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State, society and nature in Ecuador: the case of the Yasuní-ITT initiative

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Abstract

Development politics in Ecuador has experienced major changes since the election of Correa in 2007. Paralleling a regional trend, the state has become a central agent in the economy, particularly in extractive industries. Revenues accruing to the state from intensified usage of non-renewable resources have been central to the implementation of Correa's political agenda. At the same time, constitutional changes introduced in 2008 have granted rights to nature and held the promise of increased participatory engagement between the state and civil society. The emergence and development of the Yasuní-ITT initiative, which is built on the idea of leaving oil underground in exchange for financial contributions from the international community, demonstrates that increased attention to environmental conservation by the state has not resulted in improved participation. Instead, the incipient clash between the state's mission to provide socioeconomic development and to preserve nature has resulted in the state sidelining civil society and opening the possibility of intensified social conflict over the role of nature in Ecuadorian development.

Keywords: Ecuador, natural resources, Yasuní -ITT, state, civil society

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INTRODUCTION

“What does it mean to say ‘the state’ acts? Does it act on one’s own? Do others act through it? Who does it act upon? On other entities outside the state? Or does it act upon itself? To talk about the state as an ‘actor’ is to endow it with a will; to say that it acts according to coherent and rational principles of choice is further to endow it with a consciousness. How is this will and consciousness produced?”

(Chatterjee 1997: 82)

The impact of the neoliberal phase of capitalist globalization on development in Latin America has been twofold. On the one hand, the imaginary of development has been transformed in such a way to make the logic of the marketplace the central organizing principle, paving a road towards the creation of a market society. On the other hand, the role of the state was transformed from being the central socioeconomic agent that orchestrates development processes to that of being a supposedly neutral player whose main task is to create and enforce a politico-legal framework that enables the entrenchment of market forces in economic, political, social and cultural spheres (Silva 2009). While certain national economies have indeed flourished during this period, neoliberal globalization has taken a heavy toll on the poor and the environment. The ongoing ‘Left Turn’ in Latin America can in part be considered as a backlash to these changes (Rodríguez-Garavita et al. 2008).

Particularly outspoken critics of this model such as Correa, Morales and Chavez have launched separate but related campaigns to overturn these two changes. In relation to the first process, their electoral campaigns harnessed social resistance against neoliberalism that refused the ‘there is no alternative’ subscription to market ideology not (simply) because neoliberalism has failed but because of its perceived inability to create autonomous, environmentally sustainable and poverty reducing growth. For these movements that underwrote the rise of these presidents, the unbridled march of capitalist development through neoliberalism serves to subdue both society and nature to the profit motive of private (multinational) capital. Thus these leaders have campaigned to strengthen both the remit and capacity of the state as a means to defend the interests of society and nature. Consequently, a development model where the state is the key actor in societal dynamics, be they economic, political, social or environmental, has been put in place.

Within the Ecuadorian context, the rise of Correa and the *Alianza PAIS* (‘Country Alliance’ or, in its expanded form, ‘Alliance of Proud and Sovereign Fatherland’) movement which he is leading has been with the broad-based support of the various components of civil society that have been actively campaigning against neoliberal development policies. A broad swath of civil society actors, among which indigenous and environmentalist groups featured prominently, had supported the election campaign of Correa against other presidential contenders who were identified too closely with the existing neoliberal regime and the political establishment. Correa’s promise to refound the Ecuadorian state and to reclaim national sovereignty back from global actors was widely considered to be a popular, if also populist, mandate (Conaghan and de la Torre 2008).

Since 2007, the Correa regime has indeed been following an aggressive path to reestablishing state power and remit. So far his controversial rule has brought a number of far reaching changes. The new constitution, which gives the state and the presidency far

reaching powers in shaping Ecuadorian development politics, is one of the main examples. The constitution is also remarkable for being the first one in the world to grant rights to nature. In more administrative changes, Correa has made the planning ministry SENPLADES central to his agenda, endowing it with more power and resources to develop and implement a vision for development along the lines of the *'buen vivir'* notion which builds upon indigenous cosmology (see Walsh 2010). He has also renamed or restructured a number of ministries to symbolize a different vision of societal development, for instance the Ministry of Mines and Oil, which became the Ministry of Non-Renewable Natural Resources (MRNN website, 2010). Most importantly, however, a process of 'nationalization' has been started in the extractive industries, increasing the role of the state in the operation of the sector, with a view to increasing the revenues accruing from non-renewable resources to the state (Arsel, forthcoming). The expected increase in state revenues is critical to the implementation of social, political and economic agenda of the Correa government and therefore central to understanding contemporary Ecuadorian politics.

In the domain of 'daily politics', President Correa has aggressively confronted his political opponents, including members of the press and media. Taken together, Correa's actions have been labeled as undemocratic and authoritarian attempts at power-grabbing (see, for example, Colburn and Trejos 2010). Environmental activists have on a number of different occasions borne the brunt of the increasingly aggressive political tactics of the Correa regime who has not been shy about using the newly strengthened powers of the state also against groups that were only recently his allies. The short-lived but highly controversial attempt to shut down the influential environmental organization *Acción Ecológica* and the recent arrest of the indigenous leader Pepe Acacho are key examples of these encounters. Most significantly, Correa has infamously described environmental and indigenous groups as 'infantile' and also as the greatest threat to his political agenda.

