

“PRESENT SITUATION OF INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS IN ARGENTINA”

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Introduction

During the last years many changes have occurred in Indian policies in Argentina. These changes are related to the political changes accounted in the country from the recovery of democracy as well as by the political action carried on by Indigenous organisations in their struggle for obtaining their rights.

In this paper we'll analyse the political arena of Indian affairs within the sociopolitical national context. We'll also analyse the actions developed by indigenous organisations in their struggle to be themselves and to obtain all the rights in order to be recognised by the society as a whole.

During the last dictatorship government held by the militaries (1976-1983), euphemistically called “National Process of Re-organisation” (“Proceso de Reorganización Nacional”) all political, intellectual and trade unions practices were forbidden and harassed. As a consequence, the growing organisational process carried on by Indian movements and its leaders during the first half of the 1970s were suddenly eliminated. The taking of power by militaries on March 24th. 1976 cut off the achievements gained by popular movements in general and Indian organisations in particular during that period in the fight for the transformation of society.

Indigenous Peoples in Argentina

Seventeen aboriginal peoples live today in our country. Most of them live in border areas where in many cases the same aboriginal people are also settled in a neighbour country (i.e. mapuches in Chile, Quechua speaking populations in Bolivia and Perú, Avá-Chiriguano in Bolivia, Mbyá-Guaraní in Brasil and Paraguay.).

The following description is based on a linguistic approach.

Tupí-Guaraní Linguistic family:

1. Mbyá-Guaraní. (in Misiones Province).
2. Avá (Chiriguano) (Eastern Salta Province).
3. Tapii (Chané) (Eastern Salta).
4. Tapieté. (Eastern Salta).

Mataco-Mataguayo Linguistic Family:

5. Wichí (Mataco) (Chaco, Formosa and Eastern Salta Provinces).
6. Yofuaha (Chorote) (Eastern Salta).
7. Nivaklé (Axluxlay or Chulupí) (Eastern Salta).

Guaykurú Linguistic Family

8. Komlek (Toba) (Santa Fe, Chaco, Formosa and Salta Provinces).
9. Mocoví. (Santa Fe Province)
10. Pilagá. (in the center of Formosa Province).

Other groups:

11. Kollas (Keshua and Aymara speaking peoples). (In the north-western Provinces of Jujuy, Salta and Catamarca).
12. Mapuche (Mapudungún = Mapuche Language). (In Buenos Aires, La Pampa, Rio Negro, Neuquén and Chubut Provinces, the last four in the Patagonian Region).
13. Huarpe (Language mainly extinguished). (in San Juan and Mendoza Provinces).
14. Aonikenk (Southern Tehuelche, language disappeared). (In Chubut and Santa Cruz Provinces).
15. Sel'knam (Ona, language disappeared). (In Tierra del Fuego Province).
16. Diaguita-Calchaquí (language disappeared). (In Salta, Tucuman and Santiago del Estero Provinces).
17. Vilela (language disappeared). (In Chaco Province).

The linguistic criteria may be wrong to establish the ethnonym of many groups because there are some indigenous peoples who don't use their language anymore and to the contrary there are in some regions many non aboriginal people who speaks an Indian language (i.e. guaraní language mainly in the provinces of Misiones and Corrientes).

Otherwise it is very difficult to establish today how many inhabitants they are. Only once, from 1965 to 1967 a National Indian Census was performed but its figures were wrong because of the unproductive methodology used to establish what a community Indian was. As a consequence, many aboriginal people living in towns and cities because of rural-urban migration were not registered. This census established that around 170.000 aboriginal lived in Argentina at that time.

Using others appraisals like that of the Catholic Church (ENDEPA 1996), we can say that around 500.000 Indians live in many Argentinean regions in urban and rural areas.

In other way, and taking account of the Indian organisations proposals, we can see that the figures grow to almost 1.000.000 aboriginal inhabitants in Argentina.

A very important issue to be considered is the growing number of aboriginal groups who are living in small towns and urban areas because of the process of rural-urban migration. Largest cities like Buenos Aires, La Plata, Rosario, Neuquén, Tucumán and Salta are increasing the number of slums where indigenous inhabitants live.

Brief historical review

While much more needs to be known about historical development of administration and policy in Indian affairs, the main features of history are known. At the end of the nineteenth century, genocide, hatred and violence was the main way to defeat the autonomy of Indian peoples, mainly in the regions of Chaco and Pampa/Patagonia.

The consequences of the so called “Campaña del Desierto” (Desertland Conquest), were for the Indian peoples the lose of their territories. Since then they are confronted with a major problem of social and cultural adjustment: to adapt to live now hemmed in fixed small reservations under the expansion of the cattle ranch system and other economic powers, though they had once disposed over wide stretches of free land.

From then, governments did not enter the Indian policy field in a significant way during the first half of the present century. Initially, their role was limited to supporting specific types of activities such as law sanction and some direct help in a paternalistic way. However, it has really only been after the end of the last Military Dictatorship, that government at different levels, has played a major role in Indian affairs in a more democratic way. Many important goals have been achieved from the recovery of democracy on December 1983.

In 1985 the National Congress approved the Law N° 23.302, with the participation and advises of some Indian leaders. This legal instrument was regulated in 1988 establishing the creation of an specific public institution called “Insituto Nacional de Asuntos Indígenas” (National Institute for Indian Affairs). At the beginning this institution was weak in budget and in operational capability, but from 1996 it began to operate with many social programs in all the regions where indigenous peoples are located.

An special consideration must be pointed to the National Constitution Reform performed during 1994. This reform changed many discriminatory issues and recognises the “ethnic and cultural pre-existence of Indigenous Peoples” and the rights to an Education based on bilingualisms and interculturality. It also recognises the communal property of the lands they occupy just to obtain the right to human development. Other issues are referred to self-control of natural resources and other interests of the communities.

