The history of Latin America’s indigenous peoples is one of a long struggle that started with the European invasion and conquest in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Since the 1930s new approaches such as the ideology of “indigenismo” promoted the preservation of indigenous cultural history. Later on, the democratic transition in some Latin-American countries and other factors brought paved the way for the organisation of social and indigenous movements. Today these movements have established themselves as major social and political forces that even have the power to bring down governments. This paper assesses the history of these movements, explains the rise of indigenous social movements in the last few decades and explores the long way from marginalisation to occupying a central socio-political position.

Keywords: Latin America, indigenous movements, colonialism, political participation

1. Introduction

In order to understand the contemporary situation of the indigenous movements in Latin America, it is necessary to explore the past and investigate the nature of indigenous societies at the time of the European discovery. The history of Latin America’s indigenous peoples is one of a long struggle that started with the European invasion and conquest in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when an estimated 90 to 95 percent of the native populations was wiped out. Besides Spanish control policies had the effect of atomising large-scale political organisation, and forced natives to settle in small Spanish-style towns, forcing them to work as serfs on farms or in mines. However since the 1930s new approaches such as the ideology of “indigenismo” promoted the preservation of indigenous cultural history. Later on, the
democratic transition in some Latin-American countries, the role of a progressive Catholic church, civil society movements, political reforms and the struggle of leftist political parties to bring about political change and societal equality paved the way for the organisation of social and indigenous movements.

Today these movements have established themselves as major social and political forces that even have the power to bring down governments.

This paper assesses the history of these movements, explains the rise of indigenous social movements in the last few decades and explores the long way from marginalisation to occupying a central socio-political position. But while some movements have gained political inclusion, others have not achieved self-determination, and generally are still facing difficult challenges.

2. Historical background

At the time of the European discovery (1492), the indigenous people of what became known at the “New World” represented almost the full range of cultural development, from groups of hunters and gathers to complex and highly advanced literate civilisations. Overall, within the area of present-day Latin America, the great majority of the local populations had reached levels of significant cultural achievement (Schwerin, 2005:41). However, the European conquest “was catastrophic for the estimated 50 to 100 million indigenes who lived in what has since become Latin America. Violent attacks by Europeans, disruption of productive activities, diseases, displacement, etc wiped out an estimated 90 to 95 percent of the native populations” (Van Cott 2007: 129).

The sole purpose of the European invasion was to profit from these newly discovered areas. The preferred ways of doing so were to impose tribute on the native populations. The Spanish exploitation system was structured in “encomienda” (entrustment, which implies hard labour and punishment) and the “corregimiento” (recruitment of workers to forced unpaid labour such as construction, mining, ranching, and later, textiles).

Furthermore, Spanish policies destroyed well-developed local administrative systems and forced the indigenes to resettle in small Spanish-style towns, where they became serfs to haciendas or had to endure hard exploitive labour work in mines. This approach was known as “reducciones” (reductions).

Today, large concentrations of indigenous cultures are located in the centres were the great pre-Columbian civilisations had once settled: the Aztec and Mayan empires in southern Mexico and Central America, and the Incan empire and other cultures, which extended at its height from what is today Colombia down the south along the Andes Mountains until Chile.
Whereas it has proved difficult to determine with certainty exact figures, due to the inconsistency of criteria used to define the concept of “indigene”, it is generally agreed that the major concentration of indigenous peoples are found mainly in Bolivia and Guatemala, with a significant percentage in Peru and Ecuador and some minorities in Belize, Honduras, and Mexico (see table below).

