

# Ecology versus Capitalism: Dilemmas of the Citizen Revolution in Ecuador

The greatest danger for our country project is leftism and infantile environmentalism. I fear that I was not mistaken, although perhaps I forgot to add infantile indigenism.

*Rafael Correa at the National Constituent Assembly, 2008*

There is no other possible conclusion: this is a citizen revolution without citizenship.

*Ospina Peralta, 2013*

## 1 Introduction

Rafael Correa's election to the presidency of Ecuador a few months after the 2006 victory of Evo Morales in Bolivia signaled the peak of the progressive wave which eventually elected Fernando Lugo in Paraguay in 2008. In these Andean countries, the electoral triumphs seemed to crown years of popular insubordination which overthrew several presidents, paving the way for constitutional processes that promised new forms of government. Ten years later, Morales and Correa remained in the presidency, but were leading power projects far removed from the expectations of change with which they were originally identified. In Ecuador, the Venezuelan challenge of overcoming oil dependence and the Bolivian need for integration of the indigenous population converge as a synthesis of the dilemmas of progressivism. On the one hand, the constraints to overcoming dependence faced by a meager primary export economy based on oil exploration are exacerbated by the absence of a national currency since dollarization in 2000. On the other hand, the degrading social and environmental legacy of the ephemeral petroleum wealth of 1970s is at the root of a keen sensibility in the present for the renewed exploitation of natural resources, where indigenous and peasant resistance joins the environmentalist argument in pressing for an alternative pattern of development. As in Bolivia, these ideals converged, albeit diffusely, on the notion of '*Sumak Kawsay*' or 'Living Well' consecrated in the 2008 Constitution. The conflicts between the affirmation of this principle and the simultaneous deepening of primary

exports are at the root of the contradictions lived by the self-proclaimed 'Citizen Revolution' that in 2017 appeared to have gained an electoral afterlife.

## 2 Ecuadorian Formation

The advertisements showing Ecuador as a tourist destination highlight the impressive diversity of landscapes concentrated in a small country. A territory smaller than Poland, it is crossed by the Andes Mountains – punctuating the landscape with snowy peaks and volcanoes – which separate the Amazon in the east from the Pacific coast, where the ecological sanctuary of Galapagos, a tourist attraction of world appeal, is located. If its geography displays a diversity of landscapes in a small space, the impasses of the recent political situation merit a political analogy, where the aim of reconciling sovereignty, economic development and ecology points toward an alternative civilizing pattern, exhibiting, in a concentrated fashion, the dilemmas underlying continental politics in the twenty-first century.

Viewed in historical perspective, this rugged geography has impeded the national integration of the country which, since independence, has faced internal and external obstacles to consolidation. At the international level, Ecuadorian borders suffered recurrent harassment from its larger neighbors, Peru and Colombia, which materialized in several armed confrontations, mainly with the former, resulting in significant territorial loss. At the domestic level, the insertion of the country into the world market as a primary exporter, especially cocoa from the mid-nineteenth century, has sharpened regional disparities. The opposition between the interests of a commercial and financial bourgeoisie based on the export dynamism of the Guayaquil-centered coast, and a mountain oligarchy focused on land ownership and exploitation of indigenous labor based in Quito, was expressed in conflicts of regionalist hue that sometimes gave an ideological tone to mere disputes of power.

Vulnerability to international market flows and corresponding political instability characterized Ecuadorian history in the twentieth century. The fall in international cocoa prices in the face of African competition, combined with plagues that affected local production and the effects of the 1929 crisis, plunged the country into a period of economic stagnation and political alternation: between the 'Julian revolution' in 1925 and the presidency of Galo Plaza in 1952 there were 26 variations of leaders and regimes. The rise of banana exports from the 1950s uprooted the country from economic lethargy within primary export milestones, favoring political appeasement. However, the unprecedented succession of three constitutional presidents was broken with the overthrow