

Commentary

Dilemmas for the Ecuadorian left in the shadow of Correa

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Perplexing neoliberal victories

Daniel Noboa's victory in the second round of the presidential elections on 15 October 2023 was perplexing for supporters of the former president, Rafael Correa. How did a right-wing candidate with a similar neoliberal agenda to the deeply unpopular outgoing president, Guillermo Lasso, defeat Luisa González, the left-leaning candidate of the *correísta* party, Revolución Ciudadana? Surely, after six years of International Monetary Fund (IMF)-sponsored neoliberal austerity, soaring violence, escalating poverty and surging migration, the time was ripe for a *correísta* president to steer the country away from the abyss? Understanding why Ecuadorians opted for Noboa, a member of one of Ecuador's wealthiest families, over González, a loyal *correísta*, requires looking back at Correa's decade-long presidency and delving into the nature of *correísmo*, the political movement that he leads from Belgium. Unpacking *correísmo* and exploring its complicated relationships with progressive organisations and movements reveal the dilemmas that the Ecuadorian left faces as it attempts to build a lasting alternative to neoliberal capitalism.¹

By placing *correísmo* at the centre of my analysis, I am not suggesting that the movement is responsible for the catastrophe that Ecuador is experiencing, a common claim of right-wing commentators as well as some on the left. Nor do I overlook the structural factors that complicate building and sustaining left movements in Ecuador. The peripheral position that the country occupies in the capitalist world economy creates significant obstacles, while dollarisation, which was hastily introduced in 2000, brings additional problems. Drug trafficking, especially of cocaine, creates further

challenges as Ecuador is strategically placed at the centre of the international drug market. Yet critical reflection on the nature and evolution of *correísmo* is crucial to understanding the current conjuncture in Ecuador and the potential for the left to mobilise and plot a progressive path out of the crisis. A more sober reading of *correísmo* also provides a correction for the uncritical treatment Correa often receives in the international left press, which glosses over the limitations of *correísmo* and gives a distorted view of politics in Ecuador.

In this article I highlight three interrelated factors – extractivism, centralism, authoritarianism – that undermined *correísmo*, distanced it from social movements and trade unions and limited its progressive potential. Meanwhile, a fourth factor – the idolisation of Correa – has trapped the movement in the past and closed down space for reflection and renewal. To make this argument, I look back at Correa’s presidency before tracing the move to neoliberal austerity and socioeconomic collapse under Moreno, Lasso and Noboa. Claiming that *correísmo* will remain a significant political force for the foreseeable future, I conclude by considering the potential for progressive political change through, alongside and against *correísmo*. The fundamental challenge, I argue, is to construct a broad and plural left movement that respects diversity and autonomy and leverages a growing environmental consciousness to build a progressive and democratic vision of the future. Such a vision, however difficult to formulate, could counter the ruin offered by neoliberal capitalism as it slowly moves from its zombie to moribund form, becoming increasingly dystopian in the process.²

Between hope and tension

Reflecting on his election victory in 2006, the first of three successive triumphs at the polls, Correa recalled in an interview in the *New Left Review* that during the electoral campaign ‘we were clearly aware that what we were proposing was a revolution, understood as a radical and rapid change in the existing structures of Ecuadorean society, in order to change the bourgeois state into a truly popular one’.³ Moves in this direction came in the opening years of his presidency. Shortly after taking office, Correa formed a Constituent Assembly to rewrite the country’s neoliberal 1998 constitution. The new constitution that emerged through this process, which was approved by a referendum in 2008, was radical and progressive.⁴ Citizenship, for example, was implicitly extended to non-humans by bestowing nature with rights, while *Pachamama* – Mother Earth – entered the constitutional lexicon for the first time. Other important elements included prohibiting the privatisation of water, promoting food sovereignty and land redistribution, centring development around *buen vivir/sumak kawsay* and classifying Ecuador a plurinational state. Nonetheless, writing the constitution exposed tensions within the broad left movement that supported Correa’s ascent to the presidency and these deepened when his government started converting the constitution into law and developing its own political programme – the *revolución ciudadana* (citizen’s revolution).⁵

Expanding extractive frontiers

Extractivism quickly emerged as a central cleavage. Correa insisted that Ecuador’s mineral and oil deposits should be exploited to support public investment in health, education, welfare and infrastructure.⁶ Thus, unlike the constitution, the *revolución ciudadana* was anthropocentric to its core. Nature was seen as something external to plunder and put at the service of state-directed capitalist development.⁷ Correa envisaged using some of the funds generated through this process to support industrial policy and structural transformation. Some steps were taken in this direction, including elaborating economic plans, strengthening state bureaucracies, creating and bolstering public enterprises and protecting local industries. Reflecting Correa’s modernising vision of capitalist development, a new technology hub – *Yachay* – was also opened.⁸ However, no attempts were made to transform the agriculture sector. To support agribusinesses and landowning elites, the Correa government protected property rights and eschewed land reform, leaving intact a highly unequal agrarian structure.⁹ The *revolución agraria* (agrarian revolution) that Correa had promised amounted to nothing – agroexporting elites continued to wield considerable political-economic power and most small-scale farmers remained mired in poverty and precarity.¹⁰ Thus, despite efforts to diversify

production through state intervention, the macroeconomic structure remained dominated by primary exports, leaving Correa's political project at the mercy of international markets.

Oil was a crucial source of government revenues, putting the Amazonian region and Amazonian Indigenous peoples at the front line of the *revolución ciudadana*. To strengthen state control of the sector, contracts with foreign companies were rewritten and a new state-owned enterprise, Petroamazonas, was created to operate alongside the long-standing state-owned company, Petroecuador. The restructuring of the sector stopped well short of nationalisation and private firms continued to operate. However, state-owned firms became more dominant, and the central government took a larger share of oil revenues. Following a 'compensatory state' logic, oil revenues were then channelled into public spending, including in Amazonian nations and communities in some cases.¹¹ Momentarily, at least, this served to legitimise oil production and bolster support for Correa. Unsatisfied with simply exploiting existing oil fields, his government set about expanding the oil frontier in the Amazon by inviting offers to develop new deposits.¹² Plans were also made to build a new oil refinery on the Pacific coast to bolster the sector and supercharge oil production.¹³

Mining was identified as another key source of government revenues and several industrial mining projects were targeted for development in the Andes.¹⁴ Lacking a state-owned company with the technology and capital to mine at industrial scale, the Correa government turned to multinational corporations to develop these mines, especially Canadian and Chinese firms. Drawing on the constitution, which mandates that the state should take at least a 50 per cent share of the revenues generated by extractive operations, the government initially played hard ball with private mining firms, leading some to choose to downscale their operations.¹⁵ However, negotiations with Chinese companies followed a different logic, with the government's acquiescence more easily achieved, seemingly because of the multi-billion-dollar loans that it took out with Chinese state entities. The tough line that the Correa government took with private mining companies eased over time and it introduced incentives and established a new mining ministry to capture foreign direct investment.¹⁶ The outcome was the expansion of the extractive frontier in the Andes and the uneven and contested development of industrial mining projects in vital ecosystems throughout the region.

The state-directed expansion of extractive industries was met with considerable resistance and community organisations and social movements used a range of tactics to challenge mining and oil projects. The Confederación de las Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador – CONAIE) was at the centre of this struggle.

Centralism versus plurinationalism

Faced with the expansion of extractive frontiers, CONAIE attempted to steer Ecuador along a post-extractivist path to a plurinational state – that is, a new state form that recognises the country's colonial history and diverse social structure, which comprises multiple ethnic and racial groups as well as several Indigenous nations.¹⁷ The creation of a plurinational state implies a definitive break with liberal state institutions and the creation of participatory forms of democracy and planning at multiple scales. While the 2008 constitution declares Ecuador a plurinational state, the Correa government worked hard to prevent it from materialising. One way of achieving this was by centralising power around the president and state agencies. It was here that Correa's claim that he was leading a movement to create a 'truly popular' state rang particularly hollow. Rather than responding to social movement demands to democratise and plurinationalise the state apparatus, his government opted instead to centralise power and authority at every opportunity.

