

Indian-Peasant Protest for a New Democratic Order: Ecuador

"Arriba, abajo, el pueblo, carajo! Izquierda, dercha, el gobierno a la mierda!" (March chant, Quito, August 12, 1997).

At dawn on August 11, 1997, thousands of Indigenous and campesino woman and men dug ditches and hauled trees across Ecuador's major roads. The coordinated uprising halted transport for 48 hours and sent a forceful message to President Fabián Alarcón of the power of popular conviction. Demonstrators felt ridiculed by recent state decisions that scorned their interests. As the paralyza-



Photo by: Susana Sawyer

tion confirmed, Ecuador's marginalized would no longer countenance exclusionary elite politics.

Earlier this year, a massive popular demonstration on February 5 forced the impeachment of former-President Abdala Bucaram and demanded fundamental changes to the workings of the Ecuadorian state. Central to the February "Popular Mandate" was the call for a National Constituent Assembly charged with re-writing the Ecuadorian Constitution. In late July, however, President Alarcón together with conservative congressmen decreed that the National Constituent Assembly must be postponed for another year.

Indigenous and peasant groups rejected the audacity of such a state edict. Through unprecedented popular support, the February "Mandate" asserted citizens' rights to condemn corrupt rule. The August 1997 protest further substantiated that right and denounced the government's contempt for the February popular fiat. As the president of CONAIE (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador), Antonio Vargas, noted Indian and peasant organizations were the only representative bodies capable "of generating true democratic debate"; no political regime could dismiss this authority.

August's road blocks interrupted commerce and travel throughout the country. The military's presence was strong, leading to sporadic confrontations. In Azuay Province, an angry trucker ran a blockade injuring three protesters. On the principle highway north of Quito, soldiers intimidated protesters and repeatedly shot tear-gas into demonstrating crowds. Despite considerable risk, a group of peasant women explained that they were fighting against "the economic measures that made life only more and more difficult": rising commodity and health care costs, inflationary credit, soaring rural debt. "Only like this, united together," one woman interjected "can we move forward." The presence of a huge CONAIE banner intimated deeper meaning of this campesina's words: "united together" as Indians and peasants, protesters could hold their ground. Indeed, a growing indigenous-peasant coalition throughout the 1990's proved the effectiveness of

popular resistance.

Conservative politicians characterized the August mobilization as "violent" and "destructive." Popular leaders insisted, however, that the paralyzation was the only means at their disposal for confronting "an antidemocratic, exclusionary, and authoritarian" regime. Like earlier Indigenous uprisings in Ecuador this decade— May 1990 (5 days) and June 1994 (10 days)— the August 1997 protest challenged neo-liberal economic reforms. In addition to the Constituent Assembly, the paralyzation demanded the congressional ratification of ILO Convention 169 and denounced government plans to privatize the peasant social security agency and areas deemed economically strategic for the functioning of the state: telephones, electricity, and the state petroleum industry. In particular, the August mobilization sought to further a long-standing struggle to construct a new democratic order in Ecuador.

On August 12th, 500 demonstrators in Quito staged a wake and funeral procession for the February 1997 "Popular Mandate." Solemnly clothed men bearing a massive casket lead the procession through city streets. Behind them followed chanting protesters carrying banners and brilliantly colored wreathes. Protesters' mock mourning symbolized their repudiation of the government's decree to defer the National Constituent Assembly; the funereal rite gave witness to this "betrayal"— the figurative killing of the Constituent Assembly. Ending their procession outside the National Congress, protesters set the Popular Mandate casket ablaze. "So burn the stratagems of an antiquated political class," bellowed an Indian leader: "so burn attempts to scorn the Popular Mandate. Let us seize this opportunity to construct a new democracy." Many obstacles still threaten such efforts. As Luis Macas, an Indigenous congressman and former CONAIE president, observed, little has changed since Abdala Bucaram's ousting; "elite leaders continue to deceive the citizens and exacerbate economic misery." A new Constituent Assembly is slated for December 1997. 🐦

For further information please contact: Susana Sawyer, smsawyer@ucdavis.edu, or Antonio Vargas, President of CONAIE, conaie@ecunex.ec