

# Indigeneity coalesced

## The 2022 national strike in Ecuador

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1. Pablo Dávalos, 'El retorno de los guerreros y guerreras del arcoiris' (clacso.org/el-levantamiento-del-inti-raymi-de-junio-22/).

2. Ospina (2022) underscores the crucial role of fuel prices from the perspective of popular economies, as well as their potential to spur a surge of inflation with unforeseen consequences for an over-indebted economy such as that of Ecuador. We must also consider that important sectors of the population were fed up with eight long years of public expenditure cuts aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the government's pursuit of a detrimental policy of extreme fiscal tightening.

3. Bretón's various ethnographic campaigns in Ecuador go back to the 1990s, and Gascón's to 2002, while del Mármol was invited to start a research project in 2022.

### Vignette 1

Quito, 30 June 2022. Eighteenth and last day of the strike.

While peeling potatoes to feed the legions of Indigenous communities taking over the country's capital during the past 18 days, in a posh bar serving as a community kitchen, we finally heard the official statement calling off the strike, delivered by Leonidas Iza Salazar, CONAIE's Indigenous leader. The restrained effusiveness of our circumstantial kitchen companions and, several hours later, the sound of the tolling bells from Quito's Cathedral solemnly announced – at least for the time being – the end of the conflict that had emptied the country's major cities for over a fortnight.

On 25 May 2022, Leonidas Iza Salazar announced a national strike to begin on 13 June. The President of CONAIE (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de Ecuador) since 2021, a historic Indigenous leader and an environmental engineer by training, Iza predicted an uprising to echo the famous revolt of 1990. The announcement was made the day after President Guillermo Lasso delivered his annual address to the National Assembly. In his speech, he reaffirmed his conservative political programme that focused on austerity, shrinking the state and public disinvestment and privatization, in line with International Monetary Fund recommendations.<sup>1</sup>

The uprising met Iza's expectations in what became known as the *paro nacional*. It took over Quito's streets and paralysed most of the country for 18 days, seven days longer than the October 2019 revolt against the 883 Decree that raised fuel prices.<sup>2</sup> CONAIE, the foremost Indigenous organization in the country, jointly convened the 2022 strike with the Federación Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas, Indígenas y Negras del Ecuador (FENOCIN), which traditionally produces a more class-oriented discourse, and the Federación de Indígenas Evangélicos del Ecuador (FEINE). On this occasion, CONAIE – the leading organization – generated a cross-cutting cause that drew together long-term frustrated groups and diverse social sectors against the government. The three Indigenous confederations overcame their previous conflicts and drew broad support from various subaltern sectors of Ecuador's impoverished population by building beyond Indigenous identity discourse (Bretón 2022).

The conspicuous silence in the media worldwide is difficult to understand given the scope of the uprising and its relevance for understanding the historical path of

Indigenous movements in Latin America. This situation prompted us to gather some reflections to shed light on the accelerated social processes that surged during June 2022. The three of us were caught up in the strike during our planned fieldwork, two in Quito and one in Cotacachi, a rural area in the north. From our combined perspectives on the ground and building on our respective research records from the area,<sup>3</sup> we present some preliminary reflections on these days of struggle and resistance in Ecuador. The thoughts presented here focus primarily on the process experienced within the country's Andean areas, particularly concerning the Kichwa population.

In this short piece, we address two main questions. First, the 2022 uprising cannot be viewed as an isolated popular reaction against specific government measures but must be analysed in the context of the extended timeframe of Indigenous revolts stretching back to 1990. Building on our long-term research on the Indigenous resistance movement in Ecuador (Bretón 2008; 2022), we explore what this popular mobilization tells us about the recent highs and lows of the Indigenous organization and its relationship with current government regimes. Second, we delve into a tactical aspect of the uprising and explore how the Andean Indigenous population, among the most impoverished sectors in Ecuador, was able to block the entire country and freeze its economic and commercial activity for weeks on end.

### The national strike

#### Vignette 2

Quito, 21 June 2022. The ninth day of the national strike.

