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Ecuador

# Ecuador: Indigenous Resistance and Political Challenges – an interview with Leonidas Iza

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**The sudden expansion of drug trafficking in Ecuador and the intrusion into the Mexican Embassy in Quito to arrest former Vice President Jorge Glas captured global public attention. However, less widespread is the repressive policy being implemented by the government of Daniel Noboa or the upcoming popular consultation of eleven questions, scheduled for Sunday, 21 April, which promotes policies that intensify job insecurity and institutional changes promoting an authoritarian hardening of the state. To better understand these issues, we spoke with Leonidas Iza, who has established himself as one of the most prominent voices in opposition to the right-wing government of Daniel Noboa. His leadership has been crucial in the defence of indigenous rights and resistance to the neoliberal policies promoted by the current administration.**

**What do you think about the intrusion into the Mexican embassy where Jorge Glas, former vice president during the 'Correa' administration, was taking refuge?**

CONAIE strongly condemns the recent violation of the Mexican embassy in Ecuador. The government of Ecuador, under the mandate of President Daniel Noboa, has committed an act of extreme gravity by violating the inviolability of the Mexican embassy in Ecuador.

Embassies represent the sovereignty of the countries that host them and are protected by the principle of inviolability enshrined in the Vienna Convention. The Ecuadorian government's illegal incursion into the Mexican embassy in Quito is a clear transgression of Mexican sovereignty and an absolute disregard for international norms.

It is alarming how the Ecuadorian government, authoritarian and repressive in nature, resorts to force to secure its political objectives. This action not only affects bilateral relations between Mexico and Ecuador, but also sends a disturbing message to the international community.

In addition, we denounce the violent, authoritarian and abusive practices which are being replicated in the territories of the peoples and nationalities, such as Palo Quemado. Noboa's government shows a clear disregard for the law and the rule of law by using force and violence to impose its political interests and persecute community, political and social leaders. This action reflects desperation and irrationality on the part of the government, which seems to lack support for the 21 April Popular Consultation and resorts to patterns of manipulation to justify policies that directly harm the Ecuadorian people.

**Could you describe what has happened in Palo Quemado in relation to the anti-mining struggle and the repressive response of the state? How did the events unfold and what is the current situation in the community?**

The Ecuadorian state has experienced 50 years of dependence on the oil industry and in recent years has been

trying to make the transition due to oil depletion. It is estimated that by 2030 there will be a reduced average production. Currently, the focus is on the dispute over new territories for mining extraction, which has led to two fundamental issues: first, the state is offering concessions and sovereignty to transnational corporations, even considering ceding legal sovereignty to resolve conflicts through international arbitration. Second, communities, including indigenous peoples, peasants, Afro-descendants and farmers, are reluctant to cede their territories. This conflict covers about 15% of the national territory, which is equivalent to between five and eight million hectares, depending on the phase of mining extraction.

In this sense, there is a conflict in which the Ecuadorian state resorts to the use of the armed forces, as evidenced in Palo Quemado and the Pampas, to guarantee the private security of transnational corporations. They have flagrantly violated the right to free, prior and informed consultation of indigenous peoples, as well as the right to environmental consultation, that is, the right of all communities to be informed and decide on projects that may affect their environmental rights. Despite the fact that the Constitutional Court has already declared the reference manual used by the national government in the past to be unconstitutional, the latter has implemented an emergency mechanism through a similar ministerial resolution. There is a sense of desperate motivation on the part of the government, because it also has a stake of its capital in the mining area in Ecuador, which suggests a clear favouritism towards that sector to the detriment of the rights of the affected communities

**The repression in Palo Quemado was intense and appears to be linked to the state of emergency declared by the government following the 9 January drug trafficking attacks. How would you explain the sudden appearance of drug trafficking in Ecuador's recent history and what political impact is militarization and increased repression having?**

