CHAPTER FIVE

LA COORDINADORA NACIONAL INDÍGENA Y CAMPESINA
AND THE INDIGENOUS STRUGGLE FOR LAND

This chapter presents the second case study by analysing the historical development of La Coordinadora Nacional Indígena y Campesina (CONIC), an indigenous campesino organisation that formed with the intention of working on the issues of land and cultural identity. Central to this chapter is an examination of the factors that shaped the evolution of CONIC’s politics, detailing how the organisation's objectives, political strategies, identity, structure and wider relationships evolved since its formation in 1992. The analysis reflects the framework adopted in other chapters, describing the effects upon the organisation of the wider socio-political context and documenting the configuration of rights that the organisation articulated. Of particular importance to this case study is the treatment of the class/ethnicity dichotomy.

CONIC emerged later on in the cycle of protest, five years after CERJ, in July 1992. The organisation had four main objectives, these being the return of campesinos' land; the promotion of labour rights; the defence of human rights; and the recovery of Mayan culture. The promotion of human rights was a primary element within CONIC's work from its formation. This was evident in the group's condemnation of human rights violations, with particular reference to abuses carried out by the civil patrols. CONIC is not and has not, however, been definable as a human rights organisation and was not one of the early riser movements in Guatemala. Its policies were not directed exclusively toward the indigenous population, although CONIC defined itself as representative of indigenous people and, over time, issued statements oriented toward los derechos indígenas. From its formation CONIC adopted a multidimensional framework of rights, including

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1 This being principally land that had been taken from campesino communities (to which families had title) by the government during the liberal period after 1871; land taken from campesinos from the start of the twentieth century by finca owners (finqueros) and the military; and land that had been appropriated from campesino communities during the period of the internal armed conflict, predominantly by the military and by finqueros.
basic human rights, collective and specific indigenous rights, legal and historic rights. Significantly, CONIC stated that economic rights were key to its understanding of peasants’ human rights, a proposition that built upon articles thirty-nine and forty-one of the Guatemalan Constitution (1985) that guaranteed private property as a human right and recognised the protection of the right to property. According to one member of CONIC:

For us as peasant farmers, socio-economic rights are integral to our human rights, as consecrated in the Guatemalan Political Constitution. If we cannot eat or work the land, then how can we live? So if our socio-economic rights are not protected, are violated, then we believe that as indigenous and ladino peasants our human rights are not in tact, are not fully exercised or respected.2

The main point of differentiation between CONIC and other indigenous organisations was that it defined itself as an indigenous and campesino organisation. This meant that historically CONIC represented the campesino sector, which includes both indigenous and ladinos involved in agriculture as smallholders, landless peasants or as labourers in the plantation farms in the north and north-western highlands or on the south coast. However, the indigenous population has, historically, been the most profoundly affected by land expropriations and landlessness. Furthermore, due to the group’s primary focus upon “the struggle to recuperate la Madre Tierra (mother earth)”, a predicament that has not been confined to any one ethnic group but rather has concerned all campesinos, the leadership and membership of CONIC included ladinos and indígenas, since its formation. In 1998, for example, Miguel Chitic Perez, a member of staff in the national office of CONIC, claimed that 70% of the local members of CONIC were indigenous and 30% ladino, whilst at the level of national leadership, the figures were 90% and 10% respectively.3 CONIC’s policies have been focused upon work-related issues (land, salaries and labour rights) around which both ethnic groups mobilised.

CONIC developed its own form of indigenous politics, while attempting to represent politically and legally the ladino population, defining the organisation’s ladino members as “poor ladinos”. It appears that the qualifier poor acted to distinguish CONIC members from other ladinos elsewhere. Moreover, members of CONIC, when interviewed about the

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2 Interview, Rigoberto Monteros, Guatemala City, 29/10/98.
3 Interview, Guatemala City, 6/10/98.