

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8214>



Ecuador

“Indigenous peoples cannot continue to carry capitalist development on our shoulders”

- IV Online magazine - 2023 - IV583 - August 2023 -
Publication date: Monday 21 August 2023

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

Leonidas Iza is a member of CONAIE (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador - Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador) and is presenting his new book: “Estallido. La rebelión de octubre en Ecuador” (“Estallido. The October Rebellion in Ecuador”). He was interviewed by Maureen Zelaya Paredes.

Ecuador faces new elections on August 20 to choose a new government in a climate of instability and tension. [1] That same day an important popular consultation has also been convened on the oil exploitation of Yasuní, one of the largest biosphere reserves. [2] In the midst of this scenario, the centrality of CONAIE as the main social movement in Ecuador has been maintained, with renewed prestige since the social outbreak of October 2019.

A CONAIE delegation, headed by Leónidas Iza, toured Europe in July to talk about the struggles of indigenous peoples and other peasant, environmentalist, feminist and sexual diversity groups, with whom they maintain a level of coordination from the indigenous movement, the “Yes” campaign for Yasuní and also the book *Estallido. La rebelión de octubre en Ecuador* written by Iza, along with Andrés Tapia and Andrés Madrid. Maureen Zelaya Paredes interviewed Leónidas Iza about his book and the current Ecuadorian situation.

Among other things, you are on tour for the presentation of “Estallido,” a book that delves into the experience of October 2019... what does Estallido offer us?

We have defined politically and ideologically making a theoretical-academic systematization for the debate, about what happened in October 2019. Normally what is told about social struggles is done from an academic neutrality and that is why we believe it is important to tell it from the subjects who build the struggles. That's what “Estallido” does. We have said “we are going to write from within,” from the political subjects, from the fighting subjects, from the subjects that sustain the struggle. And, based on what we have, to question the economic, social, political situation of Ecuador allowing us to take the whole situation to a broader debate at the international level.

—

But with that academic and theoretical spirit we not only want to analyse but change that reality. We aspire to make it a contribution to the other struggles at the continental level. We have to be respectful of the generation of thought at the global level but I maintain that indigenous thought should not remain only for indigenous peoples, but should look for the currents with which it can unify at the global level, identify the correlation of forces, always maintaining political autonomy, autonomy of thought, organizational autonomy, and even have the possibility of anchoring with a current at a global level.

There are comrades who say, “we are indigenous, we are neither left nor right,” and when political decision-making moments arrive, they go with anyone and that does not seem right to me. We must have a look from our positioning and know with whom we anchor globally. I believe in the camp of the left and that camp of the left, of course it is diverse, there are countless currents, but we must make an effort to bring them together in the popular field at the global level, together with critical academics, with unions, workers, workers, environmentalists, ecologists and the indigenous movement recreating its own thought. The book “Estallido” looks at the struggle from practice, but also contributing a projection forward.

On August 20, general elections are called in Ecuador, what is the pre-electoral political and social context? What feelings are there in the street, in the social movement?

August 20 will mark a change of a political moment, not of conjuncture, but of political moment. We do not know what the decision of the Ecuadorian people will be, but it will finally allow us to be clear about the political conditions. The strength in the streets, the strength of the organizations determined this political moment. If the struggles of 2019 and 2022 had not taken place, the dissolution of the national assembly by Lasso would hardly have occurred. It has come here not of its own volition but because of the pressure in the streets of the popular movements in Ecuador.

At this political moment, the National Assembly has been dismissed, but the President of the Republic has also been dismissed and the government is governing by decree. Everything that at the moment the government is defining, the next Assembly has to execute those decisions, it has to throw away all decisions that are undemocratic, those of a dictatorship using the constitution. So, this political change from the elections will depend on the government that comes, and its legitimacy will be given to the extent that it accepts our demands or that it positions itself against. There, the indigenous movement and the popular sectors in general are still going to be very attentive about the government's program. There are issues that are red lines where we are not willing to give in. For the indigenous peoples, for the popular sectors, the moment will be defined by the capacity for unity at the level of all of Ecuador.

What are those red lines? What is expected of the government that emerges this August 20 and that change of political moment?

On the results of the elections, we prefer not to speculate. We are going to wait for the scenario that occurs and the conditions that occur with the results. But for us three things are clear: First to position our program. The political project that we have as an indigenous movement and popular sectors is public knowledge, and we are going to support and defend it against any government that comes.

