

Running head: Threats to Ecuador's Indigenous

Modern and Historical Threats to Ecuador's Indigenous Populations

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Introduction

The indigenous people of Ecuador, despite pre-dating all other groups that have ever held power in the country, have been mistreated since the Spanish conquest. From their treatment as mindless children by the Spanish to the social discrimination and theft of traditional land that they face today, native people have been dealt an inequitable hand. They have never been a priority to those in office, and their rights have and continued to be sacrificed in the name of agriculture and nonrenewable resource extraction. This paper will provide background on Ecuador's pre-colonial and colonial history, explore modern (post 1970s) relations between indigenous people and the government, outline the threats facing Ecuador's indigenous communities, and conclude with a nod to CONAIE, the national organization that represents the indigenous voice today.

Inca Rule and Spanish Conquest

Before the Inca expanded their empire into the area that became modern-day Ecuador, there were numerous tribes of indigenous people living separately, ruled by local chieftains. Some tribes on the Coast are thought to have traded with those from the Sierra, as the Coastal tribes had access to seafood while the Sierra tribes largely survived off of agriculture. Virtually nothing is known about early inhabitants of the Oriente. In 1463, the Peru-based Inca ruler Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui sent his armies into Ecuador with the goal of bringing Northern lands into his empire. His son, Topa, defeated the Quito-Cara civilization centered in modern-day Quito, and the invasion was complete by 1500. The next emperor, Huayna Capac, took a liking to the ancient city that would become Ecuador's capital, and made it the secondary capital of the Inca Empire (Hanratty, 1989). Inca rule brought many advancements, like roads, new forms of agriculture, and the spread of the Quechua language. However, life did not change much for

those who accepted being part of the Empire. Inca territory was so widespread that they could not impose strict lifestyle changes on every tribe, so local authorities were often allowed to keep their power (Behnke, 2009). As long as the people paid taxes in the form of labor to the central government, they were largely left alone (a trend would stick with Ecuador's indigenous groups long after the deposition of the Inca).

Huayna Capac's illegitimate son, Atahualpa, defeated his legitimate brother for power shortly before Spaniard Francisco Pizarro landed on the coast of Ecuador. In the year 1532, Pizarro's men took Atahualpa hostage at Cajamarca (in modern-day Peru). The Inca were simply no match for the Spanish with their metal armor and guns. Pizarro demanded a ransom of almost 5,000 kilograms of gold and 10,000 kilograms of silver from the Inca, but Atahualpa's release was nothing but a charade (Hanratty, 1989). The Spanish murdered him in 1533 and moved on to conquer the main Inca capital of Cuzco. Pizarro sent men back into Ecuador, where they joined forces with the Cañari people, who had never been satisfied with Inca rule. With Cañari aid, the Spanish defeated another Inca army at Mount Chimborazo. The Inca warriors withdrew to Quito, which they burnt to the ground before fleeing the Spanish once more. The conquering Spaniards renamed the city San Francisco de Quito. In 1537, they founded another of Ecuador's principal cities, Guayaquil. Pizarro and his lieutenants had control of the newly conquered territories until the 1540s, during which Pizarro was killed as a result of infighting, and his younger brother was hung for treason by the Spanish crown. Beginning in 1548, viceroys appointed by the Spanish monarchy ruled over Ecuador and its people (Hanratty, 1989).

Indigenous in the Colonial Era

Spanish organization of Ecuador's indigenous tribes was based on a system of *encomiendas* and *haciendas*, both of which gave Spanish aristocrats living in South America a

kind of paternal control over the native people in return for labor. The *encomienda* system gave Spanish colonials jurisdiction over specific groups of indigenous, which they were allowed to exploit for tribute and labor. This was originally supposed to be done in a way that left indigenous economies and societies intact, only changing who benefited from production at the very top (Keith, 1971). The rapidly expanding colonial society, however, required large quantities of free labor in areas of production that the natives had not focused on before, like the mining of precious metals. Traditional agricultural societies were disrupted to provide gold and silver to the Spanish elite. The *encomienda* system weakened over time as *encomenderos* (the rulers of *encomiendas*) moved from cities to large landed estates called *haciendas*. The *hacienda* system involved a Spanish monopoly of arable land, mainly in the Sierra region. Indigenous people from this region were used as labor in a feudal system resembling that of medieval Europe. They lived on and worked the land, giving most of the crops to the lord of the estate and keeping a meager amount for their own survival. Scholar Robert Keith states that in order for the *hacienda* system to be established, “[indigenous] society [had to] be largely destroyed and its members transformed into an agricultural proletariat” (1971, p. 438).

