

Law of the Jungle in Peru: Indigenous Amazonian Uprising against Neoliberalism

Gerardo Rénique

Socialism and Democracy Issue 51 (November 2009)

Between April 9 and June 19, 2009, what started as a protest demanding attention to basic material and political rights by the most marginalized sectors of Peruvian society turned into a powerful and widespread indigenous-popular uprising.

Stereotyped as *chunchos* (“the wild ones” in Quechua language) because of their alleged “wildness” and lack of any form of civilization, Amazonian peoples have been since the foundation of the Republic marginal to national society. In contrast, as reputed inheritors of a romanticized imperial civilization, humble and obedient workers, Andean Indigenous peoples were included – albeit in a subordinate manner – in the dominant Creole national imaginary. Set against this background – as noted by scholar Roger Rumrill – the Amazonian uprising stands as an “historical turning point” for Peruvian cultural and political formation. By bringing a “sudden consciousness among all Peruvians of the terrible fracture between Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies,” the uprising brought visibility for the first time to the socially, politically and culturally neglected Amazonian peoples.¹

The Amazonian uprising has not only redrawn Peru’s political landscape; it has made Amazonian Indigenous peoples the most important actor in this crucial political conjuncture. The struggle also helped unite a broad field of anti-neoliberal social and political forces around their common rejection of the legislative package popularly known as the “Law of the Jungle.” The disputed legislation sought to undermine the collective property regime of both highland Andean and lowland Amazonian indigenous

¹ Roger Rumrill, “Nuevo mapa político en la Amazonía,” *La Primera*, June 30, 2009; also, Yasser Gómez, Entrevista con Roger Rumrill, June 29, 2009, Blog: *Sangre en las ideas*: <http://sangreenlasideas.blogspot.com/2009/06/los-indigenas-han-forjado-la-alianza.html>

communities by conceding supposedly “uncultivated” lands to lumber companies, surrendering the nation’s rights over natural resources to private investors. Other measures sought to expand the area of forest concessions (to almost 100,000 acres for use over 40 years); facilitate the use of public waters by private irrigation projects; lower the restrictions on transgenic seeds; ease government control over protected areas; and establish forest zones of “permanent production.” One of the most controversial aspects of the decrees is that they allow private interests to buy up indigenous lands and resources.

More importantly, the Amazonian uprising has also made possible a hitherto elusive alliance between Amazonian and Andean indigenous peoples – an alliance that will be key to blocking the predatory expansion of capital across the final frontier to its global and absolute dominance. As one of the planet’s richest sources of oxygen, water, energy, and biodiversity, Amazonia is of primordial importance not only for Peruvian citizens but for all humanity. Indigenous understandings, ethical stands toward life in all its forms, collective forms of decision-making, non-capitalist drives, and communal pluralism also stand at the center of a possible new universalism beyond capitalism.

Against the Law of the Jungle

On June 5, 2009, near a stretch of highway known as the Devil's Curve in the northern Peruvian Amazon, police began firing live rounds into a multitude of indigenous protesters and their supporters – *mestizos* from the surrounding area, army veterans, and a group of *ronderos* from the Andean Highlands.² In the nearby towns of Bagua Grande, Bagua Chica, and Utcubamba, shots also came from police snipers on rooftops and from a helicopter that hovered above the mass of people. Far from being deterred by this bloody repression, both natives and *mestizos* escalated their protest.

By the end of the day, a number of buildings belonging to the government and to President Alan García's APRA party had been destroyed. At least 24 policemen and 11 Indigenous protesters – by official count – were killed, and additional protesters were

² Members of *rondas* – community-appointed self-defense and vigilance units – *ronderos* are also charged with the administration of customary law.

disappeared (estimates vary). Overwhelmed by the number of wounded, small local hospitals were forced to shutter their doors. A Church official disclosed that many of the civilian wounded and killed at the Devil's Curve were forcefully taken to the military barracks of El Milagro. From Bagua, a local journalist told a radio station that policemen had dumped bagged bodies into the Utcubamba River.

The confrontation had entered its acute phase several weeks earlier when, in violation of its September 2008 agreement with the Amazonian peoples, the government purposely delayed negotiations that had been scheduled, with the mediation of Congress, a few months before. The September agreement, together with Congressional revocation of controversial presidential Decrees 1015 and 1073 (aimed at privatizing communal lands and erasing indigenous autonomy) had resolved a weeks-long Amazonian Indigenous strike organized by the umbrella group Inter-Ethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Amazon (AIDSESEP).³ The decrees that were revoked by Congress had overturned local community rulings so as to allow “business partners,” buyers, or mortgage-holders into indigenous territories, thereby eliminating the last legal resource available to indigenous peoples to protect their territorial integrity and autonomy. The September compromise curtailed the Law of the Jungle, requiring negotiation of issues affecting territorial rights, self-determination, health and education, and cultural integrity. This was a victory for AIDSESEP and a severe blow to García's neoliberal plans. As such, it established the Indigenous Amazonian peoples as a pivotal actor in Peruvian politics.

