Resource Extraction and Yasuní National Park

Ecuador’s Bitter Choice   By Marc Becker

ON OCTOBER 3, 2013 after a marathon 10-hour debate, the Ecuadorian National Assembly approved the extraction of petroleum from the ecologically fragile Yasuní National Park. That decision was a dramatic reversal of a signature program of leftist president Rafael Correa to preserve the park. It also highlights ongoing debates within the South American left over how to balance urgent needs for economic development with environmental sustainability.

Since taking office in 2007, Correa has pursued economic policies designed to grow Ecuador’s economy and lower poverty rates, and succeeded admirably in these goals.1

Although canceling the Yasuní preservation initiative was the most unpopular decision in his years in power, it would be an exaggeration to call this a watershed moment. Instead, it was a reaffirmation of the contradictions and limitations that were present since the very beginning of Correa’s mandate.

Correa’s developmental policies could be characterized as neoliberal environmentalism — they reveal how easy it is to employ a discourse that articulates ideas of respect for the rights of nature as long as they are not put in operation.2 Therein lies the rub between Correa and his opponents on the Indigenous and environmental left. These activists favor a concrete implementation of ideas that the president is content to leave on the level of rhetoric.

The Yasuní-ITT Initiative

Experts estimate that the Ishpingo Tiputini Tambococha, or ITT oilfields in the Yasuní National Park in eastern Ecuador, hold nearly a trillion barrels of oil, about a fifth of the country’s total reserves. Depending on petroleum prices, its extraction could generate $18 billion in revenue. That money could provide key health, educational and economic development resources to overcome poverty and marginalization in this South American country.

Yasuní is also one of the most ecologically diverse places on the planet. UNESCO designated the park as a world biosphere reserve in 1989 because it contains 1,300 species of animals and 100,000 species of insects, many not found anywhere else in the world. Each hectare of the forest reportedly has as many as 655 tree species, more than in all of North America.

Given the importance of the Yasuní, Indigenous and environmental activists began advancing ideas for a plan to exchange preservation of the park for international economic development aid. Not drilling in the pristine rainforest would both protect its rich mix of wildlife and plant life, and help halt climate change by preventing the release of more than 400 million tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

When Correa was elected president, he incorporated those ideas into what became one of the most popular proposals of his government. About 90% of the country’s population supported leaving the petroleum in the ground. Correa used an Indigenous proposal to advance the popularity of his government, and in exchange his government gave a social movement proposal global visibility.

According to the original Yasuní-ITT plan, in exchange for forgoing drilling in the park, international donors would contribute $3.6 billion, half the estimated value of the petroleum as of 2007, to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) for health care, education and other social programs. Despite broad local and international support for the plan, donors were not forthcoming with contributions.

After six years, the fund had only collected $13 million in contributions. On August 15, 2013 Correa announced that because of a lack of contributions he would cancel the Yasuní-ITT initiative. “The world has failed us,” Correa stated in a news conference. “With deep sadness but also with absolute responsibility to our people and history, I have had to take one of the hardest decisions of my government.”

He blamed the world’s hypocrisy for failing to support the innovative proposal with financial donations. “We weren’t asking for charity,” Correa said, “we were asking for co-responsibility in the fight against climate change.”3

The Rights of Nature

The Yasuní initiative built on the recognition and protection of the rights of nature that was codified in Ecuador’s 2008 constitution. This recognition built on a growing environmental consciousness in the 1980s and 1990s throughout the Americas.4 Constitutional reforms in Colombia in 1991 and Brazil in 1998 established the right of people to enjoy a clean and sustainable environment, even though the extension of human rights to the realm of nature was controversial at first.5

Ecuador’s new constitution, drafted under Correa’s mandate, took this one step further to recognize the rights of nature itself, the first country in the world to do so. These rights included that of the very existence and restoration of nature. Article 71 declares, “nature or Pachamama [the Quechua term for mother earth], from which life springs, has the right to have its existence integrally respected.”6

The inclusion of the rights of nature was largely due to the actions of Alberto Acosta, the president of the constituent assembly, who pressed for the need to move beyond an anthropocentric vision of Ecuador’s future. Acosta argued that while giving rights to nature might seem as strange to some as the need to give rights to slaves or women appeared at one point in history, “great changes require bold action and open minds.”