During the first days of the uprising, the old town's empty streets were without the usual traffic jams or the regular hustle and bustle. The military and heavy barricades strategically blocked access to the main squares. The military patrolled the streets. The old city had become a vital bastion to prevent another October 2019 incident when the 'Indian legions' took over the heavily policed city centre in violent clashes under clouds of tear gas. UNESCO declared the city a Cultural Heritage Site of Humanity and an emblem of the Ecuadorian Creole/white state (Kingman 2012). We drove our car into the cobbled streets, where we were politely stopped and searched at a military checkpoint before we were allowed to continue our visit. Victor overheard conversations between soldiers with an accent from coastal areas, probably strategically deployed to maintain ideological distance between the population and



**Fig. 1.** Protesting the arrest of Leonidas Iza in Tixán, Chimborazo, June 2023.

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4. The ten demands are available here: <https://www.vistazo.com/politica/nacional/los-10-pedidos-de-la-conaie-al-presidente-guillermo-lasso-FF1968236>. Along the same lines, the spread of Mexican cartels in the area has been discussed in a variety of international media (see, e.g., [https://elpais.com/mexico/2022-11-04/los-carteles-mexicanos-se-disputan-el-control-del-narcotrafico-en-ecuador.html%23?pm=coppy\\_link](https://elpais.com/mexico/2022-11-04/los-carteles-mexicanos-se-disputan-el-control-del-narcotrafico-en-ecuador.html%23?pm=coppy_link)).

5. In 2019 and 2022, the constitutional recognition of the 'right to resistance' (art. 98) was the main argument of grassroots organizations challenging the state's monopoly of violence given its disproportionate, even punitive, repressive actions.

6. Although in this text we focus on the Andean areas, the role of the peoples and nationalities of the 'lowlands' (coast and Amazonia) was vital to the success of the uprising. Amazonian groups took control of some oil wells, closed roads and burnt the Guayaquil Bank in Puyo (province of Pastaza), among other actions. On the coast, protesters paralysed businesses and trade across the region, most relevantly in the second-largest city in the country, Guayaquil. The uprising must be considered a pan-regional effort to achieve high levels of consensus among multiple regional actors and social sectors working together to pressure the government.

7. As note 1.

8. 'Una séptima víctima del paro se confirma más de un mes después', *Primicias*.ec, 5 August 2022 (<https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/politica/dias-paro-nacional-cinco-muertes-dudas/>).

9. The Unión de Organizaciones Campesinas de Cotacachi (UNORCAC) is the second-level organization that gathers all the grass-roots organizations from the Cotacachi canton and contributed decades ago to the solid organizational structure of the canton's Indigenous population (Lalander 2010).

10. According to our most recent data, the number of people resuming part-time agricultural activities has increased due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Bretón, V. 2008. From agrarian reform to ethnodevelopment in the highlands of Ecuador. *Journal of Agrarian Change* 8(4): 583-617.

— 2022. *Indianidad evanescente en los Andes de Ecuador*. Quito y Lleida: FLACSO y Universitat de Lleida.

— et al. 2022. Peasant and Indigenous autonomy before and after the pink tide in Latin America. *Journal of Agrarian Change* 22(3): 547-575.

Bull, B. 2013. Social movements and the 'pink tide' governments in Latin America. In *Democratization in the Global South*. (eds) K. Stokke & O. Törnqvist. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Indigenous Andean communities. In front of the Palacio de Carondelet, the seat of government, lines of uniformed soldiers gazed into empty streets anticipating rumoured events speculated on in mass media: 'They are entering, the "Indians" are coming,' like the reverberation of age-old hate speech. As if they were not there already and as if their presence was an anomaly that evinced their foreignness.

From the beginning of the uprising, CONAIE, seconded by several unions, presented 10 demands to the Ecuadorian government: the reduction of fuel prices; economic relief and debt renegotiation for families in need; fair prices for farming products; funding for policies to fight precarious labour conditions; a deferral of the advance of the extractive frontier; support for collective rights (such as bilingual intercultural education, Indigenous justice, the right to prior consultation and the self-determination of Indigenous peoples); and end to the privatization of strategic sectors; control policies against speculation regarding essential goods; reinforcing the poor public health and education systems; and the promotion of public policies aimed at countering the waves of violence, closely linked to drug trafficking, that were scourging the country.<sup>4</sup> These were, in a nutshell, the aims that brought together Indigenous and peasant communities from different parts of the country; popular sectors from the southern areas of the capital city; and students, intellectuals, artists, unions and social organizations that were marching through the empty streets of cities such as Quito, Ibarra, Guayaquil, Riobamba or Cuenca, and in many cases encountered violent clashes with the police.<sup>5</sup>