The indigenous victory however was short lived. Oblivious to the generalized opinion that the “Law of the Jungle” – and the Free Trade Agreements – would have a detrimental impact on the environment and would also undermine national sovereignty, García persisted with his project. Describing Congress's decisions as “an historical mistake,” while keeping contact and conversations with Amazonian representatives open, García launched an aggressive political and media offensive against their organization. Frustrated with García's uncompromising stance, AIDSESEP launched a second general

³ AIDSESEP was created in the late 1970s. Its background is discussed in a later section of this article.

strike on April 9, 2009. In a public declaration it demanded that Congress rescind the “Law of the Jungle,” establish a genuine *Mesa de Diálogo*, and create new government agencies charged with implementing “intercultural” solutions to indigenous health and education problems. The document also called for recognition of indigenous collective property rights, guarantees for special territorial reserves of communities in voluntary isolation, and the suspension of land concessions to oil, gas, mining, lumber, and tourism industries.⁴ Indigenous organizations also demanded a new constitution that would incorporate the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the International Labor Organization (ILO)'s Convention 169, both of which guarantee indigenous rights to territorial and cultural autonomy. Finally, the April declaration also calls for the suspension of the government's free trade agreements with the United States, the European Union, Chile, and China, all of which endanger indigenous territorial rights and Amazonian biodiversity. Taken together, these proposals constitute an alternative approach to modernization, rejecting the predatory demands of capital and affirming commitment to the environment, indigenous peoples, and national sovereignty.

The decrees comprising the “Law of the Jungle” had been signed by García under special powers he received from Congress to implement the 2006 US-Peru Free Trade Agreement. In the opinion of legal experts, at least nine of those decrees contravene the prescriptions of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (ILO Convention 169), as well as Peru’s own Constitutional right of self-determination to peasant and indigenous communities. Both the ILO Convention and the Peruvian Constitution grant indigenous peoples the right of consultation, participation, and decision in development projects affecting their wellbeing and territories. Although Peru, like many other Latin American countries, has legally adopted ILO principles, they have so far remained a dead letter. By privatizing forests, hydrocarbons, water, and minerals, the Law of the Jungle also violates

⁴ Peoples in voluntary isolation are those recently contacted and that by their own will decide to live without contact with the larger society. Many of these communities were initially contacted by AIDSESP that have also negotiated with the government the creation of territorial reserves allocated exclusively to these communities. See AIDSESP's Programa Nacional de Pueblos Indigenas en Aislamiento Voluntario y Contaco Inicial, in <http://www.aidesepp.org.pe/index.php?codnota=7>

the specific Constitutional provision that “all renewable and non-renewable resources are patrimony of the nation.”⁵

Following a colonial logic of “progress” and the capitalist predatory mode, García's decrees foster the commodification of indigenous territories, ecological reserves, communal and public lands, water, and biogenetic resources to the benefit of powerful transnational interests. What's more, the Law of the Jungle implicitly conceives of indigenous Amazonia as an open, empty, bountiful, and underdeveloped frontier and its inhabitants as obstacles to neoliberal modernization and investment schemes.

President García defended the government's violent reaction and blamed the indigenous peoples for thinking they could decide what happens in their territories: "These people don't have crowns. They aren't first-class citizens who can say... 'You [the government] don't have the right to be here.' No way." The president called the protesters "pseudo-indigenous." Oblivious to demands from the most diverse quarters, García hardened his position, accusing indigenous leaders of terrorism incited by an alleged international “anti-system” force. Charged with sedition, indigenous leader Alberto Pizango was forced to seek political asylum in Nicaragua. Resorting to a bygone discourse, García further asserted that with the participation of “foreign leaders,” the country was living through a “cold war” – part and parcel of what he considered to be “a continental conflict” pitting the forces of “economic and political democracy” against those of “economic statism and demagoguery” represented by Presidents Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and Evo Morales of Bolivia.⁶

As indigenous groups escalated their direct action campaign, the government declared a state of siege on May 9 in four of the most militant provinces of Amazonia.

⁵ AIDSESEP-Equipo Legal. *Decretos Legislativos que afectan a los Pueblos Indígenas emitidos por el Poder Ejecutivo en virtud a la Ley n. 29157. Análisis de los principales Decretos Legislativos.* (Documento d Trabajo). Ms., n/d; Patricia Urteaga C. *Informe Socio Jurídico sobre Decretos Legislativos Vinculados a Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas.* Lima: Derechos, Educación y Desarrollo, 2008. See also, Monika Ludescher, “Hidrocarburos, medio ambiente y derechos indígenas en la Amazonia Peruana,” *Derecho y Ambiente*, vol.2, 1997, 281-318.

⁶ Alan García, “A la fe de la inmensa mayoría,” *Expreso*, June 28, 2009. See also, Carlos I. Degregori, “Presidente García: perdido en la era de Bush,” *Ideele*, no. 193, July 2009, <http://www.revistaideele.com/node/493>.

