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# Ecuadorians mobilize against the 'big package' of Moreno and the IMF

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October 9, 2019



Those who believe that class struggle is a matter of the past are wrong. The economic elites of Ecuador, through the government of Lenín Moreno, have declared economic war on the Ecuadorian people, with the imposition of measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund, which include increasing fuel prices, more layoffs of public employees, cutting workers' rights and measures to favor importers, exporters and the corporations of production.

In response to this "big package," the affected sectors immediately began mobilizing, demanding the repeal of the measures adopted by the government that impacts the majority of Ecuadorians. The protests began with the strike of the transport workers and now continue with the active participation of indigenous

peoples in the mountains and in the Amazon, as well as popular urban sectors, workers, students and women.

Instead of responding to citizen demands, the government decreed a state of emergency for 60 days, ordering the mobilization of the armed forces and police to repress the demonstrations. As a result of this measure, there is one dead, hundreds of people arrested, assaults on journalists, young people wounded with firearms and tear gas bombs, people beaten and harassed.

## **Many reasons to protest**

The rise in fuel prices is the trigger for the recent mobilizations, but the general discontent that reigns in Ecuador has broader and deeper roots, and must be looked at from the moment that Lenín Moreno turned his back on the government program that allowed him to assume the presidency.

Moreno's initial cabinet was replaced by representatives of the production corporation and the private media, who are imposing their own vision and group and class interests in order to favor themselves enormously from the state administration.

When the economy was showing signs of recovery, these sectors worked on a tale that the country was experiencing the worst crisis in history, for which the previous government was to be blamed. After adopting a series of measures, such as the pardon of fines and interest to the defaulters of the large economic groups that have debts with the State, which total more than 4,500 million dollars, the economy has gone from tumble to tumble. Among the main impact has been the increase in poverty and extreme poverty, the reduction of adequate employment, the growth of underemployment, the dismissal of public workers, greater insecurity and violence, and the government's inability to address serious problems such as violence in prisons, illegal mining and the border situation.

Coincidentally, while the majority of the Ecuadorian people are going through serious economic and social problems, the rich minority sectors are increasing their profits in the midst of the crisis. The banking sector, for example, in 2017-2018, made a profit of 554 million dollars, which represents an increase of 39.8% over December 2017.

On the other hand, the government, instead of seeking to finance the budget with a tax policy so that those who have more pay more, collect the debts of big businessmen and combat tax evasion and avoidance, resorts to external indebtedness in conditions that are extremely disadvantageous for the country.

Under these conditions, the government resorted to the International Monetary Fund, with which it signed an IMF Extended Service Agreement, in exchange for a loan of 4.200 million dollars, and agreed to the strings attached to increase in value added taxes (IVA), the rise in cost of fuels, the privatization of strategic sectors, the so-called labor flexibilization, which in reality means attacking the rights of workers, the reform of the statute of the Central Bank, reduction of the size of the State with layoffs of public workers among others, in order to achieve "fiscal balance". It should be remembered that the last agreement with the IMF took place in 2003, during the government of Lucio Gutiérrez, who did not end his term because of popular rejection.

President Moreno, with a level of credibility bordering on 16% and acceptance of only 22%, thus imposes a package of economic measures that has received support from the International Monetary Fund, the chambers of commerce, bankers and the corporate media, which have closed ranks to defend the measures, pointing out that the government has had the "courage" to "withdraw the subsidy" to fuels, "something that has not been done in the last 40 years.

The rise in diesel prices from 1.03 to 2.30 dollars and extra gasoline from 1.85 to 2.39 dollars, prices that will fluctuate every month, will have a great impact on the

popular economy, since they increase the prices of basic necessities and public transportation, deteriorating the purchasing power of most Ecuadorian families and worse for those who earn a basic salary or have reduced income. Every penny that goes up in fares and groceries counts a lot for the 1.7 million people who subsist on less than \$1.6 a day, and for another 4.4 million who receive less than \$2.9 a day.

### **Transport workers strike and popular mobilization**

On Thursday, October 3 and Friday, October 4, the strike of transporters affected the whole country, classes were suspended and the working day was shortened due to the difficulties of mobilization. This was the trigger for other sectors to mobilize against the measures of Lenín Moreno's government in several cities, especially in Quito, where even some flights were canceled at the Mariscal Sucre International Airport in Tababela, due to the impossibility of getting there. Government Minister María Paula Romo said there were demonstrations in 300 places that day. In Guayaquil, taking advantage of the situation, looting occurred.

### **Indigenous Mobilization in the Central Highlands**

To counteract the transport workers' strike, the government proceeded to apprehend some of its leaders in Quito (Jorge Calderón) and Cuenca, who are being prosecuted for paralyzing public services. At the same time, some private media orchestrated a smear campaign against certain leaders. After this campaign of intimidation, the government and the transporters reached an agreement whereby the latter suspended the strike in exchange for increases in freight and passenger costs in urban and interprovincial transport, tax exemptions for the import of spare parts and even allow them to carry passengers standing on buses that travel through provinces.

With this agreement, Moreno's regime gave rise to a second economic package that will have serious repercussions on the family economy, even more so when no type

of compensation has been foreseen. The lifting of the strike, however, not all transport unions complied and demonstrations against the rise in fuel prices were took place in Sucumbíos, Quito and Portoviejo and other cities.

