

Introduction

After Recognition: Indigenous Peoples Confront Capitalism

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ACROSS LATIN AMERICA HAVE IN RECENT years taken a leading position in defending national sovereignty, democratic rights, and the environment. A renewed cycle of capitalist accumulation in the region centered on mining, hydrocarbon extraction, and agro-industrial monocultures has sparked the new round of indigenous resistance. Drawing on organizational and political legacies of the peasant and agrarian struggles of previous decades, indigenous groups in the 1980s and 1990s grew and gained strength from an international arena in which governments were encouraged to recognize and promote cultural and minority rights in return for continuing debt relief and development aid.

In a wave of constitutional reforms, Colombia (1991), Guatemala (1993), Mexico (1993), and Peru (1993) took the unprecedented symbolic step of recognizing the cultural rights of indigenous people. More recently indigenous political mobilizations in Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2009) have led to constitutions that recognize those states' plurinational character and, in the case of Bolivia, establish limited autonomy for indigenous peoples. While these stated reforms represent one response to indigenous peoples' demands for recognition of cultural identities and rights, they have done little to address either their long-standing demands for justice or their rejection of the extractivist economies, environmental devastation, and rampant social inequality that characterize neoliberal capitalism.

This issue of the *NACLA Report* explores the contributions and creative possibilities of indigenous movements at a moment when indigenous politics has moved beyond requests for state recognition and inclusion. In this period "after recognition," indigenous activists, organizations and communities are challenging both the claims that liberal national states exert over indigenous resources and territories, and the misplaced social and economic priorities of neoliberal capitalism.

THE CREATIVE FORCE OF INDIGENOUS POLITICAL MOBILIZATION as a catalyst for broader popular political struggles was brought to world attention on January 1, 1994, when the Zapatista Army of National

Liberation took over several cities in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. Despite the Mexican government's military and media offensive against the Zapatistas, which continues to this day, the 1994 uprising—timed to coincide with the first day of the North American Free Trade Agreement—helped launch a national debate about democratic participation, autonomy, economic justice, and political inclusion. In the years since 1994, Zapatista organizations have drawn on indigenous philosophies of authority and community to articulate ideals of direct democracy and political participation that go well beyond liberal models of both representational democracy and cultural recognition.

The Zapatista challenge emerged in response to a neoliberal economic model that reduced social spending, deregulated key industries, dismantled unions, undermined workers' rights, and deployed increasingly authoritarian measures against social movements, ranging from the criminalization of public protests to full-scale counterinsurgency doctrine. These measures, together with neoliberalism's ongoing commitment to environmentally destructive industries like oil, mining, logging, as well as large infrastructure projects and single-crop commercial agriculture, pose the most severe threat in history to indigenous survival.

Even as Latin American popular movements face severe challenges from both the global economic crisis and the policies of their neoliberal states, indigenous organizations throughout Latin America are responding to both state repression and the uncontrolled looting of their countries' natural resources, with new and creative perspectives on development and the crisis of the liberal nation-state. In doing so, they confront the region's elected governments, including the new progressive nationalist governments, which have had difficulty thinking past the economic development model promoted by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization: fostering capitalist expansion through exploiting natural resources.

In the face of this, indigenous peoples ask why it is always necessary to privilege profits over life, to defend the

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rights of corporations and not the rights of Mother Earth, and to treat nature as a resource for the taking. In the terrain of politics as well, indigenous mobilizations have challenged the dominance of vertical decision-making on both the right and left, and the neoliberal state's tired mantras of national security and economic interest.

A significant case is the 2008 Colombian *minga*, which propelled the country's indigenous movement to the center of the political stage (see "Colombia's *Minga* Under Pressure," page 13). With this massive national mobilization, indigenous peoples demonstrated their capabilities to convene a broad range of social and political forces, and to articulate a platform of action that directly challenges the Colombian neoliberal state's commitments to the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement, militarization, mining, and industrial agriculture.

Despite significant advances, indigenous movements continue to face serious challenges. Neoliberal agendas allow no room for the negotiation of territorial or political rights, and the entrenched racism of Latin America's *criollo* or *mestizo* elites makes it difficult for indigenous perspectives and voices to be heard. Examples of this abound. In Mexico, indigenous communities have confronted the failures of the state judicial system, as well as increasing violence from state police, paramilitaries, and drug traffickers by forming community police who work to enforce their constitutional rights to autonomy and peace (see "Indigenous Justice Faces the State," page 34).

In Brazil, indigenous territories and ways of life are directly threatened by the Lula government's unwavering support for massive hydroelectric projects, such as the Inambari dams, which will flood more than 113,000 acres of rainforest on the Peruvian-Brazilian border, or the Belo Monte dams, which will divert more than 80% of the Xingu River (see "Brazil's Native Peoples and the Belo Monte Dam," page 25). In Peru, the political elite's and mining sector's disdain for Mother Earth directly threatens the survival of indigenous peoples, yet communities from the Andes and Amazon have joined forces to resist state efforts to expand extractive industries and to deny indigenous rights (see "*El buen vivir*," page 30)

Indigenous political forces face similar challenges in those countries where progressive governments—brought to power, to varying degrees, by indigenous movements—continue to promote mining and other extractive industries, to deny rights to prior consultation, to ignore indigenous territorial autonomies, and to directly

threaten both the environment and indigenous life. In Ecuador, indigenous movements have confronted the Rafael Correa government's developmental strategy, which privileges mining and oil, and in September 2009 they mobilized to protest legislation that threatened to remove control of water resources from local communities and open the way for privatization of water. Correa responded by labeling indigenous leaders "terrorists."¹ In Bolivia, indigenous movements have also joined to confront the country's first indigenous president, Evo Morales, over the distribution of profits from gas and mining operations and the determination of autonomous territories, and even to demand the outright abolition of extractive industries (see "Bolivia's New Water Wars," page 19).

INDIGENOUS ORGANIZATIONS IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES have articulated similar responses to extractive economies. In 2009, at the IV Continental Summit of Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities of Abya-Yala, held in Puno, Peru, 5,000 delegates from across the Americas issued a declaration in which they offered "an alternative of life instead of a civilization of death." In its call for a "global mobilization in defense of Mother Earth and the World's People," the summit acknowledged that this struggle—and the global crisis it addresses—demands a broad alliance with non-indigenous social and political actors.² The summit's anti-capitalist, anti-systemic platform resonates with declarations put forward by the Zapatistas, the World Social Forum, and other Latin American indigenous and popular organizations.

As indigenous movements act to hold their elected governments to account, they are not asking merely for recognition or for increased electoral participation. Their goal is not to participate in more of the same but to build something better. They question the primacy of an economic model that values private profit over life and the Mother Earth. They also remind us that popular and oppositional politics must look beyond elections and state-centered models of representative democracy that have historically marginalized and silenced not only indigenous peoples, but also a wide spectrum of disenfranchised and poor populations. They ask us, above all, to think creatively about how our commitments to political change must start not with a quest for power, but rather with respect for life, and for the ways of life and mutual well-being that indigenous organizations call *el buen vivir*. ■

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