The movement and its organizations need to exist to hold politicians accountable to the needs and demands of people in “base” communities.

History of a Cotacachi Organization

Answering that question requires a brief detour into the history of the Union of Peasant and Indigenous Organizations of Cotacachi (UNORCAC), the most prominent social movement organization in the city. Since it was founded in 1977, its forms of political action have changed over time with transforming national and local circumstances. In its first years, the organization was oriented toward combatting discrimination, exploitation, and abuse, particularly the racism embedded in the hacienda and church systems. Linked to broader affiliations with the national peasant movement and organized labor around economic rights during the 1970s, it engaged in organizational styles that privileged conflictual action over incorporation into existing institutionalism.

Involvement in electoral politics following the end of military rule in 1979 initiated a change in the organization. That included working partially within the governing institutionalism, with a single representative in an otherwise exclusionary municipality. UNORCAC also shifted its focus from a primary insistence on cultural rights to an effort to increase public services to rural areas. There is something of an irony here. In contracting directly with external financing organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), UNORCAC strengthened its economic power and broadened relationships, thereby increasing its political leverage. At the same time, by engaging in the kind of work that a municipality would typically do, it risked deflecting responsibility from elected government.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, UNORCAC’s role in local development increased, leading to literacy campaigns, microcredit financing, reforestation, and infrastructure projects through relationships with NGOs and national funding initiatives. It continued to fight for public services in rural areas.

Quandaries amid Participatory Democracy

UNORCAC was instrumental in bringing about the election of Cotacachi’s first in-

Participatory Democracy in Ecuador

By Julia Paley

O n the front page of newspapers daily, at the heart of foreign policy agendas, and at the center of debates, democracy is a central theme of our times. And in its international salience, in the confidence with which it is parlayed across the globe, it is often taken as a truth held to be self-evident, easily defined by its most prominent features, including free and fair elections, a multiparty system, and freedom of expression and the press.

Yet as recent events have highlighted and as long-standing debates have underscored, democracy is not nearly so clear-cut. Indeed, its complexity requires new forms of understanding. The article below is excerpted from the new volume Democracy: Anthropological Approaches, edited by the author (SAR Press 2008). The book is the product of an Advanced Seminar at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico. It brings together essays by prominent scholars to explore what new insights about democracy might be revealed through anthropological modes of research and analysis.

For many interlocutors—academic, policy-oriented, in the media, or in the broader public—a starting point for discussions of democracy is one of definitions: how is democracy defined? Democracy: Anthropological Approaches takes a different approach, one involving an ongoing exploration of a wide variety of lived meanings and practices. The authors begin by relinquishing preconceived notions of what democracy is or should be. Instead, the very questions being investigated develop through dialogue with people in a variety of fields, thereby generating new ways of framing inquiries. Such an analytic openness is a key contribution of anthropological approaches to democracy.

Here I examine the practice of participatory democracy by looking at its impact on social movement organizations and inquire into their ongoing significance. Based on ethnographic research in 2004-2006, this article offers a view into political relations in Ecuador during a historical moment predating the current political environment, which features a new constitution and presidential elections report on their work and set agendas for the year ahead. The mayor presents a public accounting (rendición de cuentas) of budgetary income and outlays and invites participation by organized citizens; residents decide most of the county’s budget; broad working groups tackle important themes; the mayor gives an annual public accounting of budgetary income and outlays; and a systematic planning process guides expenditures. Moreover, an explicit discourse of “interculturality” highlights cross-ethnic interaction, prominent symbolic displays celebrate the culture of indigenous peoples, a citizen oversight committee monitors government propriety, and a commitment to honesty is exemplified by the fact that the salary of every municipal employee, in rank order from highest to lowest pay, is available on the website for all to see. In such a context, do strong, independent social movement organizations continue to be necessary?

Cotacachi’s Participatory Democracy: Setting the Scene

About three hours north of Ecuador’s capital city, Quito, along the Pan-American Highway high in the Andes Mountains, a road stretches off to the left. It cuts through agricultural fields occasionally bisected by entrances to rural communities, then proceeds downward over a bridge spanning a river and ravine. As the road ascends on the other side, set vividly against the hills are large billboards announcing the international accolades won by this place. “Cotacachi, City for Peace, with Citizen Participation and Transparency” says one (referring to the UNESCO 2002 Cities for Peace Prize), and “Example of Participatory Democracy and Decentralization” reads the other (UN and Habitat’s 2000 Dubai International Award for Best Practices).