The current situation can be attributed to several factors. First, Daniel Noboa rode on the strategy of previous governments of saying that the state is too big, and that he cannot spend economic resources to maintain the obesity of the state. That was the discourse. So, he has reduced the budget in areas such as education, health, social development. But also in security, dismantling the administrative infrastructure in the control of prisons. Second, the lack of effective border control has allowed drug trafficking to enter, taking advantage of the vulnerability created by the lack of economic opportunities for young people. A third issue is that if you don't have education, you don't have health, you don't have minimum conditions for people, what do you have? A breeding ground for drug trafficking. The lack of employment has led many to be recruited by drug traffickers. Finally, governments, from Guillermo Lasso onwards, have tried to confuse the population by saying that the indigenous movement is involved drug trafficking, in order to delegitimize the protests, generating confusion and polarization in society.

So, what happened in Palo Quemado has been skilfully used to focus attention on the problem of insecurity, an issue that, although it is a reality, does not represent a generalized situation at the national level, but is more concentrated on the coast. Indigenous and peasant communities in the Sierra and the Amazon have managed to maintain a level of control over their territories. However, by trying to equate the indigenous movement with drug trafficking, they intend to establish in the opinion of the people that everything must be razed to the ground. In Palo Quemado there is no identified presence of drug trafficking or illegal mining, but the national government has used the national situation to repress indigenous communities in Palo Quemado. Even in the National Assembly, where we confronted the joint command of the Armed Forces for spreading misleading information. It is true that illegal mining linked to drug trafficking is occurring in other places such as Buenos Aires, Ponce Enríquez, Azuay and Napo, but this is due to the lack of response capacity of the communities, as a result of the violation of their territorial organization processes. In

territories where these organizational structures are present, the national government tries to create confusion about the real situation.

## **Could you talk about the referendum proposed by the government, detailing the issues at stake, and what is the position of the indigenous movement on this?**

In relation to the popular consultation, it is important to divide the analysis into three blocks. The first concerns security, where it is feasible to carry out reforms within the existing legal framework, which does not require spending \$60 million on a consultation when these modifications could be resolved through the National Assembly. Security-related thematic areas have already been identified, including relevant articles.

The second block concerns the reform of the judicial system and institutions, which could also be addressed through reforms proposed by the National Assembly, without the need to resort to consultation.

The third block, of great relevance to us, deals with labour reform. For years, we have been clear in our stance that companies seek more flexible labour rights to increase their profits at the expense of worker exploitation. The question raised in the consultation about hourly pay would trigger a significant imbalance, both at the state level and for workers. How are you going to calculate retirement? Calculating retirement and contributions to the retirement system would become complicated. We would have no possibility of demanding overtime pay when you are outside the current working day. It could be at night, it could be in the day, it could be Saturday, it could be Sunday. So, it is practically guaranteeing the conditions of exploitation and overexploitation for the benefit of the employers.

Another crucial aspect is consultation on international arbitration. The question is whether we agree that disputes with foreign companies should be resolved through international arbitration, which would be detrimental to Ecuador's sovereignty. The case of Chevron Texaco is a clear example of how companies have demanded that Ecuador cede sovereignty and submit the dispute to international arbitration, resulting in significant losses for the country. It is vital to reaffirm the sovereignty and unity of the Ecuadorian state in all legal, economic and political spheres.

In summary, we have rejected the eleven questions of the consultation, as they do not represent CONAIE's position on any of the aforementioned aspects.