Despite the crackdown, AIDSESEP gained sympathy and solidarity from broad sectors of Peruvian society. Unions, popular organizations, and highland peasant and indigenous groups have staged "civic strikes" and other protest actions. Elected municipal and regional authorities across the country have also expressed their support. And Catholic bishops across the Amazon region have called on the faithful to support indigenous demands, stating that the "rich cultural and biological diversity" of the region represents a "source of life and hope for humanity."

On May 27, Peru was rocked by a national day of protest called by the country's largest trade union federation and other social movement umbrella groups. Thousands took to the streets to protest García's neoliberal policies and to express their solidarity with AIDSESEP's struggle. In Lima a massive march arrived at the steps of Congress, demanding that the Law of the Jungle be declared unconstitutional. Meanwhile, the just-concluded Fourth Continental Indigenous People's Summit, which was held in southern Peru, called for an international day of action in solidarity with the Amazonian uprising.⁷ Labor confederations, Andean indigenous, *campesino* and popular organizations, coalesced with AIDSESEP into a *Frente por la Defensa de la Vida y la Soberanía* and called for a three-day *Jornada Nacional de Lucha*. Far from deterring mobilization, the June 9 massacre at Devil's Curve in Bagua and the ensuing repression triggered further discontent and mobilization in solidarity with AIDSESEP, in defense of the Amazon, and against García's Free Trade Agreements. Under the slogan *La Selva No Se Vende. La Selva Se Defiende* ("the forest is not for sale; the forest defends itself"), a myriad of popular organizations, women's groups, youth collectives, labor unions, and peasant federations mobilized together in a number of militant and creative ways.

Threatened by mounting popular discontent, under the scrutiny of international Human Rights organizations, under criticism from clergy and from the Ombudsman's

⁷ See Marc Becker, "Moving Forward: The Fourth Continental Summit of Indigenous Peoples," *NACLA OnLine*, June 12, 2009, <http://nacla.org>.

Office, and facing plummeting approval rates, García caved in.⁸ Finally, on June 18 after meeting with AIDSESEP leaders, a humbled Prime Minister Yehude Simeon (himself a former leftist and political prisoner under Fujimori) announced the withdrawal of the two decrees most legally threatening to the territorial and cultural autonomy of Amazonian Indigenous peoples, bringing the Amazonian strike to an end.

The overthrow of the controversial decrees however did not end the popular mobilization. The *Frente por la Defensa de la Vida y la Soberanía*, which included AIDSESEP in its ranks, demanded punishment for those responsible for the June 9 Devil's Curve Massacre, the resignation of the Cabinet, and the end of Free Trade Agreements with the United States, China and Chile. Between July 7 and 9 throughout the country, thousands took to the streets staging marches, road blockades, regional strikes and other forms of civil disobedience with a militancy and creativity not seen since the mass actions that hastened the fall of Fujimori in 2000. In the mostly indigenous highland provinces of Andahuaylas and Chumbivilcas, the strike turned into local uprisings which continued for a few weeks. Besieged but still arrogant, García restructured his cabinet in late July, warning the defiant population that he would not hesitate to apply the law against those "breaking the peace and social order." Threatened with arrest on charges of "sedition" and "mutiny," two more leaders of AIDSESEP were forced into exile in Nicaragua. Several local stations in the Amazonian regions – known for their criticism of the government – were closed on the pretext of "technical" violations.

Neoliberalism and Colonialism

García justified this new onslaught on Amazonian peoples and environment in a long editorial published in late October 2007 in the right-wing daily *El Comercio*. He identified the communal property regime as Peru's main obstacle to development and modernization, alleging the existence of "uncultivated" land that indigenous communities

⁸ By late June approval rates for García dropped by eight points as compared to the previous month to reach an historic low of 21%. His disapproval levels reached 74%. In the Amazonian regions, experts estimated his approval rate at an ignominious 5%. "Desciende aprobación de Alan García," *El Comercio*, June 27, 2009.

“do not till” and “will not till” because they lack the know-how and financial resources. He called for the prompt privatization of these lands in order to attract “long-term high technology” investment, holding the communal-property model responsible for “the vicious circle of misery” afflicting the Amazonian region. The “uneducated and poor farmers,” he said, ought to be replaced with a “middle class” of knowledgeable and financially sound property owners – in his words, the only people capable of “obtaining resources, establishing markets, and creating formal jobs.”⁹ García thus put a neoliberal gloss on the anachronistic oligarchic scheme of progress predicated upon disappearance of the indigenous peoples through expropriation, cultural assimilation and proletarianization – a scheme unsuccessfully applied in Peru and Latin America since colonial times.