Second, we will defend the red lines that we are not willing to accept, no matter whether the resulting government is left or right. We've had a response from our base, from our people about what those red lines are. In the last fifty years the economy has depended on oil and now it is intended to supplant that dependence by large-scale mining. We are not willing to accept that, and we have the organizational capacity installed in the territory: we cannot advance in large-scale mining. There is artisanal mining that needs to be regulated and better conditions guaranteed, but large-scale mining, no. And the coming governments have to know this.

We have heard politicians say that we cannot continue to be poor sitting on a sack of gold, but the problem is that that sack of gold for us is the balance of ecological conditions. Because, in the case of mining, what would be the sack of gold? The mountain! And the mountain gives us the water we drink and the ecological conditions to continue sustaining the agricultural system. The 70% that Ecuadorians consume depends on these ecological environmental conditions.

Another red line, we have said, concerns employment flexibility. There we are united with the workers, with unions. A third red line that cannot be crossed is to advance in the processes of privatization. Rather, what must be done is to strengthen, to re-empower the productive capacity of the strategic sectors that are public.

An assessment of 14 strategic public companies has been made, indicating a production of 13 billion dollars: oil, to some extent mining, telecommunications, social security; the Bank of the Ecuadorian Institute of Social Security -BIESS- and thus we can determine that ceding private rights for the exploitation of the public is a red line in which we cannot yield.

And another red line is that progress has to be made immediately in a programmatic and pragmatic agenda on the points that remained pending in the struggle of 2022 and are the aspects that have to do with the ten points that led to the struggle of the indigenous movement. So, on the one hand, we have a broad, big political project. On the other

hand, these points that are red lines and, in addition, the implementation of the demands that were raised in 2019 and 2022 in the National Strike, in a concrete way.

On the National Strike of June 2022, what balance sheet has been made of the results? How was this negotiation of the ten points with the government?

As it was known throughout Ecuador and internationally, the negotiation took place from some public points. They tried to generate political pressure on us by saying that all we wanted was Lasso's departure, that that was the only intention. When we held 18 days of struggle, demonstrating “we have not come to remove Lasso”, but if he falls under his own weight, it will be because he does not listen, because he does not understand and does not have the political will to fulfil our demands.

But the goal was the ten points, to solve the problem of subsidies. In Ecuador, subsidies are a general policy, where we say that we must focus on fuels. We identified that Ecuador's liberalized economic sectors are the ones that take the most advantage of general subsidies. So, we proposed to the National Government eight subpoints so that the sectors that love the free market are not the most benefited: if they really believe in the free market, then they should produce according to its rules and not benefit from subsidies. We show that some 1,200 million dollars are focused on sectors that should produce without subsidies, such as tuna vessels, industrial fishing, the shrimp sector, among others.

We also ask for economic relief for the people, that the price of basic necessities be controlled, that speculation with these products not be allowed and that productive development policies for peasants be guaranteed.

We also put on the table the defence of life, which is a NO to mining extractivism mainly. We demand the implementation of the 21 collective rights of indigenous peoples in all state programs and in coordination with the different branches of government. They concern health, education and also insecurity. These were the issues that, according to the report of the same national government, we reached 218 agreements in points: they were procedural agreements, general agreements that allowed progress to the possibility of building a plurinational state, of which the government complied in procedural aspects by 10%. The rest stayed there. That is why for us at this time it is of vital importance to be able to take possession in the new conjuncture of these demands on the government because they have not been resolved after the 2019 and 2022 struggle, of the national strike.

What does the “Yes to Yasuní” campaign defend in rejection of its exploitation? What would it mean for the populations that inhabit these territories if this consultation were lost?

People tend to think that we are holding an opposition in the Yasuní consultation, in a general way. But no, we have reasons and arguments to defend the Yasuní and say that to defend the Yasuní is to defend life. First, UNESCO declared it to be one of the most biodiverse areas in the world. This is because, in the period of the glaciation of the Earth, everything that is now the Amazon basin was an area that did not freeze and hence the immense diversity of this National Park, which was before that a sacred territory of the indigenous peoples.

To get an idea of the containment capacity of the species at a global level that this territory has in qualitative and quantitative terms, a single hectare of the Yasuní contains all the diversity of amphibians, reptiles, vertebrates, invertebrates, plants, major animals, minors, etc., contained in the whole of North America. But what would happen if humanity generates oil pressure? It would cause an ecological imbalance.

That is why we propose that instead of extracting oil, scientific tourism can be developed, because studying the jungle could give answers to many ills that humanity has, answers that can be found in the Amazon basin. Also

promoting ecological tourism, which allows economic recovery while respecting the balance of Mother Earth.