Table – ESTIMATED INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS IN LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Indigenous Population</th>
<th>Percent of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>5,914,000</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>8,342,000</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>12,696,000</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>5,556,000</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belize</td>
<td>47,000</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>938,000</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>14,049,000</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>1,217,000</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guyana</td>
<td>56,000</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>429,000</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>168,000</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suriname</td>
<td>26,000</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>241,000</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraguay</td>
<td>168,000</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>794,000</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>471,000</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>36,000</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>370,000</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>332,000</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is undeniable that the history of Latin America’s indigenous peoples has been a long and very painful road. Even after the Latin American colonies had won their wars of independence from Spain, the situation of the indigenous populations did not change considerably. It is important to underline that independence in most Latin American countries was achieved by criollos (Spaniards born in Spanish colonies) and mestizos (people of mixed European and Amerindian decent), who were not interested in changing the situation of the indigenes; therefore the latter remained marginalized, illiterate, isolated in rural areas without access to education, water, electricity or health care and in extreme poor conditions. Thus, as the historical legacy of the colonial time stands exclusion from political participation, economic marginalisation and material poverty of the indigenous people relative to the rest of the population.

3. Origins of indigenous organisations

“The majority of contemporary indigenous organisations have their roots in the struggle to gain back land from haciendas (plantations) or to protect traditional community lands form settlers and other intruders” (Van Cott, 2007:129). Although the colonial ruler did provide indigenous cultures with some degree of internal autonomy and collective land rights (ibid), ironically these rights were lost after the independence from Spain. The new national elites seized the majority of arable land, thereby continuing with the feudal system that had been established during the colonial times.

Hence, since the early days the fight to gain back land has been the “leitmotif” and the main core for the initially organisation and later on the activism of these indigenous movements.

What started as small and disseminated small organisations has developed in much more organised structures. “The past three decades have seen a profound transformation in Latin American states’ visions of their indigenous populations” (Jackson & Warren, 2005: 565). Nowadays we see well-consolidated indigenous movements and strong indigenous political parties.

Several factors have contributed to the emergence of these indigenous movements:

1. The ideology of “indigenismo” in the 1930s.
2. The role of a progressive Catholic Church
3. The transition to Democracy
4. The role of various transnational social movements
5. Political reforms
6. The struggle of left political parties to bring about political changes and societal equality.

The ideology of indigenismo

Indigenismo has a long tradition in Latin American history. It is important to note that the concept of indigenismo and its origins was seen as a creation of the elites; it was considered a paternalist concept and “a construction of the dominant culture, particularly that of elite intellectual mestizos, who used Indigenous issues to advance their own political agendas” (Becker, 1995). Indigenismo was addressed in different domains, such as in archaeology, anthropology, theology, politics, philosophy and especially in literature. In the 1930s indigenismo was best described as an attempt by the political elites to address questions of oppression and exploitation, albeit in a paternalistic fashion. This approach promoted the preservation of indigenous cultural history while mainstreaming indigenous children into Spanish-language schools and forcibly “modernizing” indigenous political activity (Van Cott, 2007). However, subsequent indigenista policies of various Latin American governments did not question or seek to change the structural oppression which Indigenous populations faced. As a result Indigenismo converted into, and became synonymous with, a form of protest against the injustices which Indians had to endure.

The role of a Progressive Catholic Church

In the Andean countries, especially in Bolivia and Ecuador “the transformation of the social relations of rural power that originated from the agrarian reforms of the 1960s and 1970s and the modernisation of the agriculture liberated mostly indigenous highland peasant populations from the ties of political domination. This liberation was accompanied by the presence of two religious transformations that favoured the reconstruction of the indigenous community: the adoption of liberation theology by the Catholic Church and the growth of evangelism” (Andrade & North, 2005: 428).

It is important to point out that the Catholic Church in the time of the colony was one of the institutions that contributed to oppress the indigenes and even legitimated their marginalisation. Decades later, however, and inspired by liberation theology, the Catholic Church abandoned its traditional orientation in favour of the country’s landlord elites and moved towards a new outlook and strategy. At its core stood support for, and partly even political alliance-building with, the indigenous peasantry. The Church was deeply concerned about the conditions of extreme poverty among the indigenous populations through and sought to improve their misery through the transfer of land, the organisation of agricultural cooperatives, and literacy training in native languages. One of the best known and most successful examples is associated with the province of Chimborazo (Ecuador), where Leonidas Proaño, one
of the leading Catholic bishops of the liberation theology movement, established “las ecuelas radiofónicas (Quichua-language community radio stations) in conjunction with Radio Netherland. He also organised literacy campaigns that significantly reduced the rate of illiteracy especially among the indigenous population. These initiatives propelled a new centre of power, known as “the indigenous community” (Andrade & North, 2005). Furthermore, the leadership education initiatives undertaken by the Church in the early 1980s formed the people who became the political leaders of CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador) and its political arm Pachakutik.

