

Equador Overview

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Environment

Ecuador is bounded by the Pacific Ocean and neighbours both Colombia and Peru. The country consists of three regions: the highlands or Andean region, the Amazon region or eastern lowlands (Oriente), and the Pacific coastal region. Although there is an indigenous presence throughout the country, indigenous peoples are often identified either with the Andean or Amazonian regions as highlanders or lowlanders (Amazon dwellers). Afro-Ecuadorians are highly concentrated in the coastal region of Ecuador and thus are often identified with this part of the country.

Peoples

Main languages: Spanish, indigenous languages

Main religions: Christianity (majority Roman Catholic, with Evangelical Protestantism gaining much terrain, including in indigenous communities), indigenous religions

Minority groups include 14 distinct indigenous peoples - including Quichua, Achuar, Shuar, and Huaorani - 830,418 (6.8%) and Afro-Ecuadorians 604,009 (5%). (data: 2001 census)

Among the indigenous ethnic groups are the highland and lowland Quichua, lowland Cofán, Secoya, Siona, Hauorani, Achuar and Shuar, Tsáchila and Chachí. The 2001 census recorded that indigenous people represent 6.8 per cent of the population. However, many, including the Confederation of the Indigenous Nations of Ecuador (CONAIE), argue that indigenous peoples comprise somewhere between 25 and 30 per cent of the total population.

Similarly, there is a large gap between the official figures for Afro-Ecuadorians (5 per cent) and NGO estimates (10 per cent). These differences have to do with issues of classification of black and indigenous people, particularly of those who have intermarried with non-black or non-indigenous people, and those who live in urban areas.

History

Until the oil boom in the mid-1970s, Ecuador was one of the poorest countries in Latin America, largely dependent on agricultural exports, with very little industry. The oil boom launched the country into a decade of remarkable economic growth. The rapid accumulation of foreign debt brought about the promotion of industry by import substitution, massive public works programmes, and the mushrooming of the service sector and of the government. Although the agrarian reforms of the 1960s-70s promised sweeping land redistribution in the fertile Highland valleys, such reforms were not fully implemented. The Agrarian Reform Law of 1964 and subsequent reforms treated indigenous people as poor peasants emphasizing individual land titles and dismissing their demands for collective rights. In addition, such legislation encouraged the colonization of 'empty' forested lands, despite the fact that such territory had been traditionally inhabited by minority groups for hundreds if not thousands of years. Further, Afro-Ecuadorians were largely ignored by agrarian reforms because the land that they have traditionally inhabited along the northern coast was excluded from the legislation. Afro-Ecuadorians were treated by the state as assimilated settlers and not as traditional communities with rights to communal land.

The oil boom of the 1970s brought the hope of prosperity, but it would eventually present serious threats to minority groups as well as conflict with land reform policies. Although other oil subsidiaries had been active in the Orient, it was Texaco's arrival, preceded by the Ecuadorian military and evangelical missionaries and land hungry settlers, which devastated the Siona, Secoya, Cofán, Hauorani and lowland Quichua. The penetration of oil companies in this area had devastating effects on indigenous peoples, causing the extinction of the traditionally isolated Tetete group and contaminating rivers. Medical studies showed that some 30,000 people had been affected by cancer and skin diseases caused by unsafe petroleum extraction.

Throughout the 1990s, Ecuador was forced to engage in a series of drastic policies and reforms to stabilise the economy and induce structural adjustments to cope with foreign exchange scarcity, and a distorted and non-competitive economy. By the end of the 1990s, the country's economy fell into a severe economic recession, caused by, among other factors, the continued fall of oil prices. Indigenous communities and local ecological groups united to sue the company for one billion dollars, however, in 1995 Texaco attempted to avoid payment of damages by claiming bankruptcy at the time the damage was done. Texaco subsequently offered a settlement to various communities, which was not, however, accepted. Instead, with the support of the newly elected Correa administration, indigenous communities sued Chevron (which owns Texaco) for US\$6 billion for dumping 18 billion gallons of polluted water in their operations during 1964-92.