Indigenous Movements in Argentina

Many indigenous movements appeared in our country during the 1980s. Most part of the organisations were supported by international assistance from different Indian organisations like CISA (Indian Council of South America), MPI (Indian People Movement). Otherwise, institutions like some progressive groups of the Catholic Church and its agencies helped the organisational process of Indian people in many regions of the country. In some cases supporting economical projects like the constitution of agrarian co-operatives, training leaders and revaluating the aboriginal cultural heritage.

But one of the more important roles played in this phenomena was the active participation of new leaders in the organisational process. These new leaders, most of them young men and women (female participation was an important feature of this process), began to change the ways of proposals and claims carried on by their elders in other historical situation. Older leaders were socialised in the paternalistic policies held by agencies of the Welfare State during Peronist Governments (1946-55 and 1973-76). The new leaders, most of them urban citizens with great experience and skilled in political action in trade unions, agrarian co-operatives, volunteer associations of migrants, began to claim for human rights for Indian peoples as well as fighting against the self-serving propaganda of governments about Indian affairs and the denigration of aboriginal cultures practised by local elites in an ideological way. They considered this denigration like one of the most damaging weapons used against them in an unfair intherethnic system.

With the appearance of these new ethnic movements side by side with the democratisation process, the Indian question in Argentina begun to be more visible into the society as a whole.

Historically the indigenous question in Argentina was blurred because of the ideological process held by the elites who claimed an European heritage for the Argentinean nation. Always the aboriginal heritage was denied all over the country and in different ways. But when some particular problem related to Indian peoples appeared it was always focused in a discriminatory pattern, like the epidemy of cholera occurred in the northern provinces in 1992, where a lot of racist approaches were developed just to explain how the aboriginal people of that region were guilty of their own backward cultural practices.

Otherwise, taking in account the ideological proposals of the different indigenous movements we can asses that there are a variety of ethnic identificatory patterns. From those who try to achieve territorial autonomy excluding in their struggle the participation of other social forces, to the groups which claim just cultural autonomy. There are also the organisations which perceive their political fight in the same way like other popular groups (workers, peasants, landless farm labourers, etc.).

Major trends in indigenous policy in Argentina.

The emphasis now is on participative policies. But these policies often are becoming increasingly blurred, because of the mediation of traditional political practices based on paternalism and patron-client relationships.

We are also witnessing a growing interest in indigenous cultures in many groups of civil society, in particular in several projects related to educational programs (i.e. bilingual and intercultural education).

If this process can be reinforced, it will be very useful to fight against ethnic discrimination, racism and xenophobic attitudes that are growing up in our society during the last years, side by side with social exclusion, structural unemployment and poverty. Indigenous peoples in Argentina like in other regions of Latin America are extremely poor and most of this poverty is concentrated in rural areas. They are landless farm workers or small landholders in reservations placed in environmentally fragile areas of marginal productivity suffering the most extreme deprivation. This rural poverty tends to be concentrated in areas with low agricultural productivity and few nonfarm jobs. In many cases rural-urban migration is the only way to survive for many members of households, mainly the youngsters.

Otherwise, faced with social and political changes produced during the last years in our country, indigenous peoples demand a definitively multicultural understanding in an issue such as Indian policy which is clearly in a crisis of adaptation, imagination and creativity.

In spite of this we need to overhaul and reinvent indigenous policy today taking in account the following issues:

- * Historical reconciliation by recognising the genocide and ethnocide policies applied to aboriginal people specially at the end of the XIX century.
- * Knowledge and recognition of Indian cultures in a multidimensional focus, specially in the use of aboriginal languages at elemental school.
- * Redefining the political and social responsibilities of public authorities (protection of the cultural heritage, assistance in health care and economic welfare), at all levels, wherever it be national government, provincial governments and municipalities.
- * Drawing up new operating rules for the various matters which involve Indian welfare (land tenure, rural development, housing, biodiversity and environmental protection), based on the international legal instruments signed by the national government in recent years.
- * Breaking down the barriers between indigenous policies and other policies, namely education, health care, regional development planning, which are isolated and never integrated in a multidimensional approach.
- * Considering the principle of self-management which implies an active participation of aboriginal peoples at all levels of the decision-making process.
- * Fighting against conservative bureaucracy by using participative models with a strong involvement of aboriginal groups.

Final Considerations

Indigenous peoples in Argentina have survived from ancient times to many assimilatory policies they suffered. Up to the political organisation of social movements based on ethnic identity created during the recent past is growing. These aboriginal organisations are increasing in number and in the quality of the proposals they want to achieve. At the beginning were just a few social measures linked with some kind of political assistance. But now one of the main goals they want to obtain is that of autonomy and self management in all the matters they are related to.

In recent years one of the most important problems they are facing is that linked with the social and environmental impact over their ethnic territories produced by large-scale projects (big dams, oilpipes, bridges, highways, etc.). In this struggle for the safeguard of resource-rich lands, ethnicity considered as a political goal based on ethnic identity, was the main force to face the negative effects of this megaprojects (forcibly relocation of people, land and water pollution, violence, etc). At present days questions of indigenous rights and ecological exploitation are more pressing than ever. A very important question now is how to obtain the reconciliation of indigenous interests with those of the wider society.

The pursuit of new models for society and a firmer foundation for democratic processes can help us to face these problems.

It is the time of great hopes for the building of a society based on democracy, social justice and the acceptance of pluriculturalism and multiethnicity to face the challenge of struggling against social exclusion, intolerance and homogenisation which comes side by side with the globalization process.

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