

Mapping Regional Tensions in Correa's Ecuador and Evo's Bolivia

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Bolivia and Ecuador share much more in common than amazing biodiversity and stunning geography. Both countries are home to powerful indigenous movements that have been characterized as amongst the most powerful on the continent. After long periods of political instability, they have both recently elected left-of-centre presidents who have promised to end “the long night of neoliberalism.” Rafael Correa, Ecuador's eighth president within ten years, was elected in November 2007; Evo Morales, Bolivia's sixth president within eight years, was elected in December 2005. Both finished their electoral races with decisive popular mandates. Despite these similarities, every political transition is the product of particular historical circumstances.

Over the past two years, the Bolivian government has barely kept afloat in a churning sea of strikes and blockades. On May 4th, the government was subjected to a sovereignty referendum organized by the elite in the eastern department of Santa Cruz that threatens to pull the country apart. In contrast, after a year and a half in government, Ecuador is experiencing a period of relative calm. There have been relatively few social mobilizations and the government appears to be advancing its reformist agenda with comparatively less opposition.

To begin to explain why Bolivia is on the brink of divorce while Correa enjoys a political honeymoon, this article compares the politics of the transitions underway along four axes: the geography of natural resource struggles; the politics of representation; the relationship between political parties and social movements; and the design of the constituent assemblies. In some crucial respects, Evo and the Movement towards Socialism (MAS) face more difficult set of historical circumstances than Correa and his government in their bids to achieve progressive reform. Given the “top down” character of the political transition underway in Ecuador, however, the prospects for radical transformation under Correa remain limited.

Natural Resource Geographies: Who “Owns” the Oil?

Bolivia and Ecuador are both economies deeply dependent on primary resource extraction that are characterized by strong regional divides. While typically thought of as “Andean,” they are both in fact very geographically diverse. About half of Bolivia's territory, for example, lies in Amazon to the north and in the lowlands of the east, while a little less than half of Ecuador's territory lies in the Amazon and on the coast. In both countries, the capital cities are located in the Andes due to historical rea-

sons. Over the past decades, though, economic power has slowly shifted elsewhere. Despite these similarities, social conflicts over the exploitation of oil and gas, which lie at the heart of contemporary political struggles, have fuelled greater regional tensions in Bolivia than in Ecuador due to the countries' distinct physical, economic and political geographies.

Bolivia became a nation in 1825 when silver and tin mines, located in the mountainous regions of the west, provided the state with the bulk of its foreign exchange. La Paz, which also lies in the far western part of the country, was chosen as the seat of government given its location as a key stop on the trading routes. With the slow collapse of the mining economy since the mid-twentieth century, however, economic power has slowly shifted east. Today, the area known as the “*media luna*” for its half moon shape is home to the most powerful elements of Bolivia's capitalist class – agro-exporters and gas magnates. Relatively untouched by the agrarian reform that followed the national-popular revolution of 1952, land in this region remains highly concentrated in a few hands. To this day, labour relations in parts of the countryside are “semi-feudal.”

Perhaps most importantly, oil and gas deposits, first discovered in mid-century but developed more intensely in the 1990s, lie exclusively in the eastern and southern regions of the country (80% of the natural gas extracted in Bolivia lies in the south-eastern province of Tarija). Today, oil is of minor importance but Bolivia is home to the second-largest proven natural gas deposits in South America (after Venezuela). Importantly, the major growing market for natural gas lies outside Bolivia to the south and east. Most of the natural gas that is extracted in Bolivia is exported south and east to neighbouring Brazil, Argentina, and Chile, which depend on this resource to feed their industries. Gas magnates and governors of the eastern provinces therefore have little need to negotiate with politicians in the west regarding the development and export of gas. The notion that the gas “belongs” to the peoples of the eastern region – and not the Andean social movements concentrated in the west who have led the struggles to return the resource to public hands – lends political weight to elite threats to separate.