This growing tension between a strengthened state and vocal civil society sphere forms the paradox at the heart of this article. Does this relationship need to be seen as a zero-sum affair, where an increase in the power of one comes at the expense of the other? A corollary of this question in the Ecuadorian context of the ongoing tension between the state and environmental/indigenous organizations is the issue regarding who can speak for nature – an activity historically performed by civil society, particularly environmental and indigenous groups. Now that the state has joined the bandwagon, how does this affect civil society and new policies? This is particularly important in the Ecuadorian context since much of the tension between indigenous and environmental organizations and the state has concerned the role of nature for and within a development paradigm that can be a realistic alternative to neoliberal capitalism. Here nature is more than a symbolic arena for conflict: It is central to the project of creating an alternative as it is simultaneously a source of economic value and the source of a set of relations that underwrite the well-being of individuals as well as communities.

The aim of this article is therefore to examine the changing relationship between state and civil society in Ecuador within the context of debates regarding the role of nature in development. It does so by focusing on the formation and elaboration of the Yasuní-ITT proposal, which is emblematic of the alliance between environmental and indigenous organizations and the Ecuadorian state under Correa's presidency. The Yasuní-ITT

proposal concerns the extremely biodiversity-rich nature reserve in the Ecuadorian Amazon, which has been the subject of a new policy proposal that aims to bring Ecuador financial benefits for leaving the oil underground rather than pursuing extraction (Finer et al. 2010). The next section provides an overview of the context and process of Correa's rise and the subsequent agenda of 'refounding the state'. This discussion also highlights the growing tension between Correa and civil society, paying particular attention to the emblematic cases of conflict with environmentalists and indigenous rights groups. The third section discusses the Yasuní-ITT proposal to leave the oil underground. The goal here is not to provide an exhaustive discussion of the content of the proposal and its evolution, nor to critically analyze its nature and significance (for these discussions, cf. Rival 2010, Arsel forthcoming). Rather, based on interviews with key actors in civil society and contextualization of contemporary politics of Ecuadorian development, it discusses the evolving relationship between the state and civil society. The fourth and final section returns to the question of state power and its relevance in a socioeconomic context that requires the simultaneous achievement of rapid poverty-reducing economic growth and extensive preservation of natural resources.

RE-STATING DEVELOPMENT

The story of Correa's rise to power has been well documented (cf. Conaghan 2007; Pachano 2010; Kennemore and Weeks 2011). For the sake of brevity, it will suffice to highlight a number of dimensions of this process, which is part of a larger, regional transformation. Having followed a politically charged and intellectually confrontational strategy based on the *dependency* model in previous decades that failed to deliver sufficiently robust returns, Latin American progressive circles had little to offer by way of resistance against the penetration of globalizing market forces. More importantly, a coherent critique did not coalesce throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Marginalization of the poor, especially among indigenous populations, growing socioeconomic inequality and intensified exploitation of natural resources thus continued relatively unchallenged for much of this period. This can be thought of as the poverty of development thinking, not just in Latin America but globally, in terms of resisting the neoliberal market ideology which presents itself as ahistorical, natural and inevitable. The new Latin American left is best understood as an ongoing attempt to construct a counternarrative (Barrett et al. 2008; Weyland et al 2010) and Correa's statements that he intends to "refound" the country's institutions, particularly the state (Burbach 2007) should be read within this spirit of undoing the impacts of neoliberal policies.

This still emerging counternarrative owes much to the post-Cold War destigmatization of left wing politics and policy making and the concomitant rise of China, which has been pursuing a *sui generis* approach to harnessing capitalist forces using an interventionist state that rejects the economic and political tenets of neoliberalism. As with the Chinese case, the Latin American experiment in creating a post-neoliberal development strategy defies easy categorization. Politicians such as Chavez, Correa and Morales have, seemingly for the sake of political expediency, coined their projects as an attempt to form the 'Socialism of the 21st century' (Dietrich 2007) or, in the Bolivian case, 'Andean Amazonian capitalism' (Linera 2006). While these terms are rarely discussed in sufficient detail, in practice the state is once again privileged as a fundamentally important player in political, economic and cultural spheres.

Despite the vagueness of the narrative, the actual ‘playbook’ of these three leaders have a number of strong commonalities. The introduction of a new constitution that sets out a new post-neoliberal socioeconomic vision and, particularly in the Ecuadorian and Bolivian contexts, highlighting and reaffirming the role of indigenous communities is a step common to all three cases. With these significant yet primarily symbolic moves, these constitutions also introduce a number of actual changes to the governance structure of these countries. On the one hand, the role of the state is amplified in economic development. On the other hand, these changes help concentrate power in the executive branch, especially the presidency. Through such changes, Correa has not only increased the power of his office but also opened up for himself the possibility for two more terms of election.