In fact the decrees were intended to foster the ongoing concession of thousands of hectares of public, indigenous and peasant lands to private agro-industrialists that had started during President Toledo’s administration (2000-05). Calling the palm oil industry of “national interest,” the central government superseded regional governments’ oversight power on legislation involving the use of local resources. Between 2005 and 2006, over 10,000 hectares of land in the fertile Valleys of Shanusi and Caynachari in the region of San Martín were turned over to the Grupo Romero – Peru’s largest capitalist conglomerate – intended for both palm oil and bio-fuel. The major beneficiaries of Amazonian resources however are foreign oil and gas companies. Since 2003 the government has dramatically increased the number of lots assigned to transnational corporations for oil and gas exploration and extraction. The 64 lots allocated to date, covering an area of 500,000 square kilometers, represent 72% of Peru’s Amazonian territories. Twenty-four of these lots comprise Indigenous territories and natural reserves

⁹ Alan García. “El síndrome del perro del hortelano” [“The Dog in the Manger Syndrome”]. *El Comercio*, October 28, 2007. The poverty of the region is real enough; according to a 1994 World Bank report (*Indigenous People and Poverty in Latin America: An Empirical Analysis*), 75% of Amazonian children, both indigenous and non-indigenous, between the ages of 2 and 9, suffer chronic malnutrition.

deemed by researchers from Duke University to be the richest repositories of biodiversity in the whole region, and home to its most endangered species.¹⁰

Considering the negative impact of this industry in different parts of the world inhabited by native peoples, the indigenous-led international organization “Land is Life” considers oil development in the Amazon a “blatant violation of Indigenous peoples’ human rights.” The dumping of polluted water from drilling operations into rivers and the frequent spillages from oil ducts have contaminated rivers and fish – the main source of protein for local populations. A large number of Achuar children on the banks of the Rio Corrientes – downriver from Occidental Petroleum oil wells – suffer chronic malnutrition and contamination from ingesting fish tainted with cadmium and mercury. Illegal woodcutting and the smuggling of animal and vegetable species are yet another source of conflict and environmental degradation. Authorized by corrupt functionaries and authorities, the extraction of choice hardwoods represents approximately 15% of the country’s overall lumber production.¹¹

In an indignant letter to García, AIDSEP dismissed his scheme as one of “growth without development,” devised for the exclusive benefit of transnational capitalists whose investments would further deplete Amazonian territories, leaving indigenous peoples “without resources, without air, without water, and without identity.” Requesting a formal dialogue with the government, the group offered a counter-proposal, suggesting a strategy of sustainable development grounded in the defense of existing ecosystems, protection of Amazonian biodiversity, and respect for indigenous territories and knowledge. It also asked that the president not act as a “Trojan horse” for foreign interests and warned him not to “give away any territories” or to implement any measure

¹⁰ Susana Grados, “Grupo Romero arrasa comunidades,” *La Primera*, April 13, 2008; “Proyectos petroleros son peligro para diversidad indígena del Amazonas,” *La Republica*, August 13, 2008.

¹¹ Earth Right International, Racimos de Ungurahui and Amazon Watch. *A Legacy of Harm. Occidental Petroleum in Indigenous Territory in the Peruvian Amazon*. April, 2007. http://www.amazonwatch.org/amazon/PE/blocklab/a_legacy_of_harm.pdf
Matt Finer, Clinton N. Jenkins et al. *Oil and Gas Projects in Western Amazon Threatens Biodiversity and Indigenous Peoples*. <http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0002932>

concerning the Amazon without the consent of its inhabitants. The letter and request for dialogue were met with nine months of silence.¹²

History of Plunder and Resistance

Neoliberal elites are apparently oblivious to indigenous historical agency and political activism in Peru, where there is a long trajectory of indigenous insurgency, both Andean and Amazonian. Despite systematic marginalization, defeats and setbacks, through a persistent and protracted resistance, indigenous peoples have nevertheless prevailed in the defense of their communal lands and autonomy. With approximately 9 million individuals, 711,000 of them members of 7,000 officially recognized communities, Peru's indigenous population is proportionally one of the largest in the Americas.¹³ Indigenous struggles have marked seminal moments in the country's history. The rebellion led by Inca descendant Santos Atahualpa (1742-52) in alliance with mostly Ashaninka peoples in the Central Jungle, and the simultaneous Andean uprisings of Tupac Amaru II in Southern Peru and Tupak Katari in today's Bolivia (1780-82) sparked the crisis that two decades later brought to its end 300 years of Spanish colonial domination. The radical anti-colonial and anti-landowner stance of these rebellions (which in this respect resembled the Black slave-led Haitian Revolution), however, created fear and apprehension among even the most fervent Creole patriots, themselves members of a privileged elite whose dominant position was predicated upon the exploitation and subordination of Indigenous (and Black) labor. Hampered by fierce colonial repression and tight mechanisms of social control, Indian and Black participation

¹² AIDSESEP, "Carta abierta al Presidente Alan García," November 13, 2007. See also Gil Inoach Shawit. "La diferencia entre el 'perro del hortelano' y el 'perro del monte,'" AIDSESEP, December 2007, <http://www.aidesepe.org.pe/editor/documentos/60.pdf>

