



YOUTH IN LATIN AMERICA

YOUTH AND POLITICAL ACTION IN ECUADOR

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Abstract: More than half percent of Ecuador's population is under 30 years old, which stresses the State and state officials to grant importance to discourse concerning the development of legislation on youth. This article discusses the youth participation in contemporary Ecuadorian history and its reflections in institutional political processes, as well as knowledge production.

Keywords: Ecuador – Constitution – Law – Social Movement – Youth

Ecuador is an eminently young country, according to the last census in 2010, 56 percent of the population is under 30 years old, this demographic has put stress on the State and state officials to grant importance to discourse concerning the development of legislation on youth, so it is normal to hear phrases like “investing in youth is an investment in development”.



The Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador recognizes the youth as “strategic actors in development”, in this way article 39 states:

The State shall guarantee the rights of young people and shall promote the effective exercise of these rights by means

of policies and programs, institutions and resources that ensure and uphold, on a permanent basis, their participation and inclusion in all sectors, especially in public sector spaces. The State shall recognize young people as strategic players in the country's development and shall guaran-



tee their right to education, health, housing, recreation, sports, leisure, freedom of expression and association. The State shall foster their incorporation into the labor force in fair and decent conditions, with emphasis on training, guarantee of access to first employment, and promotion of their entrepreneurial skills.

According to this focus, young people are considered fundamental actors for the integral development of society, therefore it tries to get rid of the idea that young people are the future of society, affirming, that they are the present and that it is necessary to strengthen the strategic capacity of this group.

The Law of Youth in Ecuador, passed in 2001, defines youth as the population between 18 and 29 years old, however, from the sociological point of view that is the most accepted in Ecuador, the population of "young people" is composed of people between 15 and 29 years old.

It is important to recognize the role played by youth organizations and young people in discussing regulations and public youth policy, as well as in mobilization processes that have marked the most recent decades of Ecuadorian history.

The implementation of neoliberal policies since the 80's has been respond-

ed to with the emergence of new social movements, specifically, the 90's was very effervescent in social action and the most important political focus was the indigenous movement that demonstrated a capacity of mobilization that paralyzed the country. In the fight against neoliberalism distinct groups and movements started appearing with their own declarations and political proposals, this is the case for the women's movement, environmentalists, the student movement and youth organizations.

The participation of young people in these movements during the 90's and 2000's was significant, one that was noteworthy was the higher education student movement, that many times, was the first to go to the streets to demonstrate their disagreement with structural adjustment measures or processes such as the FTAA or NAFTA .

The participation of young people was also present in the essential processes of 1998 and 2008 so that their proposals would be present in the corresponding Constitutions. In 1998 with demands such as conscientious objection, sexual and reproductive rights, and the issue of citizenship, in 2008 the focus was based on the constitutional mandate of youth, prepared by a group of youth organizations



after an intense debate about “the country of our dreams”.

The 2008 Constitution is very progressive on many issues, especially with respect to young people, in general it expands and recognizes other specific rights. For the youth movement the constitutional process of 2007-2008 was very important, not only because of the obtained objectives that translated into specific articles regarding to youth, but also because it was an opportunity to construct a platform for youth organizations that discussed their problems and were able to propose specific articles to be incorporated in the Constitution.

Intense debate between youth organizations expanded the Youth Constitutional Mandate, a document proposed in the front of an assembly that contains various principles and articles, specifically one of the principles statements established that:

Include: There should be one principle that the State recognizes, where the young population is seen as strategic actors in the development of the country, that generate processes of shared learning, promote their strengths, generate new spaces of participation, and contribute to political, social, economic and

environmental processes of the country .

To think of the participation of so many young people in institutional political processes (debate about the Constitution and other laws) as in social movements, in general discourse it is affirmed that young people don't participate, they are apathetic, they are not interested in the reality of their country; This perhaps is due to the type of political participation that is required for the adult centered world, so they demand a greater presence of youth in public institutional spaces.

According to this understanding, political participation, to a lesser or greater extent is related to young people, in some cases it would be a nonexistent practice and in others it would be an exercise in social transformation.

To explain it in a better way, the exemplary information obtained from the First National Poll about Youth and Participation, affirms that, “if between 49% and 55% of the youth have scarce (little by little) interest for national politics, between 71% and 74% express a high level of approach in politics in relation to the affairs in their neighborhoods, their communities and their cities” (Ramírez, 2011:27). Apparently, the traditional concepts that are understood as political participation



are insufficient to explain the reality in which young people live, who are more interested in their daily lives and in their concrete relationships than in participating in abstract and distant politics, unable to respond to their real necessities.

The same survey results highlight the rejection of youth participation in structures like political parties and movements, they are the least trusted institutions for the Ecuadorian youth even when compared to the national police. "Only one out of every four young people would be willing to serve in the military or in organized political structures (movements or parties)".

Generally, as demonstrated in this survey young people are disinterested in participating in traditional political structures, this is also due to the institutional crisis and political parties that have been in Ecuador in the last few decades, those that have converted the country into being famous for overthrowing three presidents and for having 6 different presidents within the same 10 years (between 1997 and 2007).

The classical structures are inadequate in responding to the demands and claims of groups like the youth, who look for representation in other forms of organizations whose practices and principles

are more horizontal and are closer to answering their concrete demands.

Youth participation in Ecuador is shown as a specific area of concern, from the state, academia and the youth organizations, this interest is not only evident because of the number of studies that have been recognized in the state of the art report on the knowledge produced by Ecuadorian youth, not only for the reforms that it has provided in legal fields, but that I mean the recognition of voluntary voting of those that are found between the ages of 16 and 18, hoping in this way to include youth in formal politics and in the productive matrix.

