

## Introduction

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### *Indigenous Political Mobilization*

The cholo, a fusion of cultures, is inevitably replacing the Ecuadorian Indian. . . . When the cholo replaces the Indian as the typical member of Ecuador's lower class, then—but not before—will the ruling class be under compulsion to institute reforms. Rebellion cannot be launched by the Indian; it can and probably will be carried forward by the cholo, the Ecuadorian of the future.

—George I. Blanksten

NORTH AMERICAN POLITICAL scientist George I. Blanksten reached these conclusions at the end of his 1951 study of Ecuador's government and politics (1964, 177). This was a time when the country's political and social elites viewed Ecuador's indigenous population as a drag on development and modernization. Indians' "disappearance" via miscegenation and by becoming *cholos* (a term used to describe Indians who rid themselves of their indigenous identities by moving to the cities, shedding their indigenous garb, and embracing mestizo culture) was seen as a key solution to the bottleneck indigenous peoples represented against the country's progress toward becoming modern.<sup>1</sup>

As Blanksten also claimed, Ecuador's Indians—viewed as hopelessly traditional, submissive, fatalistic, and oppressed—would not be the motor force for political change. They would not rebel and would therefore be incapable of acting effectively in their own interest or in the interest of reforming the state and society. That Ecuador's—and other Andean

countries<sup>1</sup>—indigenous peoples have suffered oppression for some five hundred years, first at the hands of the Spanish and continuing throughout the republican era, is indisputable. Blanksten’s claim that indigenous peoples would not revolt tells us two things. First, social prognosticators are often proved wrong, and Blanksten should not be faulted for failing to envision the organizational growth and power of Ecuador’s indigenous confederations that was to take place within three decades of his writing. Second, that Blanksten appears ignorant of the numerous Indian rebellions in both the colonial and republican epochs is a testament to the lack of attention paid to indigenous peoples by most historians.<sup>2</sup> In this light, it becomes less surprising that the 1990 *levantamiento*,<sup>3</sup> a nationwide uprising by many thousands of Indians that was organized by local, regional and national indigenous organizations, was an unexpected occurrence to Ecuador’s whites and mestizos, who were shocked to see indigenous peoples being “uppity.”

The 1990 *levantamiento* also clearly demonstrated that, despite the efforts of Ecuador’s white and mestizo leaders to encourage the disappearance of *el indio*, many of the country’s indigenous peoples were proudly and boldly asserting their claims to their indigenous identities, cultural practices, and community rights to land and territory.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, Ecuador’s Indian population was demanding a central role in the country’s politics, a role that would enfranchise them to participate in decision making about how they live and how they are governed. In short, the *levantamiento* gave notice that Ecuador’s Indians were not simply rebelling; they were insisting that the country live up to its claim that it was a democracy that was truly attentive to their interests and needs.

Ecuador is not the only country in Latin America where indigenous peoples have been mobilizing and making similar claims and demands. Scholars from a number of disciplines have for some time addressed the emergence of indigenous activism in Latin America.<sup>5</sup> Contemporary indigenous activism and movements (re)emerged in the 1980s with the so-called third wave of democratization. Across the region indigenous peoples marched, demonstrated, protested, participated in international discussion forums, blocked major roads, occupied government buildings, took up arms, and, in Ecuador, played key roles in deposing two presidents. Latin American Indians also created indigenous movements to represent their interests and demands, both to civil society and, importantly, to the state. As Deborah Yashar (2005, 21) points out, significant indigenous movements emerged in

Ecuador, Bolivia, Guatemala, and Mexico. By contrast, indigenous mobilizing in Peru has been weak and quite localized (Yashar 2005, 21–22; Albó 2004). However, indigenous organizing in these and other countries has not met with equal success (see chapter 2).

What factors gave rise to this dramatic growth in indigenous mobilization? One observer, whose analysis is limited to the central Andean region, suggests that there were both internal and external conditions, though what role each played varied between countries (Albó 2004, 28–36). Among local conditions, Albó cites land colonization and oil exploration in the Amazonian region that spurred lowland indigenous organizing to defend their traditional territories; the failure of Western models of development and the subsequent return to and reinventing of an indigenous past; increasing indigenous migration to urban areas and the opportunities there for education and the development of a new leadership cadre of Indians; the organizational assistance of a number of nonindigenous allies, such as numerous nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the Catholic Church, and sympathetic intellectuals, often in universities. The major external factors, according to Albó, included the generous financial support of a number of international NGOs (INGOs); the collapse of communism and the consequent decline of class-based organizing, on occasion leading leftist parties to form alliances with indigenous groups; the imposition of neoliberal economic models that both harmed indigenous peoples and opened up avenues for indigenous alliances with new allies; democratization—sporadic and uneven—in the late twentieth century coupled with the increasing emphasis on human rights and concern for the environment. Democratization and an international concern for human rights provided political space for indigenous mobilization. Many indigenous peoples also occupied what were environmentally fragile areas, thereby neatly combining ecological considerations with indigenous rights.