## **I would like to talk about the Noboa government, which initially gained popularity after declaring a state of emergency after 9 January, but then began to lose support. How would you characterize his leadership and what is his current situation in terms of popularity and stability?**

In the eagerness to win an election, the government made promises based on illusions, which Ecuadorians ended up accepting as truths, even though in reality they are lies. And what has happened to the national government? It has gone against its own promises in four key areas. What did it promise? To reduce the price of fuel. And what's going on? An increase in fuel prices is announced. It was said, "There will be no increase in VAT or other taxes," but in fact

value-added tax was increased. What else did it promise? That there would be no privatization of strategic sectors. However, laws have been enacted that pave the way for the privatization of businesses essential to Ecuadorians. And fourthly, what was said? Exploring alternatives to guarantee energy in the country, including the modernization of the electricity system with the promise of reducing costs. Instead, however, prices have risen and problems in electricity management have not been resolved.

though it is true that the President initially gained a lot of popularity with the issue of insecurity, the focus of his administration has been directed mainly towards the repression of the popular and impoverished sectors of the country, who are the most affected by the consequences of the structural adjustments imposed by the International Monetary Fund and neoliberal policies. What we have observed is that their strategy has focused on arresting young people, criminals and addicts, presenting them to the country and the world as trophies of their fight against crime. Of the 11,800 detainees recorded, the majority of them, approximately 11,500 people, have been arrested without any legal proceedings being initiated against them, suggesting that these arrests may be more focused on a media spectacle than a real plan to dismantle the country's criminal structures.

Another worrying aspect is that, although there are groups identified as responsible for serious criminal activities, the President has not declared these groups as terrorists, as is the case with the "Albanian mafia" or the Jalisco group in Mexico. This raises questions about whether the fight against drug trafficking and insecurity is being used more as a political tool to neutralize political opponents than anything else.

On the other hand, the apparent protection of the upper classes linked to drug trafficking is alarming, as evidenced by the recent discovery of large quantities of drugs in ports controlled by private companies. Let's just look at where the drug comes from. In these days we have seen one and a half tons, but in the previous months ten tons left the ports that are controlled by private companies. Whose? Who are the exporters? The exporter Noboa.

Or look at the case of Guillermo Lasso and his brother-in-law linked to the "Albanian mafia." What did the prosecutor say? That he has a presumption of innocence and that since it is confidential information, the names or information could not be given. But that criterion does not apply to poor, drug-addicted young people, who do not have the presumption of innocence that is granted to the elites.

It is also worrisome that certain members of the Armed Forces are disseminating irresponsible information that says that we are fighting against transnational mining because we want to or are linked to illegal mining. They are trying to generate tensions and misunderstandings in the population and in the military ranks themselves.

**Now we would like to delve into a more general topic. The indigenous movement has been a key player in recent years, with important milestones such as the outbreak of October 2019 or June 2022. What do you think is the current role of the indigenous movement in this political conjuncture and, in particular, how do you see the debate around a possible indigenous candidacy in the next presidential elections?**

At this time, I believe that the fundamental role that indigenous organizations can play in the country is to realize the ideal of plurinationality, which, although it has been present in the constitution of Ecuador since 2008, has not yet

materialized in the daily life of society. The current task of the indigenous movement and other popular and peasant sectors is to make this plurinational state a reality in organizational terms. I believe that the indigenous movement would have the possibility to share its organizational experience of more than 500 years.

In the midst of the crisis of insecurity, in what territories has it been almost impossible for drug trafficking and organized crime to enter? In territories where it has organizational capacity. Our communities have been saving the state millions of dollars by ensuring our safety with community guards and indigenous justice systems. I believe that we can make a qualitative leap and contribute to the definition of public policies with our contributions. In addition, we must work to build an intercultural society that respects and promotes community democracy and legal pluralism, fundamental values for indigenous peoples.

Let us now consider the possibility of the indigenous movement participating in the upcoming elections. It's an option that's on the table. There are minimum conditions that we must consider as we approach the opening of the new electoral process. Subsequently, it will be necessary to make decisions about the mechanisms that have historically supported us: a participatory and communitarian democracy that defends our organizational structures without provoking internal divisions or ruptures.

