

ABSTRACT

This essay analyses the Ecuadorian Indigenous Movement in order to study the impact of social movements on the situation of excluded groups in societies with flawed democracies. It starts by defining social movements and stating that their goal in societies with non-consolidated democracies and excluded groups is an expanded notion of democracy that entails the incorporation of such groups and their participation in the definition of society. It continues with an introduction to Ecuador and its political system since the return of the country to democracy in 1979. It is argued that despite formal democracy, political parties are weak and hence do not respond effectively to social demands. Finally, the Ecuadorian Indigenous Movement and its impact are described, concluding that although it has managed to incorporate the indigenous people in the political process, traditional actors still have the same old weaknesses, and that the degree of participation of the movement in the definition of Ecuadorian society is very limited.

Social Movements, Democracy and Citizenship: The Case of the Ecuadorian Indigenous Movement

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Introduction

The appearance of new kinds of social movements in the last few decades has brought about renewed attention to the study of collective mobilisation. Some people see these movements as the main source of hope for democratisation and development in the Third World, while others look at them with suspicion and as a destabilising threat.

In this context, Latin America constitutes a very interesting case for the study of social movements, because throughout the two decades of military regimes in almost every country in the region social mobilisation was extremely lively and played a prominent role in democratisation.

A singular case is that of Ecuador. Although it returned to formal democracy more than 20 years ago, its political system still shows clear symptoms of fragility. Weak political parties, populism, clientelism and other distortions characterise a flawed democracy which has coincided with, and perhaps caused, a steady decline in equality and standards of living. In this context, the emergence of a strong indigenous movement in the 1990s that has managed to occupy a central place in the country's political life has added a new element that has had important repercussions both for the indigenous people and the country as a whole. The essay, then, will analyse the impact of social

movements on democracy through the case study of the Ecuadorian indigenous movement.

In order to do this, I will proceed in three different stages. I will first present a conceptual framework in which I will analyse the main political concepts that I will use in my discussion, namely social movements, democracy and citizenship. I will then move to the study of the Ecuadorian case by outlining its political system and its development in the last 20 years. And finally, I will focus on the Ecuadorian indigenous movement and its effects in the political scene.

Conceptual framework

Social Movements

Up until the 1960s, the study of social movements was almost exclusively focused on the labour movement, which was approached from a Marxist perspective of class struggle. It was the appearance of new forms of collective mobilisation (e.g. pacifist, women's, and environmental movements) in the 60s and 70s that triggered new research and the appearance of alternative and more appropriate frameworks (Escobar and Alvarez 1992, p.3). Two main sets of theories were born in this context. Based in Europe, the New Social Movements Theory (NSM) emphasised the newness of modern movements and placed its main focus on explaining *why* they arise and how they differed from traditional labour movements. The key concept for NSM was that of identity - which is fluid, and not defined by economic interests or structural position. At the same time, in North America, a different environment brought research to focus on *how* social movements mobilise and attain their goals, and thus Resource Mobilisation Theory (RM)

was developed. The central concept of this line of investigation was strategy (Foweraker 1995, pp.2-3).

These two theories should be seen more as complementary points of view than as opposed perceptions of the same phenomenon. Moreover, Foweraker (1995, pp.20-21) argues that both identity and strategy are simultaneous elements of social movements, because these construct their identity by their actions, which are in turn determined by their collective character. Thus, social movements should not only be regarded as groups, but as the process through which groups try to reach a goal. This idea is developed by Touraine (1977, p.311), who defines social movements as the combination of a principle of identity, a principle of totality, and a principle of opposition. The first implies the self-recognition of the movement's members as a group. The second refers to the movement's strategic goal. The third denotes the existence of some actor that the social movement must confront in order to achieve its goal. This principle of opposition is what Tarrow (1998) perceives as the common element between NSM and RM, the problem of connecting collective action to politics. In other words,

the collective identity and strategic intent of social movements remains indeterminate until they are analysed in interaction with the political environment, and especially with the institutions of the state (Foweraker 1995, pp.18-19).