Transition to Democracy

Before analysing the impact of democracy on the indigenous movements, it is essential to understand the historical context of Latin America in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when most of the countries in the region saw a return to authoritarian rule.

Unlike previous dictatorships, however, the new regimes were not just extremely repressive but also characterised by their endorsement of neo-liberal economic strategies which contributed to a rapid broadening of income and wealth disparities in the region. In addition military regimes in Latin America with the aid of the United States put in place operations aiming to track down and exterminate left-wing activists and sympathisers (Fowler, 2002). Needless to say that the nature of this repression was sophisticated and horrifying, for example the abuses of the military committed in Guatemala, in particular towards the indigenous communities.

Some military regimes of the 1960s and 1970s were particularly notorious for their oppression of independent indigenous political activity. “Even states that held elections all too often raised various legal bars against voting by indigenous peoples. Ecuador and Peru, for example, imposed literacy tests for voting until each country made the transition to civilian rule” (Van Cott, 2007: 129-130).

Thus, in many Latin American countries the transition to civilian rule in the late 1970s and early 1980s undoubtedly added a new ingredient to the process of democratisation that has expanded until the early 2000. However, the ideal of democracy remains, as yet, only partly fulfilled. The principles of democracy are sometimes more engraved on paper than in the minds of policy makers. At the same time it is undisputed that Latin America has come a long way in the process of consolidating democratic governance and democratic principles that have inspired indigenous organisations, include

- The absence of reserved domains of power for the military
- Horizontal accountability of office holders
Political and civic pluralism

The consolidation of the “rule of law”

In Ecuador the transition to democracy allowed the electoral participation of illiterates (granted by the constitution of 1978), which in fact meant the political empowerment of the rural poor who, in the highlands, were largely indigenous peasants.

The role of transnational organisations

In the 1970s, the emerging principles of democracy resulted in the growing establishment of indigenous social-movements and organisations that sprang up from Mexico to Argentina. These organisations typically have their roots in local movements which were formed to defend land rights. Later these movements started to address additional agendas such as bilingual education and respect for traditional indigenous systems of law and self government.

By the 1980s and actively supported by international donor organisations and other stakeholders, including human rights organisations, churches, and environmentalist groups, national-level indigenous organisations had formed in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. At the same time, organisations covering specific and often large regions within states were active in Chile, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama and Peru. Some of these national organisations had only very limited funding at their disposal and were initially only loosely organized but they nevertheless increasingly provided a platform for interaction with national and international actors regarding economic development and human rights policies.

“Transnational organizing and coalition building opened up new opportunities for pueblos to influence national legislative agendas, and many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that specialize in development or human rights came to see indigenous peoples as clients” (Jakson & Warren citing Brysk, 2005: 551). In many ways the indigenous rights movement itself was “born transnational”.

Political reforms

Until the 1980s and 1990s, Latin American public discourse and state policies discouraged indigenous movements from entering the political sphere. The indigenist policies of the era were directed towards assimilation but not empowerment. As some scholars have pointed out, in many countries there was a clear intention to cut off the indigenous people from political participation. Jackson & Warren (2005: 551) speak of the “invisibilisation” of Indians in Argentina and the same with regard to black population in Colombia and the “discourse of concealment” in Guatemala. In Bolivia and Peru the indigenes were encouraged to self-identify as campesinos.
Peru indigenes where associated with the “nation’s glorious indigenous past”, which implied that they were marginalised in the present, except for museums, tourism, and folkloric events (Jackson & Warren, 2005: 551).

But “during the 1980’s, the most effective regional and national indigenous organisations made impressive gains in areas such as greater access to bilingual education and collective land titling. But most substantive gains were not achieved until the 1990s, after indigenous social movements had devised networks and strategies capable of mounting widespread protests and marches lasting weeks or even months” (Van Cott, 2007: 131).

