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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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24.08.2022

Ecuador: a new failed state?

Every time a social movement acquires a remarkable level of strength, herds of narcos appear, armed and willing to eviscerate the social fabric. The modalities change, but we already saw this film in Colombia, Mexico and Guatemala. Now we see a similar scenario unfolding in Wall Mapu, territory of the Mapuche people in southern Chile. Is it a coincidence?



As happened in the 1990s, the Ecuadorian population took to the streets in recent years with two formidable mobilizations: that of October 2019 against the economic adjustment perpetrated by [the unrepresentable Lenin Moreno](#), and in June 2022 against the neoliberal policy and the misgovernment of the [questioned banker Guillermo Lasso](#).



Mobilization in Ecuador 2019. Photo: CONFENIA



Ecuador at the crossroads. Repression, June 2022

However, the two periods are not comparable. Three decades ago there was a much more integrated society that was just beginning to glimpse the neoliberal model that was installed with force towards 2000, when a major political crisis led the elites to replace the sucre with the dollar, giving a blow to the popular economies but cutting hyperinflation in the bud.

In 1990, the indigenous movement appeared for the first time as a collective actor, which was capable of moving the political agenda and installing itself as an essential interlocutor for governments, political parties and civil society organizations. They were years of

optimism and hope, since the renewal of the political-social subjects removed the old ways of doing politics.

In a short time, there began to be talk of indigenous communities, of the various nationalities and peoples that exist in the country, coining the concept of plurinationality to define both a diverse reality and the political objectives of the movements. A good part of the demands of the peoples were incorporated into the constitutions of 1998, first, and 2008 later.

In three decades, things have changed radically. Walking the streets of downtown Quito means coming across signs written by merchants warning thieves that "*we will kill them with our hands.*" A reckless warning that reflects the feeling of a good part of the population before the increase in urban violence, which leads the people of Quito to lock themselves in their homes when night falls.



The Ecuadorian indigenous sector that mostly supported the banker Guillermo Lasso electorally to defeat the progressive candidacy represented by Andrés Arauz, now shows itself against him in the face of the neoliberal policies that he has been implementing since the delegitimized government he presides.

Violence has spilled over in the last two years, to unbearable levels, through the growth of homicides, robberies and drug trafficking actions. This led President Guillermo Lasso to decree a state of emergency on several occasions for "serious internal commotion" in the country's most populous provinces. However, the growing homicide rate is half the peak recorded in 2008. What has changed is the attitude of the authorities.

The deaths in prisons, which total nearly 400 detainees since 2021, are due to overcrowding and a lack of state control: *"These violent events are an alarming reminder of the authorities' inability to effectively control prisons and protect the lives and safety of Ecuadorians,"* [said HRW's acting Americas director](#). Tamara Taraciuk Broner.

Successive Ecuadorian governments, since the progressive decade of Rafael Correa (2007-2017), have endeavored to strengthen the repressive apparatus of the State that was deployed with brutality and forcefulness in the street battles of 2019 and 2022, causing eleven and seven deaths, respectively, thousands of wounded and detained.

But this armed apparatus is not used to control the drug gangs that roam freely in prisons and city streets, particularly in Guayaquil where 70% of the violent events occur. It sounds curious to see how state apparatuses are strengthened but abdicate the monopoly of violence, which is one of the keys to a legitimate state.

The current Ecuadorian disaster – including the possibility that it is really a failed state – is the responsibility of international organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF, of the Governments of the United States and of local elites, which have promoted policies that destroyed the social fabric and the capacity of institutions to articulate.



Illustration: Pavel Égüez.

The picture is dramatic: an increasingly powerful indigenous and popular movement facing a militarized state, increasingly racist and violent middle and upper classes that only think about individual salvation. The country project no longer exists, it was devoured by the ambitions of above and the fear of the popular sectors. The worst thing is that it is a trend that crosses the entire region.

The clash of social and political trains seems inevitable in a region that, remember, boasts the highest rates of inequality on the planet. This would be the first element to consider, especially in Ecuador: to the extent that no government could weaken the popular movements, peoples and original nationalities, the conflict tends to unfold from time to time.

On the occasion of the 18-day strike in June, things would have calmed down after two or three days, as none of the organizations had planned such an extensive mobilization. However, the government's clumsiness in arresting the president of conaie, Leonidas Iza, ignited the prairie. The communities overwhelmed their leaders and launched to cut roads, occupy public spaces and march on Quito, as they have been doing for three decades.



The questioned Ecuadorian banker-president Guillermo Lasso Mendoza, seen from the particular perspective of the Illustrator Vilmatraca (<http://www.vilma-vargas.com>).

The truce agreed for ten commissions to meet that must address as many demands of the indigenous movement, ends at the beginning of October. But it is just that, a truce forced by the power of the movement and the fragility of the government, although neither of the two actors were in a position to prolong the conflict.

On the subject of the title – Ecuador as a failed state – I would like to make a reflection.

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Edited by [María Piedad Ossaba](#)

Published by [Viento Sur](#)/ [CronicÓN](#)/ [Nodal](#), August 19, 2022

La Pluma. Net 19.08.2022