Thus social movements are relevant because they present their demands to and interact with other actors, of which particular attention should be paid the state because of its main role in dealing with social demands. When they engage the state, social movements are drawn back to the political arena, and they can become important

players in mass politics. In order to assess their prospects to succeed, then, it is not enough to study them in isolation, but we must analyse the 'political opportunity structure', which is made up of state institutions and national political traditions (Foweraker 1995, p.19). However, there is one important consideration to make here. Both NSM and RM, with their focus on European and North American societies where liberal democracy is established, see the goals that social movements pursue as a particular and limited set of rights (e.g. clean environment, peace, etc.) (Foweraker 1995, pp.6-7). Yet in the Latin American context liberal democracy cannot be assumed and even the most basic democratic rights are not guaranteed. Almost every country in the region suffered dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s, and even after the return to formal democracy, phenomena such as populism, clientelism, and the presence of weak party systems created inefficient mechanisms of representation, in the sense that elected rulers do not follow the people's will. In this context, the role of social movements differs from that which can be observed in Europe and North America and is closely linked to democratisation (Foweraker 1995, p.7).

Democracy and Citizenship

In order to study the goals of social movements in Latin America I will follow Scott's (1990) proposal to turn our attention to the Weberian concept of 'closure'. This refers to the process by which some groups exclude others from access to resources and opportunities. Scott argues that social movements can be seen as the other side of this idea, as collectivities that struggle for inclusion. This struggle has two major projects. First, the expansion of citizenship by groups who are excluded from the benefits available to average citizens. Second, insertion into the polity by groups who are excluded from participating in decision-making and negotiation procedures. These two

aspects, as Scott recognises, are compatible, and he explicitly suggests that ethnic groups who do not “enjoy the citizenship rights typically available to members of society are also excluded from power” (Scott 1990, p.135). As we will see, this is a very relevant point for the discussion of the Ecuadorian Indigenous Movement.

Dagnino (1998) summarises the goals of modern social movements in Latin America advanced by Scott as a struggle to expand the notion of democracy. This is based on a new conception of citizenship which is not only about the incorporation of hitherto excluded groups into the already established political system, but also in their participation in the very definition of the system and of the rights they are entitled in it (Dagnino 1998, pp.50-51). The degree of achievement of Dagnino’s expanded notions of democracy and citizenship and their consequences will be used in this essay to assess the success of social movements.

Social movements, then, will be regarded here as complex processes undertaken by groups built around a collective identity and a strategy who aim to achieve an expanded notion of democracy and citizenship that entails incorporation into the system and participation in its definition.

Ecuador since the return of democracy

In order to understand the last 20 years of Ecuadorian political history it is necessary to recur to the figure of José María Velasco Ibarra, a politician who governed the country on 5 separate occasions from 1934 to 1972 and left a lasting imprint in the political system. Velasco Ibarra was the precursor of populism in Ecuador. He introduced a new political style characterised by mass meetings and crowd actions that he used to

pressure his adversaries, and through which the people perceived that they were truly participating (de la Torre 1997, pp.12-13). The basis for their participation, however, was identification with a charismatic leader who supposedly expressed the popular will. This implied a strong emphasis in personalism that led to a sort of secular religion involving people and leaders. The resulting system served as a mechanism of control over the masses, and the role of assemblies that were supposed to represent the people was therefore weakened (de la Torre 1997, p.15). This political arrangement allowed leaders to use popular support to pursue policies aimed at their personal benefit throughout most of the 20th century. One of its main outcomes was the existence of weak parties dependent on their leaders and a political life based not on popular demands but on the confrontation between these personalities and the groups that supported them. In short, populism was used, paradoxically, to maintain the elitist character of politics (Isaacs 1993, p.223).

In the 1970s, though, the wave of military dictatorships that covered the region also reached Ecuador. The fear of the eccentricities of a populist politician who was predicted to win the elections in 1972, Assad Bucaram, in a key moment for the country in which massive earnings from recently discovered oil reserves in the Amazon basin were expected, led the military to take over power. Military rule lasted until 1979, and it was different from other contemporary Latin American dictatorships at least in two respects: first, it was less repressive than its regional counterparts; and second, it managed to use income from oil and loans provided by Western banks to undertake social policies directed to the poorest portions of the population. However, it shared with other dictatorships a distrust of politicians and of the civilian political process (Isaacs 1993, p.224), thus it never had any interest in supporting and strengthening political parties. Instead, it preferred to deal with interest groups, setting an authoritarian, corporatist

regime. The social peace created by corporatism and relative social provision did not provide any stimulus for society to independently mobilise around parties.