The struggle over the introduction of a comprehensive new water law highlights this general tendency. The Correa government's efforts to drive through its state-centric legislative proposal in 2009 and 2010 were frustrated after protests by community water systems and Indigenous and peasant movements forced a national consultation on the law.¹⁸ Yet the consultation process, the largest of its kind in Ecuador, was a tightly controlled, top-down process aimed at manufacturing consent rather than stimulating debate and revising the legislation. Introduced in 2014, the final version of the law therefore remained in the spirit of the original government proposal and, as such, limited democratic control of water and undermined the autonomy of community water systems.¹⁹ The government's failure to take social movement demands seriously was evident in the role given to the Consejo Plurinacional del

Agua (Plurinational Water Council) in the new water regime. The council had its origins in the CONAIE legislative proposal that was submitted to the National Assembly at the start of the legislative process in late 2009. However, the form it took in the approved law was radically different. Rather than being a central regulatory and planning body that comprised members of social movements, community water systems, public water companies and state agencies, it was given a secondary role and decision-making power was vested in state bureaucracies answerable to the president. The plurinational water council was so marginal to the Correa government's plans and CONAIE was so disillusioned by the consultation process that it was never actually established.

Authoritarian populism

One way that the Correa government attempted to limit the political fallout from its failure to take seriously the demands of social movements and trade unions was authoritarianism. This took multiple forms. The media was quickly identified as a key target for repression.²⁰ Newspapers like *El Universo* and *El Comercio*, and private radio and television channels, have long protected the interests of economic elites and promoted hegemonic ideologies in Ecuador, most recently that of neoliberalism. Correa responded to this threat by establishing a new bureaucratic framework to regulate and discipline media companies and workers. Missing an opportunity to plurinationalise and democratise media, the framework his government established through a new media law was highly technocratic and closely controlled by the president.²¹ The daily newspaper *Hoy*, at times highly critical of Correa,²² was one of the highest-profile victims of the tougher media regulation, ceasing publication in 2014. Meanwhile, the state-owned newspaper *El Telégrafo* and state-controlled radio and television stations became ever more subservient to Correa. The control that the president exerted over regulatory agencies and state media was accentuated by the personal attacks and lawsuits he dished out to journalists who publicly criticised him.²³ Although right-wing commentators were the main target of his abuse, this nevertheless created an atmosphere of fear and intimidation across the political spectrum and closed down space for critique and debate.

Correa's authoritarian discourse and tactics were not limited to elite-dominated domains such as the media. Indeed, a key pillar of the *revolución ciudadana* was to limit and control left organisations and movements and attempt to align them with *correísmo*.²⁴ Introduced in 2013, the Sistema Unificado de Información de las Organizaciones Sociales (Unified System of Information on Social Organisations) established a bureaucratic structure to register, monitor, and sanction a wide range of social organisations. This was combined with more proactive efforts to control left-wing organisations and movements. For example, the government established a parallel organisation, Red de Maestros por la Revolución Educativa (Network of Teachers for the Educational Revolution), to reduce the power of the long-standing national teacher union, Union Nacional de Educadores (National Union of Educators), before attempting to close it down in 2016.²⁵ Meanwhile, the student union, Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios del Ecuador (Federation of University Students of Ecuador), was infiltrated to strengthen representation in student bodies, reduce the influence of rival left political parties, like the Movimiento Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Movement), and align students with the *revolución ciudadana*.²⁶ The Correa government combined this with increased investment in education, including student scholarships, indicating its use of both the 'left' and 'right' hand of the state to weaken opposition and build popular support.²⁷

CONAIE, the most powerful social movement in Ecuador, was also fixed firmly in Correa's sights and his government worked hard to divide and control it.²⁸ Chimborazo, the site of historic Indigenous struggles, was singled out for special attention, and Correa's government used a variety of tactics to weaken CONAIE's bases in the province and align them with the *revolución ciudadana*. On the one hand, public investment was channelled into the construction of visible infrastructure like roads and schools, while cash transfers and small-scale development projects were rolled out to strengthen ties with Indigenous peoples. On the other hand, the government and the *correísta* party, Alianza País, infiltrated Indigenous communities, organisations and movements and co-opted Indigenous leaders and discourses. This was accompanied by the repression of CONAIE members and efforts to sow division within the Indigenous movement.

One such attempt took place in Riobamba in August 2015 when a pro-water anti-mining march organised by CONAIE passed through the highland city.²⁹ On the day, the government organised a *feria ciudadana* (citizen's market) in the forecourt of the train station and built a platform for speakers and music to ensure a strong state presence in the city. Parroting Correa, speakers aligned with the government repeatedly referred to CONAIE leaders as *golpistas* (coup agitators), while taunts such as '*somos más, mucho más*' ('we are more, many more') and '*la policía está con la revolución ciudadana*' ('the police is with the citizen's revolution') were frequently chanted. Later in the day, counter-protestors from local communities were shipped in to declare their support for Correa. The police presence increased throughout the day and fences were erected to separate the two groups. By the time the CONAIE march arrived in the early evening, the site resembled a war zone, with the main road and train station heavily fortified. The CONAIE protestors were tightly policed and abuse was hurled at them as they passed the government-organised event and made their way into the centre of the city.

Local conflicts such as these were replicated at a national level and Correa's verbal attacks on CONAIE were combined with state propaganda designed to portray Indigenous peoples opposed to his government as violent extremists. Hundreds of Indigenous leaders and protestors were charged or imprisoned during his presidency, often on the grounds of sabotage, sedition and terrorism.³⁰ Correa also threatened to expel CONAIE from its headquarters in Quito before backing down after widespread national and international criticism.³¹

Correa employed similar tactics to repress the wider environmental movement that challenged his extractive and anthropocentric discourses and policies. Fundación Pachamama was closed down in 2013, while Accion Ecológica, a highly respected national environmental organisation, was threatened with a similar fate in 2016 and 2017.³² Local protests against oil and mining were also singled out for repression. This included, as Teresa Velásquez documents, a litany of threats and abuse that Correa meted out to environmental activists, such as personal insults and attacks during his lengthy weekly radio and television broadcasts.³³

Correa's disdain for the environmental activists and movements also resulted in the shutting down of democratic processes, reinforcing the centralising tendencies of *correísmo*. One clear example of this was Correa's treatment of the Yasuni/ITT (Ishpingo, Tambococha, Tiputini) initiative.³⁴ This pioneering scheme, which emerged from decades of anti-oil activism in the Amazonian region, proposed leaving deposits in the ITT oil fields underground. The logic was brilliantly simple. By not exploiting the oil – equivalent to more than 850 million barrels – the initiative would limit carbon emissions and support global efforts to tackle climate change. In exchange, the Ecuadorian state would receive compensation of \$3.6 billion from overseas governments, international organisations and individual donations. Correa originally supported the initiative but became progressively less committed to it as financial contributions fell well short of the target. Given the strength of the international oil lobby and the weakness of public finances in the wake of the 2007–8 financial crisis, few governments or organisations were willing to make substantial contributions. Eyeing revenues from ITT to fund the *revolución ciudadana* during his second full term in office, he unilaterally closed down the scheme in 2013 and announced plans to start production in the oil fields.³⁵ Yasunidos, a broad-based environmental movement, sprung up to challenge the decision and demanded a referendum on the initiative. Collecting over 700,000 signatures, Yasunidos surpassed the threshold to call a national referendum.³⁶ However, the electoral authorities claimed hundreds of thousands of the signatures were fake and rejected the proposal.³⁷ Having successfully blocked the referendum, the Correa government instructed the state-owned oil company Petroamazonas to prepare the ITT oil fields for production, which commenced in 2016.