¹³ 1990 World Bank estimates gave Peru's Indigenous population at 9 million, representing approximately 41% of the total population. Spread in 5,500 communities, Andean peoples are divided among 7.1 million Quechuas and 603,000 Aymaras. The approximately 350,000 Amazonian Indigenous peoples are divided into 65 different ethnic groups. With 65,000, the Ashaninka are considered the largest. Although not as accurate as the World Bank's figures, more current calculations estimate Peruvian Indigenous peoples at 50 to 60% of an estimated total population of 29 million (the latter figure from 2007 United Nations. *World Population Prospects*). See Javier Lajo and Carlos Arana. "Diagnostico de la situación y problemática de los pueblos indígenas del Perú," ALAI, May 4, 2005, <http://alainet.org/active/5931&lang=es>

in the patriot camp in the 1810-1820s Wars of Independence was carefully held to a subordinate role.

After Independence, Indian communal organization, political autonomy and territorial control granted by the colonial corporative order were soon under fire by new independent nation-states inspired by liberal principles of individualism and private property. To maintain control over Indians (and Blacks) and quell all forms of resistance, Creole nation-states developed a two-pronged strategy of repression and often-forcible cultural assimilation. Colonial forms of labor exploitation, land expropriation, and ethnic cleansing through military campaigns, co-existed side by side with modern state-formation techniques (educational and sanitary campaigns, military conscription, White immigration and “racial improvement,” and the exercise of the vote) aimed at forming a compliant labor force, individual small-property owners, and patriotic (male) citizens. Resorting to a combination of rebellion, accommodation and negotiation, however, indigenous peoples managed to resist both private encroachment on their lands and state offensives against their political and cultural autonomy. Peasant/indigenous participation was pivotal to both the 1910 Mexican Revolution, and Bolivia’s 1952 National Revolution. During the late 1950s and early 60s massive peasant and indigenous land occupations in the Andes galvanized the popular democratic upsurge that broke up the established oligarchic regimes.

From a Creole and Lima-centered perspective, the apparent absence of Amazonian peoples from these events is usually attributed to their geographical isolation and cultural marginalization. Seen from an indigenous perspective, however, this condition reflected their persistent resistance in defense of their cultural and territorial autonomy. Since the 18th century, indigenous groups in the Amazonian rainforest have successfully rolled back the incursions of colonial missionaries, rubber barons, gold miners, lumber contractors, Sendero Luminoso guerrillas and others seen as representing an external threat. Except during the mid-18th-century insurgency of Santos Atahualpa, however, inter-ethnic alliances between Andean and Amazonian peoples have proved elusive if not impossible. Inheritors of a long and fierce tradition of struggle, Amazonian

peoples successfully resisted subjugation by the Inca Imperial state – grounded in Andean culture. Spanish colonialist incursions supported by Andean indigenous military personnel deepened the divide between the two peoples.

Under the independent nation-state, Andean cultural attitudes and behavior toward Amazonian indigenous cultures were similar to the hegemonic modalities maintained by the western Creole culture towards Andean peoples. The clearing of the forest and agricultural practices of Andean colonizers in the rainforest during the second half of the 20th century increased Amazonian native apprehension. Unlike the western god and Andean deities inhabiting heaven and mountaintops, Amazonian gods inhabit the forest, soil and water.

Serious attempts to bridge the gap were not successful until recently, when the Law of the Jungle and its threatening disposition undermining Indigenous cultural and territorial autonomy brought together the most representative organizations of both Andeans and Amazonians. Together with AIDSESEP, the Peasant Confederation of Peru (CCP), the National Agrarian Confederation (CNA), and the Confederation of Peasant Communities Affected by Mining (CONACAMI) – with a mostly Andean membership – established a coalition declaring Peru’s indigenous peoples in “state of emergency.” In a press conference following their first meetings in June 2008, Antolin Huascar, president of the CNA, announced that peasant and indigenous communities across the country would engage in marches, sit-ins, and regional mobilizations as a prelude to a countrywide indigenous strike. Scheduled for July 8-9, the strike was set to coincide with the national strike previously announced by labor and popular organizations, as well as with the Amazonian strike called by a mid-April Amazon Summit that was massively attended by popular organizations, labor unions, citizen groups, ecologists, local businessmen, academics, local municipal and regional authorities, oppositional congressional representatives, and Indigenous representatives from the five Amazonian regions.

Roadblocks, marches, and demonstrations, particularly intense in southern Peru and the Amazon (the two regions with the largest concentration of indigenous

communities), paralyzed most of the country. García's approval rating had already sunk below 25%. His eager and servile embrace of the despised and ailing Washington Consensus contrasted sharply with his electoral promises to revise the Free Trade Agreement with the United States, uphold the autonomy of the regional governments, promote a rural strategy in the Andes based on modernizing peasant production, protect the environment, and reexamine the tax breaks and fiscal privileges granted to transnational corporations by authoritarian president Alberto Fujimori and left untouched by his successor, Alejandro Toledo. Oblivious to popular mobilizations and swelling criticism, García dismissed the protesters as opponents to modernization and boycotters of globalization, manipulated by "outside" interests. He was only making matters worse for himself.