Despite these blatant forms of oppression, there were relatively few indigenous uprisings in Ecuador compared to other Central and South American countries under Spanish rule. A. Kim Clark and Marc Becker, authors of *Indigenous Peoples and State Formation in Modern Ecuador* (2007), suggest that the dividing of indigenous tribes into separate *haciendas* limited their ability to organize under traditional community lines, and that this isolation kept the amount of protest to a minimum.

The Spanish viewed the native people as children incapable of high-level thinking or political organization. They therefore took responsibility for indigenous welfare in a degrading

practice known as ethnic administration. Ecuador's native people had no representation in government. However, despite their complete lack of rights, the indigenous were protected by the Spanish crown from the type of abuses that happened elsewhere in the Americas (Clark & Becker, 2007). For example, it may be because of the paternal views of the Spanish that Ecuador's indigenous avoided genocide like that inflicted on the North American Indians by English colonists.

Modern Government and Indigenous Relations

The liberation of Ecuador from Spanish rule in 1822 did not mean that the legal or social treatment of native people immediately improved. They were still legally defined as minors after independence, and many still worked as peasants on agricultural estates until well into the 1990s. However, the 1937 Ley de Comunas (Law of Communes) meant that the government would formally recognize indigenous communities outside of haciendas. The Ley de Comunas gave these communities limited rights to self-government and collective property ownership (Mijeski & Beck, 2011). A legal distinction between "Indian" and "Citizen" lasted until 1857. Citizenship requirements were written into the Constitution that purposefully excluded natives- requirements like literacy, involvement in specific professions, and/or property ownership worth at least 300 pesos (Clark & Becker, 2007). This exclusion meant that indigenous were held to separate laws than whites and mestizos. Instead of paying taxes, indigenous people paid a special "tribute" to the government. In return, the central government would respect their authorities and lands. Some indigenous communities did not want the tribute abolished because of the protection it gave them (Clark & Becker, 2007). Since they still had no legal representation, the title of "citizen" simply meant that they were subject to stricter government interference without any way to fight it.

In more recent times, a homogenization movement dominated native-government relations. Military General Guillermo Rodriguez Lara, who controlled Ecuador in a dictatorship from 1972 to 1976, was especially concerned with the assimilation of indigenous peoples into the rest of society. He had a vision to unite Ecuador under one homogenous national culture. According to Rodriguez Lara in 1972, "There is no more Indian problem. We all become white men when we accept the goals of the national culture" (as quoted in Mijeski, 2011, p. 7). He maintained that all Ecuadorians had "Indian" blood, and therefore so-called indigenous communities did not deserve preferential treatment (Kimmerling, 2006). The Agrarian Reform Laws of 1972 were born out of this ideology, and their drive for the colonization of the Amazon led to disastrous effects on the native tribes living there.

Democracy returned to Ecuador with the election of President Jaime Roldos Aguilera, who had radically different views of the importance of indigenous culture than his predecessor. He created the National Office for Indigenous Affairs under the Ministry of Social Welfare. Unfortunately, Roldos died in a plane crash in 1981, ending the short burst of aid his term gave the native community. The next president was unsupportive of the Indigenous Affairs Office, and his successor, President Leon Febres Cordero, was downright violent toward the indigenous—especially when they stood in the way of government exploitation of the land (Minorities at Risk (MAR), 2010). The oil crisis of the 1980s plunged Ecuador into enormous debt. This not only meant that there was no money allocated to humanitarian programs, but also that the government was desperate to find and produce more ever increasing amounts of crude oil to stay afloat. They did so at the expense of indigenous rights.