Belittling environmental activists and attacking Indigenous movements was part of Correa's wider effort to construct an 'enemy' of the *revolución ciudadana* and govern through an 'us versus them' populist logic.³⁸ This might have been an effective political strategy at the start of Correa's presidency to build popular support for a left-wing project. Then, following decades of neoliberal restructuring, socioeconomic collapse and popular protests, the 'us' could plausibly be constructed as the labouring masses, including the working class and much of the middle class, and the 'them' as the domestic elites, multinational corporations and international financial institutions. But, over time, this binary became difficult to sustain as the Correa government became increasingly hostile to social movements and trade unions and started to pander to domestic and international elites. The line between 'us' and 'them' started to blur and Correa's populist strategies became progressively less effective and more destructive.

Correa's successes

Alongside these troubling elements of Correa's presidency, there were also important improvements. This helps explain the enduring appeal of *correísmo* and the core constituency of followers it has cultivated and maintained.

Following two decades of economic decline and crisis, the Correa government set about stabilising and rebuilding the economy through a process of state-centric capitalist development. Market and firm regulation tightened and the government employed heterodox macroeconomic policies to stimulate economic growth and reduce poverty, precarity and inequality, including the periodic use of capital and trade controls and countercyclical fiscal policies.³⁹ Liberal trade relations were critiqued and avoided; however, Correa eventually succumbed to export and import elites in 2014 and agreed a free trade agreement with the European Union. His government negotiated some concessions.⁴⁰ Yet the agreement, which came into effect in 2017, remained neoliberal in character and entrenched centre and periphery relations between Ecuador and Europe.

In terms of monetary policy, dollarisation was retained, which significantly reduced the potential for political-economic transformation. However, political control of the central bank strengthened and financial regulation increased. Signalling a move away from dependence on international financial markets, the Correa government defaulted on tranches of public overseas debt in late 2008, which reduced debt servicing and increased funds for public investment.⁴¹ Locked out of international financial markets because of the default, Correa turned to Chinese state agencies for funding, which included the advance sale of oil.⁴² Turning to China for credit enabled his government to avoid the liberal economic reforms that international financial institutions demand, especially the IMF. However, it provided Chinese firms with preferential access to mining projects and, hence, deepened extractivism.

Correa's discourse against multinational corporations and economic elites softened over time. Nonetheless, his government introduced some important policies that altered capital-labour-class relations. In accordance with the constitution, it withdrew from international investment dispute-settlement mechanisms and supported efforts to strengthen Latin American institutions aimed at limiting the power of multinational corporations.⁴³ No radical labour policies or initiatives were introduced and informal labour remained ubiquitous.⁴⁴ However, labour regulation was tightened, the minimum wage was increased and social security was augmented to incorporate a larger share of formal workers. Meanwhile, the public sector was expanded and better funded, improving the wages and conditions of public sector workers after decades of precarity and instability and also generating formal employment.

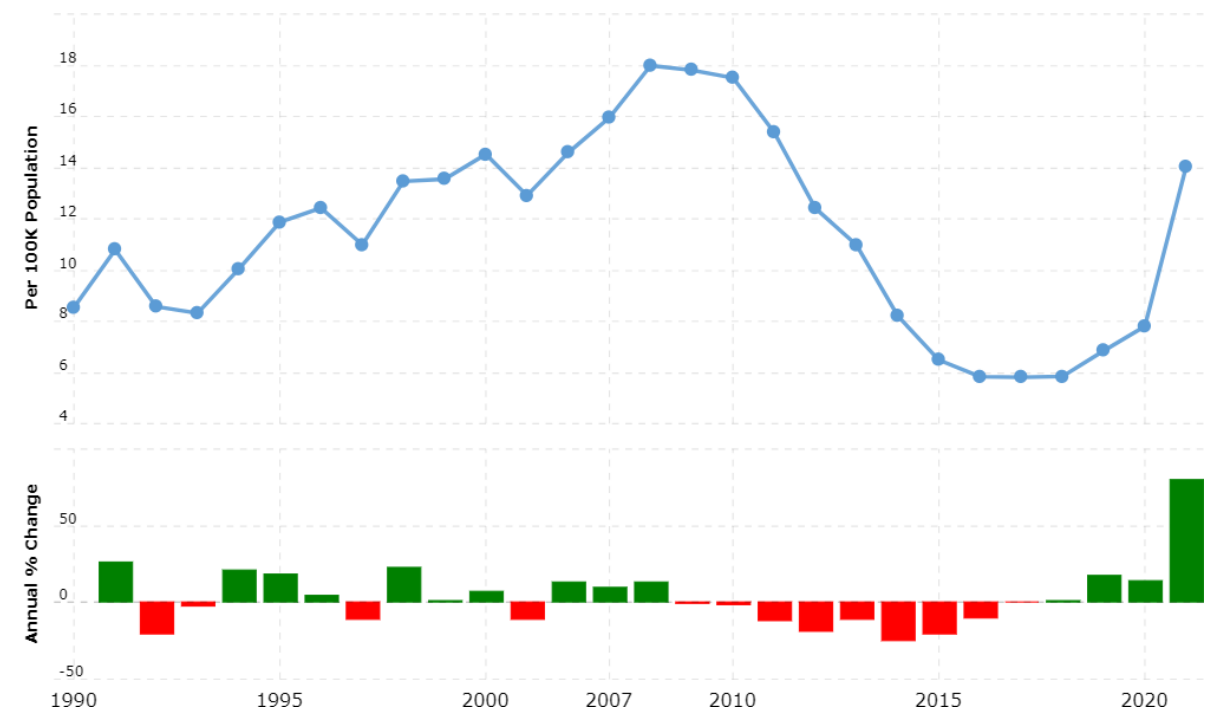
The headline macroeconomic outcome of Correa's heterodox policies was a relatively long period of stable economic growth. Gross domestic product per capita grew 1.5 per cent between 2006 and 2016, whereas it had increased only 0.6 per cent between 1980 and 2006.⁴⁵ While this was partly due to the global commodity boom, which saw oil prices momentarily rise to record highs, it was also down to the government's heterodox policies, which boosted domestic demand, redistributed income and created macroeconomic stability – for a time, at least.

Important improvements were also made in other areas. New infrastructure, including roads, schools, hospitals and airports, was constructed following decades of neglect and decay. The railway that connects the Andes to the Pacific was also partially restored to boost tourism, while a metro was planned for the capital city, Quito, and a new tram network was (eventually) opened in the southern highland city of Cuenca.⁴⁶ Public spaces were revitalised through investment in infrastructure and labour and new public parks were opened. More public funds were channelled into health and education and investment in arts and culture increased, including in national television and film production.⁴⁷

Social protection also strengthened. The main cash transfer programme – the *Bono de Desarrollo Humano* (Human Development Grant) – was bolstered. While the size of the monthly grant remained pitifully small – \$50 at the end of Correa's presidency – this was a substantial increase and the reach of the programme also expanded significantly. Poverty rates fell sharply, even if they remained elevated in rural areas.⁴⁸ Novel programmes were also introduced to tackle crime and marginalisation, including the legalisation of street gangs, the implementation of innovative projects to support gang members and the permission to use small amounts of illicit drugs for personal use.⁴⁹ More conventional forms of tackling crime were also strengthened, including significant investment in the police and prisons.⁵⁰ With

public investment increasing and poverty and inequality declining, crime and violence decreased rapidly and the homicide rate plunged to multi-decade lows (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Homicide rate, Ecuador, 1990–2021 (Source: Macrotrends/World Bank)



Thus, Correa's presidency was marked by notable socioeconomic improvements, reversing decades of decline and crisis. Yet heavy reliance on primary exports, especially oil, made the *revolución ciudadana* prone to the vagaries of international markets and when oil prices slumped in 2014, the government was forced to scale back spending and increase overseas debt. This included a \$7.5 billion loan from China in 2015 and a \$1 billion government bond issue in 2016.⁵¹ The government also negotiated a \$1 billion credit line with the World Bank in 2014 and secured a \$364 million emergency loan from the IMF in 2016 after a devastating earthquake that killed more than 600 people.⁵² Spending cuts were also implemented, resulting in the closure of public enterprises and entities, including the public pharmaceutical firm Enfarma.⁵³

The collapse of oil prices forced the government to search for alternative sources of revenue. Until then, tax changes had been modest and focused largely on expanding the tax base by enforcing tax laws. The government targeted some economic elites, most notably the banana magnate and five-time presidential candidate, Álvaro Noboa.⁵⁴ However, pressure to comply was most strongly applied to small and medium-sized businesses. Public spending was mainly driven by oil revenues and Chinese loans, enabling the Correa government to avoid introducing tax policies that seriously threatened elite interests. By introducing a new land tax and clamping down on land speculation, the so-called *Ley de Plusvalía* marked a change in direction.⁵⁵ The law, which was approved in late 2016 despite strong opposition from the upper middle class and economic elite, taxed *ganancias extraordinarias* (extraordinary profits) generated through land value increases.