Similar to how it was necessary to stop the buying and selling of slaves, it was now important to halt the commodification of nature.”If social justice was the central axis for social struggles in the twentieth century,” Acosta maintained, “environmental justice will increasingly play that role in the twenty-first century.”7

In addition to the constitutional mandate to protect the rights of nature, the constitution also required the government to protect the rights of Indigenous peoples, and in particular the Tagaeri and the
Eduardo Gudynas aptly notes that the increased use of resources rather than traditional development strategies that included an explicit critique included different perspectives that simultaneously present a radical critique of current development approaches and endorse alternatives based on the rights of nature, expanded conceptions of the community, rejection of the linearities of history, and so on.” It draws on gender, the rights of nature, plurinationality, and Indigenous cosmologies.9

Many critics do not call for an end to mineral extraction, but oppose new large-scale mining plans that continue preexisting extractivist paradigms. “We are obligated to optimize the extraction of petroleum without causing environmental and social damage,” Acosta argues. Ecuador needs to realize the highest possible social benefit from each barrel of oil extracted, instead of only focusing on maximizing production.

“We have to learn,” he continues, “exporting natural resources had not led to development.” Rather, “the principal factor in production and development is the human being.” Ecuador had to change. Acosta insists, “that vision that condemns our countries to be producers and exporters of raw materials” that historically had underdeveloped economies in the developing world.10

Beyond Distorted Development

Acosta points out that the sumak kawsay is different than development in that it does not apply a set of policies, instruments, and indicators for an “underdeveloped” state to achieve a “developed” condition. Despite the attempts of many countries to follow that path, few have achieved the goal, thereby pointing to the uselessness of that approach. Rather, these attempts have resulted in a mal desarrollo, a “bad” or distorted type of development, which contributed to climate change on a global scale.

Acosta urges instead to move beyond traditional concepts of progress that emphasize size production and mechanical notions of economic growth. Acosta calls for alternative visions based on Indigenous knowledge and ancestral concepts that are consistent with ecological, popular, Marxist, feminist and other alternative ideas for how to structure society that emerged out of marginalized sectors.

He points to the need to overcome the divorce between nature and human beings. Instead of sustaining civilization, capitalism put life itself at risk. The sumak kawsay charts one path for moving beyond western notions of progress, with a special attention to the rights of nature.11

Responding to criticisms of his extractive polices, Correa argues that “the biggest mistake is to subordinate human rights to ostensible natural rights.”12 In contrast to Acosta’s position, Correa identifies poverty as Ecuador’s primary problem, and justifies extractive development strategies that result in a negative ecological impact on a few people in order to reduce poverty for many more people.

Bolivian vice president Álvaro García Linera presents a similar argument in his book Geopolítica de la Amazonía that examines the tensions between economic development and environmental protectionism. Rather than defending the rights of nature or appealing to the sumak kawsay, García Linera favors a strategy of development at all costs with the goal of creating an economic surplus that can then be redistributed in order to satisfy the needs of society.13

Both Correa and García Linera condemn naïve environmentalists and ultraleftists who fail to understand the logic of this state-centric strategy for development. [García Linera’s book is reviewed by Devin Beaulieu and Nancy Postero in ATC 167, “The Politics of Extractivism,” online at http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/4032 — ed.]

Acosta denounces these neo-extractive strategies as a misleading farce, not unlike the unfulfilled promises of neoliberalism.14

And indeed, as the business-friendly Latin American Weekly Report observes, Correa “embraced extractive industries to spur Ecuador’s development even more than his neoliberal forebears.”15

Pursuit of the sumak kawsay, Acosta contends, requires moving beyond rhetoric and vague platitudes to a pursuit of alternative developmental models. Underlying these conflicts between Acosta and Correa were different concepts of the state, and in particular the role of social participation in decisions over public policy.

Despite Acosta’s criticisms of an anthropocentric view of the world that informs Correa’s political strategies, most leftists still favored policies that ultimately prioritized human development over concerns for environmental sustainability.
Correa’s leftist opponents contend that the sumak kawsay should lead to a fundamentally different concept of development, and repeatedly charged that Correa had failed to make a fundamental break from a capitalist logic of resource extraction. Sociologist Jorge León Trujillo never understood how the commodification of the environment, as would happen with the Yasuní initiative, could be considered a revolutionary proposal.24

Economist William Black concludes, “Correa’s budget priorities are precisely those recommended in the Washington Consensus — education, health, and infrastructure.” The economic proposals that Correa pursues are not unlike those that the conservative economist Hernando de Soto in neighboring Peru had long advocated.25 At best, for leftists Correa’s approach appeared to be one of green capitalism that was quickly discarded when it no longer provided the expected economic returns.

