

Ecuador President Rafael Correa loses indigenous allies

By Irene Caselli Quito

When Rafael Correa became president of Ecuador in January 2007, he was sworn in in unique style.

The ceremony took place in the Andean town of Zumbahua and Mr Correa wore an embroidered shirt typical of some highland villages.

Shamans shook sacred herbs over his head to protect his "Citizens' Revolution" from evil spirits.

Then, some of the country's indigenous leaders handed him a sceptre with colourful ribbons to show they accepted him as president.

"I will never fail you," Mr Correa promised.

In a country where a quarter of the population is indigenous, he was the first president to be officially invested according to indigenous traditions.



Mr Correa has lost the backing of some indigenous groups

But the same indigenous leaders are now considering taking back that sceptre - a sign of how unpopular the president has become among those who helped him come to power in the first place.

Divisive issues

After an initial honeymoon period, Mr Correa and indigenous groups have clashed over several issues.

Indigenous organisations have marched against the government's policies on mining, because they want the right to veto new projects on their ancestral land.

They stalled the approval in Congress of a new water law, which would take control of irrigation away from individual communities and give it to a new state agency.

The administration of justice in native areas has also been a bone of contention.

In March, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (Conaie) filed a lawsuit against President Correa and his government for alleged genocide of two native populations in the Amazon region - an accusation Mr Correa dismissed as "ridiculous".

The deterioration of Mr Correa's relationship with his erstwhile indigenous allies was summed up by an incident in June 2010.

Ecuador was hosting a summit on minority rights in Latin America.

Delegates were invited from across the region, including Mr Correa's left-wing allies, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Evo Morales of Bolivia.

But Ecuador's main indigenous organisations were not invited to take part in the summit in Otavalo - an important indigenous town.



Indigenous protesters say they are being criminalised

'Repressive attitude'

Angry at its exclusion, Conaie organised an alternative summit.

Hundreds of indigenous people, many of them from the Amazon lowlands, marched on the main convention centre holding traditional spears and even a snake.

After a clash with the police, some 30 leaders were charged with sabotage and terrorism.

Indigenous leader Monica Chuji, who took part in the march and who once acted as Mr Correa's secretary of communications, says using anti-terror legislation against protesters was an over-reaction.

"The president has intensified his repressive attitude towards the indigenous movement," she said.

Ms Chuji added that Mr Correa had failed in his promise to defend the interests of Ecuador's indigenous population.

"The person that has infringed most on our rights in the past four years has been the president," she said.

Political agenda

According to Conaie, the government is prosecuting 189 Indian leaders on the grounds that they are saboteurs and terrorists.

The international group Human Rights Watch expressed concern in its 2011 World Report at the "exaggerated charge of terrorism" used against protesters.

But the government denies acting disproportionately, and says it is putting the national interest first.

"We are not repressing, we are simply guaranteeing that the rest of the population is safe," says Maria Luisa Moreno, the government minister responsible for indigenous people.



Maria Luisa Moreno says the government still has broad indigenous support

She says leaders such as Monica Chuji are pursuing their own political agenda and do not speak for all Ecuador's indigenous people.

"It hurts us because they're our brothers, they are the people with whom we have been fighting all along," she said.

"The rank and file want to work with us," she added.

Pepe Acacho does not agree.

An ethnic Shuar leader from the Amazon region, Mr Acacho was arrested in February and charged with terrorism over a September 2009 protest during which a teacher lost his life.

After two days of protests, a judge released him, calling his detention "illegal, arbitrary and illegitimate."

Mr Acacho says the protests organised by his people contributed towards his release.

"We Shuar men are warriors," he said. "We are not easy prey, they can't mess around with us."

'Stepping stone'

Ecuador's indigenous movement has played a prominent role in Ecuador's recent political history.

In 1990 Conaie and other groups led an uprising which inspired indigenous activists across South America.

In 2000 and 2005 they helped topple two presidents.

But though they still have a large following in some highland areas, their overall strength is much diminished.

"The indigenous movement has been used as a stepping stone. Correa has stolen our ideals. He has been the worst president ever for us," said Mr Acacho.

Besides seeking to take back the symbolic sceptre they gave Mr Correa in 2007, indigenous groups are also campaigning against a controversial referendum proposed by the president, to be held in early May.

President Correa's approval ratings are high, including in indigenous communities, and he is most likely to win in the referendum, which he says will help his government fight crime and corruption.

The current situation in Ecuador follows a much broader pattern across the Americas, says Marc Becker, professor of Latin American history at Truman State University in Missouri in the US.

"It's a dance that you see between social movements and the governments they helped place in power," Mr Becker said.

Social movements in Brazil, Bolivia and even in the United States under Barack Obama have been faced with the disappointing realisation that "cheerleading the president doesn't do anything good," he said.

Ultimately, in the case of Ecuador, both sides need each other and the indigenous movements are not likely to try to force Mr Correa from office - at least for now.

The next big confrontation is likely to take place ahead of the 2013 presidential elections, when Mr Correa is expected to seek reelection.



Pepe Acacho says Mr Correa took advantage of indigenous goodwill