On the other hand the efforts of elite politicians to reform often weak and even failing democratic regimes through constitutional change and other political sea-changes inspired indigenous organisations and their supporters, particularly within the academic, NGO and human rights community, to increase their voice in order to secure more rights as part of the reform processes. Constitutional reforms recognizing multicultural nations containing plural citizenries occurred in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Paraguay, Ecuador, Argentina, Peru and Venezuela (Jackson & Warren, 2005). As Van Cott (2007) notes, recent constitutional reforms had fostered indigenous party formation by instituting local and regional elections.

She also points out that the process of participating effectively in constitutional reforms proved crucial to the next breakthrough in the formal inclusion of indigenous peoples. Indigenous organisations started to flourish despite substantial financial and logistical disadvantages compared to established political stakeholders and succeeded in having their own delegates elected to legislative assemblies in Colombia (1990), Ecuador (1997), and Venezuela (1999). Moreover, some new constitutions (such as those of Colombia and Ecuador) lowered barriers for party registration in order to open restrictive party systems to new entrants.

Overall, the electoral successes achieved by indigenous political parties have been remarkable. In 1991, more than 30 indigenous municipal councillors and four representatives to Congress were elected in Colombia. The Colombian case inspired indigenous organisations elsewhere and the most impressive results have been achieved in Ecuador and Bolivia. In Ecuador, the Pachakutik Movement of Prulinalnational Unity has been active in politics since its creation in 1995 and in 1998 had eight members elected in Parliament. In Bolivia the Movement to Socialism (MAS), won the presidency in 2005. These also inspired smaller indigenous organisations. In Venezuela, an indigenous organisation in the state of Amazonas formed the United Multiethnic People of Amazonas (PUAMA), won high-level political offices in elections, including the first indigenous governor of Amazonas and three of the state’s seven mayors, and sent one representative to the National Assembly in 2000.
In almost all countries long-term struggle and compromise have been necessary for the passing and implementing of the reforms which facilitated indigenous political participation. Indigenous political parties are now seen as a significant political force and they are playing an important role in decision-making and towards increasing political transparency and accountability.

**The struggle of left political parties**

It is important to consider the political context in which the left had to act when military regimes returned power to civilians: Peru, 1980, Argentina 1983, Brazil 1985, Uruguay, 1985, Ecuador 1980 and Chile 1990. Historically the left had always assumed that there was a goal, an organized force, a program and a theory explaining the logic of the system. All this was compromised in the 1980s with the momentous changes in the international communism and the fall of the Soviet system in Eastern Europe.

“The meteoric rise of indigenous movements and parties should be understood in the context of the collapse of the political left in the late 1980s and its steady recomposition and resurgence in the last decade” (Van Cott, 2007: 134). For instance, in Colombia and Argentina, indigenous parties entered the political space in the absence of other viable leftist option. Increasingly, indigenous parties attracted votes from non-indigenous parts of the population who were looking for viable alternatives to the existing conservative elite parties and their neo-liberal programmes. In Bolivia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru, indigenes emerged as important actors after formerly dynamic leftist parties had declined or moved towards the centre. In the 1990s, indigenous movements and parties emerged to fill the void and established themselves as the most dynamic voices challenging unchecked neoliberalism. For example, their protest helped to strengthen and streamline diffuse opposition to free trade negotiations and agreements. In the central Andes, Guatemala, and Mexico, surging indigenous movements absorbed key stakeholders of a defeated and divided left, creating cross-ethnic coalitions that promoted the expansion of democratic participation (ibid).

