

# Special Indian Districting: Unresolved Political Problems in Colombia

*Members of the Colombian Indigenous movement are now trying to critically evaluate the movement's political participation in order to surpass the constraints that have kept many Indigenous objectives out of reach. The following article reflects this process of self-criticism, as well as the movement's search for new solutions.*

by Alfonso Palma Capera and Oskar Benjamin Gutiérrez

Without doubt one of the worst "headaches" that the Indigenous movement has endured is the problem of electoral participation. In 1990, when Lorenzo Muelas, Alfonso Peña Chepe and Francisco Rojas Birry participated in construction of Colombia's new constitution they were sure that it would be extremely difficult to carry out the reforms they were outlining. Four years and two parliamentary elections later, Indigenous political participation—within those spaces that Indigenous people themselves have forced open—is in deep crisis due to the political inexperience of Indigenous representatives, lack of unity among Indigenous organizations and parties, and failure to skillfully manage relationships with the government.

On March 13 of this year, Indigenous communities elected Lorenzo Muelas and Gabriel Mujuy as their representatives to the Senate thanks to the system of Special Electoral Districting (CEE), one of the most important political achievements of the Colombian Indigenous movement.

Article 176 of the revised constitution created the CEE as a system reserving two

---

*Alfonso Palma Capera is the former president of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC). Oskar Benjamin Gutiérrez is a journalist and ONIC collaborator.*

seats in the senate for Indigenous candidates. The CEE allows Indigenous "lists" (names on the party ticket) registered under the special district to compete for these seats independently of the senate races for the other one hundred seats within the National Electoral District. The Indigenous movement won the CEE through its advanced level of organization in a bitter struggle with the traditional institutions. It should not in any way be seen as a gift from the Colombian state.

The proliferation of candidates this year—eight different Indigenous lists—reflected the movement's lack of unity. In many cases, the vote was split even within the same ethnic group. Many Indigenous people who wanted to support their own cause did not know for whom to vote. Not knowing the candidates, the electorate was forced to decide "by sight" which candidate on the ballot seemed to represent their cause. The Indigenous candidates used their experience in previous elections, and attempted to extend their appeal to the population in general and capture votes in non-Indigenous communities. This may explain why only three Indigenous parties registered their list under the CEE, while five sought office through the National Electoral District, competing with the other political groups under equal conditions.

The results were clear. On one hand, the Indigenous vote was diluted. This reflects disunity and lack of coordination among so many candidates, but it also reflects the immense level of abstention among ethnic minorities. On the other hand, the large number of votes obtained by some Indigenous candidates in the urban areas suggests that non-Indian voters looked to Indigenous candidates as an alternative capable of generating debate with the traditional parties.

## First Experience

Three different lists registered for the 1992 senate and chamber of deputies elections. The first was headed by Gabriel Mujuy for the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC); the second, was backed by the Indigenous Authorities of Colombia (AICO) headed by Floro Alberto Tunubalá; and the third, that of the Indigenous Social Alliance headed by Antonio Quirá Gauña was created by a faction of the Indigenous movement especially for electoral participation and registered within the national district. For the first time in Colombian history, three Indians held seats in the senate as representatives of their own communities.

The Indigenous lists succeeded in that moment largely due to their use of an Indigenous program of action titled "The

Colombia that We Want." This platform reflected a conception of Indians not as islands, but as part of a diverse country, and reached out to all the sectors of the country. It was grounded in culture, plurality and tolerance and called the nation-state's attention to a new and independent discourse with alternative proposals.

This proposal was elaborated by working groups at the local, regional and national levels during the National Constitutional Assembly. These groups sought to develop a clear legislative agenda and plan the new constitution's design and implementation. These work groups, however, were not re-assembled in following years, and the task of continuing to develop an Indigenous policy was left to the regional organizations which generally lack the advice and resources available to Indigenous Senators.

### The Problems Increase

In spite of the political space obtained, the participation and influence of Indigenous peoples in projects and discussions has been limited due to the disadvantage of having only two senators as compared to ninety from the Conservative and Liberal parties and ten from other sectors. In addition to the corruption of these political entities, Indigenous representatives' programs have received little respect. As a politically inexperienced minority, the Indigenous representatives have not been able to resist the machinations of the traditional parties.

### Confusion Between Organizations and Parties

In addition, the Indigenous movement suffers serious internal problems. The organizations have not completed enough basic work with their members to help them differentiate clearly between the political campaigns and their organizations. Regional organizations frequently support their members' political cam-

paigns without first drawing lines to distinguish the two activities. In this way leaders of some organizations enter political life and never return to work with their organizations. This situation has made many indigenous organizations skeptical and concerned about the relationship between politics and the organizations. For this reason the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) did not endorse any candidate in this election and does not plan to do so in the future, considering that doing so could deepen existing divisions.

### Alliances and Alternatives

In order to gain access to public office, Indigenous candidates have sought the support of different movements that do not represent Indigenous interests. Several of the Indigenous candidates ran with the Conservative and Liberal parties.



Photo: Aguirre/Switkes

One of the first Indian senators, Anatolio Quira, played a key role in promoting Indian political participation during his term in office.

In consequence, many Colombians who previously saw the Indian candidates as a respite from the political panorama were disappointed at these alliances and the appearance that the Indian parties were immediately falling into the same old political customs. These doubts have been reinforced by the inefficiencies and

irresponsibilities of candidates who obtained some important seats (mayors, congressmen, senators), but who lacked training and experience in government.

### Minorities Supported?

Operation of the special electoral district which Indian groups fought for so long to establish is now being questioned. Its establishment probably numerically increases minority representation and permits those sectors less involved with traditional politics to reach office. But there is also the risk that this mechanism could distort the expression of the ethnic communities' political will. Since voting within the special districts is not closely regulated, majorities may end up deciding who is elected in the name of the minorities. Many sectors within Colombia request a stricter regulation of the Districting, in order to strengthen the ethnic communities' participation.

The problems described above have resulted in the loss of many votes of those Colombians who did not find new or "clean" candidates or programs for government.

The Colombian Indigenous movement is now suffering from a state of apathy, finding hope only in what new laws can offer, rather than pressuring the State through marches and mobilizations. The presence of the Indian parliamentarians has helped establish the fundamental rights of ethnic groups and to open spaces for participation. However, it is now necessary for them to work toward reconstruction of their own fragmented forces in order to jointly face the traditional political establishment. Common proposals must be elaborated to form an electoral strategy capable of uniting with other sectors proposals who have traditionally shown solidarity with Indigenous peoples. The Indigenous movement is committed to this end, and the communities themselves will verify its development. 🐾