All this proved to be very inadequate when, at the end of the decade and due to discontent and failure to put forward the reforms planned, the military started the procedures for a return to formal democracy. It was provisioned that political parties had to be the main actors of the new system, but the new supportive legislation was not enough to overcome a tradition of personalist, opportunist and elitist parties. The rules allowed a return to parties used by their leadership as electoral vehicles, without ideological or programmatic coherence, a weak internal structure and organisation, and a propensity to fragment the party system (Isaacs 1993, p.223).

The new situation was characterised by two further and interrelated elements. First, Ecuador faced economic crisis (with the debt crisis at its core) and living standards of the population worsened dramatically. Second, the country was forced into neoliberal economic policy, following the doctrines pursued by the USA and the UK, and imposed by the IMF in the form of structural adjustment packages. This reduced the political manoeuvring of the state and brought it into confrontation with the popular classes.

In this context, and until 1996, 4 different legislatures of diverse political orientation succeeded each other. This period of sustained formal democracy, however, cannot hide the persistence of personalism, weak parties, fragmentation and strong confrontation in political conflicts. These elements, along with the aforementioned economic crisis and imposition of policies from abroad, showed the fragility of Ecuadorian democracy. This was exemplified, for instance, by the acts of repression and violation of basic human rights of the Febres Cordero administration (1984-1988), and

by the non-fulfilment of most of the Left wing coalition electoral economic promises once Rodrigo Borja achieved power (1988-1992).

Yet the worse was yet to come. The depth of the crisis was reached with the election in 1996 of the populist Abdalá Bucaram. This time it was the Congress who impeached him, forcing him to flee to Panama after being accused of mental incapacity and use of power for his personal benefit (e.g. policies in support of his commercial interests). The institutional crisis started has not been solved yet, as the next elected president, Jamil Mahuad, also had to leave the country in 2000 after popular revolts triggered by his policies.

Isaacs concludes that

often constrained by personal ambitions and rivalries, political parties still find it difficult to fulfil their mediating and representative functions. As a result, the policy-making capacities of the legislature and the executive are weakened and, ultimately, so too is the ability of the political system to process conflicts peacefully (Isaacs 1993, p.234).

It can be seen from this quote that the Ecuadorian democracy is flawed. Neither of the two dimensions of expanded citizenship that I have introduced, inclusion in the system and participation in its definition, seem to be in place in Ecuador. The weakness of parties and representative institutions means that citizens have little control over leaders or policy. Leaders are free to govern according to their whims, and policy is largely determined by international financial institutions.

The Ecuadorian Indigenous Movement

In spite of this context, there appears to be an exciting and important development in Ecuadorian politics in the form of the Ecuadorian Indigenous Movement (EIM).

Origins: CONAIE and the 1990 Uprising

Ecuador has a total population of around 12.5 million people (as reported for 2000 by Lucas 2000, p.13), of whom different estimates affirm that between 25% and 40% are indigenous (at least 3 million people). Hence, they are an important part of the Ecuadorian society, yet they exhibit some characteristics that make them extremely vulnerable and marginalised. The Ecuadorian indigenous groups typically live in rural areas of the Andean range, speak a dialect of quichua, are poor, and are consistently obviated by public policies.

Resistance against this situation, and thus the origins of the EIM, can be traced back to the Spanish colonial rule, but the phenomenon of continuous mobilisation is very recent. It was in the early 1980s that several indigenous organisations were born, and their entrance to mass politics was heralded by the creation of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) in 1986, which with 26 affiliated organisations represented all the indigenous nations of the country.¹

¹ Namely Awa, Chachi, Epera, Tsáchila, Cofán, Siona, Secoya, Huaorani, Achaur, Shuar, and all the peoples of the Quechua nation – Natabuelas, Otavalos, Caranquis, Cayambis, Quitus, Panzaleos, Salasacas, Chibuelos, Puruhaes, Warankas, Cañaris and Saraguros.