Coming in the twilight of Correa's presidency and being reformist in character, this law, along with a new land law introduced around the same time, points to the lack of radicalism of the *revolución ciudadana*.⁵⁶ While Correa talked of twenty-first-century socialism, especially during the opening years of his presidency, few attempts were made to push beyond capitalist logics and relations. As such, the legal institutional framework of the *revolución ciudadana* was oriented towards protecting private property and supporting capitalist markets and capital accumulation, which largely explains why the radical demands of social movements were lost in translation during Correa's presidency.⁵⁷

In sum, during his decade-long presidency, Correa oversaw important improvements in material conditions, conveyed a sense of hope and progress for many, and developed a powerful affective bond with millions, particularly in the coastal region. However, his brand of authoritarian populism and state-centric capitalist development stirred equally strong emotions among critics on the left and right, especially in the Andean and Amazonian regions. This partly explains why *correísmo* has failed to regain the presidency, despite the cataclysm the country has experienced since Correa left the Carondelet and moved to Belgium in 2017.

Deceit and decay

Most voters in the 2017 presidential elections, which Correa was not allowed to contest because he had served two full terms in office, opted for another four years of the *revolución ciudadana* under Lenín Moreno, the vice president between 2009 and 2013.⁵⁸ However, rather than continuing on the path of state-centric capitalist development in the form of the *revolución ciudadana*, Moreno binned this project and replaced it with an IMF-sponsored programme of neoliberal austerity.

Corruption provided him with the political cover to achieve this.⁵⁹ No sooner had Correa left office than a litany of corruption charges emerged against him and prominent members of his government. Jorge Glas, who had served as vice president between 2013 and 2017, was the highest profile *correísta* to be convicted. He was sentenced to six years in prison in 2017 for receiving \$13.5 million in bribes from the Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht and eight years in 2020 for a separate corruption case, before being (momentarily) released in 2022.⁶⁰

Charges of corruption overlapped with more tenuous accusations against other leading *correístas* as the law was weaponised to attack the *revolución ciudadana*. Ricardo Patiño was charged with plotting to overthrow the Moreno government in 2019, while Paola Pabón was imprisoned for inciting the October 2019 protests.⁶¹ A few months later, Gabriella Rivadeneira and three other *correísta* legislators left for Mexico, where they were granted political asylum, along with Patiño, who had fled Ecuador six months earlier.⁶²

The imprisonment of Glas and charges against Correa and other members of his government gave Moreno the pretext to dismantle the *revolución ciudadana*.² Neoliberal austerity was the mechanism through which this was achieved. A couple of months into his presidency Moreno signalled his plans to implement austerity, disingenuously claiming that 'we will not implement any adjustment measure that affects the *pueblo ecuatoriano*'.⁶³ In the following months, his government slashed public spending, eliminated or fused government ministries and liquidated state-owned enterprises.⁶⁴ Buttering up international financial markets and institutions, the move to austerity paved the way for a \$2.5 billion government bond issue in October 2017 and a \$4.2 billion IMF loan in March 2019.⁶⁵ In exchange, the Moreno government was instructed to take the classic IMF medicine of fiscal retrenchment and economic liberalism. In the move to neoliberal austerity, various laws introduced during the *revolución ciudadana* were overturned or diluted, including the *Ley de Plusvalía*.

A core aim of the IMF programme was to remove fuel subsidies to reduce state intervention and cut public spending. Fuel subsidies play a crucial role in reducing the cost of living and making life possible in a peripheral capitalist society like Ecuador. Lowering or removing them thus tends to generate considerable resistance. This came to pass in October 2019 when Moreno announced plans to eliminate various fuel subsidies. CONAIE mobilised its bases to lead a broad-based anti-neoliberal *paro* (strike) that involved various actors, including student movements, trade unions and transport associations.⁶⁶ Indigenous protestors travelled from far and wide to occupy Quito for several days, despite being on the receiving end of significant state repression.⁶⁷ In the midst of the protests, Moreno temporarily moved the leadership of his government to Guayaquil, claiming that Correa was organising a coup with the support of the Venezuelan president, Nicolas Maduro.⁶⁸

The strength of Indigenous opposition surprised Moreno, who seemed to believe that the modest measures he had taken to improve relations with CONAIE would prevent mass mobilisations against his government. This included granting the movement a 100-year lease on its offices in Quito, a symbolic gesture in the light of Correa's eviction threat and appointing Humberto Cholango, the former president of CONAIE, to the position of Secretary of Water. The appointment of Cholango led to important improvements in the state water bureaucracy and its relations with social movements and community

water systems; however, they proved short-lived as Moreno folded the water bureaucracy into the environment ministry to cut costs and regulations and Cholango resigned from his post during the October protests.⁶⁹

Rather than being mollified by Moreno's half-hearted attempts at reconciliation, CONAIE regrouped after a tumultuous decade and rebuilt its autonomous mobilising capacity. The strength of the *paro* forced Moreno to back down, giving CONAIE an emblematic victory.⁷⁰ Emboldened, the movement reclaimed the anti-neoliberal space it had dominated in the 1990s and a new generation of leaders, like Leonidas Iza, emerged to propel the revitalised movement into the 2020s.

Yet, with *correísmo* reeling from the imprisonment and absence of its leaders and the gradual collapse of its party, Alianza Pais, Moreno continued along the path of neoliberal austerity, despite resistance from CONAIE and other social movements. Under the aegis of the IMF, his government went into the Covid-19 pandemic, making deep public spending cuts, including in health.⁷¹ The deadly early wave of the pandemic that overran health services in Guayaquil and left bodies piled on the streets in March 2020 occurred against this backdrop.⁷² Indicative of the Moreno government's disregard for human suffering and eagerness to follow the IMF's script, it elected to repay a \$324 million public debt instalment to international investors rather than use the funds to invest in the overwhelmed public health system.⁷³ His government then went on to use the pandemic as an opportunity to push through further liberal economic reforms. Legislation introduced in June 2020 gave firms the power to alter the employment conditions of their workers, including reducing their hours and wages.⁷⁴ New flexible short-term labour contracts were also introduced. Hence, labour rather than capital was expected to bear the brunt of the crisis and the absolute bare minimum of assistance was provided by the state.⁷⁵ Rubbing salt into the wounds, Moreno reneged on his promise to pay \$500 compensation to the half million workers who lost their jobs during the pandemic, leaving them brutally exposed to the collapse of capitalist markets. The Moreno government renegotiated and increased its loan with the IMF to \$6.5 billion in August 2020, giving the US-based institution ever more influence over the direction of the country and pushing it further along the path of economic liberalisation, whatever the social and political cost.⁷⁶

Hastily undoing the *revolución ciudadana* and imposing neoliberal austerity provided space for national and international drug cartels to strengthen and expand. The neoliberal restructuring of the state involved wholesale changes to the security and intelligence apparatus that Correa had constructed.⁷⁷ While, as noted above, this regime was used to monitor and repress activists and movements, it also had more positive dimensions, which helped to reduce crime and violence to historic lows. Moreno disregarded this and hurriedly dismantled it. The college used to train prison guards was also closed down, while investment in prisons was slashed across the board. Cutting spending on the prison system had a particularly devastating impact because the prison population had increased significantly during and after Correa's presidency. Between 2006 and 2016, it climbed from 12,635 to 26,421 and by 2020 it had reached 37,623, a threefold increase in a little more than a decade.⁷⁸ Overcrowding and underfunding increased prisoner suffering and reduced the possibilities of rehabilitation. They also created fertile terrain for drug cartels and gangs to take control of the prison system. Prison violence surged between 2019 and 2021 as disputes between rival groups left hundreds of inmates dead.⁷⁹ Prison revolts and massacres were a graphic illustration of the wider surge in crime and violence that occurred during Moreno's presidency (see Figure 1). Within the space of a few years, Ecuador had descended into a spiral of violence, and things were only going to get worse after Moreno left office and packed his bags for Miami in 2021.