In terms of development policy, two major trends have emerged in Ecuador. The first is the significant increase in entitlement programs targeted at various socioeconomic groups that are poor and marginalized. New or substantially augmented bonds have been put into place to improve Ecuadorian social policy. In addition, attempts have been made to increase the incomes of the working poor by, among other measures, raising the minimum wage by approximately two hundred and fifty percent since Correa’s election. Paralleling these increases in spending, there has been a major boost in public investments. The Correa regime has undertaken massive road building projects, introducing hundreds of kilometers of paved roads and building major bridges such as the one in Bahia de Caraquez. The largest and most significant of these projects is the controversial Coca Codo Sinclair dam project which is intended as a solution to Ecuador’s rapidly growing electricity shortfall (Caselli 2011).

Thus, putting a post-neoliberal counternarrative into practice means that state policy has to actively engage with the very issues that neoliberal policy left to the market at best or simply ignored: socioeconomic protection of the marginalized, economic redistribution, protection and preservation of nature and stimulation and active steering of economic processes to further buttress these goals. As a result, a new type of development ideology and outcome is expected to emerge. This new vision has been constructed around the concept of *buen vivir*, which builds on and mainstreams the indigenous concept of *sumak kawsay*. This, however, creates a strong tension between the means and goals of Ecuador’s development policies (Walsh 2010).

The resulting increases in public spending are at the heart of this tension. The massive dam project mentioned above will be financed primarily by China following a long running and complex negotiation process. The rest of increases in expenditures, however, have been financed mostly through government revenues. For Ecuador, borrowing the necessary funds at the international market is not a plausible option. This is because, since Correa ordered the cessation of interest payments on debts accrued under previous administrations, which he characterized as “obviously immoral and illegitimate” (BBC 2008), and negotiated the buyback of some of Ecuador’s debt, the country’s credit rating has been substantially downgraded. Some of this expenditure was made possible by oil prices that have stayed higher than historic averages, at times reaching rarely recorded highs. Nevertheless, neither increases in oil revenues nor tax collection has been sufficient so Correa has pursued new international economic partners to raise additional resources, as with the case of the controversial relationship with Iran.

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Similar to his colleagues in Bolivia and Venezuela, Correa has also sought to ‘nationalize’ extractive industries in order to find additional sources of revenues. While this is still an unfolding process, two dynamics can be observed clearly. First, contemporary nationalization in Ecuador does not necessarily mean the complete takeover of private enterprises by the state through quick expropriation, though there have been examples of this as well. Second, it is clear that the state is already playing a significantly increased role in the negotiation for contracts and operation of extractive industries with a view to securing an increased share of financial returns for the state. This has been particularly visible in the newly expanded mining sector, such as the two major contracts being negotiated with Chinese and Canadian corporations in the province of Zamora Chinchipe. This has meant that natural resource extraction has taken a renewed and intensified role in Ecuadorian development strategies (Arsel et al. 2011).

As described above, a state-centered approach to undoing the effects of neoliberalism and creating the preconditions for putting into practice a different vision and practice of development requires the state to invest significant financial resources in education, healthcare, social services and public service provision. The combination of a rich natural resource base and limited ability to raise financing through development aid or borrowing, coupled with the demands of an electoral democracy that requires political figures to produce quick and easily identifiable outcomes creates the conditions in which an extractivist development model is inevitable. Whether this is ‘old fashioned’ extractivism or neo-extractivism (Webber 2010), it creates a fundamental tension between the means and aims of development policy in Ecuador. Specifically, the new constitution has articulated a vision – the Regimen of Development - which seeks harmony among these difficult to reconcile components and is articulated as the

“organized, sustainable and dynamic ensemble of economic, political, socio-cultural and environmental systems that guarantee the realization of *buen vivir*, or *sumak kawsay*... *Buen vivir* requires that persons, [indigenous] nationalities and peoples, effectively enjoy their rights and exercise responsibilities in the frame of interculturality, respect for diversities, and harmonic co-existence with nature” (Quoted in Walsh 2010: 18-19)

Just as the centrality of indigenous people are acknowledged in the above passage, the constitution also transposes indigenous communities’ cosmovision for a national development imaginary by placing nature and its sanctity at the heart of this post-neoliberal vision:

Nature, or Pacha Mama, where life is reproduced and occurs, has the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes.

All persons, communities, peoples and nations can call upon public authorities to enforce the rights of nature. To enforce and interpret these rights, the principles set forth in the Constitution shall be observed, as appropriate (Political Database of the Americas 2008).

While indigenous communities have historically successfully blended a sense of good life with harmonious existence with nature, this becomes a much more conflictive proposition within the context of contemporary Ecuador. Specifically, the financial requirement of the

first goal – ensuring the ability of all groups within the society to ‘enjoy their rights’ – necessitates, especially within a state-centered development model, the expenditure of vast sums in order to create the preconditions of such enjoyment through healthcare, education, social and infrastructure expenses. This puts the second goal – respect for nature and the integrity of its ecosystems – into substantial peril as the financing necessary for the first goal, at least in the short term, can most easily come from an extractivist development model, whose negative impacts, while not necessarily always and everywhere inevitable, are certainly extremely difficult to keep in check. Said differently, the resulting paradigm has conflict at its heart as respect for the integrity of nature becomes both the foundational stone of post-neoliberal ideology of development but also the primary financing mechanism to achieve the strategy.

