

The Uprising in Ecuador: Inside the Quito Commune

An Interview from on the Front Lines

CrimethInc.

October 14, 2019

In early October, a wave of protests swept the streets of Ecuador against cuts in gasoline subsidies and, consequently, rising costs of living. This has become the country's largest popular uprising in decades. Indigenous marches arrived in Quito, the capital, and occupied the Parliament building; thousands of protesters confronted President Lenín Moreno's police forces, forcing the government to relocate its headquarters to try to escape the insurrection. Moreno is the successor to and former vice president of the leftist Rafael Correa, who rode to power on the momentum of the social movements of the 1990s and ruled the country from 2007 on, implementing the same neoliberal model for pacifying and co-opting social movements applied by other left governments in Latin America like the Workers Party (PT) in Brazil. The convergence of various rural, city, student, women, and indigenous groups has contributed to radicalizing a struggle that is now becoming a popular uprising.

On Monday morning, October 14, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador announced that the president had backed down and agreed to repeal the decree 883, the austerity bill (known as the *paquetazo*, package), and replace it with new agreements to be build with indigenous movements. But the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) announced that the struggle continues, demanding the departure of the Ministers of Defense and Interior, who were responsible for the violent repression of the protests.

We conducted this interview on October 10, directly with comrades on the barricades in the streets of Ecuador, in order to understand the background of the mobilization. An earlier version of this interview appeared in Portuguese via *Facção Fictícia*.

The governments of Brazil and Argentina and institutions associated with the European Union are declaring their support for the government of Lenín Moreno in Ecuador and denouncing the popular revolt of working-class and indigenous people. Obviously, these institutions know that austerity policies are also on their agenda and fear that the same scenario will spread across the Americas and other parts of the globe.

How do you see austerity and subsidy-cutting policies affecting daily life in Ecuador? What was it that caused the urban population and indigenous people to say “enough”? Is there an anti-capitalist sentiment on the streets?

The resistance that is happening at this moment, which is already eight days old, is already an historic event. It is the biggest uprising in recent years—historically, I don’t know, but it is certainly the biggest strike in recent years, which has as its protagonist the indigenous people, because the uprisings of the past did not last as long as they are now.

Austerity and the policy of subsidy reductions affect daily life in Ecuador, but I believe there is a class divide in what is happening these days in Quito and throughout the country. Part of the population does not understand the reasons for the protest; they say that in fact the government is not raising the price of gasoline but merely removing an existing subsidy. What they do not understand is that increasing gasoline increases the price of tickets, for example. A 10 cent increase is a lot for a public university student. Food prices have also increased during this period. For small vendors who buy things for their everyday use and earn very little, it affects them a lot. For example, a sack of potatoes that was \$18 ten days ago is now \$30 to \$35 dollars.

There has been an immediate spike in gasoline prices. The annual subsidies allowed for greater access to food staples and other types of consumer goods; most of the food—for example, vegetables grown in the Sierra [the Andes] or bananas grown on the Costa plantations—is transported in diesel trucks. Most city buses, too. There is a connection between gas subsidies and the prices of basic grocery products. If gas costs rise, all prices will rise—food, transport, power.

As I said, there is a class issue: the middle class may not be suffering as a consequence of these measures, but most of the population is already feeling them. Indigenous people know that they will not be able to sell their products—and that when they have to sell them to townspeople, they will earn very little. In the end, this is a chain in which the direct producer is the one who earns the least, and they know it. It’s necessary to understand that here, the food in the big cities arrives from the countryside, so there is a direct effect of the rising price of gasoline on the small producers in the countryside, where most of the indigenous people live.

Regarding anti-capitalist sentiment on the streets, the left has been very divided since Rafael Correa came to power 12 years ago, establishing a left-wing government that capitalized on the social protests of the 1990s and the first years of the 21st century. Many of the protagonists of the struggles of those times ended up joining the government. During those years, there were people who believed in this government, but later realized that it was following a very capitalist direction. This prevented real unity on the left.

Now, at this moment in history, I do not believe that there was a growth process by which social movements developed until they reached this moment of explosion. Various things have happened in the social field in recent years, but there was no clear direction towards revolutionary and community organization. It is as if the social movements were asleep, and overnight, thanks to the “paquetazo” [the economic reform “package”],¹ everyone suddenly came together, and this caused the struggle to radicalize. For example, there were many blockades in neighborhoods, on the outskirts of cities, in small villages, and this kept the struggle alive for eight days.