CONAIE is managed by its directors (president, vicepresident and 3 secretaries, one for each thematic area: education, health and human rights) who are elected every two years in a congress that brings together more than 1,000 delegates from all the communities and which decides about the major objectives and strategies. The directors have executive power, but also receive instructions from CONAIE's 100-member assembly every 2 months (Lucas 2000, p.3).

The birth of CONAIE played a key role in the mobilisation and organisation of the Ecuadorian indigenous peoples. CONAIE was the main promoter of the so called 1990 uprising (*levantamiento*), through which the EIM entered the public arena. It was triggered by the granting of oil concessions in indigenous territories to foreign companies. The reaction of the indigenous communities, led by CONAIE, was unseen in Ecuador before. "They occupied roads, invaded *latifundios* (large estates), detained soldiers, withheld products from the market, took over public offices, and organised marches and demonstrations" (Lucas 2000, p.3). Unexpectedly the EIM managed to literally stop the country for a week, forcing the government to negotiate and make concessions. This display of power showed for the first time the strength that a united indigenous movement could have, and radically changed the political arena of the country (Sawyer, 1997, p.69).

Identity and mobilisation

Although the indigenous people had been oppressed for centuries, the causes of the birth of the EIM only in the late 1980s can be understood using the concepts presented in the conceptual framework as the main elements of social movements: their identity and the way they mobilise.

The construction of the identity of the EIM had its basis on ethnicity. Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of the indigenous community in Ecuador, it constitutes a distinguishable group if confronted to the Westernised *mestizo* society. This ethnicity, however, is not constructed solely on racial terms but on cultural affiliation. This is determined up to a point by language, clothing, customs, religious beliefs and, in the end, a different *cosmovisión* (perspective of life) that determines the relationship to the world and to other people. In this *cosmovisión* we find, for instance, the strait relationship and attachment of indigenous people to land, or their notion of communal work, exemplified by the popular *mingas*, in which all the community works together for a peer in need with no expectation of reward (Macas 2000). These social practices create a bond on which the ethnic community is built, and identity emerges from it.

This identity is not entirely objectively determined though, because being a cultural issue there is space for self-definition. One of the main problems of the indigenous movement before the 1990s, for instance, was the abandonment of the indigenous way of life and culture by many youngsters in order to move into towns and to adopt a much more socially prestigious Western way of life. Conversely, after the 1990 uprising many indigenous people living in towns started to recover their old clothing and customs, regaining new pride on their old indigenous identity (Radcliffe 1997). This exemplifies the fluidity of identity, and how people's relation to it is influenced by prestige.

This leads to consider why indigenous identity did not become the base for mobilisation until the 1990s. There are three reasons that explain this. Firstly, mass mobilisation was not triggered until there was an obvious confrontation between the rhetoric of equality and rights that came with the expanded period of democracy, and the realisation that

this rhetoric was not met by government's policies. Secondly, the appearance of an organisation such as CONAIE, in which all the indigenous communities could participate and which acted as an ideological and strategic credible leader, was able to boost incipient mobilisation to a national scale. Third, the very interaction between initial mobilisation and identity generated mutual reinforcement. Once mobilisation was in place and obtaining positive results, as it happened for the first time in the 1990 uprising, pride on indigenous identity was enhanced, attracting more and more people and thus making further mobilisation easier and stronger.

The EIM objective: an expanded notion of democracy and citizenship

Indigenous people have traditionally been seen as second class citizens in Ecuador and their situation in economic, cultural and social terms is far below the average of the country. Yet, instead of amalgamating different and relatively unconnected social demands, the leaders of the EIM have built a coherent discourse which revolves around an indigenous identity and can be explained in the terms that I have introduced in the conceptual framework; an extended notion of democracy and citizenship.²

The first dimension of this notion of citizenship has to do with the incorporation of the indigenous people as subjects of rights. This specific goal of the EIM is reflected in the very structure of CONAIE, with one of its three main areas being dedicated to human rights. The conception that the EIM has of rights includes collective and economic rights directed to the recognition of their identity and way of life and to the improvement of their