A second argument is that in the El Yasuní Reserve, in the National Park, two peoples live in voluntary isolation: the Tagaeri and Taromenane. There were already massacres in 2003, 2006 and 2013 because the oil companies have been gaining strength and control in the territories and the pressure generated by exploitation has reduced the territory of the peoples in voluntary isolation. When the isolation and balance have been broken, everything has ended in massacres. For these peoples it is a forced way of relating to the world and if pressure continues to be generated, there will only be more killings. Therefore, it is demanded that they stop this genocide of the populations that are there.

And a third argument is that while in other regions there has been a development due to extractivism, what have the oil companies left in 50 years to the indigenous peoples? Only contaminated territories, contaminated water, comrades with diabetes, with cancer, a soil that does not produce because it is contaminated. It cannot be that we indigenous peoples continue to shoulder the development that Ecuador needs.

Fifty years of oil extractivism have not left a sustainable economy for indigenous peoples, it cannot be said that, once the oil was extracted, we have a sustainable economy and a future for the new generations of all indigenous nationalities, to continue living. This has not happened. What has happened is that the territories have been destroyed. Therefore, these three arguments for us are tremendously strong, which is why we say yes to life and yes to Yasuní.

The destruction of extractivist capitalism is common to many countries in Latin America and other parts of the world, where it is the native and indigenous peoples who bear the burden of sustaining modern civilization, and – so-called – development. Are there alliances in this struggle at the continental level?

Yes, because that is a shared reality. They are destroying the territories of life of indigenous peoples, which happens in Ecuador, in Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, throughout the Amazon basin and elsewhere.

Why do indigenous peoples' territories have to sustain development? Why do we have to exploit Mother Earth to sustain the capitalist productive matrix at a global level? We do not believe that this should be the case. You have to think about another economy. Another related theme whose struggle we share is against the prevailing racism and a colonial vision of society. Can they impose on us indigenous peoples all this that is so entrenched in society? And we can no longer accept that as normal.

A third issue is that progress is being made in this change in the energy matrix, from oil to clean energy. In this process, in addition to territorial control there is also control of our rivers: the main gorges of the rivers are being concessioned to generate hydroelectric plants and all this without respecting the right to prior, free and informed consultation. That's another shared struggle.

We believe that it is important to make society and humanity understand that there are territories that are regulating the balance of nature and that rivers, forests, moors are central to that balance. Also, in our territories they are invading with monoculture, agribusiness, concentration of land, concentration of water. Also here in Europe, in France, we have seen these struggles against the concentration of land, privatization. All this allows us to call in the first instance for a continental unity at the level of Latin America, but also with that impulse I think we can lead to struggle at the global level.

To close, let's go back to the book. Everything you have put into perspective about the struggle of indigenous peoples and the need for change, what receptivity have you found in academia about the

approaches you propose?

We've found a lot of reluctance really. That is, there is a dominant form of production of conservative thought and that means that there is also a rejection of a part of the population that continues to question, that does not find answers. Many people on the left have chosen not to participate in these spaces, even though they are struggling. I believe that we must give options that do not break organizational capacity but seek the ability to bring together from different forms of struggle. If we do not do it, we see that the right and the extreme right are already doing it. Look at what happened with the progressive governments of Latin America or what is happening in Europe, they are taking the doubts of the youth, taking arguments where citizens are asking for answers.

Although in Ecuador we are fighting, although we may have conditions of change, in a country that is anchored to the global capitalist economic model it will be very difficult to win. We already have experience of what happened with Chile, Peru, Cuba, Venezuela.

If we in the popular camp are not giving answers, then it will be the right who propitiates theses that end up reaching the popular sectors.

I believe that academia at the global level cannot produce science and theory just to analyse. That is what has happened with all sources of ideological political construction. Rather, it ends up attacking the possibilities of change from a political line different from that of the right, attacking the very possibility of change. And we end up defending change, as responsible. In that sense, I believe that if we want to make a qualitative leap in the change that humanity needs right now, we must unite struggles at the global level. So, we are putting in a grain of sand for this.

6 August 2023

Translated by *International Viewpoint* from [Punto de Vista Internacional](#).

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of *International Viewpoint*. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.

[1] For the result of this first round see BBC 21 August 2023, "[Leftist leads Ecuador presidential poll count amid spike in violence](#)".

[2] See *The Guardian*, 21 August 2023 "[Ecuadorians vote to halt oil drilling in biodiverse Amazonian national park](#)".