Another observer, political scientist Deborah Yashar (1999), suggests that increasing politicization of Indians in Latin America is partly a result of unintended consequences of state policies implemented unevenly within state territories. By the middle of the twentieth century most Latin American states practiced some version of corporatism that, in regard to the region's indigenous peoples, tried to reconstitute Indians as peasants, bereft of any ethnic identity. But due to the limited reach of state authority and power, large areas of a country operated beyond the state's reach. Thus, in the case of

indigenous communities, the state unwittingly provided autonomous spaces that protected rural Indians from state control, nowhere more evident than in the Amazonian regions of Andean countries. By the last couple of decades of the twentieth century, states—also unevenly and sporadically—attempted to replace corporatist with neoliberal regimes, the latter emphasizing individual civil and political rights at the expense of group or community rights. But this challenged the (unintended) autonomy that indigenous communities had come to expect. And “because indigenous communities have rarely experienced the full complement of civil and political rights associated with liberal democracy, they have little reason to believe that neoliberal (versus corporatist) citizenship regimes will necessarily fulfill their promises now” (Yashar 1999, 91). The (again, unintended) result of the efforts to impose a neoliberal regime by a weak state was further politicization of the regions’ Indian communities, which mobilized in opposition to state policies and demanded recognition of indigenous community rights.

While these efforts to explain generally contemporary indigenous mobilization in Latin America provide us with useful guidelines for comparative research, we believe there is still a need for in-depth case studies of these processes within a single country. Our hope is that such a case study—particularly a longitudinal study that permits us to examine the birth, development, and, in the present case, decline of a specific indigenous movement—will provide scholars and activists alike an example of where general efforts of explanation are fruitful and instances where they may fall short in fully comprehending events and outcomes. Therefore, this book is about the ways in which Ecuador’s indigenous peoples have worked to assemble themselves into what has become, according to Yashar, “the most prominent and consequential indigenous movement in Latin America” (Yashar 2005, 23). It is also about both the promises and pitfalls attending such ambitious projects that are launched by peoples who have long been objects rather than subjects in their country’s political process. This book is primarily concerned, therefore, with evaluating the successes and failures experienced by Ecuador’s Indians in their quest for reclaiming their identities and their lands and in their efforts to enter the mainstream of Ecuador’s political life in their avowed mission to transform the state into a participative democracy that addresses the needs of the country’s long-ignored and impoverished majority, both indigenous and nonindigenous.

Thus, the specific focus of this book is the Pachakutik Plurinational Unity Movement–New Country (MUPP-NP),<sup>6</sup> a political movement usually referred

to as Pachakutik, which was born in 1995 at the height of organizational solidarity of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE). This movement, or party, represented a sharp turn in the course of the larger indigenous movement, certainly a new path, leading into the competitive, confusing, and sometimes chaotic world of Ecuadorian electoral politics. While Pachakutik emanated from CONAIE, in conjunction with some nonindigenous social movements, the political movement has had a complex and at times conflictive relationship with its parent, and that is part of the story of the rise and decline of the power of the Ecuadorian indigenous movement.

Chapter 1 explores the origins of Ecuador's indigenous activism and organizing, followed by a discussion of the establishment of local, regional, and, ultimately, national-level indigenous associations both before and after Ecuador's return to democratic rule in 1979. This exploration includes consideration of Ecuador's efforts at nation building, particularly regarding the state's aims for a nation based on a vision of a homogeneous mestizo people and culture.

Chapter 2 comparatively examines the evolution and maturation of modern Latin American indigenous movements, primarily in the 1980s and 1990s. We apply concepts derived from social-movement theories with the aim of assessing their utility in helping us understand the emergence and growth of these movements. Specific attention is paid to an analysis of Ecuador's political and economic conditions and to the build-up of moral capital by indigenous leadership via the adoption of civil disobedience tactics through the first half of the 1990s. The chapter then focuses on the context within which the leaders of the movement opted to create an alternative strategy to civil disobedience: direct electoral participation.

Chapter 3 tells the story of the creation, in 1995, of the Pachakutik political movement by examining the various fortuitous events, strategic alliances, the use of organizational networks, and the expenditure of moral capital that surrounded the birth of this political arm of the country's largest national indigenous confederation.

Chapter 4 initiates the analysis of the most central concern of the book: the chronicle of Pachakutik's first taste of the political fruit of knowledge, followed by the frequently painful path that eventually led to its fall from grace. The chapter describes the early success and subsequent trials and tribulations experienced by the movement from its electoral debut, in 1996, through the end of the decade.

Chapter 5 continues the analysis begun in the previous chapter, concentrating on what may have been both the zenith and the nadir of the power of the indigenous movement: the abortive indigenous-military “coup” of January 21, 2000, which overthrew the presidency of Jamil Mahuad. The chapter addresses the short-term gains resulting from this action and, more important, the long-term costs, particularly the deepening of internal conflicts within the movement and the growing disconnect between the leadership and the rank-and-file voters.

Chapter 6 addresses two moments of truth for the indigenous movement’s electoral strategy: the ill-fated alliance with ex-colonel Lucio Gutiérrez for the 2002 presidential elections and the indigenous leadership’s equally ill fated decision to nominate an Indian for the presidency in 2006. Both moments—and the astounding electoral and political success of Ecuador’s current president, Rafael Correa—led to the current status of the movement, arguably its most debilitated state since Pachakutik’s inception in 1995.

The final chapter attempts an answer to the question, Whither Ecuador’s indigenous movement? Included here is a critical analysis of the movement’s crucial decision to form Pachakutik to become an actor inside the state’s political institutions. This analysis concludes that the electoral strategy and all the political intrigues that ensued have failed to attain the morally lofty goals expressed in Pachakutik’s founding documents. Rather than transform what is widely seen as a corrupt and bogus democracy into one that truly acts to meet the needs of the country’s citizens, the political election game has failed to advance not only the cause of Ecuador’s poor majority but of the movement’s own indigenous base. Finally, the chapter explores more generally the lessons that might be learned about social movements that develop electoral strategies.