The signs are a tribute to the work of the government of Aník Titaña Males, a Cuban-trained economist and indigenous resident of urban Cotacachi. Elected in 1996 as a candidate of the political movement Pachakutik, and affiliated with the national indigenous organization, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), Titaña came into office along with the first wave of mayors forming “alternative local governments” in Ecuador. In keeping with CONAIE’s effort to establish popular parliaments, Titaña created the Assembly of County Unity, in which representatives of organizations come together for making policy recommendations and creating agendas for the year’s work. As described on Cotacachi’s municipal website, the Assembly of County Unity is a space for citizen expression to socialize, work together, and plan in a participatory way the future of the county, whose decisions are based in the principles of solidarity and tolerance for the existing pluricultural and multi-ethnic diversity, without distinction of gender or generation.

Through the assembly, organizations including youth, women, and neighborhood groups convene to engage in a process of planning and decision making about the county’s future. The assembly holds its main meeting once a year, when commissions report on their work and set agendas for the year ahead. The mayor presents a public accounting (rendición de cuentas) of budgetary income and outlays and describes how promises for public works and programs were met. In addition to its annual meeting, the assembly functions year-round through numerous task forces. Broad working groups, called intersectoral committees, tackle major issues such as the environment and natural resources, health, education and culture, tourism, production, and municipal government. Through a participatory budgeting process, organizations identify priorities for the expenditures. Organized citizens also helped create the county’s development plan. These mechanisms constitute Cotacachi’s version of participatory democracy.

Over the years, Cotacachi has become known worldwide. Its reputation is strengthened through the mayor’s international travels and the frequent influx of visitors (mayors from other Andean countries or emissaries from provinces in southern Ecuador, for example) looking to learn about Cotacachi’s model of participatory democracy. Through these processes, Cotacachi has attracted an inflow of external funding and garnered substantial international recognition.

Investigating the Importance of Social Movement Organizations

After I gave a presentation on participatory democracy in Ecuador, at the United Nations Development Program conference in Paris in January 2005, an attendee asked why I insist on the continued importance of social movement organizations. After all, he suggested, such organizations may come and go. They may display elements of corruption, clientelism, and lack of representativeness. Is not the most reliable strategy the formation of enduring procedures for participatory and transparent governance?

This question is an excellent one to bring to bear in the case of Cotacachi, which is (in theory, at least) a near-perfect example of what he was calling for. As noted above, the municipality invites participation by organized citizens; residents decide most of the county’s budget; broad working groups tackle important themes; the mayor gives an annual public accounting of budgetary income and outlays; and a systematic planning process guides expenditures. Moreover, an explicit discourse of “interculturality” highlights cross-ethnic interaction, prominent symbolic displays celebrate the culture of indigenous peoples, a citizen oversight committee monitors government propriety, and a commitment to honesty is exemplified by the fact that the salary of every municipal employee, in rank order from highest to lowest pay, is available on the website for all to see. In such a context, do strong, independent social movement organizations continue to be necessary?
Social movement organizations are a crucial space in which to produce a new generation of leaders...[with] different visions, commitments, and connections to rural communities and broader social movement activity.

Why Social Movement Organizations Are Necessary

The possibility that UNORCAC might be weakened by channeling its demands through the assembly and by lending its support to the mayor has consequences for the achievement of ongoing social movement goals. In what follows, I explain why through the assembly and by lending its support to the mayor has consequences for residents of urban neighborhoods who are given disproportionate voice (in terms of cultural style of political discussion and in terms of their weight in the decision-making process). To move forward, then, a number of opportunities but also challenges.

digenous mayor, Auki Tituaña Males, in 1996. Yet that achievement in the electoral process, and the formation of the Assembly of County Unity, presented not only opportunities but also challenges.

