was intact, and unquestionably positioned itself as the leading pole of the strike, and became the catalyst of the struggle against the neoliberal package. October brought a change in the correlation of forces. Even though the social movement has not managed to overcome the crisis that has dogged it for many years, nonetheless, this set the stage for the coming struggles against the neoliberal offensive.

This symbolic and organizational leadership by the Indigenous movement found its main support among the different sectors of the youth, in the women's movement, and in the low-income neighborhoods of Quito and the other cities where important mobilizations developed. The contribution of the organized labour movement, through its unions, was present, but only weakly. Although the transport strike began the stoppage at a national level, this did not correspond to a class interest, but rather to a specific, sectoral one; once they won their immediate demands, they abandoned the conflict. On the other hand, the occupations of some oil fields in the Amazon region were the product of a mixture of actors, including workers and local inhabitants tired of the state's neglect. This shows the continuing weakness of the country's trade union movement, which has not been overcome in recent decades.

The attempts by the Moreno government to blame Correa and his fellow leaders for the great mobilization of October was as ridiculous as trying to blame Maduro and the Bolivarian movement in Venezuela. In fact, the leaders of the Citizens Revolution movement were conspicuous by their absence during the strike, although supporters of the Correa movement did take part in the mobilizations along with the other currents of the left, the various social movements, and the Indigenous movement. The strike was marked by this impressive unity in action, which was essentially a unity from below, since the leaders of the left said very little and had little impact on the social explosion. In that sense, the strike overcame in practice the pro-Correa/anti-Correa antagonism that has so marked, weakened, and disoriented most of the Ecuadorean left in recent years.

The strike in Ecuador and the months of mobilization in Chile that followed, as well as, in a negative sense, the coup in Bolivia, appear to have opened a new stage in Latin America. A stage in which the radical left will necessarily have to rethink the electoral path towards progressive governments that has dominated the political perspective of the 21st century. Nonetheless, the electoral situation in Ecuador poses as an immediate task the need to develop an option, and preferably a political organization, that can express that unity in action that emerged in October, a political expression that also needs an electoral slate for 2021.

The best option would be unity around an Indigenous candidate, with the support of the different popular sectors and of the Citizen's Revolution movement (but surely without Rafael Correa), and with a clear, anti-neoliberal and anti-extractivist programme. This would be the ideal formula for confronting the right, which has closed ranks and, despite some friction among its components, has an agreement for the elections in order to win the presidency in 2021.

However, it will be quite difficult to unite all the forces that make up the left, given the very strong opposition that the Indigenous movement had to the former Correa government, because of its policies against such demands such as care for nature, bilingual education, Indigenous justice, and its neglect of the countryside and its persecution of Indigenous leaders, which generated internal divisions and weakened the movement. Its patriarchal and conservative character also distanced it from the women's movement, which criticized its actions and policies to the detriment of this sector, such as the veto of the proposal to decriminalize abortion, the imposition of pro-life representatives in programmes of sexual education, etc. On the other hand, some of the leaders of the Correa movement, especially Rafael Correa himself, do not want such unity, because they criticise the Indigenous leaders for being opportunists, and for playing into the hands of the right.

It is important to understand, therefore, that the Indigenous movement is not homogenous. There are indeed sectors with right-wing and other opportunist leaderships, which have become institutionalized, just as there are within the Correa movement. But the enormous difference is that the Indigenous movement is a grassroots process going back decades, which in the 1990s and now, acted as the spearhead of the social struggle, and which has again become the umbrella under which all forces and achievements of the popular struggle can gather. Not to grasp this would be a terrible mistake by the left in Ecuador.

The underlying difference is between distinct projects, distinct models of development. The Parliament of the Peoples, which emerged from the October mobilizations, and which at the beginning included Correa supporters, clearly expressed its opposition to a neoliberal, extractivist project, and for the defense of the rights of the people and nature. However, a good part of the Correa leadership maintains an extractivist vision, although this has been combined with social policies.

It should also be said that the October days were marked by a high degree of coercion and repression carried out by the Moreno government, with human rights violations that were confirmed by the IACHR and the UN in their subsequent reports. Indigenous leaders, and some figures of the Correa movement (who still have popular support) have suffered persecution, in an attempt to weaken their capacity for action, and in particular the government is seeking to undermine possible electoral candidates such as Iza or Vargas, because of the respect and visibility they won through the mobilizations. Currently the government is strengthening the police and armed forces, using the pretext of preserving peace against vandalism, a discourse that is being strengthened with the support of the media.

## 2. The situation of the left in Ecuador

After the protests of October 2019, it is the social left that has managed to strengthen its support and its proposals. For the moment, these have focused around the proposals of the Indigenous movement, in opposition to the government of Lenin Moreno and seeking the withdrawal of the package of neoliberal measures promoted by business sectors, under pressure from the IMF and the U.S. government. The same is not true of the political left, whether in the form of Popular Unity, the Socialist Party or Pachakutik, which at the beginning of the current government gave it their "critical support", justifying their action with an anti-Correa discourse.