**You have mentioned on several occasions the importance of the unity of the left in the context of an eventual indigenous candidacy. How do you visualize that unity on the left? Is it viable? What would be the necessary conditions for an indigenous candidacy to be effective? And, if those conditions are met, what would be the next step?**

Structurally, our society and our democratic system are dominated by representative democracy, which tends to fragment power into different political parties or movements. To move towards a true transformation of the country, we must break with those parcels of power that each party defends for itself and focus on a comprehensive project for the transformation of Ecuador. We have said: elections have to be seen as part of a process of struggle. Elections for us do not become exclusive, they have to be part of a process of struggle, the struggle in the streets, the struggle in the legislative assembly, the legal struggle, the struggle in the demands of the national and international courts. To move forward in the electoral process, what will it take? Breaking those parcels of power. So, what does the matrix need to be in order to get out of this process? The matrix has to be to define the project for the transformation of Ecuador. In this project of transformation of Ecuador, all the movements, political parties that have this ideology of the left are either part of the popular camp or question the neoliberal model. So, let's come together in this project of transforming the country.

The indigenous movement, made up of 18 peoples and 15 nationalities, represents millenary societies that have existed long before the formation of the Republic 200 years ago. These communities have endured for millennia. How can we integrate the ideology of the original nations into this political project that we defend from the left and that criticizes the current model? How do we achieve this convergence among those of us who defend these values?

Right now, we're facing this challenge, aren't we? Achieving the union of diverse sectors of society: mestizos, whites, cholos, indigenous, Afro-descendants, all sharing the vision of the left or the objective of transforming society. On the other hand, we also have the vision of indigenous peoples, represented by 18 peoples and 15 nationalities, who aspire to transform this country by preserving their lives, worldview and culture. I think it's possible to build from these

visions, which would be nice, don't you think?

## Do you think it's possible that *Correismo* or other left-wing movements could join this perspective?

All left-wing movements must be questioned and shaken up, including Correa. We are not attacking *Correismo* as a phenomenon, but rather questioning how it is possible that, if it defines itself as left-wing, it is supporting radicalized right-wing neoliberal policies in our country. Over the past 15 days, I have raised this debate. Some fear being labelled radicals, so they choose to moderate, but the problem is that the right is radicalizing, not just here, but globally. So, who is responsible for the increasingly radical right-wing policies advancing? Not only the right, but also those who consider themselves to be on the left but vote for these policies. Even *Correismo* must be shaken up. Is it possible to continue to call oneself left-wing when, through voting, policies such as privatization, tax increases and debt forgiveness for large economic groups are supported, while continuing to implement a fiscal policy that affects the poor and the middle class? I believe that at this moment it is necessary to call on all left-wing movements to look beyond their own interests and consider a program of a plurinational left-wing government. This also implies opening a debate within the indigenous movement. Ecuadorian politics has stigmatized having a political stance, and if someone from *Correismo* participates in a broader program that seeks to transform Ecuador, what will the stigma be? It will be: are you a Correista or an anti-Correista? And who benefits from this division? The radicalized right in Ecuador. That is why I believe that we must open this process at this time. These parcels of power will only dissolve if we can unite in a project to transform Ecuador. Therefore, all left-wing movements must mobilize and work to build a more inclusive process at the national level.

## What is the situation in the Pachakutik movement?

The situation in the Pachakutik movement is complicated to address due to an ideological softening that has occurred over the past 15 years. It has been claimed that the indigenous movement is not aligned with either the left or the right, which has led to confusion among the political cadres. This confusion has been exploited by the right, since no one wanted to be identified as a Correista and that is why many sectors of the indigenous movement ended up supporting the right. However, at the moment, the Pachakutik leadership is taking a more defined and left-wing stance. Even so, we must confront a sector of social democracy both within the indigenous movement and in society at large. It is essential that we maintain clear positions on what it means to be on the left and to belong to the indigenous movement, as these positions must serve as a basis for building something different. We cannot allow moderate positions to be supported in the name of social democracy that ultimately support the most radical policies of the right. Currently, at Pachakutik we are in a process of redefinition and reflection, with the aim that the candidates who go to the National Assembly not only seek to obtain a space, but also see that space as an integral part of the transformation project in Ecuador.

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