Voto nulo

If Correa's presidency was characterised by relative stability, Moreno's was marked by absolute chaos. How, then, did Guillermo Lasso, a presidential candidate committed to deepening neoliberal austerity, defeat the young *correísta* candidate Andrés Arauz to win the 2021 presidential elections? The three troubling, interlinked features of *correísmo* highlighted above – extractivism, centralism, authoritarianism – were important factors.

In fact, Yaku Pérez, the presidential candidate for the Indigenous party Pachakutik, embodied all three. A long-standing anti-mining and pro-water activist, Pérez was at the frontline of battles against

Correa and was subjected to intimidation and repression as a result. Riding on the back of the resurgence of CONAIE and tapping into a growing environmental consciousness, he captured nearly 20 per cent of the vote in the first round of the elections, the highest vote share a Pachakutik candidate had ever won.⁸⁰ Pérez trailed Arauz by more than 10 per cent of the vote but was only narrowly behind Lasso. Amid strong claims of electoral fraud, Lasso, a wealthy banker, made it through to the second round.⁸¹ Unwilling to endorse Arauz, whose campaign suggested the reconstruction of the *revolución ciudadana* in its original form, Pachakutik and CONAIE called for a null vote.⁸² This proved decisive as Arauz was unable to expand beyond the core *correísta* constituency and Lasso narrowly won the second round.

Once in office, Lasso quickly set about extending the neoliberal restructuring that Moreno had started four years earlier. However, he faced a hostile legislature dominated by the *correísta* coalition comprising the Union por la Esperanza (Union for Hope) and a historically large block of Pachakutik legislators. Lasso bought off some Pachakutik legislators and the party splintered into different groups.⁸³ The *correísta* alliance stood firmer, although it did allow Lasso's neoliberal tax reforms to pass early in his presidency, seemingly as part of a deal to free Glas from prison.⁸⁴ The strength of opposition in the National Assembly limited Lasso's neoliberal reform agenda, but, to the satisfaction of the IMF, he continued along the path of austerity and slashed public spending, especially in what turned out to be his final year in office. His government received the final disbursement of the \$6.5 billion IMF loan in late 2022 and when he left office in 2023, his government left over \$5 billion in late payments, including the wages of thousands of public sector workers and transfers to local governments.⁸⁵

The results of this additional bout of neoliberal austerity were inevitably catastrophic. Crime and violence spiralled out of control and a new wave of prison revolts left hundreds of inmates dead.⁸⁶ The homicide rate jumped from 14 per 100,000 in 2021 (see Figure 1) to 45 per 100,000 in 2023, making Ecuador one of the most violent countries in Latin America.⁸⁷ Public killings and political assassinations, once rare events, became increasingly common and crime and violence escalated across the country.⁸⁸ Migration surged as poverty and insecurity worsened, hitting a 20-year high soon after the country's national borders reopened following the easing of Covid-19 restrictions (see Figure 2). Most migrants attempted to travel to the United States or Canada via the treacherous Darién Gap and many were killed or traumatised in the process.⁸⁹ In a damning indictment of IMF-sponsored neoliberal austerity, one migrant declared, 'Tengo más miedo de vivir en Ecuador de que cruzar el Darién' ('I'm more scared of living in Ecuador than crossing the Darién').⁹⁰

Figure 2. Migration, Ecuador, 1997–2022 (Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos [INEC] and Registro Estadístico de Entradas y Salidas Internacionales 2022–April 2023)



As socioeconomic conditions deteriorated and neoliberalisation accelerated, CONAIE, once again, mobilised its bases to resist and attempt to put the country on a different trajectory. The Indigenous

movement announced another *paro* in June 2022, which lasted 18 days and brought the country to a standstill.⁹¹ Elaborated to maximise popular support, CONAIE made several wide-ranging demands, including stopping fuel price increases, implementing price controls, strengthening labour rights and prohibiting mining (see Figure 3). In a vain attempt to prevent Indigenous protestors from travelling to Quito and occupying the city, Lasso declared a state of emergency and ordered the police to raid and close the Casa de la Cultura, where Indigenous protestors often shelter and congregate.⁹² However, teachers and students pressured universities to open their doors to Indigenous protestors and several provided them with refuge, including the Universidad Central del Ecuador, which housed thousands of protestors during mobilisation.⁹³ Solidarity networks and Indigenous practices like the *minga* provided protestors with food and supplies to support the *paro* and keep the pressure on the Lasso government. Having some control over the means of production through private and communal land ownership and plural agricultural activities was vital in sustaining the *paro*, indicating the importance of historical land struggles to contemporary political dynamics.⁹⁴ Indigenous protestors once again faced significant state repression. Leonidas Iza, who became the president of CONAIE in the wake of the 2019 protest, was singled out for particular attention and was detained and charged during the protests.⁹⁵ Several Indigenous protestors were killed, while hundreds of others were injured.⁹⁶ While Quito was the epicentre of the mobilisation, protests took place across the country, including in the coastal region, indicating the breadth of opposition to Lasso and signalling the potential of a truly national left movement (see below).

Lasso's disastrous handling of the *paro* encouraged UNES, the *correísta* block in the National Assembly, to attempt to remove him from office in late June 2022. He narrowly escaped impeachment on this occasion but was less fortunate the second time around when *correístas* aligned with the traditional right-wing party Partido Social Cristiano (Christian Social Party) and left factions of the Indigenous party Pachakutik to force him out. Facing accusations of corruption and links to international drug cartels, a disgraced Lasso dissolved the National Assembly in May 2023 and triggered new elections in August 2023.⁹⁷

Correísmo's electoral limits

The 2023 elections presented *correísmo* with another chance to reclaim the presidency. Revolución Ciudadana – the *correísta* party that emerged from the ashes of the once dominant Alianza País – performed strongly in the local elections in February 2023, including winning the mayoral elections in Quito and Guayaquil.⁹⁸ Everything looked set for a victory at the presidential elections. However, several factors worked against it. First, following a decade-long struggle, Yasunidos finally forced a referendum on the future of oil production in Yasuní/ITT.⁹⁹ Missing an opportunity to heal old wounds, Luisa González, the *correísta* candidate, refused to back the proposal, which alienated her from a growing constituency of environmentally conscious voters. The referendum took place on the same day as the first round of the elections in August 2023 and was backed by 59 per cent of voters.¹⁰⁰ Second, González ran a backward-looking campaign that celebrated the successes of Correa's presidency without recognising any of its failures. This, along with the fact that Glas was first offered the presidential ticket ahead of González, convinced many non-*correísta* voters that the aim was to bring back Correa from Belgium and reconstruct the *revolución ciudadana* in its original form, warts and all. The lack of reflection, critique and renewal within *correísmo* prevented CONAIE from endorsing González in the second round of the elections. Leonidas Iza declared: 'We need the people, authorities and candidates to speak about our agenda. We're not going to give our vote to anyone.'¹⁰¹ CONAIE's decision to protect its hard-won autonomy stopped a broad left block of voters emerging to prevent another victory for a neoliberal candidate.