The Indigenous movement, and its main actor, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), exceeded all expectations at the beginning of the October rebellion and put in question the legitimacy not only of the neoliberal measures but also that of the government, which had been promoting a business agenda backed by the right-wing parties and the business associations that benefited. It allowed at re-awakening of its grassroots, which had been battered and weakened by the interference of Correa's populism. Its new and young leadership proved capable of confronting the onslaught of the government's repressive forces, as well as the joint action of the right-wing parties and the media. It organized its communities to descend on the city of Quito, and win the support of other social sectors and the population in general. The gains of this important struggle open up the possibility of an

Indigenous candidate for the presidential elections of 2021, with a high level of acceptance among both Indigenous and mestizo sections of the population.

Behind the neoliberal measures there were other factors that encouraged widespread protest. The weight of classist, patriarchal, xenophobic and racist structures came to the fore with redoubled force. Poverty and inequality combined with the specific frustrations of many sectors. Among these, young students, mostly university students, played an important role in the different fronts of popular resistance, either by occupying the front lines and confronting the repressive apparatus, or by providing humanitarian solidarity, setting up a variety of logistical support centres (to supply medicine, clothing, food), or providing medical aid to the wounded and those affected by the violent action of the police and the military. The creativity of these young people, from the universities and the communities, was seen in various forms of resistance (from making shields and setting up relief brigades, to songs and soup kitchens, etc.). This action of the youth was partly spontaneous, but also drew on a variety of existing organizations (student bodies, neighborhood and cultural movements, etc.)

The organized women's movement played a fundamental role. Its protest actions had been more frequent in recent years, both with Correa and Moreno. The issue of therapeutic abortion, the cases of femicide, the different forms of violence against women, the government's policies and backward discourse on women's issues, led to a series of mobilisations by different women's organisations. In October, their presence in the final phase brought together a diversity of groups and campaigns to extend the popular struggle against the neoliberal model, and to strengthen their own demands.

The workers' movement, which has been weakened since the 1980s, and which suffered further erosion as a result both of actions by the Correa government and of errors by its own leaders and organizations, also took part in the great October mobilization, and contributed to the popular mobilization as its protest actions advanced. But the trade unions revealed their shortcomings when it came to coordinating joint actions, showing how little the movement has been renewed and how weak it is for future political struggles.

Finally, an urban community movement, partly spontaneous and partly organized, joined the other sectors in the protests, and along with ecologists, LGBTI, traders, indigenous migrants and so on, made possible this partial victory of a social left that brought together its different forces to block the neoliberal attack by Lenin Moreno's government.

This process of struggle converged in the setting up of the Peoples' Parliament and the Women's Parliament, which united diverse sectors and organizations in a clear stand against the neoliberal project, extractivism and against the interference of the IMF. At present, there are still itinerant parliaments in different provinces of the country and the women's parliament.

The same thing did not happen within the ranks of the left parties, of what remains of these political fronts, since their role and purpose in Ecuadorean political life is in deep crisis. The Ecuadorean Socialist Party (PSE), following its role in the Alianza PaÑ-s (AP) governments, first of Correa and then of Moreno, is split in three, further undermining its already weakened political presence. One group, as a sympathizers of Rafael Correa, left the government and plays a part in the opposition. Another remains in the ranks of AP, occupying different government posts, and selling its left-wing credentials at a high price. While a third group, and perhaps the most numerous, remains in the ranks of socialism (Renovación Socialista) under the historic leaders (Enrique Ayala, Victor Granda, among others). Their links with Moreno's government and their role in the October days diminished even further their discredited presence in the ranks of the Ecuadorean left.

The Stalinist left of the PCMLE, formerly appearing as the Popular Democratic Movement (MPD), and now as Popular Unity (UP), was one of the sectors most affected by the Correa government. In fact, its student and teacher unions were divided and were on the verge of disappearing. But in spite of the persecution it suffered, it was able to

survive, along with its electoral base, through a forced alliance with Moreno at the beginning of his mandate, based on an anti-Correa discourse. The UP maintained a significant presence in the October days, even with its weakened bases, and currently supports the presidential candidacy coming out of the Indigenous movement. This is a sector that has always been criticized within the left for its vertical, sectarian and opportunistic positions.

The Pachakutik Movement has still not emerged from the crisis that began with the forced alliance with Lucio Gutiérrez (2002-2003), and which later deepened with the series of errors of its different leaderships and the weakness of its organizational work at the grassroots, a consequence of centering its political project entirely on elections. In October, its weak forces played a role alongside the bases of CONAIE and other campesino and Indigenous movements. Like other political organizations of the left, it has expressed opposition to a possible alliance with the Correa movement.