In Ecuador, the political division in the country also runs along geographic lines between the coast and the sierra. In the colonial division of labor, the sierra city of Quito served as the primary manufacturer of textile goods that made their way down to the mining centers of Peru and Bolivia. Given its weight in the economy, Quito was therefore chosen as the seat of government when the nation gained its independence from Spain in 1822. →

With the cocoa and banana booms of the 19th and 20th centuries, however, the coastal city of Guayaquil (which lies south of Quito) has gained economic importance, eventually overtaking its rival in terms of contribution to GDP. Today, Guayaquil is the country's largest port, the commercial centre and home to agro-export businesses. The Guayaquileño elite considers itself to be the real centre of power in the country.

In contrast to Bolivia, oil in Ecuador has contributed towards nation-building largely due to the country's geography and the timing of its discovery. The deposits lie in the Amazonian frontier, to the east of both the coast and the sierra. The first "oil boom" in Ecuador occurred in the 1970s during a period of progressive military rule when the oil company, PetroEcuador, was owned by the state. While there are multinationals operating in exploration and exploitation, PetroEcuador was never privatized like its Bolivian equivalent. Importantly, Ecuador has access to the sea, which has made it a major supplier of oil to global markets. Ecuador currently ranks as the 9th exporter of crude oil to the USA.

The majority of the oil that is exported abroad is shipped from the Amazon via an oil duct that passes north of Quito to the northern port of Esmeraldas. The Amazonian indigenous populations who are affected by oil exploration and production are well-organized, but relatively small compared to the indigenous groups in the Andes. Ecuador is a typical oil state in which the benefits of oil exploitation in the past decades have accrued mostly to a small elite. Given the country's geography, however, it is difficult for any one regional elite to make particularistic claims over the natural resource, as in Bolivia.

Kollas, Cambas & Mestizos: Racism and the Politics of Representation

These distinct economic geographies have also played out in the racial politics in both countries. Both Bolivia and Ecuador are deeply divided, racist societies. In Ecuador, for example, one of my university colleagues was forbidden as a child from spending time with his Kichwa-speaking grandmother because his parents feared that he would pick up a "lilt" that might impair his ability of class ascension. In Bolivia, indigenous people were forbidden from stepping in the central plaza of La Paz until the 1952 Revolution. Centuries of racism and exclusion suffered by indigenous peoples have been resisted by powerful social movements in both countries, which have experienced an up-

surge in recent decades. The elections of Correa and Evo are important symbolically since both presidents are from humble origins and speak at least one indigenous language. Only Evo, however, claims indigenous identity.

As is well-known, Evo Morales' election is of world-historic importance. He is the first bona fide indigenous president in Latin America with deep roots in the indigenous movement. Evo grew up in destitute poverty, born to an Aymara family in the Andean highlands of Bolivia. With a low level of formal education, Evo cut his political teeth as a union leader in the Chapare, a semi-tropical area in the central valley where many displaced miners (re-settled following structural adjustment in the 1980s) grow coca. Persecuted by the US's "War against Drugs," the coccaleros developed strong unions built upon a mix of traditions from trade union and indigenous organizations to resist U.S. imperialism.



"The opposition's claims for 'autonomy' and 'democracy' are actually thinly-veiled claims for separation by wealthier, whiter Bolivians"

Evo's political party, the Movement towards Socialism (MAS), emerged in the late 1990s when the coccaleros decided that they needed a "political instrument" in order to defend their right to livelihood against the US-sponsored eradication program. As journalist and investigator Pablo Stefanoni has highlighted, given the indigenous-campesino-trade union mix, the ideological orientation of the MAS tends to be more "national-populist" than "indigenous" per se, but as the party has expanded its social base, it has adapted powerful indigenous symbols such as the coca leaf and the multi-coloured wiphala flag in order to broaden its appeal to the majority indigenous population.

