



## ECUADOR

**“The Correa model is for certain a post neoliberal model, but not post capitalist yet”**

Paolo Moiola  
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Interview with priest and Marxist sociologist François Houtart

Born in Belgium, **François Houtart** — a catholic priest, outspoken proponent of liberation theology, sociologist and a professor — has known Ecuador since the 70s, but has only resided in Quito since 2010. He is currently a professor at the Institute for Advanced National Studies (IAEN), a public university that offers postgraduate specialization courses.

**Paolo Moiola**, a **Latinamerica Press** collaborator, spoke with this well known figure of the alter-globalist movement. Below is an extract of this conversation in which Houtart analyzes what he defines as the “multidimensional crisis” (economic, environmental, of values) of the modern world and presents a balance of the government of Rafael Correa (his former student at Lovaina University) with whom he maintains frequent contact, “even if we don’t agree in some issues”.

**The Constitution of Ecuador, approved in 2008 during the first term of President Rafael Correa is truly innovative.**

There may be too many articles in it, but it is truly forward-looking. For instance, the concepts of a plurinational and pluricultural country are now included in it; it is the only constitution in the world that includes the rights of nature. For certain, one thing is to write a constitution and other thing is to apply it; and in that sense, here in Ecuador there is an abysmal gap between what is written and what really takes place. A Bolivian friend of mine made a comment to me with a hint of irony: “We have a magnificent Constitution in Bolivia, but all the laws are unconstitutional”. This is obviously an exaggeration, but the problem does exist.

**The destructive failure of the neoliberal economic system, as well as the rapid worsening of the environmental issue is evident worldwide. This crisis does not end with more neoliberalism.**

At the moment the world is living a multidimensional crisis, a financial, economic, food, energetic, and climatic crisis; a crisis of the system, values and civilization, all at once. However neoliberalism appears as an opportunity for development in Asia. This is similar in Africa, the Middle East and in Europe itself, where the measures taken to combat the crisis are simply more neoliberalism.

I am not saying that one must suddenly reach a new paradigm, what I call the “common good of humanity”; this would be utopian and illusory. But steps could be taken in that direction. Until now, however, there have only been adaptations of the system to new social and cultural demands.

**Until just recently Latin America seemed as the place for experimenting and alternatives. And then everything started to come crumbling down; from Venezuela to Argentina, going through the defeats (albeit diverse) of Dilma Rousseff in Brazil and Evo Morales in Bolivia.**

But Latin America was the only place where change was attempted, as was the case in Ecuador. Something remarkable has been accomplished here: rebuild the State and its citizens; give more importance to public services such as health and education. The Correa model is certainly a post neoliberal model, but not post capitalistic yet, as he himself admits.

The problem is that most political leaders are still stuck in the old vision of intense development that is defined as the exploitation of nature and within a modernity seen as a rejection of the different traditions and cultures. They have not entered into this new perspective where nature and culture are fundamental elements of human development. We need to develop new leaders, but without wasting any more time as this could turn into a disaster.

**Nature as an exploitation resource versus nature as the basis for development; the Constitution of Ecuador has made a clear choice by dedicating four articles to “Nature Rights”.**

The first difficulty lies in defining just what Nature Rights means. It is only in the indigenous worldview that nature is a living being with feelings. Trees, rivers and animals are our brothers and sisters. This is a magnificent vision, but one that does not adapt to the mentality of people nowadays. In the World Conference for the Rights of Mother Earth, held in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 2010, there were more than 30,000 indigenous people speaking on worldview, climate change and the rights of Mother Earth, of the *Pachamama*. The idea emerged there to adopt a text, but there was strong opposition, like from Via Campesina, for example.

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François Houtart/ Paolo Moiola

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So what is the problem? The integration of nature rights into a legal perspective, because nature, as it is evident, cannot defend its prerogatives. Only human beings are those who can recognize them and thus defend them, or, on the contrary, violate them and destroy them. This is why the right of nature is, as has been said before, a "vicarious right", which cannot be talked about without human intermediation. And this brings us to a general awareness of humans' responsibility to nature.

I work in the agricultural sector and I see a peasant and indigenous agriculture that is completely abandoned. I have visited the Amazonia in various countries and I am astonished by the systematic destruction taking place and by the consequences [environmental and social] that this entails. The encyclical of Pope Francisco also talks about the environmental issue, but I really do not know how many people have actually read it.