It is thus possible to understand much of recent Ecuadorian development debates from the prism of this conflict. Civil society organizations – including environmental NGOs and indigenous groups – have found much appeal in and put forward substantial support for the post-neoliberal development vision produced by the Correa regime which built its ideology upon ideas developed by social movements and other civil society actors. However, as the actual process of achieving this vision has become clearer, significant doubts have emerged not only regarding the possibility of balancing these two goals but also the sincerity of the regime. While some have dismissed the Correa government as just another neoliberal peon that works for multinational interests since it is willing to do business with oil and mining corporations, others have accused it of pursuing a classical development strategy that primarily perpetuates state power over nature and society without providing significant benefits to either.

This tension has been manifesting itself with increasing frequency and intensity since Correa assumed power in January 2007. Correa’s authority has been challenged from various quarters, most spectacularly in September 30, 2010 by the police force whose actions Correa himself labeled as an attempted ‘coup’. In most instances, Correa personally has pushed back at its critics, occasionally going beyond verbal confrontations into using the power of the state to squash dissent. The blustery rhetoric as in the above mentioned ‘infantile’ comment, has been only one part of the growing tension between Correa and environmental and indigenous organizations.

In 2010, arguably the most outspoken Ecuadorian environmental NGO, *Acción Ecológica*, was ordered to shut down by state authorities. The underlying reason was that *Acción Ecológica* was charged with undertaking activities that are not contained within its charter – an accusation that *Acción Ecológica* rejected as arbitrary use of state power with the intention of intimidating dissenting voices. Ivonne Ramos from *Acción Ecológica* has suggested that her organization’s criticism of the state’s extractivist policies was at the heart of the episode: “If the elimination of our legal status is a retaliation against our organization's opposition to government policies such as large-scale mining and the expansion of the oil frontier, it would set a precedent for authoritarianism that is intolerable in a democratic regime” (Denvir 2009).

Most recently, with Ecuador’s extractivist development model extending from oil to mining, state authorities have once again undertaken a drastic measure to confront another vocal critic, indigenous communities. On 31 January 2011, the outspoken indigenous leader

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Pepe Acacho, a former president of the Interprovincial Federation of Shuar Centers (FICSH) and a likely future president of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), was arrested in a raid involving a helicopter and masked policemen. The rarely used terrorism charge was brought up in this case on the grounds that Pepe Acacho had incited the use of violence during a demonstration in September 2010. The demonstration in question was organized by a number of indigenous federations in the southern Amazon, who were concerned about the changes to water and mining legislation that threatened indigenous livelihoods and environmental sustainability. Acacho's arrest came during the final stages of negotiation between the Ministry of Mines and two corporations, one Chinese and the other Canadian, to start large-scale mining operations in Zamora Chinchipe.

The arrest of Acacho is significant not simply because of the terrorism charge or its spectacular execution. It also concretely displays the growing fracture between Correa and his support base within environmental and indigenous organizations. To better understand this tension, the article next turns to the creation and development of the Yasuní-ITT proposal. This proposal is noteworthy because of its historic and symbolic potential for creating a new mechanism to balance the need of developing countries to benefit from their rich natural resource bases while preserving the integrity of globally-significant ecosystems. It is also important for showcasing the evolving relations between the state and civil society over the changing role of nature in constructing a post-neoliberal development model in which natural resource extraction plays a highly contentious role.

YASUNÍ-ITT INITIATIVE

The Yasuní-ITT initiative proposes to leave oil underground in exchange for financial contributions from developed nations. By so doing, it places the Ecuadorian state at the center of revenue generation by potentially eliminating not only (foreign) oil corporations but extraction itself completely within a small area of significant importance for its oil reserves and biodiversity. With wide ranging implications for both Ecuador and conservation in general, it is not surprising that a recent Ecuadorian governmental report was entitled 'A big idea from a small country' (Larrea n.d.).

The 'ITT' in the proposal's name refers to the Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini oil field, which is Ecuador's largest deposit and located within the the Yasuní National Park that was created in 1979. At 982000 hectares, it is the largest national park in Ecuador after the Galapagos Islands, and is singularly one of the most important sites for biodiversity anywhere on the planet (Finer et al. 2010). Home to 173 mammal species and over 40 percent of Ecuador's extremely rich and diverse bird population, one square mile of Yasuní has as many trees and shrubs species as in the whole of North America (Marx 2010). The park is also home to the Huoarani tribe as well as two related groups of 'uncontacted peoples', the Tagaeri and Taromenane. After the explorations for oil reserves and formal studies that were made since 1983 and later on in 1995 and 2003-2004, the ITT block of the Yasuní turned into a crucial economic and political factor for debate around fossil oil production in the country. Significant oil reserves have been estimated to be under the ground of this part of the Park. The field is a 200 km² area located in the west part of the Yasuní in the Ecuadorian Amazon, where proven reserves amount to as much as 412 million barrels of recoverable heavy oil and potential reserves up to 920 million barrels

(Fontaine 2007:12). A section of the southern part of the Yasuní was declared in 1999 as an ‘Intangible Zone’ for the protection of the uncontacted groups who are believed to be in voluntary isolation.