Noboa's victory

These factors help explain why Noboa, a fresh-faced, little-known 35-year-old member of one of Ecuador's wealthiest families, defeated González in the second round of the elections in October 2023.¹⁰² But his victory was not only down to the deficiencies of *correísmo*. Presenting himself as a centrist, pragmatic politician, Noboa ran a crafty social media-friendly campaign, which nodded to environmental concerns and promised a fresh start for the country. He pulled all this together in a televised presidential

debate before the first round of the elections, which boosted his popularity and helped him build momentum. The considerable wealth of his family and the political experience of his father, Álvaro Noboa, were other important factors. Last but not least, the assassination of Fernando Villavicencio, a centre-right anti-correísta presidential candidate, on the eve of the first round of the elections also worked in his favour.¹⁰³ Villavicencio's murder hardened opinion against González in the first round. Meanwhile, a few weeks before the second round, unfounded rumours were circulated through the media that Correa had orchestrated the killing of Villavicencio, which further reduced support for González and provided another boost to Noboa.¹⁰⁴

Figure 3. CONAIE protest demands, June 2022 (Source: CONAIE, downloaded from Twitter 4 June 2022)



Noboa will serve as president until 2025, when new elections will take place for a full four-year presidential term. His decision to implement a state of emergency, militarise the country and declare war against drug

cartels and street gangs is a core part of his re-election strategy.¹⁰⁵ Mimicking the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Noboa has taken to wearing bullet-proof vests, army fatigues and dark sunglasses to create a tough-man Hollywood image and garner popular support. His policies will no doubt result in widespread human rights abuses and have disastrous social consequences. Yet they have enabled him to seize the initiative and boost his popularity in the opening months of his presidency.

Despite this, it could be argued that the 2023 elections were good ones to lose, given the magnitude of the crisis. *Correísmo* may well build and recapture the presidency in 2025, especially if Noboa's performative *mano dura* policies backfire. Yet the 2021 and 2023 elections suggest that *correísmo* has hit its electoral limits and will need a new political strategy to return to power. This could involve a period of internal reflection and renewal, as well as the emergence of new leaders and ideas to capture more progressive votes. However, the party remains rooted in the idolatry of Correa and the glorification of his presidency, which limits space for critique and regeneration. Moreno's betrayal of the movement seems to have hardened this tendency and closed down space for internal debate. While a new *correísta* candidate might emerge before the 2025 elections, the initial selection of González suggests the movement is prioritising continuity over renewal. Combined, this suggests that there are clear limits to change and progression within *correísmo*.

Events since Noboa took office in November 2023 provide further evidence of this. Rather than mounting a frontal attack against the president, Revolución Ciudadana opted to form an informal alliance in the National Assembly with Jaime Nebot's right-wing Partido Social Cristiano and Accion Democratica Nacional, the coalition of right-wing parties aligned to the president.¹⁰⁶ This enabled Noboa to advance his neoliberal reform agenda, including tax breaks to attract global capital and the privatisation of the energy sector.¹⁰⁷ As part of this agreement, Revolución Ciudadana also opted out of formally campaigning against the referendum that Noboa called to further neoliberal restructuring and extend the militarisation of the country.¹⁰⁸ The party's decision to vote in favour of Noboa's neoliberal laws has undermined the legitimacy of *correísmo* as a progressive force. However, it still retains some of its anti-neoliberal spirit. Revolución Ciudadana criticised the free trade agreement that the Lasso government negotiated with China and voted against it in the National Assembly in February.¹⁰⁹ Further, while it opted out of the official referendum campaign, it urged *correístas* to vote against questions aimed at extending labour precarity and facilitating international investor disputes, the most clearly neoliberal elements of the referendum.

Correísmo's decision to support Noboa and selectively vote in favour of his neoliberal reforms in the opening months of his presidency is difficult to comprehend from a left perspective. Officially, the movement claimed it was necessary to enable him to govern in the wake of the tumult of Lasso's presidency, the deterioration of socioeconomic conditions and the surge in crime and violence – that is, *correísmo* was willing to put the *patria* (homeland) before the *partido* (party).¹¹⁰ It is hard to believe such noble intentions, however, not least because *correísta* legislators would have been well aware that the laws they were going to support would chiefly benefit multinational corporations and economic elites and aggravate rather than alleviate the socioeconomic crisis. A more plausible explanation is that support for Noboa was part of a deal to pave the way to dropping charges against Correa, Glas and other prominent *correístas*.¹¹¹ Such a move would confirm suspicions that *correísmo* has been reduced to a movement with one primary objective: to liberate its leaders. If this was the plan, however, it unravelled spectacularly in early April 2024 when Noboa instructed the police to remove Glas from the Mexican embassy in Quito after he had been granted political asylum by the Mexican government.¹¹² As Glas was transferred to La Roca prison in Guayaquil to await trial for fresh corruption charges, the Noboa-Correa pact imploded, and González demanded that the president resign.¹¹³ Whatever the reasons for *correísmo's* decision to support Noboa, it has further damaged its progressive credentials, which brings challenges and opportunities for the left.

Mobilising in the rubble of neoliberal austerity

The right's commitment to neoliberal policies, fiscal conservatism and big capital is a congenital weakness that the left can exploit. While politicians like Noboa can talk of economic renewal, employment generation and environmental protection, their policies have no potential to achieve this, especially in the current conjuncture of austerity and decline. The challenge for the Ecuadorian left

is to build a cross-class movement that respects diversity and autonomy and leverages a growing environmental consciousness to challenge the ruin offered by neoliberal capitalism.

In attempting to do this, the dilemma for the non-*correísta* left is what to do with *correísmo*. It is possible that the movement will continue to drift rightwards and become totally irrelevant as a progressive force. Indeed, some would argue this happened years ago. However, it is most likely to continue to position itself as a left project, implying that the non-*correísta* left will have to engage with it in some way or another. Ignoring it or wishing it away are not realistic strategies. Full frontal opposition will be a tempting tactic for some, but this is likely to play into the hands of the right, who will happily govern in the void created by the absence of a broad left alternative.

What are the options? The intrinsic characteristics of *correísmo*, the lack of critique and renewal and the idolatry of Correa rule out the possibility of building a broad and plural left project through *correísmo*. Nonetheless, despite its centralising and totalising tendencies, the movement is not monolithic and includes members dedicated to progressive politics and who are open to dialogue and cooperation. The splits that have emerged within Revolución Ciudadana during Noboa's presidency might allow progressive spaces to grow.¹¹⁴ Hence, there are opportunities to effect progressive change through *correísmo*.

The best hope for this lies at the local and regional level, where progressive *correísta* politicians, bureaucrats and advisers have the potential to leverage the autonomy of municipal and provincial governments to support struggles around everyday issues like labour, housing, water and transport. The anthropocentric and extractivist nature of *correísmo* can also be challenged from the ground up by supporting local environmental struggles and initiatives. For example, members of the Pabel Muñoz municipal government in Quito have the opportunity to work with the collectives involved in the Choco Andino referendum to ensure it is implemented. The initiative, which seeks to prohibit mining in an ecologically diverse zone north-west of Quito, was backed by 68 per cent of voters in August, indicating its considerable popular support.¹¹⁵ Through this, trust could be built with social movements and grassroots organisations, opening space for further collaboration. Such forms of politics run the constant risk of clientelism and domination. However, a truly left-wing political project requires state support that respects individual and collective autonomy and has faith that votes will flow through relations based on solidarity and respect. Wishful thinking, perhaps, but it is a principle worth fighting for while also building political relations and institutions that push beyond representative democracy.