Social Movement Responses

On August 20, 2013, the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana (CONFINIAE, Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon) that groups 21 organizations and federations from 11 Indigenous nationalities
in the Amazon denounced the government’s plans to terminate the Yasuni-ITT initiative.

“The deepening of the extractive policies of the current regime, which exceeds that of former neoliberal governments,” the statement reads, “has led to systematic violations of our fundamental rights and has generated a number of socio-environmental conflicts in Indigenous communities throughout the Amazon region.”

The CONFENIAE points to a historical pattern of the extermination of Indigenous groups due to petroleum exploration, including the Tetete in northeastern Ecuador 40 years earlier. “History repeats itself,” the federation proclaims. “We are on the verge of a new ethnicicide.”

The current abuses were occurring, the CONFENIAE complains, even as the country projected an image as “possessing one of the world’s most advanced constitutions, which recognizes the collective rights of Indigenous peoples, especially their right to free, prior and informed consent, the rights of nature, the sumak kawsay, among others.” Nevertheless, “when the interests of large capital become involved, the rulers through their control of the judicial system demonstrate that they have no qualms with reforming laws to legalize theft, looting, and human rights violations.” Correa’s announcement to suspend the Yasuni initiative “has been only one more example of the neoliberal, pro-imperialist, and traitorous character of the current regime.”

From the CONFENIAE’s perspective, Correa’s actions confirm what they had long understood: “the government was never really committed to the conservation of nature, beyond an advertising and media campaign to project an opposite image to the world.”

On August 22, 2013, in the name of Indigenous, student, and environmental organizations, the noted jurist Dr. Julio César Trujillo formally delivered a request to the constitutional court in Quito for a popular referendum on the president’s plans to drill in the ecologically sensitive park. To demand a referendum, opponents are required to collect 584,000 signatures, or 5% of the voters in this country of 15 million people.

If enough signatures are collected, voters will be asked: “Do you agree that the Ecuadorian government should keep the crude in the ITT, known as block 43, underground indefinitely?”

Correa welcomed the challenge of opponents calling for a referendum on the government’s decision to drill in the Yasuni.

“How am I going to oppose a referendum if it is a constitutional right to request one?” Correa responded. “We are sure,” Correa declared, “that with sufficient information we will have the full support of the Ecuadorian people” for his plans to accelerate the pace of resource extraction.

Despite initial support for the Yasuni initiative, public opinion quickly shifted to favor Correa’s position in favor of drilling. The potential defeat of a referendum on drilling in the public park could further erode public support for environmental causes.

On August 27, 2013, Indigenous and environmentalist activists took to the streets of Ecuador to protest against the decision to drill in the Yasuní. A police cordon prevented the demonstrators from reaching the presidential palace on Quito’s central plaza. Police fired rubber bullets on the protesters, hurting 12 people (nearly blinding a young woman) and detaining seven.

Among those arrested was Marco Guatamal, vice-president of Ecuarunari, the powerful federation of Kichwa peoples in the Ecuadorian highlands that had long fought against neoliberal economic policies.

In response to the repression, the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE, Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador), the country’s primary Indigenous organization, released a statement that calls on “the president to stop the repression and prosecution of Indigenous leaders.”

The CONAIE also demands amnesty for those who faced prosecution on charges of terrorism for previous protests against the government’s extractive policies.

These conflicts placed a popular president on a collision course with social movements whose historic protests against neoliberal economic policies opened up political space for the election of his leftist government. Even though the government has now officially disavowed the initiative, Alberto Acosta still hopes that social movements might be able to make this idea a reality. “Yasuni-ITT can still be achieved by civil society in Ecuador and around the world,” Acosta concludes. “We need other Yasunís too.” Social movements and leftist governments continue to dance around each other, and we need the cooperation of both to realize the shared objectives of saving the world from poverty and environmental catastrophe.

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Notes

13. Álvaro García Linera, Gente en la lucha revolucionaria: La Guerra Guajira y el Triunfo del Pueblo en Colombia (Bogotá: ALAI, 2010).