The Yasuní-ITT proposal was unveiled in June 2007 by Correa himself. The original version of the proposal asked the international community to compensate Ecuador with US\$ 350 million per year for ten consecutive years, representing a total sum that would be 50 per cent of the potential revenues Ecuador would forego by not extracting the oil. According to Acosta et al. (2009, p. 5), the proposal aimed to “achieve efficiency by making equity the first priority”. It also “seeks to establish a new foundation for North-South relations based on justice”.

The proposal has come to be identified very strongly with Correa himself as well as the Ecuadorian government under his regime. For instance, the Terms of Reference document signed with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in July 28, 2010 states that “President Correa’s vision of this pioneer proposal, unprecedented in the history of an oil-dependent country, has been received favorably by several governments and organizations around the world” (UNDP 2010). The practical aspect of leading the initiative has been associated with Correa as a recent *Financial Times* piece demonstrates: “Rafael Correa, president, is asking for \$3.6bn over 13 years in return for leaving the reserves in the ground” (Blair 2011). In this formulation, too, it is President Correa who is doing the asking, rather than the institutional structures of the government of Ecuador or the society itself. Reading such statements, it would be easy to assume that the Yasuní-ITT proposal is indeed the brainchild of Correa himself and that it has been developed and implemented mainly by the state in recent years. Indeed, Correa himself suggested such ownership when stating that the Yasuní-ITT initiative represents an “emblematic project of the citizen’s revolution”, of which he is the leader (Acosta 2010).

In reality, the intellectual roots of the Yasuní-ITT proposal predate the Correa regime and have emerged from outside his government, though many of the leading names behind the idea of leaving the oil underground have subsequently joined the Correa government and continued to work on the proposal not as members of the civil society but as part of Correa’s political project in official governmental capacities. The proposal to leave underground owes much to the work of Alberto Acosta, an influential figure with a background in business and academia, who also became for a while close collaborator of Correa. Having worked in the oil business, Acosta has developed a version of the classic ‘resource curse’ thesis, believing that Ecuador’s problems of poverty and underdevelopment cannot be solved, and in fact will be worsened, by continued dependence on the exploitation of its oil deposits. Acosta later published a clear statement of this vision in a book entitled ‘The Curse of Abundance’ (*Maldición de la Abundancia*) (Acosta 2009).

Along with Acosta, the environmental NGO Acción Ecológica has also been a key player in the development of the idea of abandoning extraction. Pursuing similar critiques, Acosta, Acción Ecológica and others have been long campaigning against the negative effects of oil extraction in the Amazon. According to Acción Ecológica’s Esperanza Martínez, the creation of the Oilwatch network in year 1996 contributed to the strengthening of and support to societal resistance against oil exploration and exploitation in the Amazon,

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creating protective spaces for them. With the establishment of this network, the idea of enacting an Oil Moratorium was put on the table. Such a moratorium would cover not only exploitation but also exploration since, as Martínez argues within the context of CO² emissions from oil that cause global climate change, “it is clear that if it is not possible anymore to consume what has been already discovered, why should there be exploration for more discoveries?” (Martínez 2010) The idea of not exploiting oil in the Yasuní was articulated as part of the Oil Moratorium’s initiative with a final document called “An Ecological (sic) call for conservation, climate and rights”. Oilwatch presented it in 2005 at an expert’s meeting held in Italy regarding protected areas. The idea started to gain momentum in Ecuador within the national debate on oil and sustainable development at a moment just before the process of campaigning for presidential elections began to place. The Oil Moratorium idea became included in Correa’s plan of government at his electoral campaign in 2006 and was officially taken up by Alberto Acosta when he became the Minister of Mines and Energy (as the ministry was known then).

It is important to mention within this regard that Pachamama, another prominent civil society actor that works on environmental and indigenous issues, had also been working on an alternative development plan for the Southern Centre-south Zone of the Ecuadorian Amazon (*Zona Centro-sur de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana*). Essentially, this plan highlighted the destructive impact of oil exploitation in the Amazon, calling for an end to further expansion and proposing alternative development strategies to benefit the indigenous communities.

If the presentation of the proposal for an oil moratorium can be seen as the moment of conception of the ‘leave oil underground’ idea, the subsequent appointment of Alberto Acosta as the Minister of Energy and Mines by the Government of Rafael Correa in 2007 can be seen as the beginning of a painful process of delivery of the Yasuní-ITT initiative. Alberto Acosta was only the most prominent of a spate of appointments that brought individuals coming from a civil society background to work for the state. Many of these had been involved in the discussions leading to the unveiling of the proposal. Espinoza Martínez, for example, states that Acción Ecológica had already discussed the Yasuní proposal before the Correa government took it up, with “at least five of the people who went on to become ministers in this government” (Martínez 2010). Another prominent example is Maria Fernanda Espinoza who was the regional director of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) before moving into the state, currently serving as the Minister of Coordination of Heritage.