Around the theme of youth participation there are various points for discussion, starting with the fact that there are various understandings of what participation means, many understand it only as public participation, i.e. in the State, however, the practice of youth organizations has realized that they should differentiate between public participation through traditional channels and forms of participation that go beyond the public like demonstrations in the streets to express their voices.

Although the last government has given drive to youth participation, it is un-



settling for them to institutionalize their participation, so state spaces and public channels will co-opt their spaces for participation. While various youth practices have been linked to formal spaces of decision-making and have fought for institutionalization and the incorporation into legal frameworks in every country, other activities are located outside establishments as a practice of transformation and emancipation.

In this way there can be two types of relationships observed between the youth and participation (that could be classified as political), the first relationship is in regards to youth and formal participation and a second is in regards to practices of social transformation.

With respect to the first, the incident within the formal structures has been hard work for the organizations that have specific results, with this I am referring to the recognition of youth rights in the 2008 Constitution of the Republic, however, in the same sense, what is written in the law is not observed in reality through public policies that does not allow these results.

Many times the participation of young people in the formation of public policy ends only being instrumental, so there isn't a process that permits real par-

ticipation, this is also due to that youth organizations are not numerically representative of the young population and are not permanently mobilized on these issues.

With respect to the practices of organized and non-organized youth that overflow traditional parties and that march as a means of transformation and emancipation and manifest themselves in demonstrations that take to the streets, we can say that they are forms of action more widespread but do not hold up over time.

In 2013 particular events that had lead to social mobilization especially in youth, in themes like education, the environment and sexual and reproductive rights, all of their demonstrations are marked as defending human rights.

During the last few years in Ecuador an education reform has been implemented that reduces access to higher education for many young people, they feel like their right is being violated, and they are not offered other alternatives, to this we must add that the majority of young people are either unemployed or under-employed.



The demonstrations related to education have been basically made up of university students, we can't affirm that it has been an extensive process nor sustained but it has served to revive the student movement.

The environmental issue has been the most important in provoking the youth, in the defense of the Yasuní-ITT region.

For more than seven years, Ecuador proposed to leave a substantial amount of oil in the ground in the Amazon region, this proposal, known as the Yasuní-ITT Initiative, that emerged from the civil society, has one central objective: to not take the crude oil out of the ground in three deposits in block 43. The initiative is based on four pillars:

1) To protect the territory and the life of the indigenous communities in voluntary isolation,

2) To conserve biodiversity that is incomparable to any other place on earth (the highest concentration of biodiversity recorded by scientists thus far)

3) To take care of the global climate, maintaining a significant amount of oil underground, omitting 410 million tons of CO2 from the atmosphere,

4) To take the first step towards the transition to a post-oil Ecuador, which would have a demonstrating affect elsewhere.

In return Ecuador waited for the financial contributions of the international community, that should have assumed their shared and differentiated responsibility based on the many levels of environmental destruction caused by many societies around the world.

This proposal has a lot of strength with the support of the Rights of the Environment in the 2008 Constitution, in article 71 that states: "Nature or Pacha Mama, where life is realized and produced, has rights that respect its existence, maintenance and regeneration of its vital cycles, structures, functions and evolutionary processes". Article 73 complements the anterior constitutional outlook: "The State will apply means of precaution and restriction to activities that can produce the extinction of a species, the destruction of ecosystems or the permanent alteration of natural cycles".

However, on the 15th of August in 2013, President Rafael Correa announced the ending of the initiative and exploitation of the Yasuní-ITT, affecting not only the area of the most biodiversity that exists in the world but also putting risk on



the lives of the communities that live in voluntary isolation.

This decision was rejected by the citizens of Ecuador, especially the youth, who occupied plazas and streets demonstrating their disagreement. Since the government made this decision, environmental organizations, indigenous people and young people organized themselves to demand a popular consensus from the Ecuadorian community, to decide as a whole whether or not to exploit these oil fields.

The realization of the popular consensus referring to the Yasuní-ITT is mostly mobilized through organized and un-

organized youth, in the call to march and mobilize social media has played a big role through which information has been shared and organized spontaneously in the defense of the Yasuní-ITT.

The group of young people who have organized specifically around the defense of the Yasuní-ITT, have been called Yasunidos and have employed themselves to collect signatures in order to have a popular consensus. It is important to note that the conflict has lowered in toxicity and now there are less demonstrations as well as the number of youth who are involved.

The other topic that has mobilized young people, specifically young women



were topics related to gender violence and sexual and reproductive rights, the first point is in regards to the “slut walks” and actions surrounded by cases of femicide, the second point, is the debate that is purposefully maintained in the legislative assembly about the comprehensive criminal code, which was related to the action of the practice of decriminalizing abortion in cases of rape.

The decriminalization of abortion in cases of rape was defended by feminist organizations, but the groups that had the most impact were those made up of young people. Despite all of the pressure put on them, the assembly did not decriminalize abortion in the case of rape, however the

public event put the issue into public debate, to which they have been adding other collective initiatives.

As may be evident the political action of the youth in Ecuador has had two fronts, one in formal politics, using the mechanisms of formal participation and the other through social protesting outside of traditional spaces, the second is the most attended by young people in the recent years; however, both cases show little sustained mobilization or organization, so many young people that attend marches like those of the defense of the Yasuní-ITT do not belong to any organization and their participation is more spontaneous and sporadic.



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