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Indigenous party prospects in Peru

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The decision by Peru's indigenous communities to form a political party ahead of next year's presidential election poses a number of questions. These include the prospects of such a party in Peru specifically and the relationship between social movements and political parties more generally.

The immediate reasons for the decision are clear: according to the Peruvian indigenous leader, Alberto Pizango, [the announcement reflects opposition to the current Peruvian president, Alan Garcia and his refusal to sign a law that would allow indigenous people to stop oil and mining projects on their land.](#)

At first glance the creation of an indigenous political party in Peru is an attractive one. Indigenous identity and political activity has been on the rise in Latin America over the past 30 years. Moreover, in several nearby countries with similarly high indigenous populations it has played a key role, bringing to power presidents Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador and bolstering support for Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. Why should the same not happen in Peru?

That it will not is down to several reasons. First, at a structural level [Maritza Paredes](#) has pointed out that despite various institutional and political changes in Peru over the past century, social discrimination against indigenous identity has persisted. This has had the knock-on effect of discouraging personal association in this regard in favour of other, less ethnic or cultural forms of identity, such as class, religion or occupation. At the same time, the authoritarian nature of the state and the conflict between it and the Shining Path from the 1960s until the 1990s effectively 'beheaded' the indigenous leadership.

Second, at the level of agency, Peru has already experienced an indigenous presidential candidate in the form of Ollanta Humala in the 2006 election. Despite winning 31% of the vote in the first round, he lost the second round to Garcia. Two key reasons have been put forward for this: (1) institutional arrangements in the form of the electoral rules and (2) [Peruvian voters' reassurance that a Garcia victory would provide a political alternative without undermining macro-economic stability and growth that was then under way.](#)

Third, the experience of successful indigenous political action may not be as apparent as it seems. Although Paredes presents the fate of Peru's indigenous population as having been more politically marginalised than those in Ecuador and Bolivia, Francisco Panizza offers a more nuanced perspective in his and George Philip's forthcoming book, [The Return of the Left in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador](#). Indigenous social movements may well have played a significant role in opposing neo-liberalism and bringing down governments in their respective countries, but Panizza argues that in terms of political action, indigenous Bolivian political movements and leaders have been more successful than in Ecuador.

According to Panizza, the Ecuadorian indigenous Pachakutik political party largely failed in its objectives. This was due to four main reasons: (1) along with its sister indigenous social movement and other social movements, it lacked any basis for unity with other mass organisations beyond the protests that brought them into the street; (2) the uncertainty regarding the broader social movements' commitment to liberal democracy; (3) their inability to offer an alternative future other than opposition to the present; and (4) the failure of the indigenous community to establish clear lines between its social movement base and as a political party.

By contrast, the Bolivian case may well be the exception to the (Peruvian and Ecuadorian) rule. That it has been more successful than Peru and Ecuador may be due less to a single, powerful indigenous social movement and political party than the fact that the two groups only constituted part of a broader social and political movement. If one looks past the significant (and indigenous) presence of Morales himself, it becomes apparent that Bolivian indigenous success owed as much to the parallel challenge against the neo-liberal model of the 1980s and 1990s. This was partially captured in the protests against water and gas privatisation during the first half of the last decade. At the same time MAS has never been a single issue party or represented one section of society: it has sought to be a broad church, even if the various ethnic, regional and class cleavages in that country have largely reinforced each other compared to other Andean countries.

The realisation that indigenous politics is only part of a wider phenomenon has been concisely encapsulated by Sofia Donoso, an Oxford University doctoral student. An observer of social movements, she has noted a shift away from a culture as the principal basis for social movement resistance to one that is more concerned with material matters. Although this is a contemporary trend, it has echoes with the past, especially in the period before the decline of import substitution industrialisation (ISI) (1970s-80s) and the rise of structural readjustment measures in the neo-liberal period (1980s-90s). In that earlier period the bulk of social movements were organised along class or occupational lines, which transcended many of the later political identities, such as ethnicity, religion or sexuality. Moreover, the main demands were similarly general: the incorporation of marginalised social groups into the state and welfare systems and incomes that were both decent and secure.

In sum, what does this all suggest? At one level, it means that for indigenous political parties or candidates to do well they have to look beyond their own personal identity. For Pizango and his political party, the cases of Bolivia and Ecuador provide important and instructive experiences. In particular, they highlight the need to link up indigenous grievances with other, broader concerns and alternatives. At the same time, Pizango and others will need to evaluate the impact that another touted Humala campaign in 2011 may have on their own political fortunes. At another level, the scholarly trend captured above poses interesting research questions about the nature and scope of social movements and political parties. Particularly valuable in this regard would be analyses related to the development of political identity and material concerns across such groups and time periods, including before and after the switch from ISI and to neo-liberalism.

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