For a better understanding, we need to delve into the particularities of the Ecuadorian Indigenous communities. Their primary demographic bulk is based in the Andes, where in some cases they account for 40 per cent of the total population (as is the case of the provinces of Chimborazo, Cotopaxi and Imbabura), mainly Kichwa-speakers (SIISE 2003; Zamosc 1995). Most of them work the land. In some cases, they are agricultural producers linked to the global markets. However, most are pluriactive small farmers: they combine non-agricultural activities with smallholder production for self-consumption, distributing their surpluses in local markets (Gascón 2016; Martínez Valle 2013). This population is mainly responsible for the food supplies feeding most regional markets. Historically, they represented the Indigenous movement's backbone, from the times of the struggle against the Hacienda system (1960-1970) to the emergence of the ethnic platforms in the 1980s and up until today (Pallares 2002; Zamosc 1994). The Amazonian peoples and nationalities are fighting alongside them, with a different and more recent history of integration in the nation-state and a more robust political orientation towards territoriality and environmentalist demands.<sup>6</sup>

The so-called Agenda de Lucha Nacional (Agenda for the National Struggle) drew support from different social sectors. It resulted from a long dialogue and consensus among Indigenous communities starting right after Iza's election to President of CONAIE in 2021.<sup>7</sup> This Agenda bound political leadership to force the state to accept a debate process in the form of dialogue roundtables. The pressure from protesters in the streets of Quito and other major cities across the country was crucial in pushing Lasso's neoliberal government to accept a dialogue process that eventually led to the end of the strike and the beginning of three months of negotiation, during which debates were planned to continue.

The battle with the national government was fought on different fronts: first, in the streets and roads, against the military forces and the police, in different attempts to control and occupy strategic areas of the main cities and communication lines and confronting a surge of violence that ended up with six civilians and one serviceman dead;<sup>8</sup>

second, on the political front, with a strategic agenda of demands that was clearly structured and tactically used to advance the protesters' needs, covering a broad ideological spectrum – from class-based needs opposing the neoliberal regime to ethnic claims – and achieving a broad consensus; and, third, in the media, a battle for the *relato* (the narrative), confronting the criminalizing perspective conveyed by the mass media with the help of multiple communities and popular media outlets that had been established since the last uprising in October 2019.

The official narrative, building on the long-term racist representation of the Indigenous population in Ecuador (Guerrero 2010), portrayed the mutinous communities as violent mobs, resorting to arguments linking the uprising to the growing presence of drug trafficking in the country (Bretón 2022). On these fronts, the Indigenous leadership was able to secure its role as a political subject capable of disrupting the path of the neoliberal government (Dávalos 2005).

## On the tactics of the Indigenous organizations

### Vignette 3

Cotacachi, 23 June 2022. The eleventh day of the national strike.

At 6 a.m., Santa Bárbara's loudspeakers announced a food drive for the Indigenous people from Cotacachi who had marched to Quito. Every household then gathered food provisions from their vegetable gardens or storehouses. These donations were carefully stored in the community centre to be distributed by community leaders. A group of women were busy cooking a meal to transport to the city. Among the requested fruits were lemons; a huge pile was stacked in a corner. In Quito, the protesters would binge on fresh lemonade.

The main aim of the uprising was to undermine the legitimacy of the government and force it to compromise. This was possible by deploying mobilization strategies to achieve multiple purposes, such as greater visibility of the problems of subaltern populations (Indigenous and other) or reinforcing their role as powerful political actors (Madrid 2012; Van Cott 2008; Yashar 2005; Zamosc 2004; 2007). As seen on previous occasions, there were three tactics implemented in the national strike of 2022: first, major blockades of the national roadway system encumbered the movement of people and goods and were organized from the rural communities close to each road; second, picket lines were strategically deployed to disrupt business activity: shops, markets, industries and mines were closed; and, third, large masses headed towards the capital city to take the streets and march in front of the central government buildings.

The active participation of and logistical support provided by the urban Indigenous population, other urban sectors, such as *mestizos* and *criollos*, and progressive institutions, such as universities, were vital to the success of the actions in Quito. Nonetheless, these resistance tactics were only sustainable due to the economic structure of most of the Kichwa population of the Andean rural area of Ecuador. These populations are predominant in certain areas and are organized in households engaged in pluriactive strategies. They are connected to the market as part of the workforce or as suppliers of goods and services. However, for the most part, they are also smallholder farmers (Gascón 2016; Martínez Valle 2002; 2004). Their diversified agriculture covers the family's basic needs and any available surplus is sold to the local market. Few Indigenous farmers produce for global markets (Lacour & Vaillant 2007).