Governance

Throughout the 1950s Ecuadorian politics was plagued with problems of corruption, coups and general social unrest; however stability was briefly returned in the 1960s and 1970s with military rule and with the introduction of a multiparty democratic system in 1979. Still, the persistence of weak institutions and party conflict paired with a deterioration of the economy propelled Ecuadorian politics into a perpetual state of emergency. Ecuador has seen seven presidents in the last ten years, most of which have been ousted by mass protest or through congressional rulings. Starting in the late 1980s, the most salient issue defining Ecuadorian politics has been neo-liberal reform and the presence of international corporations in Ecuador.

One of the most important political developments in Ecuador was the founding of the Confederation of the Indigenous Nations of Ecuador (CONAIE) in 1986. This confederation has been instrumental in organizing pan-indigenous uprising. A key player in Ecuadorian politics, CONAIE has demanded land restitution for indigenous peoples and envisaged a national economy based on territorial autonomy. Its sixteen-point demands included the right to practice traditional medicine, to bilingual education and to indigenous control of archaeological sites. Whereas issues of ethnicity and multiculturalism had

traditionally been marginalized from Ecuadorian politics, they have come to define them. Ecuador's minority groups, namely the indigenous populations, have been key players in opposing neo-liberal reforms and thus have been central to popular and sometimes violent uprisings. Although Afro-Ecuadorians have not been as visible in Ecuadorian politics as their indigenous counterparts, they have gained more visibility through the presence of black politicians and Afro-Ecuadorian NGOs. In 2000, responding to neo-liberal reform and dollarization policies, indigenous communities backed Lucio Gutierrez in a brief junta that replaced President Jamil Mahuad. Still, the alliance between Gutierrez and minority groups failed over his adoption of neoliberal economic policies.

Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

The 1998 constitution recognizes Ecuador as a pluri-ethnic nation and guarantees the rights of both indigenous peoples and Afro-Ecuadorians. These include the right to collective territory, the use of natural resources, cultural patrimony, and bilingual education. However, the political turmoil and economic crises that has intensified in recent years has meant that these rights still remain on paper. The socio-economic disparities between indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian on the one hand and the majority white/mestizo population on the other continue to be marked. Despite a national poverty rate of 34 per cent, according to the 2001 census, 42 per cent of black Ecuadorians and 55 per cent of indigenous people were in poverty. Similarly, nearly one third of the indigenous population was illiterate compared to eight per cent of mestizos and 4.8 per cent of whites.

Seven years after the constitution there is still an absence of clear or widely accepted rights-based rules and regulations - particularly with regard to informed prior consent. In 2005, members of the Haurani indigenous groups were unsuccessful in derailing plans by Brazilian oil company, Petrobrás, to drill for oil in the Yasuní forest. The presence of such companies may cause the extinction of smaller indigenous groups like the Tagaeri/Taromenani, who had been isolated from the outside world until recently. Free Trade of the Americas Agreement (FTAA) negotiations have incited a new wave of social unrest and protests, particularly among Ecuador's indigenous population. In the latest sequence of massive indigenous protests, CONAIE along with Acción Ecológica was successful in ousting the US-based oil company, Occidental, in May, 2006.

Employing more mainstream political strategies through the Pachakutik Movement, the political arm of CONAIE, indigenous groups supported Luis Macas as their 2006 presidential candidate; however he was not a front runner in this election.

Christian leftist candidate, Rafael Correa of the Proud and Sovereign Fatherland Alliance (Alianza - PAIS) was sworn into the presidency in January 2007. Along with Rafael Correa, four indigenous persons, and one Afro-Ecuadorian managed to get elected to the 100-seat Congress.

Upon entering office Correa indicated he would seek to establish a Bolivia-style constituent assembly that would rewrite the Constitution to include empowerment for Ecuador's indigenous majority. Work on drafting the new constitution began in November 2007 following a landslide Alianza - PAIS victory in constituent assembly elections. As agreed between the government and indigenous organizations, among the key inclusions is the establishment of Ecuador as a united "plurinational" state.

The "plurinational" concept accepts not just that Ecuador is a pluri-ethnic nation with different peoples, cultures and worldviews but that this dimension needs to be reflected in all public policies, such as education, health, housing, local government et al.

Collective rights will be included in all relevant instruments establishing forms of administration,

functions and self-government for nations and peoples in their own territories, without implying they have property rights over non-renewable subsoil resources.