This exodus of major figures from civil society to the state has had mixed results for the effectiveness of the latter. Without a doubt, the appointment of influential thinkers such as Alberto Acosta gave much credence and actual political power to the ideas of civil society. Yet, according to Eduardo Pichilingue, who himself made a move from non-governmental work to becoming the leading figure within the Ministry of Environment during the process of establishing an ‘Intangible Zone’ for the uncontacted people within the Yasuní argues that “civil society weakened to a great extent due to a shift of several civil society figures to positions within the state’s machinery”. Consequently, he argues that the agenda of civil society, especially with respect to environmental and human rights issues, “were consigned to oblivion” (Pichilingue 2010).

A number of interrelated considerations can explain the relocation of members of environmental and indigenous rights groups to the state. A chief explanation is that individuals such as Alberto Acosta were part of Correa's rise and were active players within the *Alianza PAIS*. Thus they had first joined a political movement, which eventually came to power. To that extent, some key figures seem to have not merely joined the state but actively campaigned to be a part of a political process that sought to change the governance of Ecuador by effectively taking over the state through democratic activism. Especially during the early days of Correa's rule, interviews with a broad swath of civil society actors revealed considerable optimism and excitement about the post-neoliberal turn Correa's election seemed to herald, giving some credence to the comparison that he was the "Obama of Latin America" (Collins 2009).

Another important consideration has certainly been the new constitution which not only acknowledged the plurinational character of the country and adapted indigenous conceptions of *buen vivir* as part of a national vision for development but also made Ecuador the first country to give constitutional rights to nature. Thus by unveiling the Yasuní-ITT proposal months into his tenure, Correa burnished his credentials as a change maker among civil society members. That the proposal was not fully adapting the ideas previously articulated by *Acción Ecológica* or Pachamama did not require civil society actors to keep a (confrontational) distance from the state as it was nevertheless a historic step in the right direction. This interpretation is confirmed by Natalia Green who considered it as a "model of transition through an experience occurring with the ITT fields" for a more comprehensive implementation later in other parts of the Ecuadorian Amazon (Green 2010).

The expectation of the civil society actors were that the process of developing, unveiling and adapting the proposal would follow an inclusive and participatory path. Part of this expectation was based on the above discussed optimism. The relevant sections of the new constitution also gave rise to expectations of meaningful and deep participation of civil society actors. For instance, Article 95 claims that:

Citizens, individually and collectively, shall participate as leading players in decision making, planning and management of public affairs and in the people's monitoring of State institutions and society and their representatives in an ongoing process of building citizen power. Participation shall be governed by the principles of equality, autonomy, public deliberation, respect for differences, monitoring by the public, solidarity and interculturalism.

The participation of citizens in all matters of public interest is a right, which shall be exercised by means of mechanisms of representative, direct and community democracy (Political Database of the Americas 2008).

The actual process however turned out to be far less participatory and inclusive. From the development of the project to its unveiling and later signing with the UNDP, civil society members, and particularly indigenous organizations, have stayed largely outside the process. The proposal was primarily discussed between the Ecuadorian state and international actors at the institutional level and local actors of civil society, such as the

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indigenous movement and the environmental movement, are only mentioned in the UNDP document by stating that they support the proposal.

For Carlos Larrea, a university professor who was charged with developing the proposal and becoming its technical director, the early period of the proposal development was dominated by technical, political and international arrangements within the government apparatus. Larrea considers this period as one of gestation and management of the initiative. He argues that due to those reasons, “the participation of civil society was difficult, because we didn’t know already what we were up to, so that implied that the participative nature of the initiative didn’t reach an optimal point” (Larrea 2010). From the vantage point of civil society, however, Sigrid Vasconez of *Grupo Faro* perceives this as more than an unfortunate inability and points out the irony that the lack of participation of civil society was perpetrated by actors within the state who themselves had recently been key leaders in civil society:

“...they are very closed [to the outside and to civil society], at the ceremony of the singing agreement they were all ambassadors, people from the government and the crazy thing is that we have to remember that [many of] the people in the government, they come from civil society...” (Vasconez 2010)

Therefore, what had started as part of a long-standing indigenous and environmentalist resistance against oil exploitation in the Amazon and later became articulated as an idea of the civil society to reshape Ecuadorian democracy, had effectively been appropriated by a state machinery whose actions and processes – regardless of their intent – had marginalized the very people that advocated the proposal in the first place. Thus, Vasconez argues that the Yasuní-ITT proposal had become the “State’s strategy” (ibid.)

This change of ownership has particularly been difficult for the indigenous communities. In keeping with the unfortunate tradition in Ecuador as well as much of Latin America of making policy for or in the name of indigenous people, the Yasuní-ITT proposal has been portrayed by the state as a key policy demonstrating its concern for indigenous livelihoods and well-being. Miguel Guatemal, vice-president of CONAIE, the highly important and powerful federation of indigenous organizations, perceives their isolation in stark terms: “...everything that the government wants, has to happen; in other words, we as the indigenous, have to accept everything that they say, so there is non-dialogue (sic), rather there is a direct imposition” (Guatemal 2010).