Against this backdrop of pluriactivity, we can understand the ability of Indigenous rural households to endure market shortages and the collapse of the different economic sectors during the uprising. Even though they also suffer the economic impact, insofar as they are engaged





**Fig. 2 (above).** Indigenous women from Cotopaxi arriving at the Universidad Central del Ecuador, June 2023.

**Fig. 3 (right).** Popular kitchen at the Ejido Park, Quito, June 2023.

**Fig. 4.** Demonstration at the Ejido Park, Quito, June 2023.

**Fig. 5.** Protesters' belongings at the Universidad Central del Ecuador, Quito, June 2023.

in various economic sectors, the nature of their diversified agricultural activities allows them to resist for long periods that would be unbearable for market-dependent urban economies. Moreover, family farming made it possible to maintain vast numbers of people who had been displaced to the cities. The roads were only open for the convoys of trucks loaded with families and essential goods for their stay (Ulloa & Baquero 2022). In short, the road and productive system blockades leading to severe shortages (or price rises due to speculation) were effective because of the Indigenous population's ability to self-supply. Traditionally, this part-time agricultural model has been considered an economic strategy (Ploeg 2010). However, it can also be a political strategy since it enables economically radical resistance actions.

The existence of smallholder peasant agriculture, however, was not sufficient to sustain these resistance tactics. Controlling roads and deploying groups of marchers and supplies towards the city also required a logistical system articulated by the complex organization of communitarian structures. The national strike was a nationwide decision and could be led by national organizations (CONAIE, FENOCIN, etc.), but the logistics depended on the bases. The Indigenous communities, with their autonomous governments and political administrations, were ultimately responsible for this aspect; they organized through mechanisms at the very root of their communities. No ad hoc leaderships or structures were necessary; the traditional rhythm of the *mingas* (communally organized work) allowed for workforce allocation and provisions, requiring donations from each family unit.

In Cotacachi, we observed the logistics system for supplying supplies to Quito protesters. Each community president appealed to their people on behalf of UNORCAC,<sup>9</sup> asking them to donate specific goods in substantial quantities. In Santa Barbara, a small community on the outskirts of Cotacachi, Marina told us that anyone with a plot of agricultural land was expected to collaborate. If they failed to do so, they were called on the loudspeakers. The food was explicitly aimed at the Cotacacheños in Quito but could also feed other displaced communities when needed. In Quito, in the self-managed food kitchen where we were lending a hand, vegetables and potatoes arrived from the communities to be peeled and chopped, and orders kept coming in, resulting in a continuous flow of individually bottled Andean soups that were then transported on an expensive black pickup truck on their way to the collection centre. They could stick it out: they had been doing so for the past 500 years; the government was not up to the task.

### The reverberations of Indigeneity Vignette 4

25 June 2022, Quito. The thirteenth day of the national strike.

We attended a protest assembly at the Universidad Central, where about a thousand people gathered by the entrance hall to listen to Indigenous leaders from communities staying on its campus. After Iza delivered a short address, women leaders from different provinces rallied the people around them to keep up the fight. Sara, our companion with long-standing experience working with Indigenous communities in the highlands, pointed out new discursive trends, such as feminist demands and intersectional critique within the movement. Rosa, from the Kichwa community of Pastaza (Amazonia), shouted these words to the crowds while wielding her spear:

We have come here on foot, asking the government to solve problems; we came in a peaceful demonstration, but the government greeted us with bullets. We are here to fight and are not going back without the 10 points resolved. The government must accept our proposals; we are a small country, and it must take good decisions to be loved. We're warriors, we're Amazonians, we live on yucca and bananas, and we're not going to starve to death.



CAMILA DEL MÁRMOL



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Several women leaders' speeches called to keep up the strike by repeating requests for the government to behave like a 'good father' who 'provides' for his children: 'We are here to defend our rights, what is due to us. Please don't give up. No one can intimidate us. We will fight!'

Ecuador went through a period of turbulent political instability between 1994 and 2006, governed by a suc-

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- Macdonald, T., Jr. 2002. Ecuador's Indian movement. In *The politics of ethnicity*. (ed.) D. Maybury-Lewis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.



**Fig. 6.** Indigenous protesters cutting the Panamericana Sur as it passes through Chimborazo, June 2023.



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cession of neoliberal administrations. They were fiercely confronted by the rising popularity of the Indigenous movements (Bull 2013; Macdonald 2002), a conglomerate of peasant and class-based organizations that leaned towards ethnopolitics following the dominant development discourses constructed within international bodies (Díaz-Polanco 2011). From 2007 to 2017, President Rafael Correa's government promoted a reinforcement of the social state, the so-called *Revolución Ciudadana*, establishing a contradictory relationship with the Indigenous organizations that resulted in the fragmentation of their leadership, internal discrepancies and a consequent weakening of the movement.