¹ This refers to the decree 883 of the government of Lenin Moreno and its economic package, in Spanish the expression is used to give a negative meaning

On October 8, thousands of indigenous people occupied the Parliament building in Quito. Can you describe for us what happened there?

In fact, the Indians arrived on October 7, on Monday, and there was a pitched battle in Quito that lasted five or six hours involving students, social movements, and other residents of Quito who were trying to keep the police busy in order to enable the indigenous comrades to enter. Recall that we are living in a State of Exception, so the military is on the streets and had blocked Quito's main entrances, the North and South entrances, to prevent indigenous people from other provinces from entering. However, the people were so well-organized that the military did not have enough intelligence at their disposal to stop them. The fact that the fight took place in the city center also opened up gaps that enabled the indigenous people to reach the historic center.

Just as we pushed the police back, we saw the crowded trucks coming and the bikes that accompanied the indigenous caravan. It was a very exciting moment.

They went directly to El Arbolito Park, next to the Salesian University, where logistical support for the movement is organized. The following day, a rally took place at Parque El Arbolito and people agreed to take the Assembly (the parliament building in Quito). When we arrived there, a first delegation entered, then gradually more and more people entered, while there were thousands of people at the door of the Assembly wanting to enter. Police shot tear gas canisters at people, which created a mass panic. People could have been trampled to death because many could not breathe; people ran in various directions. Meanwhile, police continued to fire tear gas canisters and rubber bullets at protesters. At that moment, a very great repression began.

The Assembly, strategically speaking, is like a small fort perched on a hill; to protect it, the police positioned themselves at a higher point so that snipers could hit the protesters with tear gas canisters and also live rounds. As a result, the police inflicted a large number of injuries and some deaths, as they were in a strategic position.

The idea of going to the Assembly was one of the actions that the indigenous movement had decided to carry out during these days in Quito. Until yesterday [Wednesday, October 9], there was a lot of concern because there was no clear strategy, while the government refused to back down and kept increasing the repression. The fact that police sent tear gas into shelters and peace enclaves such as the Salesian University and the Catholic University caused a great deal of outrage; in a way, this was a blow to the government, because the news circulated despite the news shutdown that the mainstream media and the government have been trying to maintain.

Today [Thursday, October 10], in the morning, eight police officers were captured by the movement and brought to the large popular and indigenous assembly at the House of Culture, where there were about 10,000 or 15,000 people. The reporters who were there ended up broadcasting the assembly live, even if they didn't do it in the best way. In a way, this broke the media siege by disclosing, for example, the fact that an indigenous leader of Cotopaxi, Inocencio Tucumbi, had been killed. He had lost consciousness after inhaling a lot of tear gas and was then trampled by a police horse. That had not appeared in the mainstream media. Suddenly, the dead appeared on the big television channels and it became clear to the general public that—yes, the government is killing people and carrying out repression at an extreme level!

So today's strategy was successful. As I told you, yesterday, there was still no very precise strategy, but today we were more organized. People formed a procession one kilometer long from the House of Culture to the Hospital to transport the body of a comrade. Many people applauded; it was also a moment of great emotion. We said goodbye to him with great honor, because he was a great fighting companion. People also promised at that time that the fight

would continue in his memory. It was also a time to regroup, to rest, to consider what strategy to follow in the coming days, and to share this general pain by thinking of those who have fallen, those who are injured, giving us the courage to keep fighting.

The demand from the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) next was clear, announcing that if the government radicalized the violence, obviously the street would also in response become radicalized.

When night came, the police were released and handed over at the front of the Assembly, in the midst of a large demonstration. Because the Assembly and the House of Culture are near each other, there was a kind of permanent demonstration taking place in front of the Assembly and the area was full of protesters. There were about 30,000 people in the area tonight. When the police were handed over, the indigenous people made it clear that they had been detained for entering an area that had been declared a peace zone. This is why they had been detained, but now they were being released safe and sound. This stands in contrast to police practice, because on the day the Assembly was taken, the police took about 80 prisoners. Almost all of them were released yesterday with marks of violence and injuries.

Indigenous peoples have declared their own State of Exception in their territories, threatening and arresting state agents who have dared to enter those regions. Can you describe this form of autonomy and territorial organization?

