
Ecuador: The government faces a challenge in the Yasuni National Park

When couple of days ago President Rafael Correa affirmed that the environmentalists want to return to the Stone Age on requesting an oil moratorium he was only repeating what has been said for years by those who have shaped and maintained the dependent country we have... The problem is that this time he made this statement while the international press was sounding the alarm over global warming...if we burn more oil we will end up in the Stone Age!

Beyond this typically developmental comment, it invites us to remember Plato's myth of the cavemen.

According to the myth, we human beings live in chains inside a cave, sitting with our backs to the entry and with a light at our backs. The shadows represent the only reality we can see. We do not notice the chains and we neither can nor want to act against our perceptions.

However, Plato said that someone, sometime, became aware that he was chained, got free, turned round and left the cave. The light was so strong that he felt blinded and it was only gradually that he got used to it and could see real things...

The Ishinpingo-Tiputini-Tambococha (ITT) project, like a gigantic shadow in the midst of the darkness, is being announced with the same enthusiasm as other large projects that have failed. There is talk of 4,000 jobs and investment of 5 billion dollars, the opportunity to leave poverty behind...but if someone notices the environmental impacts, the response is that "they will be minimized."

Why is this project causing so much fuss?

The ITT project is located in the Yasuni National Park. According to scientific studies, the Yasuni Park (set up in 1979) is a region with the greatest biodiversity in the world. It is part of the Pleistocene Napo refuge. It is also the territory of the Huaorani people and an area for transiting, fishing and hunting for the Taromenane and Tagaeri people who live in voluntary isolation and who need their territory to be free from external intervention in order to live.

This is a project confronting two visions of the world, two realities. From the shadow it projects images of growth. But seen in the light of Ecuadorian oil experience this would be yet another environmental and social disaster for the local communities.

With proven reserves of almost 1 billion barrels of heavy crude oil, the Government intends to maintain the pace of its oil exploitation and exportation. It is interested in a consortium involving Petrobras (Brazil), Enap (Chile), Petroecuador and even Pdvsa (Venezuela), which seeks to consolidate a partnership in the field based on integration proposals, whatever the costs, even environmental costs. SINOPEC, a Chinese corporation is also interested as they are trying to assert their presence in the region and are submitting high bids at the cost of their total ignorance of environmental issues.

However it cannot be ignored that the project is within the National Park, environmentally a highly sensitive zone. It is expected that the project will cause levels of contamination even higher than those existing in the areas already under intervention as the exploitation is of heavy crude oil associated to large amounts of toxic water at a ratio of 80-20 (80 of toxic water to 20 of crude oil).

The project will undoubtedly cause widespread degradation in the area, serious negative impacts on the life of local peoples and the extinction of cultures.

With this scenario in mind, a proposal has been made to sell the crude oil in the subsoil to ensure that it is not extracted. It has been said that each barrel of oil in the subsoil would cost 5 dollars. I have heard many people saying that they would love to have 20 barrels, or 10 or 1 and to know that it will never be extracted...

It is considered that with this proposal a three-pronged objective can be achieved: to conserve biodiversity, to address global warming and to protect the rights of peoples in voluntary isolation.

President Rafael Correa, in an almost challenging tone, entrusted the Minister of Energy, Alberto Acosta and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Maria Fernanda Espinosa with "substituting the resources that the country will stop receiving and that could be invested in health, education and infrastructure programmes. If this substitution is achieved there will be no call for bids" he insisted.

Ecuador has signed international conventions such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Climate Change Convention, ILO Convention 169, the International Pact on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the American Convention on Human Rights, the Convention for the Prevention and Sanction of the Crime of Genocide, that protect the peoples and their territories and that aim at safeguarding the Planet.

There are sufficient arguments for the mechanism of selling oil to prevent it from being extracted to operate but, is there enough political will not only at national but at international level, to address the issue?

Will this be a project dealt with in the shadows of an Ecuador in chains or, on the contrary, will it be addressed in the light of a new vision of the country, where the environment is not a requisite to be overcome but the basis for the nation's subsistence?

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