Some examples can be found in the series of successful indigenous mobilisations during the 1990s, such as the indigenous uprisings in Ecuador. The Ecuadorian indigenous movement has been central to almost every such protest from 1990 to this day, and it is among the most successful indigenous movements in Latin America. Mobilised by the Confederación de las Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador or CONAIE), the indigenous movement was instrumental in removing two Ecuadorian presidents (Bucaram in 1997 and Jamil Mahuad in 2000) and as a result occupied key ministries in the Lucio Gutiérrez administration (2003-2005). There are other examples such as the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas in 1994 to protest the signing of
the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In 2000, indigenous people helped force the Bolivian government to cancel plans for the privatisation of the national Water Company. In Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico indigenous movements exerted pressure on the respective governments to push through changes. In Honduras, they organised resistance of the illegal coup and the sham election. Equally important, they are changing the way ordinary citizens in Latin America think about politics and political participation and helping to define what we might call a new politics and concomitant political culture (Stahler-Sholk & Vanden, 2011).

4. The case of Ecuador

In line with the afore presented analysis, the general patterns of Ecuador’s twentieth century development, which excluded the majority of the population from political participation and the benefits of economic growth, have their roots in the colonial period. However, it was mainly during the first two great waves of modern export growth – the cacao (1860-1920) and banana (1948-1972) booms - that the basis for exclusionary economic development and social inequality established itself (Black, 2005). Then in the mid-1960s, and once more at the beginning of the decade-long “petroleum boom” (1972-1982) business empires were created, and the concentration of the land in the hands of a minority elite took place, while rural population remained segregated, economically marginalised and subject to servile labour relations.

The historical origins of Ecuador’s indigenous movements can be traced to the “Ley de Comunas” (Communities Law) in 1937, which granted legal recognition to indigenous communities (Bowen citing in Becker, 2011). However, its most recent origins can be found in substantial changes brought by the agrarian reforms of the 1960s and 1970s and the abolition of the “Huasipungo” (a quechua word which describes the designation of a small portion of Indian land cultivated for use, which however requires a forced contract with the landowner). However, the most important development was the formation of the CONAIE in 1986. This new organisation unified the different indigenous groups of the coast, sierra, and rainforest, grouping the country’s 17 indigenous nationalities into a recognisable force for social justice. The CONAIE not only supported the transformation of indigenous consciousness but also provided a platform for the movement to contribute to economic policy debates. In the 1990s, the movement was consolidated thanks to the successful uprising and street mobilisations during which CONAIE repeatedly played the key role in ousting neoliberal governments. CONAIE is widely seen as one of the most powerful social movements in Latin America of the last two decades.

Since 1990, the demand for a “plurinational state” has been a main agenda of the Ecuadorian indigenous movement. In other countries, such as Colombia, Mexico and
Venezuela, constitutions already defined the respective nations as *pluricultural* and *multiethnic*. The success of CONAIE and his political party Pachakutik, was that in April 2008 the CONAIE position on the plurinational state was accepted and became part of the new constitution. The Ecuadorian Constitution became the first in Latin America to recognise a *plurinational* state, which went beyond the notion of pluriculturalism. “Having obtained formal acceptance of the plurinational state, the indigenous movement can use the implications of that acceptance to support policies that respond to indigenous demands and to do so as a “government” of the nationalities” (Jameson, 2010). A plurinational state means a “new form of a social contract that respects and harmonizes the rights of indigenous peoples and nationalities with the judicial structure and political force to recognize their status as political subjects with clear rights” (Mónica Chuji cited in Becker, 2010: 55). This implies that the CONAIE as a social movement will remain a key political actor in Ecuador for the foreseeable future. At the same time the indigenous movements in Ecuador face difficult challenges:

Firstly, plurinationalism has to build a strong and sovereign state that recognises and and promotes equal development for all Ecuadorians and not only for certain regions or sectors (Becker, 2010). It has to avoid the creation of a state within a state.

Secondly, “as part of a well-organised civil society, social movements can influence the direction of governmental deliberations, but engaging state administrations requires compromises and tradeoffs” (Becker, 2010: 60). The question remains as to how to avoid collaboration with non-popular powers. A case in point are the elections of 2002 when the indigenous movement created an alliance with Col. Lucio Gutierrez or even worse when Antonio Vargas, the president of the CONAIE, joined Gutiérrez and Carlos Solórzano as members of the “national salvation junta” that ousted President Jamil Mahuad.¹ This was considered a coup d’état.