However although these resources are the property of the state, communities have the right to be consulted regarding their extraction and to be fully informed of the impact that mining, oil production and other activities will have on their lives.

Institutionalizing the concept of "Plurinationalism" was an important long held initiative of CONAIE. According to Luis Macas, former head of the organization, the concept was tied to the struggle for land and structural reform of Ecuadorean agriculture, which implies access to water, markets and credit.

Many of the indigenous communities in Ecuador have continued to live according to their traditional values, including a system of sharing and exchanging, which frequently clashes with the individualism of modern western influenced society. One of these is the highly valued tradition of the "minga" - working together to harvest crops or build roads and homes.

While indigenous peoples deal adeptly with market forces in the outside world elimination of the communal aspect within their communities threatens solidarity and reciprocity without which, rights defenders claim, indigenous societies would sink into widespread violence and disintegration.

CONAIE, has long sought an instrument that would better reflect the reality in the country and replace the colonial-era derived structures which stressed homogeneity within a single culture. The organization argues that this approach has resulted in 500 years of discrimination against Ecuador's indigenous people, their lifestyles and world views.

The declaration of Ecuador as a united plurinational state is supported in the constituent assembly by the governing PAÍS Alliance, the indigenous Pachakutik Movement, the Marxist Popular Democratic Movement along with some delegates from social democratic parties.

Both indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian groups have been effective in mobilizing international support and resources in order to improve their living conditions. In 2004, the World Bank approved a grant for US\$34 million to finance the renewal of the Indigenous People and Afro-Ecuadorian Development Project (PRODEPINE) aimed at providing secure land titles and financing community-based sub-projects. This program was initiated in 1998 with a total budget of US\$50 million and facilitated the creation of the ministry level agency, National Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorians Development Planning Council.

Despite growing political influence, in 2007 indigenous and Afro-descendant minorities in Ecuador have continued to suffer discrimination at many levels of society.

70 percent of the estimated 600,000 Afro-Ecuadorian citizens, continued to suffer widespread poverty and very pervasive educational and societal discrimination persisted in 2007. Despite the absence of official discrimination there were still no special government efforts to address these problems in 2007.

The UN Special Human Rights Reporter on Indigenous people raised concerns at the lack of consultation on extractive projects in Indigenous territories and the negative impact of resource extraction activities on the environment and Indigenous living conditions. These are all issues that the new constitution is designed to address.

Indigenous activists environmentalists and rights defenders report frequent threats and violence against them by police, soldiers, and private security forces including levying of unsubstantiated charges. This

includes the legal team representing Indigenous communities suing a multinational oil company for pollution caused by drilling between 1964 to 1992 in Sucumbíos province.

Much of Ecuador's wealth lies in the Amazon rainforest region where some indigenous populations still live in voluntary isolation. Of the 400,000 barrels of oil per day produced by Ecuador more than 32,000 barrels annually spill into the Amazon River systems, mostly in areas inhabited by indigenous groups.

An estimated additional untapped 900 million barrel oil reserve has been identified in the heart of the bio-diverse rainforest. In light of ecological concerns --including the future of indigenous populations in June 2007 Ecuadorian officials indicated to the UN that Ecuador would ban exploitation of huge oil reserves if compensated by the international community for its effort to save the Amazon region and its indigenous inhabitants from ecological collapse.

The hope is to raise some 350 million dollars a year which is equivalent to 50 percent of what the state would earn from petroleum extraction. In September 2007 the Ecuadorian government for the fourth time ordered the suspension of all activities at the controversial Junin open pit copper mining project located in the ecologically diverse Tropical Andes of Ecuador. The National Coordinator for the Defence of Life and Sovereignty, an umbrella body of social organisations formed by local residents in communities affected by mining, wants Ecuador to be declared a "country free of large-scale mining and is calling for all foreign mining corporations to pull out of the country "

Monoculture oil-palm expansion is also affecting Afro-descendant and indigenous populations in Ecuador; particularly in the biologically diverse Cayapas-Mataje Ecological Reserve in Esmeraldas. Local activists report oil palm companies are increasingly moving into the northern coastal province of Esmeraldas, which is a traditional Afro-Ecuadorian zone. This is having a direct social and environmental impact on Afro-descendant and indigenous Awá and Chachi villages, including land appropriation.