2008 Amazonian Strike

Quietly and steadfastly in the early hours of August 9, 2008, hundreds of Matsiguengas closed down navigation on the Urubamba River. Not far away, in a simultaneous action, another group occupied two pumping stations, heliports, and installations of Pluspetrol, the corporation operating the Camisea gas deposit – the largest in the country, located in the southern department of Cusco. Further north, in the other extreme of the Peruvian Amazon, more than 500 Awajun occupied and closed down the hydroelectric plant of El Muyo, while thousands rallied in the nearby provincial capital of Bagua. On the banks of the Ucayali River near the port of Pucallpa, indigenous protesters closed the river to navigation. In Manseriche, department of Loreto, indigenous protesters occupied and closed down the pipeline transporting oil from the deposits in Manseriche to the coast. Vowing to maintain the blockades and occupations until the government established a direct dialogue, AIDSESEP released an 11-point platform.

The group demanded, first and foremost, the immediate repeal of decrees 1015 and 1073 and the cancellation of other decrees threatening indigenous territorial integrity

and autonomy. The platform also demanded a fund for sustainable-development projects among indigenous peoples; evaluation of the environmental impact of extractive industries in the Amazon; creation of a program for the protection of indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation; a congressional commission to oversee implementation of the UN Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples; and the reorganization, with the rank of Ministry, of the National Institute for the Development of Andean, Amazon, and Afro-Peruvian Peoples (INDEPA), which had been dismantled by García.

Startled by AIDSESEP's militancy and the strategic implications of its demands, the government went on the offensive, drawing on the racist and anti-Communist repertoires of oligarchic and Cold War ideologies. The police chief of Amazonas department, Victor Castañeda, said the mobilizations' "real stimulus" was to defend the interests of narcotraffickers. Prime Minister Eduardo del Castillo in turn denounced the uprising as part of a broader "plot" led by former Nationalist Party presidential candidate Ollanta Humala to overthrow the government. As AIDSESEP persisted in demanding a dialogue and protesters maintained their actions, the supposed sponsors of the mobilization multiplied rapidly: from subversive priests to radical left-wing activists to foreign NGOs to agents of presidents Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales.

A week into the protest, with negotiations stalled by the uncompromising stance of government representatives, AIDSESEP raised the stakes with another round of actions. Blockades were now extended to the key bridges and highways connecting the Amazonian region with the rest of the country. By this time the ubiquitous presence of Alberto Pizango and other members of the AIDSESEP National Council in the media and the skillful and astute work displayed by its press team gained public sympathy for indigenous demands. In response, the government declared a "state of emergency" in the four areas at the center of indigenous mobilization. Basic democratic rights were suspended, and elected officials surrendered their authority to the military.

The government also increased police and military presence in the most conflictive areas. The alarmist and racially charged declarations of cabinet members, on the other hand, failed to ignite the latent contempt and mistrust toward so-called

chunchos particularly harbored by urban populations. Minister of the Environment Antonio Barack, commissioned by the executive as its leading negotiator with AIDSESEP, declared to the press that the hidden and “ultimate” goal of the protest was the “liberation” of indigenous territories and “independence” from the Peruvian state. Prime Minister del Castillo falsely asserted that the continued blockade of power plants and gas and oil facilities – mostly for exports – would paralyze industry and throw cities into darkness.

The conflict finally reached the halls of Congress. In a unanimous vote the congressional Committee on Andean, Amazonian and Afro-Peruvian Peoples repealed García’s decrees and drafted their own law. In an astute political move, AIDSESEP leaders immediately opened a dialogue with Congress. Indigenous and congressional representatives reached an agreement according to which the protesters agreed to suspend their actions while the representatives would take their draft law to the full Congress. Two days later, Congress passed law 2440 annulling García’s decrees 1015 and 1073.

A severe blow to García’s neoliberal plans, AIDSESEP’s victory marked the consolidation of indigenous peoples as a pivotal actor on the Peruvian political scene. The group’s forceful, sophisticated intervention also shattered the condescending attitudes held toward Amazonian natives by many Peruvians – including progressive intellectuals and left-wing activists.

AIDSESEP: Another Modernity

The product of more than two decades of intense organizing, AIDSESEP’s establishment as an umbrella group for the several regional and local federations represents a turning point in the evolution of Peru’s indigenous peoples as an autonomous social and political force. It also embodies the dramatic transformation experienced by Peru’s popular movement during the near decade since the fall of Fujimori. In this period, indigenous peoples have displaced the labor movement – devastated by the elimination of workers’ rights, neoliberal deindustrialization, and unemployment – as the central force for social transformation.