Collective autonomy is also crucial for strategically working alongside and against *correísmo* in a process of what might be described as productive antagonism. The legacy of Correa's presidency and the possibility of his return make collaboration extremely challenging. Yet the gravity of the crisis might provide opportunities to overcome this. Reflecting on the possibilities for the left on a global scale, Oliver Eagleton argues that neoliberal capitalism has a 'tendency towards calamity, which could, out of sheer terror, incite the imagination of alternative realities'.¹¹⁶ Tragically, such calamity and terror are evident in Ecuador and there is the possibility that this will create space to rewire political relations and transcend disagreements and rivalries.

Yasunidos is a good example of what can be achieved by acting creatively and strategically to advance progressive agendas.¹¹⁷ Despite being repressed by Correa, the movement bridged the *correísta*/non-*correísta* divide by working with a wide range of organisations and movements and limiting open criticism of the former president and *correísmo*. The movement also mobilised across classes. Official election and referendum data indicate its coalition building capacity.¹¹⁸ Five and a half million people backed the Yasuni/ITT referendum, while 3.8 million voted against it. González won 3.3 million votes in the first round of the elections, which implies that if every one of her supporters voted against the referendum, the vast majority of non-*correísta* voters must have voted in favour or null, which is highly unlikely. This suggests a sizeable number of people who voted for González also supported the referendum, indicating the *correísta*/non-*correísta* divide is constantly shifting and open to negotiation. Yasunidos also reveals that it is not only up to *correísmo* to adapt and evolve but progressive non-*correísta* movements, organisations and networks.

Resisting and expelling the IMF could become a common objective that helps create a broad left coalition. As part of its carefully orchestrated public relations campaign, the IMF has claimed to be supporting Ecuador's 'home-grown policy plan' but, in reality, it has been one of the chief architects and enforcers of neoliberal austerity and, as such, one of the main culprits of the catastrophe that the country is experiencing.¹¹⁹ The conditions imposed by the IMF encourage weak regulation and relentless

extractivism; hence, challenging the institution is crucial for environmental activists and movements. Cutting through the IMF's cuddly image and making it one of the main targets of resistance could help build a broad and plural progressive movement against neoliberal austerity.

One of the risks of focusing on the IMF, however, is that too much attention is given to neoliberalism and not enough to capitalism. That is, the goal might be reduced to rolling back the excesses of neoliberal reform rather than tackling more fundamental features of peripheral capitalism. There seems little appetite within *correísmo* to move in a more radical direction than state-directed capitalist development. However, left movements that strategically collaborate with *correísmo* while retaining the capacity to challenge it have the potential to drive a wider left movement in a more radical and progressive direction. Rejecting the IMF could support such a process, as it would require a future left-wing government to find alternative sources of funding. As China is no longer willing to lend on the scale it did a decade ago, more redistribution and creativity would be required to reduce the need for external financing.

While Yasunidos hint at what is possible, the environment and extractivism are big obstacles in the way of left movements working alongside *correísmo*. Its failure to break with extractivism and embrace environmentalism has isolated it and limited its progressive potential. Given the growing environmental consciousness that has emerged in Ecuador and the strength of resistance to oil and mining, continuing along a pro-extractivist path implies committing to a political project based on repression and authoritarianism. Hence, at the very least, *correísmo* will have to rein in its extractivist impulses and support post-extractivist alternatives if it is to be part of a broad-based left project. Local organising and activism, as argued above, could pave the way for a move in this direction. There are also indications that members of *correísmo* are willing to support local anti-extractive struggles, as indicated by the Revolución Ciudadana's response to the repression of Indigenous communities opposed to the development of the La Plata mine in Palo Quemado and Las Pampas, Cotopaxi (see Figure 4).¹²⁰ This came after Noboa announced \$4.8 billion of Canadian investment in the mining sector and his government attempted to conduct a sham consultation while militarising the zone and repressing anti-mining protestors (see Figure 5).¹²¹ Such carefully crafted declarations of solidarity have to be backed up by concrete actions over the long term to have any real meaning and effect. Yet there are some indications, however tentative, that *correísmo* is willing to soften its pro-extractivist stance.

For a broad post-extractive programme to emerge, the unfinished business of building a popular and plurinational state would have to be confronted. Such a task is fiendishly difficult, especially in the current context of escalating crime and violence and economic stagnation, but there is the possibility of taking steps in this direction through the rubble of neoliberal austerity. Legislative proposals developed by social movements during Correa's presidency indicate how the state could be transformed along plurinational and democratic lines. Meanwhile, the Yasuní/ITT referendum demonstrates the possibilities of direct democracy. Such initiatives could provide an institutional basis for a vernacular form of socioecological transformation that combines plurinational and democratic planning, heterodox macroeconomic policies and autonomous territorial organising to transform the productive forces and socioenvironmental relations. Such a transformation might seem utopian, but utopian thinking has the potential to inspire and mobilise – and there is something to be said for exploring the possibilities of the 'not yet' rather than wallowing in the fatalism of the 'not ever'.¹²²

CONAIE has the potential to perform a lead role in a transformation along these lines. It has its own limitations, of course. Hundreds of Indigenous communities and organisations remain outside the movement, which limits its reach and legitimacy, while tensions inevitably exist between the bases and leadership. Internal divisions and personal disputes, amplified by the efforts of governments of the day to divide and weaken CONAIE, are also rife, resulting in the exit of Indigenous leaders like Yaku Pérez, who has started his own political party. Yet, despite this and against the odds, CONAIE has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to evolve and adapt to changing political conditions. During the last seven years, it has adopted a largely defensive stance and focused on resisting and limiting the neoliberal restructuring of the Moreno and Lasso governments (see Figure 3). It has also led the charge against the neoliberal policies of the Noboa government (see Figure 6). While this has helped it regroup and build alliances, it has limited transformative potential. To move more decisively in this direction, CONAIE would have to adopt a more offensive agenda that integrates its anti-extractive activism and plurinational vision into a wider programme of political-economic and socioecological transformation.

Figure 4. Revolución Ciudadana statement regarding repression of anti-mining protestors in Palo Quemado and Las Pampas, Cotopaxi, March 2024 (Source: Revolución Ciudadana, downloaded from Twitter 21 March 2024)

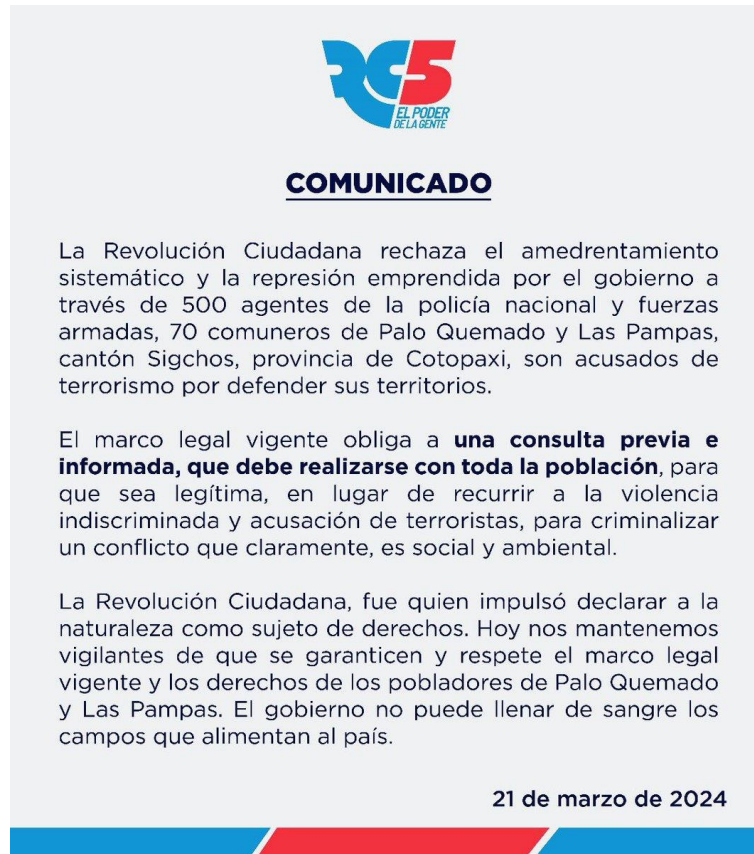


Figure 5. Militarisation of mining in Cotopaxi, March 2024 (Source: ViNU/Frente Nacional Antiminero, downloaded from Twitter 29 March 2024)




Pachakutik could play a pivotal role in this. Since securing a record number of legislators in the National Assembly in the 2021 elections, the party has been pulled apart and restructured.¹²³ Following a bitter internal dispute, which resulted in Pachakutik only winning a handful of seats in 2023, the party has become more closely aligned with CONAIE. While the relationship between movement and party is not totally harmonious, this provides a stronger foundation to build a left project through a combination of electoral politics, social mobilisation and territorial and communal organising. A unified left Pachakutik closely aligned to CONAIE would counteract the electoral strength of *Revolución Ciudadana* and create opportunities for the formation of a wider left block to check the power of *correísmo*.