Despite the MAS's "national-populist" origins, the *media luna* has spun a lot of political traction on the idea that Evo is an *indigenista* (a supporter of indigenous concepts of development and community). The opposition's claims for "autonomy" and "democracy" are actually thinly-veiled claims for separation by wealthier, whiter Bolivians in the eastern part of the country, which has a higher concentration of European migrants than the Andean highlands to the west. Given the strong west-east migration in the past few decades, these lighter-skinned elites tend to base their claims for separation on territorial (rather than ethnic) markers that separate the "Cambas" (the eastern lowlanders) from the "Kollas" (the highlanders).

Nonetheless, these eastern elites concerned about the legitimacy of Morales' authority occasionally slip up and express

themselves in overtly racist statements. In a recent speech the mayor of Santa Cruz, for example, declared that: “Soon you’ll have to wear feathers if you want to get any respect in this country.” Such racist sentiments are backed with brute force. Since the late 1990s, the elites have been arming thousands of young people in the Union Juvenil Cruceña (UJC), a fascist gang which focuses its attacks on indigenous people during protests. The presence of the UJC, amongst other organizations, has created a tense political climate since the MAS’s electoral victory, particularly in the department of Santa Cruz.

By contrast to the polarizing effect that Evo’s election has had in Bolivia, Correa is considered to be a centralizing force in Ecuadorian politics. For the paler-skinned Ecuadorian elite, Correa is a much more palatable character. Like Evo, he refuses to wear a tie, but otherwise he looks and talks like them. A mestizo (mixed race, neither Indian nor Spanish) from a middle-class family, Correa was born in Guayaquil but is also popular in rival Quito because of his centre-left political orientation. A devout Catholic, he spent one year on a mission in a rural community in Zumbagua, one of the poorest indigenous areas in the central Andean province of Cotopaxi. During this year, he learned about the peasant struggle for land and about the plight of the country’s poor indigenous people. Most importantly, he also learned Kichwa, at feat to which few middle-class Ecuadorians can lay claim. Correa, unlike Evo, who is regularly subject to racist assaults in the press for his low level of formal education, is also widely considered to be “smart.” He studied abroad on full scholarship in Belgium and the United States, completed a PhD in Economics from the University of Illinois in 2001 and returned to Quito to take up a position as lecturer in economics at a prestigious university. Most importantly, Correa is considered to be a political outsider, which has given him wide room to maneuver in contemporary Ecuadorian politics.

Outsiders/Insiders: Social Movements and Political Parties

The crucial difference between these two governments is their relationships with social movements. Correa is an outsider in more respects than one: unlike Evo he has no formal ties with social movements and does not seem to be interested in forming them. The electoral platform created by Correa for the 2006 Presidential elections, Alianza Pais (AP), is not a formal political party but an electoral alliance composed of old parties of the Left, former members of Pachakutik (the political arm of the CONAIE, the country’s most important national indigenous federation) and a diverse assortment of middle-class intellectuals. As sociologists Franklin Ramírez and Analía Minteguiaga argue, this outsider status is part of the AP’s recipe for success. In April 2005, a social mobilization known as “*el forajido*” (the outsiders) brought down the government of Lucio Gutiérrez with the chant, “*Qué se vayan todos*” (Out with all politicians!). Since AP had never before participated in elections, its candidates could present themselves as political outsiders, or a new citizens’ movement far removed from the traditional party structure. AP did not put forward any congressional candidates, instead promising to call new elections for a Constitu-

ents’ Assembly that would be responsible for writing a new constitution. This strategy enabled AP to capitalize on the rampant anti-party sentiment amongst voters and demonstrated its willingness to follow through on its campaign promises.

The electoral results from the first round suggest that AP garnered widespread support from the indigenous and social movements which brought down the government of Lucio Gutiérrez in April 2005. Luís Macas, the candidate of the CONAIE (Ecuador’s largest national indigenous organization) came in with a mere 2.5% of the popular vote, compared to Correa’s 22.3%, which means that many of the nation’s indigenous population – estimated to be around 15% – voted for Correa. Leftist efforts to support Correa stepped-up in the second round, however, to prevent the election of Álvaro Noboa, a multimillionaire banana-magnate who won the first round with 26.7%. The rallying of the troops worked: after the second round, Correa became president of Ecuador with a decisive 57% of the votes.