For another indigenous activist, Manuela Ima, chairwoman of the Association of the Waorani Women of Ecuadorian Amazon, this forms a clear case of trespassing, the government stepping into an area that belongs first and foremost to indigenous people. Speaking about an occasion when she had a chance to speak with Correa, she articulates the relationship between the state and indigenous communities using the metaphor of the privacy of a house: “What do you think if I enter into your house through the door with my shoes on, wanting to occupy this place? You would say...this is not your house, it is my house, you are getting it dirty” (Ima 2010).

However accurate as it may be, Ima’s analogy of an individual trespassing into the domain of another fails to capture an important dimension of the dynamics behind the Yasuní-ITT proposal. Once the state became involved in the process of articulating a new development vision that purported to be environmentally sensitive and cognizant of the needs of

indigenous peoples, an entire new set of bureaucratic processes were unleashed. This bureaucratic system, given its complexity and insularity, however, inhibits the participation of actors from the civil society. Miguel Guatemal argues that the dominating institutional presence of the ministries in question – such as that of the environment, natural resources, etc. – leave little or no room for participation from civil society and other concerned actors who have been engaged in environmental protection and indigenous rights activism long before the ministers themselves were appointed and from a much broader perspective.

Speaking from the ‘inside’, Larrea paints a contrasting picture. Whereas from the outside the state seems closed and overwhelming, a sense of confusion and disorder prevails within its internal institutional architecture. Noting that the institutional design for the promotion of the Yasuní proposal has changed several times, he states that “it hasn’t been a stable evolution in time”. First the initiative was under the administration of Maria Fernanda Espinoza at the Chancellor Office and later Maria Isabel Salvador from the same ministry took over. Next, a technical secretariat independent from the Chancellor’s Office was established for a short time period coordinated by Juana Ramos. Later on the initiative came back under the Chancellor’s Office, where a Committee for the administration and direction of the initiative was established, chaired by Roque Sevilla. The latter lasted until January 2010, where again the initiative moved on to be promoted by three commissions politically chaired by the current minister of Foreign Affairs, Maria Fernanda Espinoza. “So, there has been a constant change in the institutionalism, what has created certain instability” (Larrea 2010).

Therefore, rather than an effective bureaucratic mechanism, the Yasuní-ITT proposal was left to the vagaries of a political process where complex calculations both of Correa and those surrounding him further exacerbated the instability of the process. In the meantime, despite the lofty ambitions of the proposal, the Correa government has refused to rule out extraction in the Yasuní Park, while pursuing potential concessions with Chinese and Brazilian corporations to begin oil extraction. Simultaneously, in light of its inability to attract sufficient serious interest in the initiative from the international community, the state put forward a renewed proposal in 2009, changing both the terms of the proposal and the language of its appeal.

The new proposal puts the focus singularly on global climate change and the Yasuní’s role in averting it by arguing that a decision not to extract the oil would avoid the emission of 407 million tons of carbon dioxide. Instead of direct cash transfers – which gave the donors very little concrete incentive beyond contributing to international sustainable development – the new proposal establishes Yasuní Guarantee Certificates (CGY in its Spanish acronym) to be traded within the European Union Emission Trading Scheme. While such credits are not recognized in the existing Kyoto Protocol mechanisms, the Ecuadorian government hopes to include them within a potential deal at the future climate summits. If pursued successfully, the plan would bring approximately \$7 billion to Ecuador, which corresponds to the value of the oil proposed to be left untouched (Finer et al. 2010).

With strong German support as well as serious interest from Spain, Italy and other nations, a deal was put on the table during the Copenhagen climate negotiations. Yet, in a surprise move on 9 January 2010, Correa criticized the Copenhagen team in his weekly radio

address for accepting conditions in the UNDP trust fund that were "shameful" and that "threatened the sovereignty" of their country (Martin, 2010). Faced by this rebuke, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Fander Falconi resigned from his post and Correa threatened to go ahead with the extraction. In the ensuing national debate, Correa subsequently toned down his rhetoric, establishing a new – expanded – commission to lead the efforts which resulted in the agreement signed with the UNDP. The option of a 'Plan B' to continue with extraction was kept on the table.

'STATING' NATURE OR THE NATURE OF THE STATE?

Insofar as the power of the Ecuadorian state as well as its centrality for societal development has recently increased, this is not necessarily a new phenomenon and has a number of historical parallels. In previous episodes of ascendant state power, similar policies and outcomes to those described here could have been observed. Indeed, terms such as 'nationalization' and 'authoritarianism' have a long and complex history in Ecuador as with the rest of the region. There is, however, a fundamental exception to this well-worn pattern. Whereas previous state-centric development approaches too have looked upon nature – or more accurately, exploitation of nature – as the driving force of socioeconomic development and thus sought to bring nature and its role in economic development under state control, these episodes did not take the state into the realm of environmentalism. In other words, a relatively clean-cut division of labour had prevailed until recently: the state sought to transform and 'develop' nature (and those dependent on it, e.g. indigenous populations) whereas civil society resisted these efforts in the name of environmental preservation and indigenous rights. With the Yasuní-ITT initiative, however, it is possible to argue that the Ecuadorian state has effectively begun to colonize not only the role of the civil society as the defender of nature but its societal space as well.

