

# Marching Against Repression



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Each morning of the month-long march of communities toward Quito begins with a ceremony. It is both an expression of strength and an assertion of survival for Andean and Amazonian knowledge. They invoke the cosmivision – or world view – contained in the Andean *chakana*; the relationship with fruits and vegetables worked from the land, coming from the *pampamesas*; or calls to provide food collectively, which is also a source of energy for the march. The *mamas*, wise women who perform the ceremonies, burn incense and rosewood around the participants for protection during the march. It smells of centuries of struggle and dignity.

“Que se queden en el paramo” (Go back to the paramo); “vayan a ordenar a su casa... unos cuantos abusivos, así se vistan de poncho” (boss around at home... a few harassers, look at the ponchos) or “indio encontrado, indio preso” (find an Indian, lock him (her) up): These are just a few of the insults that have been hurled by governing politicians or the hegemonic media toward indigenous marches as they arrived in Ecuador’s largest cities. The historical configuration of Latin American cities that were “founded” by the colonizers in the 15th century – who erased the cities’ previous history and who assumed the cities as spaces that belonged to *them* – has had a strong influence with regards to public demonstrations. Racism implies violence toward non-white/mestizo ways of inhabiting urban space and the violence reaches its peak during the marches: the deployment of the police and the army is especially brutal, as reflected in the eight deaths during the last indigenous uprising in October 2019.

## Marching through the highlands to the capital

The anti-repression strategy of Ecuador’s indigenous movement has been to carry out marches from emblematic places for its peoples and nations to the capital city of Quito. Despite the 2008 Constitution recognizing the right to resistance through the *Sumak Kawsay*, or Good Living and the Rights of Nature, changes such as the new mining law of 2009, the cancellation of the Yasuní-ITT initiative, and oil exploration through the XI oil round forced the indigenous movement to raise its voice. As a result, five large marches have been held in the last decade, starting in the Amazon and traveling through the Ecuadorian highlands to the center of

Quito, converging thousands of people from the north and south of the country, supported by urban leftist groups.

The first march was called due to the launch of the first mega mining project in the south of the Ecuadorian Amazon, concessioned to a Chinese transnational company. Communities resisting mining from across the country made a show of force as the march passed through numerous cities. One of the other emblematic marches was led by Amazonian women, who walked for days from the centre of the Amazon to voice to state institutions their arguments against oil expansion of Spanish, Belorussian, and Chinese companies. The President of the Republic and the President of the National Assembly refused to receive them.

## Networks of care and solidarity

The marches usually last between nine and 12 days. This involves a quick ascent – from hot tropical climates to the Andean cold – up almost 3000 meters of elevation, which is only possible because of a solidarity network that moves hundreds or thousands of people from one place to the next. Care and mutual solidarities become essential. It is essential to be able to feed all the people who walk from town to town. This is staged through large *pampamesas*: a collective meal that is prepared in huge pots to feed those who arrive at the end of the day, flooding the public space with the smells of the seasonings of the mountains. They symbolize the sense of community, and the importance of nourishing bodies with food.



This is why the presence of healers is also fundamental during the marches. The mothers have the tough job of emotional containment, given that blisters or gastric diseases multiply as the walk goes on. To sustain the march, places to sleep vary in terms of climates and conditions, and an endless number of logistical needs accumulate. In Ecuador, funds are raised through collection, *hacer una vaca* (literally “to make a cow”). For these marches, a cardboard cow in the form of a piggy bank is made, where those who receive the march in each city put their contributions. Human rights, religious, and environmental organizations become important supporters through intercultural solidarity.

The marches are intergenerational. Women are very visible, while at the same time there are spaces for childcare, thanks to which children can participate for the entire route. The marches are a sign of presence and millenary strength of resistance to colonization. The paintings on the faces and bodies of those who walk are crucial; as with the indigenous cosmovisions, they are a way to become part of territories through the representation of animals, plants, concepts, or dreams; they are a message and protection against the white-mestizo society that observes, stigmatizes, or violates them with the police or the army.

## Anti-extractivist mobilizations

Despite the harshness of institutional racism that the marches face, they are lived as moments that will become pillars of memory for indigenous peoples, flooded with emotions. The many moments of music, song, dance, and multiple sharing are also spaces of joy. Although the most symbolic moments are the moments of entry into the successive cities, particularly Quito, hours pass walking through the arid Andean fields, which move between suffocating heat and excessive cold due to torrential rain. Thus, the marches are also symbolic renunciations of the means of travel that use fossil fuels and other sources of modern energy, in a gesture of moving from the strength given by the food produced in the communities. They are a diversity of bodies that march, suffer, move or enjoy together, reconfiguring as the march progresses and more people join, forming a confluence of laughter, sounds, proclamations, languages, and flags.

The marches thus become a form of vindication that acquire a time-space of their own, where hierarchical orders are subverted: the political protagonism of women, the taking of white-mestizo public spaces in the cities, media visibility, or the questioning of the state are results generated through the existence of the marches. These forms of anti-extractivist mobilization have been true milestones in the social articulation and mobilization for the indigenous movement, as well as for the environmental and human rights groups, in the face of transnational mining and oil companies, which have played a key role in the violence of the racist-colonial state in imposing their megaprojects. The marches are a form of struggle against historical inequalities promoted by the hegemonic model of power, not only with respect to the specific demands put forward by the marches, but also to their format; their meaning, organization, and aesthetics. The sheer realization of the marches is a way of displaying the proposed “other” politics, as shown in the slogan of the Ecuadorian indigenous movement: *diciendo-haciendo* (saying-doing).

### Illustrations

p. 134: Marcha 2015, Espacio Rural, Cedhu.

p. 137: Marcha Centro, Juan Manuel Ruales.

p. 139: Marcha 2015, Ceremonia música en camino, Cedhu.