The first autonomous regional indigenous organizations above community level emerged during the 1970s among the Ashaninka, Amuesha, and Aguaruna peoples in the High Marañon Valley in northeastern Peru. Organized along ethnic lines, these earlier organizations were established to defend indigenous territories and resources against the rapid expansion of settlers, cattlemen, lumber and oil companies. The reformist policies of the military government (1968–80), particularly its legislation recognizing indigenous communities and their territorial claims, created favorable conditions for the political mobilization and organization of Amazonian peoples. AIDSESEP emerged out of these experiences, established first as a coordinating committee in 1979. The organization is led by a national council representing six regional coordinating committees spread across Peru's vast Amazonian territories. Its membership includes every one of the 64 different indigenous peoples living in 1,340 communities with a population of about 350,000, organized in turn in 57 valley and regional federations. Its strength resides in its organization from the bottom up, decision-making by consensus, reaffirmation of traditional knowledge, and respect and consideration for the communities' *apus* (elders).

More than a defensive organization, AIDSESEP has also consolidated its presence in the region through the direct and autonomous management and administration of services and resources – a process paradoxically favored by the central government's age-old disdain and neglect towards Amazonian Indigenous peoples, deepened in the last decades of neoliberal reorganization with the resulting neglect of the state's basic social responsibilities. AIDSESEP filled in the vacuum left by the retreat of the state, particularly in the areas of health and education. Its intervention however goes far beyond the mere provision of services. Founded on the rescue of traditional shamanic medicine, languages and cultural traditions, it promotes the involvement and participation of the population in formulating and implementing its health and educational programs. This has made it an important vehicle of self-organization, education and strategic envisioning of a different and alternative future. Its program of bilingual inter-cultural education, coordinated with the Ministry of Education and supported by regional teachers' colleges, has graduated 300 specialized schoolteachers, offered development courses to thousands of Indigenous

and non-Indigenous teachers, produced textbooks in native languages, and developed a number of specialists in the formulation of bilingual educational national policies. AIDSESEP's indigenous health program has trained hundreds of "health technicians," and many of its public health initiatives have been adopted by the national and regional governments.

Two other critical areas of immediate concern are the promotion of women's participation and the development of alternative economic strategies. Through workshops and ad hoc activities, AIDSESEP's *Programa de la Mujer Indígena* promotes women's participation in Indigenous organizations, gender equity in the process of decision-making, and the adoption of a gender perspective at all levels of the organization's work. A special team investigates, promotes and implements more efficient agricultural methods and technologies. It also prepares programs of forest management and sustainable development, and conducts pilot production programs. Other AIDSESEP programs at different stages of development include a radio station, alternative energy, eco-tourism, and technical schools.

It is however AIDSESEP's firm defense of Indigenous democratic rights, territories and resources that gives the organization its most visible face and oppositional edge. As the sole repository of 30% of the planet's fresh water and 10% of its biodiversity, the Amazon is recognized by a growing number of scientists and policymakers to be at the crossroads of humanity's future. While in García's neoliberal predatory schemes Amazonian resources are considered exclusively as a source of profit, for Amazonian peoples the rainforest represents the foundation of their existence, culture, and identity. If deprived of their territories, Amazonian peoples are – states AIDSESEP – “doomed to extinction.” From an indigenous perspective their ancestral territories are a common good in integral interdependence with nature. Amazonian landscape and geography constitute “sacred places that deserve respect as fountains of visions of the future and spiritual strength.”

After centuries of contemptuous western dismissal of indigenous affirmations of the spirituality of their territories, these demands were finally recognized in the 2007

United Nations Declaration of Indigenous Rights. More precisely, Convention 169 of the ILO mandates its signatory states – Peru among them – to respect and protect Indigenous cultural, religious and spiritual rights. García, however, in his justificatory October 2007 essay on “the dog in the manger” (in favor of privatization of Indian lands and resources),¹⁴ dismissed indigenous claims as “demagoguery and trickery.” Following in the steps of 16th-century colonizers, and invoking the 1850s discourse of progress and modernization, neoliberal modernizers today also rely on the expropriation of Indian territories and the obliteration of their cultures in order to advance a vision of development driven by the demands of capital.

Territorial defense then stands – together with the defense of indigenous rights and self-determination – as the overriding demand of indigenous struggle. AIDSESEP has led this struggle through a combination of direct mobilization, legal action, territorial demarcation, education, and the promotion of research and programs aimed at better use of the Amazon forest’s natural resources. With the support of sympathetic professionals and academics and with the use of cutting-edge technology, including GPS-SIG monitoring, AIDSESEP established the Centro de Información y Planificación Territorial (CITPA). Charged with upholding the integrity of Indigenous territories, the Center sets community boundaries and negotiates with the government for their official recognition. To date the Center has managed to settle the titles for 40% of all Indigenous communities; it has also mapped Indigenous territories in three of the six regions integrated into AIDSESEP, and is conducting a census and socio-economic study of each one of the communities in the organization. Its legal team keeps a close watch on both national and international legislation affecting or undermining indigenous self-determination, and takes legal actions in defense of the rights of the indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation.