When business leaders, the media and the government thought that the end of the transport strike meant the end of the protests, the mobilization of the indigenous communities in the provinces of Imbabura, Pichincha, Cotopaxi, Tungurahua, Azuay, Cañar and Loja, as well as in the Amazon region, broke out with great force.

On Saturday, October 5, through Monday indigenous people blocked the roads with barricades and trees, while holding rallies in provincial capitals such as Ambato, Latacunga, and Riobamba. The objective of the indigenous struggle is not only to demand the repeal of the package of economic measures, but also the suspension of concessions to open-pit mining and other demands in defense of small-scale agriculture.

In response to the declaration of the “State of Exception”, the unleashed repression and the imprisonment of the leaders of Pachakútic, Marlon Santi and Jairo Gualinga, the indigenous leaders of CONAIE issued a communiqué declaring their own state of exception in all indigenous territories and warned that “military personnel who approach indigenous territories will be detained and submitted to indigenous justice. The measure is given in response to “the brutality and lack of awareness of the public force to understand the popular character of the demands of the National Strike against the Big Package, which affects the whole of Ecuadorian society and deteriorates the living conditions and existence of the most vulnerable sectors of the country. The indigenous organization denounced that military and police contingents harshly repressed the indigenous mobilizations, even attacking women and children.

The military, according to CONAIE, entered indigenous territories at various points in the Ecuadorian sierra, raiding houses, using pellet guns and tear gas bombs that

wounded demonstrators. In the Panzaleo sector, in the Andean province of Cotopaxi, the military detained demonstrators, put hoods on them, and took them to unknown places.

### **Military held by Indigenous people**

In the community of Nizag, province of Chimborazo, in Peguche, province of Imbabura and in Lasso, province of Cotopaxi, indigenous people and peasants held military and police officers, to exchange them for indigenous people detained, denounce repression and apply indigenous justice.

The corporate media and the “public” media have closed ranks around Moreno’s government and its policies. They joined the official story by silencing or minimizing the protests, and give bias coverage by omission of the protests in the country like nothing was happening. But popular independent social media has been filling the information void. One of them is the Universal Radio Pichincha that has a wide audience not only in Pichincha province but also in Quito. The site has lost power several times but it continues to report. The Moreno government has censored and closed other digital media including ElEstado.net and Ecuadorinmediato.com.

### **State of emergency ... increased repression**

Resorting to the declaration of a state of emergency by a government with such low popularity is a sign of weakness in the face of growing opposition. The 60-day state of emergency suspends the right of association and assembly 24 hours a day, limits the right to freedom of transit, and provides for the mobilization of the armed forces and police “to maintain order.”

Under this framework, 24,000 military personnel and thousands of police have been mobilized to contain the popular protest that as of October 6 have detained nearly 500 people according, María Paula Romo, the Minister of Government.

Romo, who defines herself as a feminist and “from the left that believes in rights and liberties,” was a member of the Alianza País assembly in Rafael Correa’s government. Then, in the last presidential elections, she spoke in favor of banker Guillermo Lasso and now, as the head of the Ministry of Government, she directs the harsh police repression against the demonstrators.

While armored personnel carriers of the Army and military red berets were stationed in front of the Government Palace on the Sunday, the Minister of Defense, Oswaldo Jarrín denied it, and at the same time made a public announcement that “because the military knows how to defend themselves, they have experience in combat and war, they cannot be outraged, they have honor, they have dignity and will be respected.”

On the morning of seventh we were able to see that the armored vehicles had been removed, but hundreds of policemen surrounded the Government Palace in the centre of Quito, which is fenced in to keep out impede pedestrian traffic.

On the same day that the measures were announced, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights questioned the Ecuadorian State about the adoption and impact of the structural adjustment provided by the IMF and its impact on human rights. The following day, in an unusual manner, the Committee issued a strong statement in which it pointed out that the reduction in the institutionality and budgets of the State through the implementation of the agreement with the IMF are incompatible with Ecuador’s international obligations and negatively affects economic and social rights.

The same concerns were communicated to Argentina a year ago in relation to measures dictated by the IMF. In March 2019 the Human Rights Council recognized that efforts to stabilize an economy in times of crisis disproportionately affect the most vulnerable sectors of the population and increases inequality in countries. This scenario of worsening inequalities and job insecurity is being implemented violently,

as Moreno's government intends to do through a state of emergency.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, expressed concern about the situation of indigenous peoples in the context of protests in Ecuador and urged the government to avoid excessive use of force, respect human rights, and seek a solution to the conflict through intercultural dialogue.

Finally, it is important to point out that although the current mobilizations in the countryside and the city are the most significant in recent years, during the Moreno administration, various demonstrations and protests have taken place, largely hidden by the corporate media. The most recent protests took place from September 24-30 in the northern province of Carchi, with the closure of roads, demanding the construction of roads, a differentiated added taxes valued for the province, the creation of a free zone and the refund of such taxes to the Decentralized Autonomous Governments. In the province of Bolívar, thousands of indigenous people marched on September 25 in the provincial capital Guaranda, for the government to annul the mining concessions, which would affect more than 160,000 hectares of water sources and moors. Women's marches for the decriminalization of abortion in cases of rape, which was denied by the National Assembly, have also taken place.

Source: [America Latina in Movement](#), translation, Resumen Latinoamericano, North America bureau

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