

## **Indigenous autonomies in Latin America: a screening of their strengths and difficulties**

*The struggles for the processes of autonomy building have gained prominence in Latin America. However, they are challenged by the fragmentation of the indigenous movement and the fear of the States of the autonomy discourse that puts national unity in crisis. In this context, it is important not to repeat the experience that has been developed with the free, prior and informed consultation process. Rather, it is time to join forces and struggles with the human rights movement and rely on indigenous autonomies as a process for the global sustainability of rights.*

**By Asier Martínez de Bringas - February 1<sup>st</sup> 2022**

The struggles for the processes of autonomy building are an unstoppable dynamic in Latin America and the world. The discourse of autonomies, as a fundamental means to articulate and shape indigenous political demands within the framework of the State, has acquired relevance and shifted the debates of the last decades, such as on territoriality, jurisdiction, interculturality, or other dimensions of collective rights that would allow the merging of the indigenous discourse.

Currently, this energy is channeled and projected through the autonomous discourse. We could say, in a crude and pedestrian way, that autonomies are in fashion; there is no closed and hermetic way of understanding indigenous autonomies. They are expressed and deployed according to the characteristics, conjunctures and idiosyncrasies of the different indigenous peoples. Therefore, there are as many autonomous processes as there are peoples and dynamics of struggle, with their specificities and differences.

As a political strategy for the consolidation and sustainability of indigenous ways of life, the autonomy discourse has been making significant progress at the collective level. In some countries, it has made it possible to rethink the institutional framework of the State in order to include their territorial demands and interpret them as cross-cutting claims. In this framework, autonomies

have given meaning and depth to complex issues, such as plurinationality and interculturality through indigenous life plans that convey, regulate, guide and plan the autonomy project.

The autonomy discourse has gained prominence since it has been a fundamental strategy to articulate and propel the processes of indigenous resistance, to make the forms of defense and territorial self-protection politically visible. It is a more ambitious and profound discourse than a mere territorial, cultural or identity claim. In the face of new extractive policies of companies and States, autonomies are a retaining wall against territorial dispossession. They also help resist the multiple expressions of violence and phenomenon of criminalization of indigenous peoples and their leadership.

### **Screening of the difficulties**

Today, indigenous autonomous processes are experiencing a regressive logic and dynamic of bogging down throughout the continent, which is why self-criticism is necessary. Autonomy construction processes are projected on the specular ghost of the dynamics of free, prior and informed consultations. Many of these processes ended in failures and implied depoliticization for indigenous peoples, thus reverberating, once again, the ghost of manipulation and deception of collective rights. Will these processes be a repetition of the misappropriation of the indigenous consultation? This is a reasonable doubt which we will have to bear with us.

The first type of difficulty lies in the States. Conservative or progressive, they are committed to the construction of a civic republican citizenship, rather than to fostering a state dynamic that would strengthen the figure of decentralized autonomous indigenous governments. In this sense, the indigenous autonomous discourse has functioned as a counter-discourse in the way of understanding the territorial organization of the State, as it is considered a danger to the unity and sovereignty of the State.

In the way that indigenous autonomies are understood, state policy has been developing a republican understanding of identity and citizenship that is fiercely centralized. This view contradicts the intention of forging a plurinational state model, as expressed in the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia. In this framework, the autonomies in Bolivia or the indigenous territorial

districts in Ecuador have functioned, in a certain way, as an instrument for the consolidation of this project of state centralization.

At the same time, there is the difficulty of a strong institutional fragmentation that prevents the existence of intermediate forms of government, a fundamental element for intra-state coordination and articulation with peoples and nationalities in forested areas, jungle areas and areas far from urban centers. This situation is compounded by the lack of a clear and effective system of competencies and an obsolete fiscal system for the necessary distribution of resources to indigenous autonomies. This difficult panorama is compounded with the lack of real indigenous participation in the whole process.

These difficulties are relevant explanatory factors to understand the failure in the construction of certain indigenous autonomies, as previously occurred with free, prior and informed consultation. As a result, autonomies have been reduced to a project of a regulatory-assimilative nature, without implying a real autonomous power for indigenous peoples.