² Luis Macas, former president of CONAIE, explicitly refers to democracy and citizenship as key elements of their political project in a document summarising the first ten years since the 1990 uprising (Macas 2000).

living conditions. The articulation of this element can be seen from the very beginnings of the movement, in the 16-point document summarising the demands of the indigenous people to the Ecuadorian government during the 1990 uprising. Some of these demands were agrarian reform, the legalization of territories of the indigenous nationalities, a freeze on prices of basic necessities, fair prices for farm products, autonomy in marketing, and a demand to change the Constitution to make Ecuador a plurinational state (Treackle 1998, pp.222-223). The focus on extended rights is also clear from the words of former CONAIE president Luis Macas: “we were organising to build the unity of our peoples, obtain fundamental rights for our communities and improve living conditions” (interview in Lucas 2000, p.105).

But beyond rights and inclusion in the system, the EIM also strives for the second dimension of citizenship: participation in deciding about the society in which the indigenous people want to live. As Luis Macas further argues while reflecting about the 1990 uprising: “Above all, we showed that we were in a position to be protagonists in society, making contributions and proposals from our own point of view” (interview in Lucas 2000, p.105). One of the main points of conflict that reflect the will of the indigenous people of defining their society is economic policy. The neoliberal orientation of the Ecuadorian government contradicts the indigenous *cosmovisión* (Carrière 2001, p.147), and thus the EIM has fought to influence the government to pursue a more communitarian approach to economic issues. This and other disputes, although focused on specific concerns, are based on the fight for inclusion and participation of indigenous peoples in Ecuador, and thus it can be concluded that the demands of the EIM have to do with a deepening of democracy and citizenship.

The EIM through the 90s

Based on this objective, the EIM has been extremely active through the 1990s. The realisation of its power after the 1990 uprising and the less than satisfactory reaction of the Ecuadorian government to its demands has led to further mobilisations. In 1992, 1994, 1996, 1999 and 2000 there were major protests that led, again, to a halt in the life of the country, with demonstrations and blockading of roads that forced the state to negotiate. The results of this process are three important changes to the Ecuadorian political environment.

First, there has been an institutionalisation of the EIM into Ecuadorian politics with the creation of a movement (it is not legally a political party) called Pachakutik/Nuevo País in 1996, which has run in all the elections since its birth and which received 10% of the votes in the 1996 presidential elections and 9 (out of 131) seats in Parliament in 1999.

Second, the EIM succeeded in forcing the elaboration of a new constitution which takes into account (at least rhetorically) the diversity of the country and the rights of the indigenous people.

Third, in January 2000 indigenous mobilisation, along with that of other social actors, forced the resignation of president Jamil Mahuad, who was highly unpopular because of the dollarisation of the Ecuadorian economy and other liberalising measures. After a week of protests, the march of the indigenous people towards the presidential palace ended up with the president fleeing the country when a part of the armed forces decided to join the demonstrators. A popular transition government headed by a triumvirate formed by the president of CONAIE, Antonio Vargas, colonel Lucio Gutiérrez, and the

former president of the supreme court of justice, Carlos Solórzano, was subsequently created. However, the intervention of the high commandment of the Army managed to dissolve this government and return to constitutional rule by giving power to the former vicepresident, Gustavo Noboa.

Even though the final outcome was not that expected by the EIM (its leaders argue that the armed forces betrayed the Ecuadorian people), the events of January 2000 were the definitive proof of the EIM's capacity of mobilisation and power. From that moment, the movement cannot be seen anymore as an annoyance that must be dealt with by making concessions, because it has proven that it can effectively force the removal of a government.

One further element has also become important in relation to the EIM in the 1990s. Besides the state, other actors have appeared as crucial in order to understand the mobilisation and impact of the EIM. One example is provided by the relationships developed by CONAIE with international NGOs and public institutions. The EIM has been able to capitalise its image as a defender of the environment in the Amazon basin and of oppressed indigenous peoples, and this has been very beneficial in order to obtain foreign political and economic support for its struggle.

The impact of the EIM: what has happened to democracy and citizenship?