As we have previously argued (Bretón 2008; 2022), CONAIE has been entangled in the intricacies of identity politics, the multicultural rhetoric spurred first by neoliberal movements (Díaz-Polanco 2006) and later by the neo-developmentalism of the Correa presidency (Bretón et al. 2022; Martínez Novo 2014; 2018). Since the backlash of orthodox neoliberal politics starting in 2017, under the governments of Lenin Moreno (2017–2021) and Guillermo Lasso (starting in 2021), the Indigenous movements seems to have recovered their pace and strength, becoming the most powerful actors in confronting the national government.

Since the times of the first revolt in 1990 or the one in 1994, which forced the Presidency of the Republic to negotiate the Agrarian Development Law with the Indigenous leadership, the Indigenous movements have succumbed first to the siren calls of *projectismo desarrollista* (development projectism), with its inherent risks of depoliticization and technocratization of the leadership, and second to entering professional politics by forming parties only to encounter the ensuing internal disputes, corruption and loss of legitimacy. But the rising and falling tides left a new political cycle on the shore. CONAIE bounced back with renewed force, summoning political support beyond its traditional basis.

President Lasso attempted to disregard CONAIE several times by refusing to negotiate directly with the movements' leadership. However, the communities gathered behind Leonidas Iza, forcing the government finally to accept the dialogue roundtables warranted by the Episcopal Conference of Ecuador. Different observers pointed out the administration's short-sighted approach during the conflict and its profoundly disdainful attitude towards the Indigenous movements, evincing the long-term disregard of the *criollo*-white elites towards those communities and utter ignorance regarding the intricacies of Indigenous politics in the country.

## Conclusion

Returning to the questions raised in the introduction, we set out two arguments addressing what we consider to be the crucial dimensions of the uprising.

First, Ecuador's 2022 *paro nacional* social mobilization is not an isolated incident. It consolidates a cycle that began with the 2019 protests in which the Indigenous movements revived their radical demands and confronted authoritarian capitalist accumulation. For a moment, they had broken

free from the neoliberal 'multiculturalist regime', which, as Hale (2005) has argued, typically involved foregrounding limited recognition of cultural rights ('ethnicization of the Agenda') while voiding the movement of its more radical political and economic claims (Bretón 2022). The events of 2019 and 2022 signalled the beginning of a new cycle of mobilizations and protests after a period marked by the Indigenous movements' loss of power from 2006 onwards. Within this new cycle, there are elements of continuity with the previous one, which materialize in specific forms that the mobilization acquired: the importance of the 'seizure' of Quito and the solidarity networks that arose (ranging from universities mobilizing the white-*mestizo* sector to a wide range of urban actors). How lasting these are remains to be seen. However, the uprising's effectiveness and massive support in urban and rural areas indicate a watershed moment.

Second, the strategy for the struggle that resulted in a shutdown of economic activity throughout the country for weeks was based to a considerable extent on the Indigenous population comprising mainly part-time peasants. Even though integrated into the market economy, they still produce much of their food supplies.<sup>10</sup> This grants them economic autonomy and direct access to staples, at least enough to resist for weeks. Other sectors of the population depend on their salaries for access to food and the normal functioning of conventional markets.

Thus, relying on partial self-subsistence in the communities' survival strategies was critical for sustaining the pressure on the state over time. The deployed tactics involving major roadblocks that constricted the supply sector to bring about general shortages were only possible because most families could provide for their own needs, even when they left their home communities to march into the capital city. The improvised network of community kitchens set up in motley venues across Quito, organizing a timely supply of meals for the displaced communities, was a clear example and led us to reflect on the organization of social movements.

The dialogue roundtables concluded on 14 October 2022 with 218 agreements. Although disagreements on subsidies and extractivism remained unresolved, the discussions generated a sense of optimism. Nevertheless, the government used the talks as propaganda while showing little interest in implementing the accords. They thereby managed to avoid another wide-ranging strike. Whenever an agreement is reached, the government tends to appease uprisings with temporary measures to reduce the irritation of mobilized bases. For many participants, the uprisings had an 'anti-adjustment' component directly related to the high cost of living and the decline of their living conditions. This temporary appeasement is delaying decision-making ad infinitum regarding structural elements that question the accumulation model. The political project, strategy and timing of the elites leading Indigenous organizations are not homogeneous, nor do they all share the same aims. For these elites, it is crucial to calibrate social forces and guarantee that a new mobilization, if necessary, will not be branded as a failure. ●