By 1990, indigenous people had mobilized against government mistreatment by organizing on a national scale. President Rodrigo Borja was the first Ecuadorian leader to

encounter and deal with large, organized indigenous protests. He was faced with CONAIE (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador), a movement that united natives from both the Sierra and the Oriente, and the most powerful indigenous organization Ecuador has seen to date. (For more on the formation of CONAIE, see the *Political Organization* section of this paper.) Borja made a show of negotiating with CONAIE during the famous 1990 Levantamiento, or uprising, but he never actually honored the majority of his promises. His successor, President Sixto Duran Ballen, was also unpopular. He successfully passed another Agrarian Reform Law, which allowed community plots of land to be broken up and sold to individual farmers. With traditional community farmland at risk, CONAIE and other organizations, including some without indigenous affiliation, protested until Duran made changes to the law (MAR, 2010).

CONAIE and its political offshoot, Pachakutik, were instrumental in both ousting and electing the next few Ecuadorian presidents. In 2002, ten indigenous people were elected to the Ecuadorian Congress (MAR, 2010). In 2008, a new Constitution was drawn up under the leadership of current president Rafael Correa. Some vital pieces of the document are as follows. Under Title II, Chapter 4 of this new Constitution,

Indigenous communes, communities, peoples and nations are recognized and guaranteed, in conformity with the Constitution and human rights agreements, conventions, declarations and other international instruments, the following collective rights: ...

4. To keep ownership, without subject to a statute of limitations, of their community lands, which shall be unalienable, immune from seizure and indivisible. These lands shall be exempt from paying fees or taxes. ...

6. To participate in the use, usufruct, administration and conservation of natural renewable resources located on their lands.

7. To free prior informed consultation, within a reasonable period of time, on the plans and programs for prospecting, producing and marketing nonrenewable resources located on their lands and which could have an environmental or cultural impact on them; to participate in the profits earned from these projects and to receive compensation for social, cultural and environmental damages caused to them. The consultation that must be conducted by the competent authorities shall be mandatory and in due time. If consent of the consulted community is not obtained, steps provided for by the Constitution and the law shall be taken. (Ecuadorian National Assembly, 2008).

The parts about resource use are extremely important, especially for indigenous tribes in the Amazon. The most significant piece of this legislation is that the government guarantees native people control of *renewable* resources within their ancestral lands, but not the nonrenewable ones. This allows the Ecuadorian government to maintain ownership of oil deposits under native land. In Ecuador, the federal government runs the energy sector (and the oil extraction business in particular) with limited interference by private companies. As of 2004, oil revenue made up 40% of the national budget (Hurtig and San Sebastian, 2004). Therefore, they cannot risk losing control over drilling rights. Note that declaration number seven, while giving indigenous leaders an illusion of choice when it comes to nonrenewable resource extraction by the government, does not in reality give them any veto power on federal drilling projects.

The Constitution goes on to state, “The territories of the peoples living in voluntary isolation are an irreducible and intangible ancestral possession and all forms of extractive activities shall be forbidden there” (Ecuadorian National Assembly, 2008). In 2013, President Correa opened Yasuni National Park, home to two completely uncontacted tribes, to oil drilling in a clear violation of his own Constitution (Juhasz, 2014). During Correa’s presidency so far,

around two hundred indigenous leaders have been labeled terrorists for trying to protest oil drilling laws and therefore, in the government's eyes, presenting a threat to national security (Santamaria, 2013). Although Correa had a strong indigenous backing when he was first elected in 2007, he quickly lost much of that support due to his willingness to sacrifice indigenous rights to protect the oil industry.

Ecuador's Three Regions

Oil has been the principal source of indigenous struggle in the past few decades, but it is not the only source of contention between Ecuador's native peoples and its government. In order to study these conflicts, it's important to understand Ecuador's three regions. Traditionally, the country's landscape is split into the Costa (the Coast), the Sierra (or Highlands), and the Oriente (or Amazon). There are distinct indigenous communities living in each region, and each group of communities faces different threats.

Four tribes live on the coast. They are the Awa, the Chachi, the Epera, and the Tsáchila. These groups are relatively small and depend on agriculture, fishing, and sustainable logging for survival. They voluntarily remain in contact with nonindigenous Ecuadorians and bring their products to market. The Tsáchila are involved in the national export of bananas and cacao (Pero Ferreira, 2012). In the Sierra region, there are a variety of indigenous tribes that are all categorized as Kichwa, because they all share a language. The Kichwa tribes are almost fully integrated into the national economy, mainly participating in agriculture. Certain groups are known for specialty trades; for example, the Saraguro are cattle ranchers, the Cañar specialize in Panama hat production, and the Otavalos are known for their textile weaving (Clark & Becker, 2007). Finally, there are nine tribes that inhabit the Oriente region: the Shuar, Achuar, Zápara, Sionas, Secoyas, Cofán, Waorani, Tagaeri, and Taromenane. The Amazon tribes have varying

degrees of interaction with outsiders, although they tend to be less involved in mainstream society than the Sierra or Coastal peoples. The Tagaeri and the Taromenane live completely uncontacted in Yasuni National Park.