The most frequent criticism of the AP’s “citizen’s revolution” from more radical elements of the Ecuadorian left is that it is based upon a liberal, individualistic politics that de-emphasizes the role of social movements. Decision-making within the AP is highly centralized and, according to some insiders, even authoritarian. After Correa was elected, he announced that he was investing more powers in the police and the military to repress popular protests. In April 2007 he followed through with that promise, sending in the troops to violently put down a protest against the mining activities of Toronto-based Iamgold. Due to these and other problems, CONAIE denounced Correa in a public statement on May 12 for failing to meet two of its main demands: to recognize Ecuador as a plurinational state in the new constitution and the requirement that communities must offer prior consent before large-scale mining and other major extractive projects take place.

Evo, on the other hand, maintains strong links with his social movement base, famously pronouncing that he aims to “command obeying the people.” Shortly after his inauguration as president, Evo was re-elected as the President of the six Federations of Coca Producers of the Chapare, a post that he has held since 1996. Given the MAS’s roots as the “political instrument” of the coca-growers, it is accurately described as a social-movement party. Due to these strong links with indigenous-peasant organizations, the MAS government has also made agrarian reform one of its policy platforms, a policy that has never been mentioned by Correa.

To observe that the MAS has strong links to social movements is not to argue that the latter embraces social movements wholeheartedly. Indeed, the government’s support for extra-parliamentary forms of popular power has tended to oscillate, depending on whether or not social movements’ actions conform to the government’s legislative agenda. In January 2007, for example, when violent clashes broke out in Cochabamba between MAS supporters and the pro-autonomy prefect in Cochabamba, the government lambasted social movement activists (including MAS Senator and peasant leader, Omar Fernández), insisting that the prefect be respected as a legitimately-elected political leader. →

Later, when the “autonomists” went on the offensive, the government embraced social mobilization calling on its supporters to hit the streets to provide the political strength necessary to pass the draft of the new Constitution through Congress. This political flip-flopping has created confusion amongst the supporters of the MAS, leading to demobilization in many sectors. Meanwhile, the oligarchy has been able to seize the initiative and even win a base of support amongst the masses, exacerbating the regional polarization, an issue that has played out most forcefully in the arena of the Constituent Assembly.

Constituent Assemblies: Re-founding the Nation

Social movements in both Bolivia and Ecuador have repeatedly called for new constitutions in order to remake the countries’ political landscapes. Evo and Correa were elected on promises to call Constituent Assemblies (CA), charged with the task of drafting new constitutions. In Bolivia the political process has been high-jacked by the opposition, while in Ecuador the CA has been designed in such a way to centralize the government’s control over the process.



Four months after taking office, Correa held a referendum asking citizens whether they wanted to re-found the nation with a CA. On April 15, 2007, over 80% of voters said “yes.” Upon winning the referendum, Correa submitted his resignation to Congress and dissolved parliament, calling new elections for a CA. In the elections held on September 30, the AP won 60% of the seats. The CA performs the legislative functions of government, which has facilitated the passing of progressive legislation. Deliberations began in January, 2008 in the coastal city of Montecristi. The 130 candidates are divided into 10 different “mesas” which are charged with the responsibility of holding public consultations and drafting articles, which are to be passed by majority vote. The CA is to sit for a maximum of 180 days with the possibility of a 60-day extension. Public debate has been about the substance of the new constitution instead of the process.

