Indigenous people in South America

A political awakening
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Poverty and a new ethnic politics have spawned radical Indian movements in the Andean countries. Are these a threat or a boost to democracy?

LUCIO GUARACHI was born in a village on Bolivia's windswept Altiplano, some 4,000 metres (13,000 feet) above sea level. Of Andean Indian descent, he speaks Aymara as well as Spanish. Since he was ten, he has lived mainly in El Alto, an ever-expanding satellite city of 700,000 people whose self-built houses of bare brick or mud and corrugated iron straggle out into the Altiplano above Bolivia's capital, La Paz. He works, when there is work, in a small workshop making water pumps. Last October, he helped to overthrow an elected president.

EI Alto was the scene of battles between the army and well-organised protestors that ended with at least 59 dead and the resignation of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, a pro-American mining magnate. The ostensible motive for the protests was a scheme by multinational companies to export liquefied natural gas from Bolivia to California via Chile.

But was there another factor at work? Most of the protesters were of indigenous descent. The trigger for their action lay in an obscure incident in Pucarani, a small town near Lake Titicaca. Indian followers of Felipe Quispe, a militant peasant leader, had captured two cattle rustlers; invoking indigenous traditions of justice, they beat and killed them. When police arrested his lieutenant for the crime, Mr Quispe organised roadblocks. After protestors and police were killed, matters escalated.

Many observers saw the EI Alto uprising as an example of a new ethnic politics in Latin America, a flexing of political muscles by Indian peoples long subordinate to the dominant "white" elite. Though recession,
poverty, America’s “war” on drugs, and century-old hostility to Chile played big parts too, the emergence of newly assertive Indian movements in the Andean countries is undeniable. As well as threatening political stability, they help to explain growing support for far-left leaders, such as Mr Quispe and Evo Morales, an Aymara Indian who is the leader of Bolivia’s coca growers (whose crop provides the raw material for cocaine).

It was not the first time that Indian protestors have helped to topple a democratic president. In Ecuador in January 2000 tens of thousands of Indians, allied with dissident army officers, forced the resignation of Jamil Mahuad. Three years earlier, Indians had helped to oust Mr Mahuad’s predecessor but one, Abdala Bucaram.

It may not be the last, either. In Bolivia, Carlos Mesa, the former vice-president, has taken over the top job. But Bolivian democracy remains fragile. In Ecuador in 2002, the Indian movement helped to elect Lucio Gutiérrez, one of the dissident army colonels. Now it feels betrayed: he has accepted a loan from the IMF and is friendly to the United States.

Indian leaders blame the government (it denies it) for a recent attempt on the life of Leonidas Iza, the president of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), the country’s main Indian organisation. Outraged, CONAIE this week launched roadblocks and protests aimed at forcing the president to resign. But the movement has been weakened by splits between radicals and pragmatists; after two days, most of the protests were called off.

This political awakening of Latin America’s indigenous people is not confined to the Andes. “Marcos”, the balaclava-clad leader of Mexico’s Zapatista movement, is a middle-class white but he has drawn on the grievances of Mayan Indians. In Brazil, Indian peoples fight for land against encroaching agribusiness.

After the Incas

But it is in the Andes that Indian militancy seems most threatening to democracy and economic development. Compared to Brazil or Mexico, Indians make up a far larger proportion of the population in the countries of the former Inca Empire, as they do in Guatemala (see map). The Andean democracies are fragile for many other reasons: they are relatively poor, and their states are corroded by the drug trade. Colombia remains embroiled in violent conflict. In Peru, coca growers plan protests this month which, according to the interior minister, could involve an attempt to overthrow the democratic—but deeply unpopular—president, Alejandro Toledo, who is himself of Andean Indian descent.
Venezuela's populist president, Hugo Chávez, is itching to export his "Bolivarian revolution" to his neighbours. His chosen instrument is the Bolivarian Congress of the Peoples, a putative pan-Latin American revolutionary movement, to which Indian-led parties in both Ecuador and Bolivia belong. Many of the Indian leaders do not hide their admiration for Mr Chávez and for his friend and mentor, Cuba's Communist president, Fidel Castro.