The establishment of this impressive technical/administrative structure benefited greatly in the first place from AIDSESEP’s carefully crafted network of strategic alliances

¹⁴ Cited above, note 8.

with local and global indigenous and ecological movements and organizations.¹⁵ More specific cooperation and concrete agreements with NGOs, religious institutions, professionals and academics were also important. AIDSESEP's political drive and strength however came from the mobilization from below, galvanized by a predatory and hostile state which at the same time was only sporadically present in Amazonian Indigenous communities. Lacking state representation and facing the daunting offensive of neoliberalism, indigenous peoples responded with the revitalization and reaffirmation of ethnic authority. The creation of AIDSESEP was integral to this process.

AIDSESEP also participates in the construction of national and international political networks among Amazonian and non-Amazonian Indigenous peoples in South America. A founding member of COICA – *Coordinadora de las Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica* – AIDSESEP hosted its founding congress in 1984 in Lima. Formed by indigenous representatives from the nine Amazonian countries, COICA has emerged as an important space for exchange of ideas and organizational experiences in defense of indigenous peoples' rights. Staunch opponents to the Free Trade Agreement, COICA's member organizations participate in the broader social and political struggle against neoliberalism in the region.

In May 2008, AIDSESEP together with hundreds of representatives from a number of indigenous and peasant organizations in the country issued a declaration calling for the creation of “an autonomous political movement.” In a public manifesto the signatories outlined this effort as a long process to be built from the bottom up, with the collective participation of the population in local and regional “gatherings of exchange and consultation.” It called for a national mobilization of all those sharing their aspiration to transform the existing “mono-cultural and exclusionary state” into a “pluri-national, inclusionary and intercultural” state. The declaration also called for the establishment of “autonomous communitarian governments” and the creation of an economy based on principles of “human reciprocity” and in a “reciprocal relation with nature.” Summoned

¹⁵ The Confederación de Nacionalidades Amazónicas del Perú, led by César Sara, claims a membership of 200,000. Given its support to oil and gas companies, and its weak and bureaucratic organizational structure, its real political presence among Amazonian peoples is rather marginal.

by the CAOI (Coordinadora Andina de Organizaciones Indígenas) – formed in 2006 and coordinated by former president of CONACAMI – this was by far the most significant and representative indigenous gathering in Peruvian history.

La Lucha Continua

Unlike the traditional working class, whose political subjectivity was determined by its subordination to capital, indigenous peoples, and the new poor of the neoliberal age, have a certain degree of control over the production and reproduction of their living conditions, a key factor informing their anti-systemic militancy and disposition. Indigenous peoples have also displaced the onetime powerful left, fragmented by infighting, its retreat from revolutionary socialism, and embrace of mainstream electoral politics. Indigenous peoples have taken over the role of the left as the most important voice in the defense of national and public resources and national sovereignty.

Driven by principles of communality, self-esteem, and respect for nature, the indigenous movement stands as a powerful challenge to the individualism, self-interest, and exclusion that are the core values of the neoliberal, monocultural Peruvian state. The indigenous struggle has also brought to the surface the Peruvian nation-state's legacy of colonial oppression and racism. Indigenous forms of collective participation, understanding of leadership as service, and decision by consensus also challenge the top-down organization and “democratic centralism” of traditional labor unions and left-wing political formations. Their amalgamation of democracy and collective interest; articulation with new and old political traditions; and their simultaneous deployment of reform, insurgency, and rebellion are crucial to developing the revolutionary strategy prophetically envisioned in the 1920s by Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui, who imagined a confluence of socialist objectives and indigenous communitarian struggles.

The structuring of this emerging indigenous movement into a more coherent anti-systemic bloc and the incorporation of its demands, strategies and world perspectives into a programmatic alternative to neoliberal capitalism, will entail not only an extraordinary

and continuing organizational effort, but also a shedding, on the part of the left, of deep-seated disdain toward indigenous knowledge and political capability.

In the current political juncture in Peru, Amazonian peoples have proved to be the most organized and militant sector of Peruvian society, with a broad political appeal. Through their recent struggles they managed to join together the broadest coalition against neoliberalism in the last decade. The historically unprecedented alliance established with Andean indigenous peoples will be pivotal to the consolidation of a counter-hegemonic bloc of forces, to the re-foundation of Peru's nation state, and to the re-imagining of a strategy of development respectful of nature and aimed at the well-being of the majority.

The Amazonian uprising also brought to the political debate and social consciousness three crucial issues: (1) the imperative need to reconstruct the country as a multinational state, (2) the importance of the Amazon rainforest as a source of life and sovereignty, and (3) the illegitimacy of a political system that operates in secrecy, without public oversight and effective democratic control.

García's hardening stance towards the Amazonian peoples (particularly the AIDSESEP leadership) and his calls to respond to their uprising through further criminalization of the protest, constitute the best proof of their political impact and its potential threat to his predatory capitalism, which, like its 19th-century predecessor, remains predicated upon the destruction of nature and the colonialist expropriation and subjugation of indigenous peoples.