About the State of Exception decreed in the indigenous territories, this also explains the episode I just described. For at this time, the House of Culture and the surrounding regions are being considered indigenous territories, so it was understood that the police violated the exceptional sovereignty of the indigenous peoples and were therefore detained. This also took place in other indigenous territories this week, when military forces who violated these territories were arrested and military buses and armored vehicles were hijacked. Indigenous peoples have long demanded autonomy in their territories and have their own indigenous principles. When a problem occurs within these territories, such as someone stealing or causing trouble, the case is resolved by indigenous justice without going through state justice.

From the moment the Government decreed the State of Exception, in response, the Indians also decreed a State of Exception in their territories as a way to reduce the level of repression and also to pressure the military and police. On the street or in the territories, representatives of the state repress people, so they know they are in danger of being detained. In response, in various territories, military and police officers were detained, disarmed, and released after a few days after having experienced indigenous justice. This functions to make the accused person face the reality of everything he has done, depending on the offense committed, and in relation to this, the punishment to be suffered by the prisoner is decided in a communal way.

Regarding ethnicities, let's say CONAIE is divided between all indigenous peoples and other peoples including cholos (mestizos) and black people from the equator. There are the indigenous people of the coast, the people of Serra Norte, Serra Central, Serra do sul, and those from the east, from the Amazon region, and they all come together through the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador.

There are rumors from the government media that CONAIE is making deals with the government and it seems that the government is trying to divide the movement between "good protesters" and "bad protesters." But in the last few hours [of October 10], however, there have been reports that there is no agreement between CONAIE and the government. What chance is there that state cooption will be successful? How

willing is CONAIE to radicalize the movement or negotiate? And what influence or effective representation does CONAIE have among indigenous peoples?

Of course, there have been rumors, gossip, lies, and falsehoods from the government and the media aimed at dividing the popular struggle that is taking place today on the streets of Quito and throughout Ecuador. It must be said that the large organizations such as CONAIE and the FUT (the largest labor union in the country) have historically negotiated in times of weakness, and these negotiations have gone nowhere. And because they are large organizations, they also take place within a super-political scenario—thus, sometimes, the movements themselves see them as ambiguous political structures.

But this is normal. Besides, we must see the organizational capacity they have, in this case especially CONAIE, with its historical role, considering that in the past it has managed to overthrow several presidents. In those days, we also saw the power of bus drivers, truck drivers, and taxi drivers that paralyze the city and the power of the students who took to the streets. The truth is that bus drivers and truck drivers have a very self-interested historical role in Ecuador and they decided to get out of the strike as soon as they were able to raise ticket prices, whereas other people, especially students, managed to keep the fight going on the streets and the Indians immediately joined in. Both the urban movement and the indigenous movement soon managed to decentralize the attention that was initially exclusively directed at bus drivers and truck drivers.

So yes, there were these rumors. But today [October 10], there is attention focused on the arrests of the police officers and on the journalists who immediately went there. The leaders of each indigenous group and CONAIE's president, Mr. Vargas, have publicly stated that they will not negotiate with the government because there is no negotiating about the blood of the dead and that the conditions for initiating a dialogue would be the elimination of decree 883 (the "paquetazo"), that the IMF leave the country, and that Interior Minister Maria Paula Romo and Defense Minister Oswaldo Jarrín immediately resign because they are to blame for the deaths. Obviously, there is a lot of pressure from the base in these organizations.

Over the previous days, there were a few meetings, mainly between leaders and the high command of political organizations. But today [October 10], it was decided to hold a popular assembly that lasted many hours and every decision was the result of consultation with everyone, with the base population that was there. There were about 10–15 thousand people and everything was then decided collectively. We can also say that grassroots pressure is compelling the leadership to make radical decisions as well, not to sell out the movement out of desperation for fear of being arrested or in return for money the government wants to give them under the table.

CONAIE, in general, has a huge representation. In Ecuador, if you think of indigenous peoples, you think immediately of CONAIE. It is a very large organization with considerable political structure and also communicative, strategic. Today we saw very well how they managed to "turn over the tortilla" and put the government in difficulty.

The government accuses former President Rafael Correa of being behind the demonstrations. But it doesn't appear that the Correistas [supporters of Correa] are playing a leading role. What is Correa's role in the current phase of activity, both in the marches and in the possibility of "peaceful" or electoral co-optation and exit from the conflict?