**A just cause**

Behind all this agitation lies a just cause and a bitter history dating from the Spanish conquest. Robbed of their best lands, subjected to forced labour and heavy taxation as well as European diseases, the Indian population of the Americas shrank to around 10% of its pre-conquest level. It has since grown. But independence did little to alter the Indians' second-class status, or the racism they suffered.

In the 20th century, paternalistic efforts were made in several countries to improve the lot of indigenous people, and their cultural legacy was recognised. The aim was assimilation. Indian peoples, it was tacitly thought, would disappear under the twin processes of *mestizaje* (racial mixing) and urbanisation.

They did not. According to the best estimates, there are some 45m indigenous people in Latin America today. Who are they? Those who define themselves thus, say social scientists. That self-definition does not turn on language and dress, nor still less on living in a rural community (though all those elements may be important to Indian cultural identities).

The rise of the new Indian movements has several causes. First and foremost, most indigenous Latin Americans still live in poverty, and many in extreme poverty. Compared with the rest of the population, they have fewer years of schooling and are less likely to enjoy basic services, according to the World Bank. While access to primary schooling is now nearly universal, that is not true of higher education. Whereas 18% of Ecuadoreans aged between 18 and 25 are in full-time education, the figure for indigenous Ecuadoreans is only 1%, reckons Fernando Garda, an anthropologist at FLACSO, a postgraduate school in Quito.

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Indians also continue to suffer discrimination, and worse. In Guatemala, Mayan Indians made up most of around 180,000 people killed by the army in suppressing leftist guerrillas in the 1970s and 1980s. In Peru during the “dirty war” unleashed by the Shining Path guerrillas in the 1980s and early 1990s, Indians suffered disproportionately: 75% of the 60,000 victims spoke Quechua, and an Amazonian tribe, the Ashaninka, suffered “near genocide” according to Carlos Ivan Degregori, an anthropologist who served on the recent “Truth Commission” which investigated these events.

Two other factors explain the new movements. The first is democracy. New constitutions in Ecuador and Peru granted illiterates the vote for the first time (in Bolivia, this had been achieved after a revolution in 1952). The second is globalisation. Indian groups began to receive support from the Catholic Church and rich-world charities in the 1970s. They are linked to a wider international network. This was given a boost in Latin America by the protests over the commemoration in 1992 of the quincentenary of Columbus’s “discovery” of the Americas.

The Indian cause was given legal force by Convention 169 of the International Labour Organisation. This committed signatory governments (and most in Latin America did sign) to guarantee indigenous people equal rights; participation in formulating policies that affect them; respect for their institutions, customary law and culture; and health and education.

Democracy and the quest for indigenous rights have taken the Indian movements into the political arena. That is long overdue: indigenous people lacked representation. In Ecuador, CONAIE set up a mainly Indian political party called Pachakutik (“reawakening” in Quechua, but also the name of the greatest of the Incas). It currently holds 19 out of 215 municipalities, five provincial governorships (out of 22) and ten of the 100 seats in Congress.

Something similar has happened in Bolivia. In a general election in 2002, Mr Morales’s (mainly Indian) Movement to Socialism won 21% of the vote and Mr Quispe’s party, also called Pachakutik, won 6%. Between them, they captured 33 seats in Congress’s lower house. Including those from traditional parties, in all some 50 of the 130 deputies are indigenous.

In Peru, mestizaje has gone much further than in Bolivia. There, rural Indians have tended to define themselves as campesinos (country people). Peru’s urban Indians, known as cholas, many of them working in the informal economy as small businessmen or employees, are having a decisive impact on politics and culture. Though there are no significant Indian parties, Indians are winning office. Mr Degregori cites research in Ayacucho department: in ten municipalities studied, only one had a Quechua-speaking mayor in 1966; 30 years later, all ten mayors spoke Quechua, six had a Quechua surname and seven had peasant origins.

Along with (or ahead of) political representation has gone a drive for legal reforms. In a round of constitution-writing in Latin America in the 1990s, the ILO’s provisions were incorporated in ten countries, including Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. For the first time these constitutions declared their countries to be “pluri-ethnic” and/or multicultural.

Quechua lessons

Between them, democracy and constitutional reform have provided the Indian movements with a new political agenda. One priority is laws to implement the constitutional proclamation of collective rights. Another is local self-government.