The results of the activity of the EIM in the 1990s have to be evaluated in relation to its main objectives and the key concepts that I have introduced when defining social movements, that is the expanded notion of democracy and citizenship and its two dimensions, inclusion in the system and participation in its definition.

Regarding inclusion, the EIM has achieved advancements. Before 1990 indigenous people were ignored in Ecuador as a group, and the political process did not take into account their demands. The EIM has made them a visible actor that cannot be ignored. The constitution has been changed in order to recognise and protect diversity in the country, and other particular measures such as the establishment of bilingual education in Spanish and Quichua have been taken. The EIM itself has become an instrument of inclusion of the indigenous people in Ecuadorian public life, and the creation of the Pachakutik/Nuevo País movement has been a further improvement. However, these are specific indigenous institutions, and national politics are still dominated by the same weak traditional parties that do not respond effectively to popular (and even less indigenous) demands. Failure to change this environment is one of the reasons why, notwithstanding the creation of Pachakutik/Nuevo País, the EIM has maintained and radicalised its mobilisation practices. With them, it has managed to by-pass the flawed political apparatus and bring its demands to the terrain of confrontation by direct social action. Indigenous claims are thus not lost anymore in forgotten promises of political parties, but put on the negotiation table and supported by the force of mass mobilisation. Whether this switch in politics, from a faulty party system to social movement action, will end up leading to a transformation of parties in Ecuador that will make the EIM unnecessary cannot be foreseen yet.

Besides the failure of political parties to incorporate indigenous interests, another reason for the persistence of mobilisation by the EIM is the dismissive attitude of the state towards its demands throughout all the 1990s. The government seems to make only minor concessions that ensure a minimum of social peace and allow it to pursue its own agenda. This leads to the second dimension of the expanded notion of citizenship, which

considers the participation of the excluded people in defining the society in which they live. Here the EIM encounters a very serious difficulty which is hard to overcome and which remains the basis of the conflict. The fact that most of the indigenous population are poor peasants, along with their communalistic vision of life, leads the EIM to make demands that defend a definition of society that, at least in economic terms, directly opposes the neoliberal approach that is promoted by mainstream politicians, multinational companies and international financial institutions that have a great influence in the country. The radical opposition between both sides of this conflict makes it difficult to foresee a synthesis that can be reached through negotiation, and thus the result has been more than a decade of increasing mobilisation. It is true that in other spheres, such as culture, the EIM has been more successful, achieving the state's promotion of multiculturalism and indigenous languages. On the whole, though, the EIM has had little impact in the definition of the Ecuadorian society.

Conclusions

The study of the EIM illustrates the use of social movement direct action by an excluded group in its struggle for its collective goals. It has shown that when strong identity and effective mobilisation coincide, their interaction can make social movements achieve a significant degree of success. In this particular case, identity built around ethnicity has proved to be dynamic, and the initial success of mobilisation has had a positive impact in strengthening indigenous identity and in drawing more people to the movement, thus favouring further mobilisation. Direct action, in turn, has benefited from a combination of mass mobilisation aimed towards the disruption of the normal functioning of the society, which makes impossible for the state to ignore it, and network-building with influential international actors.

The success of the EIM in achieving its objective of an expanded notion of democracy and citizenship in Ecuador is notorious though not complete. It has achieved the incorporation of the indigenous people in the Ecuadorian society, but it has done so through their own mobilisation and pressure, not because traditional actors have integrated them. The Ecuadorian political system has not abandoned its old weaknesses yet, and thus indigenous demands are still put forward in direct confrontation with the state from the outside. The EIM has been less successful in participating in the definition of the Ecuadorian society, still monopolised by traditional actors, and has only achieved small concessions in this field, mainly in the cultural sphere.

It can be concluded, then, that if excluded groups are able to build a solid identity and find mobilisation strategies that force the state to acknowledge them, their organisation in social movements can be a valuable way to achieve their incorporation into the system. However, this does not mean that social movements are a panacea that will solve all the problems of such groups. Moreover, the question of how to make the transition from presenting demands through confrontation to their integration into the system has not been answered yet, and it constitutes the main challenge for the EIM and Ecuador in the future.

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