Thirdly, the indigenous agenda has to seek reconciliation and not division; it has to incorporate “unity in diversity” (Becker, 2010). Most importantly, as the Ecuadorian case shows, it is not sufficient to make a contribution to the drafting of progressive legislation. Social movements need to ensure that these laws and constitutional provisions do not just exist on paper but are thoroughly implemented and enforced.

Finally, they have to overcome internal divisions.

5. Conclusion

¹ Lucio Gutierrez served as President of Ecuador from 15 January 2003 to 20 April 2005. He was a direct participant in the “coup d'état” that broke the democratic regime of Ecuador in 2000. President Jamil Mahuad was forced to abandon office after demonstrations in Quito when thousands of indigenous Ecuadorians protested against his neo-liberal economic policies.
It is undeniable that indigenous movements in Latin America have travelled a long and painful journey from marginalisation to self-determination. They have put an end to the silence and isolation through years of resilience. Today they have become the voice that denounces oppression, injustice, exclusion and demands “sumak kawsay” (quechua expression for “living well”).

In the political arena, the “force of the ponchos” had enacted significant cultural changes and broadens popular participation. In the true meaning of democracy their political agenda enables once-excluded citizens to have a say in how decision are made. Their political inclusion has shaped a new form of politics.

The indigenous movements questioned one of the more fundamental problems with Latin America democracy: the permanent disconnect between the state and civil society (Van Cott, 2007); and denounce the disparities of wealth distribution and political underrepresentation. In important ways, these movements are continually questioning participation and redefining politics. But at the same time they are facing the challenge of how to remain guardians of democracy. As some scholars have highlighted, indigenous movements can also hinder democracy.

In some countries indigenous movements have become a force able to bring down democratically elected governments, as it was the case in Ecuador in 1997, 2001 and 2005 and in Bolivia in 2003 and 2005. Another example is the case of Mario Conejo, an indigene leader who became the Major of Otavalo (Ecuador) in 2000. “Conejo’s progressive view intended to govern for indigenes and non-indigenes of Otavalo, but he gained himself the critics of indigenous movements for not giving priority to indigenous agendas and even he was accused of traitor and being an ally of the white mestizo forces (Lalander, 2010). More and more they are criticised for their despotic and confrontational styles of politics, for hindering dialogue and consensus and for making the core of their fight to gain power, forgetting the essence of their activism: to seek social justice, democracy, equality and guarantee of a plurinational and democratic state. In Guatemala, some observers perceive indigenous organisations as promoters of racism and class or ethnic conflict. In Bolivia, at the surface the uprising of the indigenes in September 2012 was directed at improving the working condition of the miners in the country. Yet, in the mainstream perception it was a fight to bring natural resources under the exclusive control of the indigenes.

The development of indigenous movements has not been the same all over Latin America. While in some countries they have constituted themselves as political forces, there are other countries where these movements are far from reaching self-determination and autonomy. Therefore it is essential that, as Van Cott (2007: 139) rightly stresses, “traditional elites must accept that indigenous peoples are now permanent players in politics; their needs must be addressed and their cultures respected. By the same token, indigenous politicians and groups must shift their perspective from that of excluded outsiders to protectors of democratic institutions,
laws, and values. They should seek reconciliation, not retribution, and incorporate
the best features of Western liberal democracy into their multicultural visions”.

The indigenous movements have probably established the best structured and
organised network in Latin America. Unlike political organisations, trade unions and
anti-globalisation movements, indigenes are not only united based on a convergence
of ideals, ideologies or claims, but an identity, a long shared history and a sense of
community. Indigenous movements have entered a new space: the institutional
spheres of political power. It seems certain that the future of the indigenous
movements and their role as agents of democracy will always be scrutinised and
therefore what the future holds for these movements will depend on their tactical and
strategic choices, and on their ability to facilitate the coexistence and cooperation
among elites and left movements.

For the indigenous peoples the most painful part of their long journey from
marginalisation and political exclusion might be over, but it is also clear that there are
more challenges ahead.

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