



## Evaluating October 2019 in Ecuador

The events of October 2019 dealt a hard blow to the economic plans of Ecuador's elites, in particular their programme for eliminating fuel subsidies. But for the people these dates will be remembered as beautiful days of solidarity, of re-encounter with living traditions, of mutual recognition among equals, and of respect for differences.

Indigenous people from rural areas flooded the cities, above all Quito. Non-indigenous urban dwellers and young people joined them, as well as indigenous inhabiting marginal zones. Together, they transformed the city. There were times of confrontation and times of celebration. Spaces to accommodate the visitors were quickly organized, collective kitchens were set up, the doors of private homes thrown open. Volunteers went to work in shifts to cook for the more than 40,000 people who were on the streets and to clean bathrooms while indigenous protesters deliberated, planned and acted. Brigades of volunteer doctors staffed makeshift centres and caravans went to work collecting and distributing monetary donations. The public response was so great that food collection centers had to turn away donations: "We don't need any more bread!"

Of course there were people viewing the process from the distance of social networks who circulated racist messages, stoked fear, or incited hate and violence. But that could not detract from the respect and affection that flowed from others toward the indigenous protesters.

The October indigenous uprising marked an important transition. During the previous 10 years we had had a particular cultural "package" pushed on us: hackneyed images of "progress", of roads, mining, mega-infrastructure and transgenic agriculture, mixed together with conservatism, authoritarianism and corruption. It was a package characteristic of regimes of the new right across the Latin American continent. A package spiked with harassment, discrediting and persecution of people's organizations.

This package had especially virulent effects on nature, its people and its defenders. The oil frontier was expanded, reaching even into the Yasuní National Park (despite all the pledges). Mining projects were violently imposed on indigenous and peasant territories. Mega-infrastructure was rolled out for the benefit of extractivism and agribusiness, taking away communities' water. As dispossession advanced, hundreds of people were criminalized, often the ones most closely connected with the defence of lands and territories.

After the International Monetary Fund returned to the country offering new credit arrangements, the current government agreed to various neoliberal adjustment measures. Decree 722 gave tax relief to mining companies. Decree 724 reformed various fuel prices. Labour reforms were promulgated and a Law of Productive Development and an Environmental Organic Code enacted. But it was Decree 883, which withdrew a longstanding fuel subsidy, that finally ignited the social explosion led by the indigenous movement.

Decree 883 has recently been portrayed by the government as a way of stopping fuel smuggling across Ecuador's borders and preventing the rich from benefiting from state largesse. But its real impact – as steadfastly maintained by the indigenous movement – was to cut into the subsistence of the most impoverished.

Finally achieving the repeal of Decree 883 on 13-14 October, the indigenous movement demanded that proposed reforms be subject to examination of their constitutionality. It also advanced the cause of democracy by insisting that the negotiations that it forced the government into be broadcast live to the nation, precluding deals behind closed doors. In addition, it laid down as a condition for dialogue that the issue of those imprisoned, wounded or publicly denounced during the uprising be addressed.

During the uprising, the Ecuadorian right – whether Christian Democrat, conservative or liberal – made its racism evident. Although these groups do not respect indigenous people, they are afraid of them because they are aware of their strength. For them, it was easier to attribute the conflicts underlying the uprising to an attempt by former President Rafael Correa to launch a coup d'état with the backing of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. Accordingly, they favoured increased military repression to deal with supposed guerrilla infiltration. That, of course, would have laid the groundwork for future repression of a more general kind.

For Correa's supporters, meanwhile, as well as some of their allies on the country's old left, who always mistreated indigenous peoples as and misconstrued them as remnants of a dead past, the revolt constituted a defeat. Their hopes of early elections and Correa's return to the country are in a shambles, at least for the time being.

Neither the rightists nor the Correistas grasped that the October uprising was motivated by a genuine desire to suspend austerity measures in order to benefit the majority of Ecuadorians. Both have found it difficult to accept that the indigenous movement has now succeeded in re-positioning itself as a central political actor with an agenda of social justice that looks beyond current disputes far into the future.

Less immediately visible during the uprising, but no less important, was the continuing conflict over oil extraction, which features persisting grievances over pollution, calls for oil-free territories, profound criticisms of fossil fuels, and alliances with other struggles against mineral extraction.

In Ecuador, as across the world, oil is the most subsidized source of energy, simultaneously the most costly to the geo-bio-metabolic cycles of the planet and the cheapest on the market. The current government, following its predecessor, is committed to expanding the oil frontier and maintaining subsidies to oil companies, including the payment of damages levied as the result of abusive legal arbitrations. Indeed, part of the IMF loans coming in as a part of the present agreement will be wasted on this form of subsidy.

The indigenous world, by contrast, remains unambiguously opposed to this extractivist politics, as do Ecuadorian environmentalists. Struggles for a post-oil Ecuador and for territories free of oil, mining and dams will continue throughout the country.

In October, a subsidy that reveals as clearly as any do the fatal dependence of society on this energy source was put to debate. The uprising demonstrated that withdrawing this particular subsidy without addressing more general issues of energy, transport and food sovereignty merely puts the burden of the crisis on the shoulders of the most impoverished. The task now is to resolve the overarching environmental problems stemming from the use of fossil fuels.