Cotacachi’s assembly is constituted through local organizations rather than through participation by individual citizens. To move forward, then, a number of organizations have come into being through the process of local governance rather than surging from social struggles independent of it. Whereas UNORCAC has existed for over three decades and is closely connected to the communities it represents, the newer groups have a more limited historical trajectory and less extensive grounding in grassroots relationships. With its broad set of relationships with external funders, UNORCAC also manages important relationships and funds and has ample experience with development projects. In acting through the assembly, therefore, UNORCAC may dilute its own power as an organization, subordinating it to residents of urban neighborhoods who are given disproportionate voice (in terms of cultural style of political discussion and in terms of their weight in the decision-making process), and equal representation in votes, despite a less profound connection with the organization’s history of organizational strength and its representa-
tional structure.

UNORCAC’s independent ability to shape policy and hold the municipality accountable is also subsumed within a set of personal loyalties, institutional cooperation, and identification with the mayor’s cultural identity that has made cooperation with the municipal government far more the norm than contestation, and that perpetuates a sense of ambivalence and mixed fortunes in having an indigenous mayor who does not emanate from, nor necessarily build, the organization. Ironically, for UNORCAC, holding an indigenous, inclusive mayor accountable may be more difficult than holding to a mestizo, exclusionary mayor, against whom the organization could more easily exert pressure. As with the national-level indigenous organization CONAIE in regard to the political movement Pachakutik, through which candidates run for office, the question to be grappled with is whether the indigenous movement or the rural organization can formulate proposals to direct the politicians and establish mechanisms with which to hold them accountable. Although gaining elected office has provided opportunities, it can also pose risks to the indigenous movement and rural indigenous organization.

Lake Cuscocha, which is situated in the Cotacachi-Cayapas Ecological Reserve of Ecuador, has been the subject of many local policy disputes. It has become a popular natural attraction as part of UNORCAC’s tourism initiative to address issues of agrobiodiversity, resource use, and conservation. The organization founded a rural community tourism company, Runa Tupari Native Travel, for this specific purpose. JULIA PALEY
Participatory Democracy in Ecuador

By Kiyoteru Tsutsui

As GLOBAL IDEAL

By Kiyoteru Tsutsui

Pressured governments to commit to human rights. As we have seen, it went through twists and turns and in the process gained acceptance by virtually all major actors in world politics. First, western nations led the early efforts, then newly independent nations took over, and then during the Cold War countries in both eastern and western blocs committed to the idea of human rights. By the 1990s, a vast majority of governments had expressed some level of commitment, and human rights had achieved almost universal recognition as a global ideal.

Contrast this situation to the lack of international instruments to promote democracy. When Zimbabwian citizens suffer from the unwillingness of President Mugabe to accept election results, they do not have an international instrument to which they can appeal. When citizens of Myanmar or North Korea take part in a perfunctory election, they too have no international forum to which they can appeal the absurdity of fake democracy. They can certainly claim human rights violations, but, with the major human rights instruments overwhelmed by many claims, it would be much more effective if there were an international instrument devoted entirely to democracy. The International Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984, 1987) serves as a good model. Torture was a part of the UDHR and the ICCPR, but many experts and activists agree that there should be a separate treaty and monitoring body devoted specifically to the issue of torture. A similarly focused convention is proposed for democracy. If there were sufficient diplomatic will and activist zeal, there is no reason why an international treaty on democracy cannot be adopted at the UN.

We have learned from the history of global human rights that, for a global ideal that could potentially undermine state sovereignty to become institutionalized into international instruments, state commitments and civil society support—even as lip service at the outset—are crucial to implementation. Looking at the current status of democracy in international society, it is foreseeable that commitments and civil society support—even as lip service at the outset—are crucial to implementation. Despite the pressure of many countries would make discursive commitment to democracy as a global ideal. Procedural commitments can take—what can be achieved and what kinds of political practice. For collective actors, the forms political action can take—what can be achieved and what kinds of individual and collective subjects are constructed—are crucial questions. This essay suggests that, even in the most successful and highly touted cases, these local participatory democracies have their limits and must be judged in relation to the aspirations and organizational capacities of social movement organizations.

What are the implications of this for an anthropology of democracy? Anthropology can contribute to such discussions by highlighting and comparing local definitions and practices labeled “democracy” to gain insight into how these modes of political practice are achieving goals as the people define them, rather than assume a universal template for what democracy is or should be.

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[continued from page 7]