

## Aboriginal Peoples' days: Some Reflections

Recently, a number of celebrations marking Aboriginal peoples' days have been taking place in Canada and elsewhere. These celebrations are an occasion to recognize the place and contributions of indigenous peoples. They also take place in a context where the voices of indigenous peoples are demanding to be heard in local and national settings.

In Peru, the celebration takes place on June 24th and it is called *dia del campesino*. The celebrations in Cuzco, the capital of the Inca Empire, include the *Inti Raymi*, the festival of the Sun God. It includes rituals and offerings to thank the Sun and other gods such as the *pacha mama*—mother earth, and *apus*—mountains, for what they provide us as humans. The celebration is built out of the embeddedness of humanity in nature. The rituals recognize the intensively reciprocal relationship—giving and receiving—between humans and their surroundings: the life-giving sun, the nurturing earth, fertilizing water, fellow animals and the spiritual kin of the mountains.

This year's celebrations in Peru took place in the setting of significant events that mirror the challenges that indigenous peoples face in Peru and elsewhere. In the last month there have been massive *campesino* protests against mining activity in northern and southern Peru. These protests have led to injury and even death, as well as incarceration and denunciation.

The national government sees mining as important economic opportunity for the nation and for the communities, while indigenous/*campesino* protesters see mining as a threat to their habitat, especially water, and to their way of life. Many feel as well that economic benefits are not fairly shared with their communities. The situation of conflict has become polarized. In spite of government rhetoric about the need for dialogue, there seems to be little space provided for it on terms that respect all voices. President Humala's policy appears to be represented in the arrest and detention of protest leaders: an approach unlikely to deal with the concerns underlying the protests. Accusations of terrorist anti-patriotism abound in the national media.

There is no doubt that in the last five years Peru has experienced an impressive economic development. GDP has doubled in the last ten years, and was the highest in the world in 2008. Extreme poverty has fallen by 42.7% between 2004 and 2010. Generalized GDP and extreme poverty figures, however, obscure remaining and troubling facts concerning poverty, inequality and hardship. Extreme poverty has been reduced far less in the Peruvian highlands, where indigenous populations are concentrated, and remains 47 times higher than in Lima. In the sierra, more than 60% are poor, and 35% extremely poor. These are the regions where mining is concentrated, and where the *campesino* protests are found.

In a recent address to the International Labour Organization, Peruvian President Ollanta Humala highlighted sustainable mining, and identified the indigenous

people as “strategic partners” in the development strategy. At the national level, the President, government, public officials and the media emphasize the need for “social inclusion”. An outline of a development strategy that could bring a more inclusive distribution of wealth and environmental protection, however, seems as yet unarticulated.

Interestingly, the latest polls suggest that 61% of Peruvians think that government should use an approach based on dialogue, rather than repression, to deal with the social conflicts taking place in the highlands. The celebration of the day of the *campesino*, June 24<sup>th</sup>, would have been a great opportunity for the president to acknowledge the possibility that behind the protests lie issues about social inclusion and the balancing of economic development with concerns about the environment and cultural patrimony.

As we in Canada know, the challenge to find this balance, and to engage the indigenous in serious and respectful conversations about it, is not confined to Peru.

There is a genuine and deep need to improve the material well-being of Canada’s indigenous, as of Peru’s. But we need at the same time to take seriously indigenous views (they are not uniform) about what well-being really is, and what kind of development can lead in that direction. Poverty, for many indigenous, is not just material hardship but a failure in their responsibility to care for mother earth. Discussions and protests involving indigenous peoples and extractive industries now going on in BC, Alberta and Ontario highlight these same issues. If we fail to recognize this, and attempt to “fast track” the conversations, our observance of days recognizing indigenous populations will be empty, ironic ceremonies.

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