For example, previously, sentences such as these below could only have been spoken by an environmental activist:

“Ecuador is a marginal country in terms of emissions (less of 1% of the worldwide total), but in which the impacts of the Climate Change could cause the gradual transformation of tropical forests on savannahs; the replacement of semi-arid vegetation in barren; a significant loss of the biodiversity; and the backward movement of glaciers and changes in the precipitation regime with potential impacts in the availability of water for human consumption.”

Yet they come from the speech Correa gave at the United Nations where he officially unveiled the Yasuní-ITT initiative in 2007 (Correa 2007). Whereas such 'green' pronouncements have recently been uttered by many a head of state with little change in actual policy making, the concept behind the Yasuní-ITT initiative, if not the actual policy which has a number of problems and shortcomings, makes this a significant break in environmental politics as well as conceptions of the role of nature in development.

It is, in fact, possible to identify two significant and separate dimensions. The first is that “the Ecuadorian proposal seeks to transform the old conceptions of the economy and the concept of the value.” How meaningful this transformation can become remains to be seen, with the gradual slide of the proposal towards market-based payments for ecosystem services promising to undermine the novelty of the proposal to a certain extent. The

second dimension, the escalation of the state's remit from merely making environmental policy to taking on the preservation of nature as a whole is of great significance. This is doubly so within the context of Ecuador as Correa has proclaimed since, “[f]or the first time an oil producer country...where a third of the resources of the State depends on the exploitation of [natural] resources, resigns this income for the well-being of the whole humanity”.

Both dimensions have a unique commonality: the state. The first – new forms of value – can only be delivered and exchanged using the institutional, bureaucratic and legal capabilities of the state. Despite the growing importance of non-governmental organizations in the international sphere, the state and the power its territorial and legal sovereignty bestows it remain unmatched in terms of their legitimizing capability. Just as with the financial sector whose dependence on the state for regulation, steering and ultimately bailing-out has been laid bare by the Great Recession, the new sphere of environmental value is dependent on the willingness and ability of the state to not only ‘create’ it – as proposed by the Yasuní-ITT proposal – but also to back it up. No other agent – be they corporations, international organizations or domestic civil society actors – can, at least for the time being, fulfill the same role. The second dimension – entrenchment of the preservation of nature into an institutional code – has begun to take place with the changes made to the Ecuadorian constitution to grant rights to nature. Once again, and even more so than the first dimension, no other public or private body is capable of matching the state's unique capability to create and enforce a constitution.

These observations then suggest that neither the entry of the state into the domain of civil society nor its subsequent exclusion of the very actors who have not only performed the duty of environmental and indigenous rights advocacy and developed policy frameworks to back them up can be considered accidental. Carlos Larrea confirms this by explaining that when a policy becomes a state policy and is taken into a constellation of legal, bureaucratic and political mechanisms which privilege the state as the main, if not the only, actor endowed with the ability to take action that is recognized as meaningful, this essentially negates the possibility of meaningful participation and inclusion:

“Once the policy is defined as the state's – because according to the constitution and the Ecuadorian laws the only one that can take decisions about the extraction of oil is the state – the only one that has the political ability to promote or not the initiative is the state” (Larrea 2010).

As Barry and Eckersley express with acute insight, “[the] modern environmental movement has long been ambivalent in its attitude toward the state and the state system” because of the “contradictory role that states have played in facilitating both environmental degradation and environmental protection” (2005: ix). In terms of the paradox stated at the beginning of the article regarding the power dynamics between state and civil society, the case of Ecuador makes for an excellent site to inquire into the future of the relationship between the state and civil society as the state increases its willingness and ability to undertake the defense of nature. Unfortunately, the preceding analysis shows that the entry of the state into the domain of nature preservation not only can serve to alienate civil society, it can exacerbate existing conflicts. This is primarily because of the long-standing central function of the state in developing societies: to deliver socioeconomic development.

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Whereas in affluent (post-)industrial societies it might be possible to envision a transition from a welfare state to an eco-state (Meadowcroft 2009), in developing nations such as Ecuador the role of the state as both the developer and the preserver need to be undertaken simultaneously. This is perhaps why Correa, in a speech he delivered at Chatham House in London on 27 October, 2009, affirmed not only that “[like] friendship, happiness and security, the environment is priceless” but also that the income the Ecuadorian state could earn from exploiting the oil under the Yasuní – US\$ 720 million to be precise – “is needed for schools, hospitals, [and] hydroelectric dams” (Correa 2009). Given the uncertainties and pitfalls surrounding both tasks, the risk that conflicts between civil society organizations and the state are likely to intensify in Ecuador (and beyond) remains unfortunately real.

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