### 3. The women's and feminist movement

Among other things, October 2019 showed that the capital/life contradiction is very much the order of the day. The mobilization against the elimination of fuel subsidies occurred mainly because people felt that their living conditions would be affected, particularly the most vulnerable sections of the population, who have been bearing the burden of the economic crisis that the country is going through, and especially women who carry the main load of the social reproduction of life on their shoulders.

The struggles went beyond the traditional capital/labour conflict. For many months, women had been demanding from the State the recognition of their rights, especially to a life without violence, mainly because of the increase in complaints of harassment, sexual violation and femicide. In Ecuador every 71 hours a woman dies as a result of sexist violence. Ecuador is one of the countries with the highest rates of teenage mothers in the region, many as a result of rape. Every 4 minutes a woman has an abortion, yet the National Assembly denied the possibility of abortion in cases of rape, forcing girls to have children, even by their own fathers. Abortion is one of the main causes of maternal death.

Historically, this violence has been naturalized, and it has combined with the structural violence of the patriarchal, colonial state, which is present in everyday life, especially for women, children and adolescents: their bodies are subject to these multiple forms of sexual and gender violence, ethnic violence, class violence, adult-centric violence and heteronormative violence. A structural violence, which insists on treating women's lives as mere reproducers of a new workforce for capital.

The repression of the macho, patriarchal state has been expressed not only through the criminalization of protest, but also in budget cuts for social policies; cuts in programmes for the prevention of gender violence, with the closure of institutions responsible for the care of victims of violence; cuts in the health sector, with massive layoffs of administrative and medical staff, among others. These cuts in social services mean costs and care are transferred to families, especially to women, who are forced to look for sources of income, under precarious conditions, through informal work, with an excessive workload. This is how precarious lives are produced: with violence, the exploitation of bodies, and a reduction in rights.

The recent growth of feminism in Ecuador has come hand in hand with the activism of young women, mainly against male violence and femicide. The fight for the decriminalization of abortion is one of the main struggles around which various women's organizations converge at the national level, and as part of a regional struggle in Latin America. However, women's struggles have been present on a number of other fronts, and include the demands of different social sectors: the defence of land and water, against extractive industries, unemployment, poverty, xenophobia and

for freedom of movement, for the reestablishment of bilingual schools, for equal access to land, for social security, for access to quality healthcare, and for care policies, etc.

In October, the women's movement was present in all its different social expressions: Indigenous women, Black women, youth, students, urban women, peasant women, girls and boys accompanying their mothers. It reached its strongest expression in the march for peace, which called for an end to the heavy repression during the ten days of protests. October allowed for unity between the struggle of the spontaneous social movement and the feminist movement. And although not everyone shares everyone else's struggles, all or most of us felt the need to unite and combine our discontent with the system. The positive "conclusion" has been the creation of the Popular Women's Parliament, which is still a process in its infancy, as well as the reactivation of collective spaces of encounter between women, recognizing the diversity of struggles in each territory.

## 4. The ecological struggle in the Amazon

The Ecuadorean Amazon has been, continuously and for decades, an epicenter of socio-environmental conflicts. These have been over the extraction of oil, mining, the advance of the agricultural frontier and other constant attacks against the Indigenous nationalities that live in the region. Socio-environmental conflicts are growing due to the contamination of river water through the misuse of natural goods, the lack of public policies and adequate infrastructure in the cities of the Amazon, and ignorance of alternative practices for processing garbage and transforming solid and liquid waste, etc.

There is an almost total absence of support for the Amazon from the current government. After the Correa government, almost no progress has been made in support for the communities and population of the Amazon. Rather, the neglect has increased, even though the resources that contribute most to Ecuador's GDP come from the Amazon rainforest. It should be noted that Correa's government deepened extractive policies in the country, and the Moreno government is continuing this. Chinese mining companies continue to operate in the area, and even have concessions in areas of high biodiversity and with very important ecosystems.

Given this constant deterioration of biodiversity, the Amazonian nationalities, women's organizations and farmers' organizations, are organising constantly to struggle against extractivism. In 2019 and 2020, the Waorani, Shuar and Kichwa peoples have been fighting to defend water (the case of the defence of Paitua River), to stop oil extraction (the case of the Waorani, whose legal action succeeded in stopping the exploitation of new oil fields in Orellana), and against mining (the case of Napo Province).

However, due to the economic crisis and the weakening of public policies, some of the population accept and partly support the extractivist projects, in the hope of finding work and obtaining some kind of benefit through "development" programmes promised in the communities. However, these programmes are in many cases set to be run by the same government institutions, and there is no guarantee that they will really be executed in the areas affected by extractivism.

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