### **The complexity of plurinationality**

A second type of problem has been the difficulty in understanding and integrating, in the territorial and institutional organization, such important principles as plurinationality and interculturality, which are contrary to the centralist and unifying dynamics of the States. In addition, indigenous migrations have played a relevant role in the composition and balance between the territory and the city. This has unbalanced force relations for the construction of autonomies. This situation has also entailed a profound and drastic metamorphosis of indigenous leadership, its possibilities, capacities and competencies. Therefore, these factors have contributed to the gestation of new ways of understanding and politically articulating the autonomies for the construction of a plurinational framework within the indigenous movement itself.

A third type of difficulty is related to the two planes or levels at which autonomy issues can and should be addressed. On the one hand, at the transversal level, plurinationality is a quality that affects, modulates and crosses the main institutions of the State in its legislative, executive and judicial axes. On the other hand, at the territorial level, autonomy implies a profound and drastic territorial redefinition of the State, its management and its competences. Therefore, if these levels

are not developed in parallel, the process of indigenous autonomies will be doomed to fail through its instrumentalization and depoliticization.

## **Weaknesses in the indigenous movement**

A fourth type of problem is related to the fracturing and weakness of the indigenous movement itself in Latin America to articulate a cohesive and consensual project of autonomy, with a plurinational character for all nationalities and peoples. In this context, the States have taken advantage of the weakness of the indigenous movement to deepen the fracture through practices of co-optation and instrumentalization of its leaders. The criminalization of social protest and the indigenous movement adds another factor in interpreting the movement's own weakness.

In this sense, some peoples and nationalities have exercised autonomy aimed at deepening territorial and jurisdictional management models (indigenous justice system), proposing strategies that imply radical changes in the distribution of power within the framework of the State, with a clearly plurinational intention. However, other dynamics have emphasized more tenuous processes of autonomy building, oriented towards negotiation and consensus-building of power within the framework of the State. Within this framework, the decentralization of competencies between the State and the indigenous autonomies is a priority.

The fifth type of difficulty is linked to the misappropriation and mythification that has developed in the discourse of the plurinational and intercultural State, to the benefit of certain elites, but to the detriment of indigenous peoples. There has been an ideological inversion of the content of autonomies, depoliticizing their potential for the construction of indigenous ways of life.

All these difficulties provide us with a structural framework for understanding some of the weaknesses in the process of shaping indigenous autonomies in Latin America. Many indigenous autonomous processes, moreover, have shown colonial biases in their structure, organization and process, limiting their creative potential by giving priority to administrative and hierarchical articulation as if they were monocultural and not very decentralized states, ignoring the principles of plurinationality and interculturality. Thus, the true meaning of autonomy is left out, forgetting the role that indigenous territoriality and jurisdiction play in the life plans of these peoples.

## **Strategies for action**

Based on this framework of difficulties in which indigenous autonomy processes are dangerously approaching and projecting themselves onto the experience of free, prior and informed consultation in Latin America, it is important to develop some strategies for action to break and limit these dynamics.

In this sense, it is necessary to think transversally about the struggles for indigenous autonomy in Latin America. If indigenous claims are fundamentally political – and not reductively ethnic, cultural, territorial or intercultural – it is important to build and design a strategy of alliances in the struggle to consolidate indigenous autonomies. It is no longer a purely indigenous issue, but a structurally political one, which implies designing practices of struggle and resistance with social movements, human rights movements, political ecology, the LGBTQ+ movement, the ecofeminist and decolonial movement, universities and many other actors and sectors that are close and permeable to the indigenous autonomy movement.

The construction of autonomies is consolidated in conjunction with other forces that, within the framework of the State, bet on the creation of indigenous autonomies as processes that contribute to the overall sustainability of rights. Indigenous autonomy is a dynamic of struggle for sustainable life (and lives), a proposal for the construction of the commons that has projection and implication beyond indigenous peoples. Hence its political relevance and also the fact that the indigenous movement itself has focused all its energy on the construction of collective rights from the autonomies.

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