

Ecuador: National referendum ending oil exploitation in the Amazon is victorious

written by Santiago Rosero
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Indigenous Waoranis march for a “Yes” vote in the referendum to protect the Yasuní. Photo: Jose Jacome

While most of the focus was on the general elections in Ecuador, a national referendum was held on oil exploitation in the Amazon. In addition, in a regional

referendum, the inhabitants of Quito voted on mining. In both cases, the vote to stop exploitation triumphed.

The long struggle to save Yasuní Biosphere Reserve reached a milestone this Sunday when the majority of the Ecuadorian population voted in favor of keeping the existing oil in Block 43 in the ground. This also includes the Ishpingo, Tambococha, and Tiputini fields. The yes vote was 59%, while the no vote to continue exploitation was 41%. The referendum was held in the context of the presidential and legislative elections where the correaist got 33% and the Guayaquil businessman Daniel Noboa 24% advancing them both to the second round to be held on October 15.

The oil block 43 is partially located within the Yasuní National Park (Ecuadorian Amazon), one of the areas with the greatest biodiversity on the planet and which, together with the neighboring Huaorani Ancestral Territory, was declared a biosphere reserve by UNESCO in 1989. It is also home to the Tagaeri and Taromenane, the last peoples in voluntary isolation in Ecuador.

After the failure in 2013 of the Yasuní Initiative presented by the government of then President Rafael Correa, it was announced that the block would be exploited. It was then that the environmental group Yasunidos was formed, which immediately submitted a question to the Constitutional Court to call for a referendum and for the Ecuadorian people to decide on this issue: “Do you agree that the Ecuadorian government should keep the crude oil, known as Block 43, indefinitely in the subsoil?”.

Bogged down in a process that would later be recognized as fraudulent, neither the question nor the consultation were approved at that time, so Yasunidos began a tortuous legal battle that would take 10 years and cross three governments. Along the way, that is, starting in 2016, the Block 43 began to be exploited after the declaration of national interest that former President Correa had requested to the National Assembly in 2013 came into force. After the official proclamation of the

results this Sunday, the operations must now stop and, according to the law, the state-owned Petroecuador will have one year to dismantle its facilities and leave that area of Yasuní. However, Petroecuador officials have indicated that the withdrawal would take at least five years since there are around 230 wells in operation there.

“This is something historic. Ecuador has taken the first concrete step to fight climate change and has set a global example,” says Antonella Calle, spokesperson for Yasunidos. “That is very important because it forces countries around the world to make real decisions in this regard. On the other hand, this shows us once again that the Ecuadorian people are in favor of defending life, nature, the rights of people and animals.”

Opposing figures and campaigns

The Government of Guillermo Lasso has sustained the argument of the supposed economic loss that the State would incur by ceasing to exploit block 43: 1200 million dollars per year, considering that, according to his figures, that was the income achieved in 2022. Petroecuador’s manager, Ramón Correa, has also pointed out that in 20 years, the loss would total US\$ 16.47 billion, which includes US\$ 13.8 billion for oil revenues not received; US\$ 467 million for the cost of abandoning the block; US\$ 1.952 billion for the infrastructure and facilities that will have to be removed, and US\$ 251 million for social compensations.

Carlos Larrea, economist, and member of Yasunidos has pointed out that this calculation is inaccurate since it is the result of multiplying 55,000 barrels of oil that Block 43 supposedly produces per day (about 12% of the country’s total production), 60 dollars per barrel and 365 days of the year. In this way, 1.2 billion is achieved, but in exports, not in income for the State. Larrea argues that the price of \$60 per barrel is unrealistic since 2016 when exploitation of that block began, the price has been \$51. Moreover, the calculation does not consider the cost of extraction, which is \$35 per barrel, and the fact that it is a crude that contains too much water (11

barrels of water for each barrel of oil), which reduces its quality and makes it difficult to extract. The Minister of Energy himself, Fernando Santos, had said about this oil that “it was a disappointment,” that it is a “very heavy tar,” and that the enormous amount of water it contains “finds a way out to the surface and drowns the well”.

Countering the eventual losses pointed out by the Lasso government, Yasunidos has mentioned some alternatives, among them to eliminate the tax exemptions granted by the State to the richest groups in the country. According to information from the Internal Revenue Service (SRI), in 2021, Ecuador stopped receiving 6,338 million dollars for this reason, which in only one year is 30% more than what it would receive for exploiting the ITT block for 33 years.

While the Government’s strategy was to replicate the figures of the alleged losses through various spokespeople and with the main information media at its disposal, the campaign for a “yes” vote concentrated on the defense of natural resources, biodiversity, the territory of plants, animals and Amazonian peoples, with emphasis on the fact that this is not only Ecuador’s heritage but that of the world.

Rich in audiovisual products and very active in social networks, the Yes campaign stood out for its vitality and multiple voices. Although it radiated a mostly youthful energy, it was also careful to generate messages targeted to specific sectors, including academia, coastal populations, and indigenous peoples and nationalities.

“The beauty of this campaign is that it was megadiverse; like Yasuní,” says Antonella Calle. “Many wills from different parts of Ecuador and the world have joined in; various sectors of society, not only environmentalists. It has been a struggle from the heart, activism and the hope of defending life”.

Among the foreign personalities who backed the yes vote were activist Greta Thunberg and actors Leonardo DiCaprio, Mark Ruffalo, Jason Momoa, and Gael

García Bernal. “Ecuador could become an example of democratizing climate policy, offering people the opportunity to vote for the forest, indigenous rights, the climate and the well-being of the planet,” DiCaprio wrote on his social networks.

With the outcome of the referendum now comes the phasing out of the ITT oil facilities. “We are going to make sure that the oil tankers leave our sacred forest as soon as possible,” says Nemonte Nenquimo, an indigenous leader, member of the Huaorani nationality, and winner of the Goldman 2020 environmental award. “And we are going to share this model of direct action on climate change with all peoples and countries, because at this time of climate crisis the world needs models of struggle that put power in the hands of the people.”

Another yes to stop mining

Parallel to the Yasuní consultation, the inhabitants of the Metropolitan District of Quito voted in a referendum on mining in six of its rural parishes in the northwest, which make up the Chocó Andino commonwealth, a territory of 287,000 hectares also declared a biosphere reserve by UNESCO. This is another area with very rich biodiversity, where 270 species of mammals, 210 reptiles, 130 amphibians, and 227 varieties of orchids have been recorded.

In this case, the will to stop the advance of mining obtained 68% of the votes. “This triumph has the weight of what the people want and need, because we citizens must be the ones to build democracy,” says Inti Arcos, spokesperson for the Quito Without Mining collective, which promoted the consultation. “It is the expression that we want a different world and that it is possible for economic alternatives to emerge that respect human rights and the rights of nature. As a society we have entered a fatal circle of violence, and mining was going to bring us more violence, because violence means entering the territories and destroying nature and the lives of the people.”

In the Andean Chocó, there are already twelve copper, gold, and silver mining concessions of artisanal, small, medium, and large scale in early stages of exploration. The yes vote in this consultation will prohibit mining at these four scales and the granting of new concessions, but existing projects will remain active.

Source: [Resumen Latinoamericano - Buenos Aires](#)