Threats to Amazonian Indigenous Communities

The first threat to the Amazon tribes was the colonization of their homeland by outsiders under the push of Agrarian Reform laws. Starting in the 1960s, the Ecuadorian government became concerned with efficiency and set out to modernize agricultural production. This meant having as much land in production as possible. They set their eyes on the Amazon, previously left alone, and gave Sierra farmers deeds to land in the Oriente. This caused a great deal of conflict as colonists with legal rights to the land fought with native people already living there (Mijeski, 2011).

All of Ecuador's indigenous people rely on their land for survival, but none are so vulnerable to environmental degradation as the Amazonian tribes. With their lesser degree of economic and social integration, they depend almost entirely on clean water, fertile soil, and healthy game populations. Unfortunately, Texaco Oil's discovery of crude oil fields in the 1960s spurred the beginning of decades of pollution that would threaten the indigenous way of life. Under a contract with the Ecuadorian government, Texaco drilled in the Amazon without following any environmental regulations from 1972 to 1990. They dumped billions of gallons of oil field brine, a dangerous mix of chemicals used in the drilling process, into unlined pits that were designed to overflow straight into rivers and streams (K Videos, 2014). They routinely spread crude oil onto dirt roads to prevent dust clouds from rising, and they never made any attempts to clean up almost weekly oil spills (Kimmerling, 2006).

Pollution of the rivers made it hazardous for indigenous people to drink, bathe, wash their clothes and dishes, and even travel by boat. Their livestock died when they grazed contaminated vegetation, and what crops grew in the chemical-choked soil were dangerous to consume. Even the noise from the drilling operations was harmful; it scared away game species, and the lack of protein led to malnutrition in communities. As they watched their homes die around them, indigenous tribes had to migrate to cleaner areas or perish. In some cases, they were also forced to contact and trade with outsiders just to feed their families (Kimmerling, 2006). There have also been physical health effects found in communities living in the polluted rainforest. Exposure to crude oil increases the risk of cancer in the stomach, rectum, soft tissue, skin, kidney, cervix, and lymph nodes. It also leads to infertility, miscarriages, and even sterility. These health issues are popping up among the Amazon indigenous alongside the psychological effects that come with living in a toxic environment: depression, anxiety, and stress (Gay, Shepherd, Thyman, & Whitman, 2010). In 1993, several plaintiffs came together to file a class-action lawsuit against Texaco, suing them for billions of dollars' worth of damages. The Ecuadorian government tried to have the case thrown out because it would discourage other foreign energy companies from investing in the country. They were unsuccessful, and the case is ongoing (Kimmerling, 2006).

Threats to Highland Indigenous Communities

The main threat to Ecuador's highland indigenous communities has traditionally been oppression through hacienda labor, but native highlanders have also faced a crisis of identity in recent times. Author Dennis Hanratty (1989) writes, "Prolonged contact with Hispanic culture, which dated back to the conquest, had a homogenizing effect, reducing the variation among the indigenous Sierra tribes." This homogenization intensified in the Twentieth Century as it became more and more prudent to assimilate to mestizo culture. In the early 1900s, Sierra natives were

seen as “model Indian[s]” because they had the potential to switch over to so-called civilized society (unlike Oriente indigenous peoples, who were seen as a lost cause) (Beck, Mijeski, & Stark, 2011). For those who did not work for hacendados, there was an increasing need to turn to wage labor. Widespread discrimination against indigenous people forced them to shed their traditional clothing and hairstyles in order to find work. By the 1980s, there was a dip in the number of indigenous children who learned Kichwa. Throwing off one's indigenous identity, Hanratty explains, meant betraying one's community and forfeiting the support that came with it.