Obviously, the government accused Correa, accused Maduro, alleged that Correa had traveled to Venezuela and, from there, developed a plan to destabilize the government. Now they are also saying that the ones behind the street turmoil are Latinquín, which is a "pandilla" (gang) and the FARC [*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia,

an insurgent group that fought a civil war against the government for years]. All this shows that government politicians no longer know what to say. Obviously, he's used to blaming Correa, for two years Correa has been guilty of everything. Although it is true that Correa is a corrupt man who must pay for crimes against humanity, for the repression that took place under his governments, for corruption, it's senseless to blame him for all that is the responsibility of the current government, which has ruled the country for more than two years. There is a general right-wing custom of supporting Lenin Moreno and blaming Correa every time there is a crisis. If money is lacking, it is because Correa took it; if there are criminals, it is because Correa made laws that liberated criminals; if there are many migrants, it is because of the mobility law. The previous government is always to blame.

That said, over the past year, in mobilizations and marches against the government—which were much smaller than they are now, because now it is a real revolt—the Correistas were always present and this created problems for some social movements who didn't want to be with them. That made us expect that they would still be present in the marches that are taking place now, as they are also a very consistent group. In fact, on the first day they marched and were repressed; on the second day, they also appeared, but stayed behind the march and simply burned two tires outside the Central Bank while students tried to enter the historic center and confront the police. After that day, the Correistas practically disappeared; people gave them no space. Today [October 10], we were doing interviews with some self-organized companions and we asked them, "What about Correa?" And they all answered very clearly: "I'm not a Correista, I'm not here for Correa, Correa doesn't pay us." And this is evident: the Correistas are not in the marches. Certainly a few might be there as individuals, but they are not organized.

Two days ago, on the day of the assembly, Father Tuárez, the president of the Citizen's Participation Council who was fired for being a religious fanatic, said that God had told him that Correa was the Savior and that he needed to return. He tried to infiltrate the mobilizations, but people forced him to flee. So in short, this possibility does not exist.

This is also interesting: neither political parties nor traditional politicians have been able to appropriate what is happening. The only authorities who propose more "policies" that are seen as possessing legitimacy are the leadership of the FUT and CONAIE unions, which are currently leading the mobilizations. In fact, the power lies in all the people on the streets, and that is very scary to the Right, to the bourgeoisie, to the bankers, to the "owners" of the country, because the street does not accept any of the political leaders.

So the solution may be for the "paquetazo" to fall and for the country to return to calm for some time, but obviously this cannot last long. Another possibility is that Lenin Moreno will resign and the "paquetazo" will remain, and the government will try to distract and pacify the people by focusing attention on the fact that Moreno has left or the process of building a "popular" government, a street-born government—such rumors are already circulating. So imagine what the Right is thinking, the Ecuadorian bourgeoisie. They absolutely cannot permit the streets to win, because that would mean that after 12 or 13 years people are shown something that in common perception no longer exists—that is, that going to the streets is good and that if you get organized, if you resist and keep insisting, you will achieve your goal. That would cause a chain reaction that would once again enable people to believe in their own potential.

The Right knows this and that is why they are all united to try to prevent it from happening.

How is the ruling bloc responding to the demonstrations? Could divisions open up between parties, in the military, or elsewhere?

The bloc that holds power is united. The greatest political leaders (Lenín Moreno, Guillermo Lasso, Jaime Nebot, Álvaro Noboa) are all united. Correa obviously says nothing because what he wants to do is capitalize on what's happening in the upcoming elections. He is well aware that it is not convenient for him to talk too much, because the government is already saying that it is his fault and it is not strategic for him to get too involved. It is enough for people to think that "everything was better when he was there" and in the next elections he is very likely to win. The president is now in Guayaquil, which is the refuge of the social-Christians, the right-wing party, whom everyone feared would win the next election. But now it does not seem possible because, certainly, he will not have the vote of the Sierra, cities like Quito, Ambato, Riobamba, indigenous communities. So everyone in power is united, trying to use every possible means to criminalize the protest.