The MAS, on the other hand, has made compromises from the very beginning, which has made the CA a very messy and conflictual process. One of the key roadblocks on the road to reform is that the MAS controls the congress, but not the senate. This political weakness forced the MAS to make three debilitating compromises in the initial design of the CA. First, the party agreed to a rule that proposed changes to the constitution would require two-thirds of the assembly’s approval. Second, it required that candidates either be from a recognized political party or gather 15,000 signatures each – complete with fingerprints and identification card numbers – in just a few weeks, which barred participation of more radical social movement leaders not affiliated to political parties. Third, the election rules were designed in such a way that no one party could win two-thirds of the seats. The MAS won 53% of the seats in the CA elections of July 2, 2006 – the maximum possible for any one party, but short of the two-thirds needed to make decisive changes. Disagreements over procedural rules have dominated public debate rather than substance of the document.

The process of writing the new Magna Carta was quickly bogged down by quibbles over procedure. Initially, the right-wing in the *media luna*, who were resolutely opposed to the CA from the very beginning, rallied to preserve the two-thirds rule, which morphed into claims that the administrative capitol should be moved to Sucre and, as the movement gained strength, into the contemporary call for “autonomy.” A draft of the new constitution was finally approved in November 2007 by pro-government legislators in the absence of opposition politicians who were boycotting the proceedings. At the end of February 2008, Evo announced his intention of putting the document to popular vote on May 4th. The *media luna* high jacked the plan, responding with their own plans to host its own referendum on “autonomy.” Under pressure from the courts, the government postponed the vote, but the right wing in the department of Santa Cruz followed through.

The claims of the organizer that the referendum in Santa Cruz was a “popular plebiscite” representing the will of the people is highly questionable, given the context of violence, accusations of fraud and imperialist manipulation in which voting has taken place. Over the past decade, USAID and National Endowment for democracy have funneled an estimated \$120 million to the Boliv-

ian separatist movement. The right wing has waged a campaign of terror to block various MAS initiatives. In the past few years, the lives of Cuban doctors brought in by the MAS to work in poor barrios have been threatened. The office of CEJIS, an NGO engaged in research on the indigenous movement, was vandalized and documents related to land titles burned. Landowners in the region frequently resort to violence to maintain their labor force in conditions of “semi-slavery.” Indeed, Santa Cruz landowners are probably the largest armed group in Bolivia outside of the military.

On the day of voting, 35 people were injured in clashes between MAS supporters and the UJC and other factions. Eyewitnesses have reported that some stations were equipped with ballot boxes already stuffed with “yes” votes. Nonetheless, the results delivered a serious blow to the MAS government. While about 39% responded to the MAS’s call to boycott the vote (compared to the regular abstention rate of 20 to 25% for national elections), 82 % of the voters who turned out that day cast ballots in favour of “autonomy.”

Conclusion

The distinct physical and political geographies of the social struggles over hydrocarbons resources goes a long way to explain why divisive regional tensions have flared up in Bolivia but are unlikely to do so to the same extent in Ecuador. Although they have a common history of regional rivalry, regional tensions cannot fully explain the different dynamics of the political transitions in Ecuador and Bolivia, for the MAS has made some crucial strategic mistakes.

While promising to “rebuild the nation” and “decolonize the state,” the MAS has found itself tied to the institutions of the past. The MAS has also tended to distrust the self-organization of the most radical wings of the peasantry and working class, calling for extra-parliamentary forms of popular mobilization only when convenient for its reformist program. The MAS’s blunders have given the right ample time to re-organize itself. And so far, the latter has managed to keep two steps ahead of the government. While the political agenda in the first half of the decade was set by left-wing social movements, it is now clearly being set by the right. Meanwhile, the country’s constitutional future hangs in balance.

Correa appears to have learned at least one valuable lesson from his Andean neighbor: When formal political institutions are rotten to the core, it is better to raze them to the ground than to try and renovate them in an ad hoc fashion. Compared to the MAS in Bolivia, the AP government has therefore acted in a more strategic, although highly ‘top-down,’ fashion. While it may be tempting to jump to the conclusion that Correa’s self-styled “citizens’ revolution” will be more successful, any spaces opened by the new constitution are unlikely to foment true structural change unless they build upon the energy of organized forms of popular participation, that is, of social movements. **R**

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