To see this at work, visit Cotacachi, a small town in a verdant valley between two lowering volcanoes, a couple of hours’ drive north of Quito. The school at Tunibamba Llacta, a hamlet near Cotacachi, consists of two huts next to a football pitch carved out of a mountainside and scuffed bare of grass. The school is surrounded by maize fields and small, red-tiled farmhouses. There are just two teachers for the 75 pupils.

One of them is José Menacho, a young Indian whose long black hair is pulled back from his handsome copper-coloured face into a pigtail. On the board, he draws a dog. “Allku”, he repeats to his class of five-to-eight-year-olds, some of whom are paying attention. He then draws a sun (“Inti”, he writes) and a hot pepper (“uchu”).

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Mr Menacho is teaching reading and writing in Quechua, his pupils' first language. Bilingual education in primary schools began in Ecuador in 1988. Educationalists thought it would improve the performance of indigenous children; activists hoped it would preserve the language. But the scheme suffers from a lack of teachers and materials.

Cotacachi, with 37,000 people, has been governed since 1996 by Pachakutik. The mayor, Auki Tituña, a thoughtful economist, is trying hard to make bilingual education work. A pilot project to improve rural schools, involving parents and $128,000 from the education ministry, operates from Tunibamba Llacta. Back in the town, a dozen teachers and education officials from across the country are meeting to draw up a history text book in Quechua for older children.

Mr Tituña has also launched "participatory budgeting", an idea copied from Brazil's left-wing Workers' Party. In the past, nearly all the public money was spent on the main town of Santa Ana de Cotacachi, whose 7,000 people are 90% mestizo (mixed race). Now, it is spread around the district. A crackdown on corruption and mis-spending means the town has not lost out, Mr Tituña says. Each year, he reports back to a three-day communal assembly. It all seems to work: Mr Tituña was re-elected in 2000 with 80% of the vote (including that of many mestizos).

Democracy or extremism

Such experiences show that the Indian movements can bring about a welcome deepening of democracy. But there are several big dangers. One is extremism. To those in Washington who try to link him with drug traffickers or Colombian guerrillas, Mr Morales retorts that he is a democrat: "Here we have decided to reach power by means of the vote, nor by arms nor by insurrectional means," he says. His party has decided to concentrate this year on municipal elections in December.

But Mr Morales remains an incipient democrat. Mr Quispe, who has a guerrilla past, is not even that. "We have to be prepared for violence," he says. Neither is the behaviour of the Indian movements always democratic. "Participatory democracy" can mean greater accountability—or rule by mass-meeting or mob. Taking to the streets is essential under dictatorships but, in excess, can weaken democracy.

A second danger is anti-capitalism. Beyond their tired rhetorical opposition to privatisation and the IMF, the Indian parties are also hostile to multinational firms, and especially to foreign investment in oil, gas and mining projects. That is placing a brake on economic growth in Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru. In a few cases, that Indian resistance reflects justified environmental concerns. But is there a deeper tension between indigenous cultures and entrepreneurship? Mr Iza of CONAIE argues that collectivism is a central part of indigenous culture, and has allowed its survival against the odds. However, Indians have no difficulty operating in the market economy when given the chance—as markets across the Andes testify.

A third danger lies in racial politics. Mr Quispe says he wants an independent Indian republic called Kollasuyu, after a segment of the Inca empire: "We want to have our own army, flag, constitution and education." In Peru, Antauro Humala, a mestizo former army officer, has organised ex-conscripts into an anti-democratic "Inca nationalist" movement.

Few others go as far. But in the call for territorial autonomy and collective rights there is a potential conflict with democracy. Proponents, such as Rodolfo Stavenhagen, a Mexican sociologist, argue that systematic discrimination vitiates the enjoyment of liberal freedoms.

Something more is needed...a bundle of group rights allowing the indigenous...to reproduce their cultures, organise their lives according to their own social norms, maintain and develop their own collective identities, enjoy social, political and legal status as distinct groups in the wider society and relate to...the state on their own terms as recognised and respected peoples or nations.

No state in Latin America has been prepared to concede all of that, and for good reasons. Many of the norms appealed to are authoritarian ones, dating from colonial custom as much as the Incas or Aztecs. Collective rights can be inimical to human rights, as the murders in Pucarani showed. Ceding authority for law and...