Racism is still a problem today, although the idea of racial discrimination is not widely discussed in Ecuador. In a survey of eight thousand Ecuadorians taken in 2004, 70% claimed not to know what racial prejudice was. The authors of the survey analysis remind readers that leaders of indigenous movements have always spoken in terms of nationality or culture, rather than race (Beck, Mijeski, & Stark, 2011). Nevertheless, highland natives continue to suffer because of discriminatory policies.

Threats to Coastal Indigenous Communities

The Coastal tribes of Ecuador are less studied than the other two regional groups, perhaps because they make up a small percentage of the country's indigenous population, or because they live in relative peace with mestizo society. However, they do have their own set of issues that should not be overlooked. The Awa people live on the Ecuadorian/Colombian border, and have been adversely affected by the continuing armed conflict instigated by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in the 1960s. They also bear the consequences of the aerial fumigation of coca fields in Colombia (Pero Ferreira, 2012). The United States has pushed the Colombian government to aerially dump an herbicide called Round-Up on any fields they suspect may contain coca, the plant from which cocaine is derived. This attempt to stem the trade

of an illegal drug results in the death of many innocent crops because Round-Up is non-selective. It kills any plant it touches (Paige, 2014). (In the United States, our own crops and landscape plants are bred to be Round-Up resistant, so that the herbicide appears to specifically target weeds.) Furthermore, the active ingredient in Round-Up is believed to cause negative health effects such as skin irritation and even abortion (Paige, 2014). The Awa, living just across the border from these fumigations, face crop damage and illness just as the Colombian people do.

Another Coastal tribe, the Chachi, suffer from a lack of healthcare services, and are therefore plagued by mosquito-borne diseases. The Tsáchila have to deal with colonization of their traditional territory. All four groups, including the tiny Épera community, are threatened by logging and palm oil companies (Pero Ferreira 2012). Just as in the Amazon, the Coastal tribes must continually rebuff those who would degrade their forests through unsustainable resource extraction.

Indigenous Political Organization and Protest

According to scholars Kenneth Mijeski and Scott Beck, “The rapid formation of modern indigenous confederations...is testament to the commitment of Ecuador’s Indians to pursue their common struggles for land and territory, for recognition as citizens, to be identified as different and equal at the same time, and for their unyielding insistence that they be treated with dignity as human beings” (2011, p. 20). Indeed, since the 1980s, a strong indigenous movement has ensured that native communities do not sit idly by while their rights are ignored. The formation of CONAIE in 1986 united three separate regional organizations. These are ECUARUNARI, representing the highland indigenous; CONFENIAE, representing the Amazon; and COINCCE, representing the Coast (Collins, 2004). One marked difference between this organization and previous ones is that non-indigenous people were excluded from leadership. In the past, white or

mestizo clergy members often facilitated indigenous movements. However, the all-indigenous leadership of CONAIE cast off any attempts by patronizing outsiders to control their cause. CONAIE became a formidable force in Ecuador, staging several nation-wide protests in the 1990s. The most famous, known as the 1990 Levantamiento, comprised three days of hunger strikes, road blocks, and boycotts of agricultural markets. CONAIE leaders gave the Ecuadorian government sixteen demands, most of which were ignored. Nonetheless, this protest proved to be a successful way of getting the government's attention. Another CONAIE uprising in 1992 resulted in the alteration of election procedures, and CONAIE action in 2000 actually removed President Jamil Mahuad from office (Mijeski & Beck, 2011).

Conclusion

CONAIE gave birth to Pachakutik, a political party focused on getting indigenous politicians into office. So far they have succeeded in getting several party members elected to the Ecuadorian National Assembly, and they even put forth a presidential candidate in 2006. This type of political participation is something the native people of Ecuador have never seen, and it leads one to hope that the indigenous lot may improve in the future. However, there is much work to be done if conditions are to improve. First of all, Ecuador's dependence on crude oil production must be broken if Amazonian peoples are ever to be treated fairly. At present, the government is too concerned with the economy, which struggles with every dip in global oil prices, to put the welfare of its indigenous citizens first. Second, the loopholes in the Constitution must be filled in to ensure all indigenous communities rights to all resources provided by their lands, renewable *and* nonrenewable. Finally, the Ecuadorian mindset needs to change to include indigenous people as part of the national culture; a culture that celebrates the diversity of all of its people, and recognizes the beauty and value in the indigenous way of life.

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