As for the Armed Forces, we now have a Defense Minister trained in Israel, the Mossad and the School of the Americas, a crazy fascist, a military man. Four days ago, the government imposed a mandatory one-hour government show on radio and television that all companies were compelled to broadcast, in which this madman spoke half the time, threatening that the Armed Forces will be able to defend themselves, that they should not be provoked, that people must remain calm because if they do not, the repression will be fierce, as if we were in a dictatorship. This clearly provoked a lot of outrage. It is not yet known, there is no accurate data, whether there have been desertions within the army or police. What is certain is that the historical role of the army has always been to repress the people, and at a certain moment, when popular discontent is already evident, they try to come up with a strategy to prevent the emergence of a popular government and present themselves as mediators to create a new government, but it usually always ends up being worse than the previous one. Then it is possible that at some point the Armed Forces will begin to create disruption within popular organizations and also to withdraw their support from the president.

How did the movement transform everyday life in the city of Quito? And how is the day organized in the spaces occupied by the protesters?

The kind of solidarity that has emerged here in the city is amazing; some have renamed it the Quito Commune, because it is not just indigenous people, not just students, not just manifestations. There are blockades in the neighborhoods that are organized. Just as in the Historic Center, the neighborhood of San Juan, for example, is being organized autonomously. When a demonstration arrives, people give you food, water. Yesterday [October 9], when tension shifted to the outskirts of San Juan, in the upper part of the Historic Center, there were several locals arriving bringing stones, people opening the windows of their houses to give the protesters material to burn or to use to protect themselves from tear gas, people opening the doors of their houses to give us water.

Inside houses, people received and helped the injured, providing a space for volunteer doctors to treat them, since ambulances could not get there. There are many volunteer doctors, many of them medical students from the ward, who are helping in the streets, providing emergency assistance to the injured, saving lives. We have an incredible medical apparatus, very organized.

We have spaces to receive and redistribute food: I am part of one of these groups on Whatsapp because the place where I work is serving as a collection point. And throughout the city center, through all the universities, there are places that function as popular canteens, as welcoming spaces for outsiders who have come to Quito to fight. These places are full of donations; sometimes they do not even know where to take all the donations they receive. There are communal

kitchens where people come to volunteer to prepare food. Yesterday, I was talking to people from a communal kitchen in Parque Arbolito; there was a gentleman there who was injured when police attacked the Park, because despite the attack the kitchen continued to serve people. The kitchen was set up by a neighborhood of Quito, organized through an evangelical church—there was the pastor and his three giant pots. I was told that they had fed 700 people this day alone.

I also met and spoke with a very humble lady from southern Quito who had a small business. She came in the afternoon in a small van along with her son, passing by the Park to hand out coffee and bread to the people. So really, food is not lacking, there is food everywhere—today I have eaten four times. Everywhere, there are people calling you to eat something; sometimes they take offense if you refuse, because it is a way of donating to the cause.

There are people organized to extinguish the tear gas canisters, and to take care of the people affected by the gas. There are all kinds of organizations—there are people who offer childcare. [At this point, the interviewee coughs: “It was bad, it’s the effect of gas on the lungs.”] There are people who organize games for children. There are people who spend the day singing, playing music. It is really very, very interesting what is happening here. This is why some here speak of the Quito Commune, some say that in some ways, in this regard, we have already made gains at the level of spontaneous self-organization.

But it took a lot of assemblies to be able to organize what is happening now. I believe this is the biggest victory, and we hope it can continue—this spirit of self-organization. This shows that together we can stand up to the government for eight days and paralyze a country for eight days, to ensure that our rights are respected.

How does the movement plan to organize from tomorrow [October 11]?

Today [October 10], there was a demonstration, with the release of the police who had been arrested, with a call to continue the fight; the indigenous people are still here in Quito. Today was a day of tranquility, peace, mourning. In fact, CONAIE has announced three days of mourning; I don’t know if that means that in the next three days there will be only peaceful marches. But I think strategically it can also serve a little; for example, today was a “peaceful” day, but a lot of things have been achieved, we have gained media attention, the media barrier has been broken—despite the fact that the government cut our cell phone signal and shut down the Internet, which made it difficult to document and communicate about the events via independent media and individual efforts.

I think we are all preparing for a long resistance. If at first we thought it might end suddenly, after what we have seen in recent days, we understand that it will last much longer—and it is. That is why we have to organize the moments of struggle strategically, not burn them up immediately. It is important to try to shape public opinion, to break the media barrier, to create new combat strategies as well as demonstrations, riots, times of conflict with the police. This is not to say that one thing is right and another is wrong, but that we need to use every possible tool to achieve victory.

Surely the fight will continue! Today we promised before the coffin of the comrade killed by the police that the fight will go on.

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Retrieved on 17th June 2021 from crimethinc.com

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