**The Constitution of Ecuador devotes an important space to the indigenous populations. What is their situation like?**

There has been a rebirth of the indigenous identity. Their culture has come out from being in the shadows. For example, the chamanes are now recognized; I have participated with them in some public ceremonies, dressed as a catholic priest. The indigenous participation in the last election was massive. This clearly shows the merits of Monsignor Leonidas Proaño [Ecuadorian theologian of liberation theology, known as the bishop of the indigenous peoples, who died in 1988].

The indigenous peoples play a very important role in this society, although in the last 30 years there has been an important structural change with the growth of the middle class, especially under Correa, who has benefitted from more revenue.

There has been a growth in urbanization, while at the same time a desertion of the countryside, especially of peasant agriculture. A large portion of the indigenous population live in urban areas, and the youth in these areas is more interested about cell phones than their indigenous origins. It is a process of cultural change. For this reason the organizations have lost part of their social base as well as their political weight.

**President Correa and his government are promoting what they call the Citizens' Revolution which considers indigenous peoples citizens like anyone else.**

And this is not a socialist project. Rafael Correa and Alianza País [a coalition of right and left sectors] speak about a modern capitalism. They want all citizens to have the same rights and obligations in a modernized society.

Yes, they do [consider the indigenous population as citizens]; but citizens that are "lagging behind", as the president stated, who must modernize, and who are not recognized as their status as "peoples". But the constitution is there, in which in its article 1 it mentions plurinationality. We have the definition and recognition of indigenous territories. The indigenous peoples who are more aware of the situation, those who are members of the CONAIE [Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador], suffer a lot because of this cultural and political aggression. Thus, after having supported Correa, little by little they have taken distance.

The latest laws — the Water Law in June 2014 and the Earth Laws in January 2016, as an example — exclude indigenous groups despite a wording that seems favorable to them. These laws promote agriculture of monoculture focused on exports, causing small and indigenous farmers to disappear. Thus, the rupture with the government has widened even more. The danger lies in that due to this conflict with Correa, one part of the indigenous movement may close a deal with the right, a right that will never come to their defense, which only wants to use them.

The language used by Correa towards indigenous peoples has often been vulgar; and this is a real shame as Correa is the only political leader [in Ecuador] who speaks Kichwa.

**From the wonderful (but not often applied) Constitution to the wonderful promise by Correa (in March 2007) to leave untouched the Yasuni National Park, a true world treasure of biodiversity that is also an important oil reserve; it seems that we are facing a broken promise.**

Ecuador decided to make the proposal to the international community to leave the oil untouched if it helped by paying, for a certain number of years, half of what the country would have received from the production from those oil fields. There were some positive comments made, mainly from Germany. Then everything fell when [Angela] Merkel took office; at that moment President Correa said that the international community had not responded to the proposal submitted by Ecuador, therefore, he would start exploiting the oil.

This was really Plan B as there were local economic interests involved who encouraged the exploitation of those fields. The government stated that it would only exploit a little over 1 percent of the park using cutting edge technology. According to my information, it looks like the destruction of the area is much worse than what the government wants to admit.

**There are at least three different indigenous groups: Shuar, Kichwa and especially the Huaorani, living in and around the park. Against the decision to start oil exploration in Yasuni, there have been indigenous protests, but not with a voice in unison.**

The government has won the support of most of the unions in the territory — at least 40, many of whom are indigenous — promising that a substantial portion of the profits would go to the municipality.

There was a strong reaction from young people, especially from the urban areas; and the "Yasunidos" movement was born. It has been highly successful, having gathered more than 700,000 signatures against the exploitation of oil. However, the government's audit reduced this number to less than 300,000 [in this manner preventing a popular referendum].

**One last question, what is your opinion of Correa?**

Luckily he has renounced to a reelection. This may be more due to family reasons than political reasons. However, he is still young, and he could take a four year break to run again later on. I have no objection to him doing that, but I hope that he takes advantage of this time to read, meet people, travel the world and above all transform his vision and adapting it to the reality of the world as it is now. He is a sincere man; too sincere at times. Sometimes is a little arrogant, but he is a person of values and a hard worker. —*Latinamerica Press*.



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