A major challenge for a truly *national* plurinational project is overcoming the geographic and social reach of the Indigenous movement to incorporate mestizo and afroecuatoriano communities, organisations and movements, especially in the populous coastal region. The conditions of peripheral capitalism make ‘capitalist realism’ – that is, the inability to imagine life beyond capitalism – less entrenched, and the diverse customs, practices and cosmologies that coexist in Ecuador create fertile terrain for a progressive national plurinational project.¹²⁴ However, weaving all this together into a national movement means overcoming significant obstacles, including long-standing regional divisions. The environmental consciousness that has strengthened in recent decades can support efforts to move in this direction, especially if it can be linked to progressive thinking about labour, food and production. Amid darkness, light shines.

Figure 6. CONAIE anti-referendum campaign, April 2024 (Source: CONAIE, downloaded from Twitter, 1 April 2024)

Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador - CONAIE

¡Dile NO a la consulta de Noboa! 

La consulta popular no beneficia al Ecuador, sino que favorece los intereses de Daniel Noboa.
¿Qué representa el Gobierno de Noboa?

- Promesas de campaña incumplidas
- Aumento de impuestos: te subió el IVA al 15%, la gasolina y el gas doméstico.
- Persiste el crimen, la violencia e inseguridad.
- Privilegios para la banca mientras se castiga al pueblo.
- Nula inversión social y en obra pública.
- Menos presupuesto para educación, salud y servicios básicos.
- Destrucción de la naturaleza por el extractivismo
- Pisoteo a los derechos laborales.
- Persiste el odio, el racismo y la discriminación.
- Nueva ola migratoria.

A la consulta de **NO**boa dile **#11VecesNo**

Notes

- ¹ I finished writing this commentary on 9 April 2024.
- ² Goodwin, 'Uneven decommodification geographies'.
- ³ Correa, 'Ecuador's path', 90
- ⁴ Acosta and Martínez, *El buen vivir*.
- ⁵ Becker, 'Correa, Indigenous movements'; Hidalgo Flor and Zotaminga, *Constituyente y constitución*.
- ⁶ Riofrancos, *Resource Radicals*.
- ⁷ Acosta, *La maldición de la abundancia*.
- ⁸ El Universo, 'Cerca de 60 proyectos se exhiben en Yachay', 17 January 2015.
- ⁹ Berry et al., *La concentración de la tierra*.
- ¹⁰ Goodwin, 'The quest to bring land'; McBurney et al., 'Land and livelihood'.
- ¹¹ Gudynas, 'Natural resource nationalisms'; Dayot, 'They want to change us by charging us'
- ¹² El Comercio, 'XI Ronda Petrolera arrancó en medio de protestas indígenas', 28 November 2012.
- ¹³ El Comercio, 'La Refinería del Pacífico', 9 January 2012.
- ¹⁴ Acosta, *La maldición de la abundancia*; Pérez Guartambel, *Agua u oro*.
- ¹⁵ El Comercio, 'Decisión de Kinross desanima a inversionistas mineros foráneos', 13 June 2013.
- ¹⁶ El Telégrafo, 'Nuevo Ministerio de Minería se crea por Decreto Ejecutivo', 13 February 2015.
- ¹⁷ Becker, 'Building a plurinational Ecuador'; Martínez Novo, 'Managing diversity in postneoliberal Ecuador'; Radhuber and Radcliffe, 'Contested sovereignties'.
- ¹⁸ Armijos, 'They cannot come and impose on us'; Isch López and Zambrano, 'En torno a los resultados de la consulta prelegislativa'; Goodwin et al., 'The politics of coproduction'.
- ¹⁹ Registro Oficial, *Ley Orgánica de Recursos Hídricos*; Goodwin, 'The problem and promise of coproduction'; Goodwin, 'Cerca del Río y Lejos del Agua'; Goodwin et al., 'The politics of coproduction'.
- ²⁰ Conaghan, 'Surveil and sanction'.
- ²¹ Registro Oficial, *Ley Orgánica de Comunicación*.
- ²² Hoy, '¿Por qué Correa es autoritario?', 9 October 2011.
- ²³ Hoy, 'Juicio por libro El Gran Hermano se cierra', 14 April 2014.
- ²⁴ Conaghan, 'Surveil and sanction'; Posner, 'Buen vivir under Correa'.
- ²⁵ El Universo, 'Ministerio de Educación disuelve a la Unión Nacional de Educadores', 18 August 2016.
- ²⁶ El Telégrafo 'Correa sobre agresión a universitarios', 17 July 2015.
- ²⁷ Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*.
- ²⁸ Becker, 'Building a plurinational Ecuador'; Martínez Novo, 'Managing diversity in postneoliberal Ecuador'; Lalander et al., 'Political economy of state-Indigenous liaisons'.
- ²⁹ This is based on my observation of and support for the CONAIE protest in Riobamba, 7 August 2015.
- ³⁰ See, for example, Hoy, 'La sentencia contra Pepe Acacho' 14 August 2013; El Comercio, '95 presos y 98 heridos de la fuerza pública deja el paro nacional', 19 August 2015; CONAIE, 'Conaie demanda inmediata respuesta a solicitud de amnistía hecha ante régimen de Moreno', 12 June 2017; El Comercio, 'La Conaie va por 180 pedidos de amnistía', 13 July 2018.
- ³¹ El Comercio, 'La Conaie tiene 15 días para abandonar su sede', 11 December 2014.
- ³² Conaghan, 'Surveil and sanction'; El Universo 'Acción Ecológica pide archivar su proceso de disolución', 6 January 2017.
- ³³ Velásquez, *Pachamama Politics*.
- ³⁴ Rival, 'Ecuador's Yasuní-ITT initiative'; Vallejo et al., 'Leaving oil underground in Ecuador'.
- ³⁵ El Comercio, 'Arranca explotación petrolera del Yasuní ITT', 14 August 2013; Ministerio de Recursos Naturales No Renovables, 'El mundo nos ha fallado', 15 August 2013.
- ³⁶ El Universo, '727947 firmas respaldarán a Yasunidos para pedir la convocatoria a consulta popular', 10 April 2014; Hoy, 'CNE versus Yasunidos', 28 April 2014.
- ³⁷ El Comercio, 'Yasunidos rechaza informe del CNE' 6 May 2014; Hoy, '¿Por qué los Yasunidos dejaron de creer en el CNE?', 4 May 2014.
- ³⁸ De la Torre, *De Velasco a Correa*; Velásquez, *Pachamama Politics*; Posner, 'Buen vivir under Correa'.
- ³⁹ Galbraith and Chang. '50+ Economists'.
- ⁴⁰ Preusser, 'The losing battle'.

- ⁴¹ Ponce and Acosta, 'La pobreza en la "revolución ciudadana"'.
⁴² El Comercio, '926 millones restan pagar a China', 10 August 2012.
⁴³ Hoy, 'La ALBA rechaza los tratados de inversión y critica a la CIDH', 31 July 2013.
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