
Yasuní: The significance of a victory

On August 20, 2023, the Ecuadorian people went to the polls for early elections to choose a president and representatives to the National Assembly. Additionally, there were two popular referenda on the ballot: in Quito, a referendum to stop mining in the Andean Chocó region; and nationally, a referendum to leave oil underground in the ITT block within the Yasuní National Park. Almost 60 percent of voters in Ecuador said Yes to leaving oil in Yasuní. This meant that within one year of this decision, the oil wells would have to be shut down, the infrastructure removed, and a process of repairing the affected area begun.

The Yasuní National Park is one of the most biodiverse areas of the world and home to Indigenous Peoples, including the Tagaeri and Taromenane Peoples who are in voluntary isolation. There is also oil underground in Yasuní, and three oil blocks within its territory: Block 16, which is in decline, and which changed hands from REPSOL to the Ecuadorian state company; Block 31, which has very little crude; and ITT, or Block 43, which the state company, PetroEcuador, has been operating. In 2016, extraction began from its fields, which had proven reserves of almost 900 million barrels of oil. This oil is very heavy. To extract it requires a lot of energy, and the process generates high amounts of toxic waste waters and other contaminants.

Due to this reality, and to the struggle of many organizations and collectives, the Yasuní victory was, without a doubt, very moving and long-awaited. But like any success, it brings challenges.

In Block 43 in Yasuní, also known as Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini (ITT), an oil enclave has been built which must now be dismantled and removed from the site. But what does its removal involve? How can a sacrificed territory be recovered? What are the actions that will bring justice, in light of the abuses committed against nature and the peoples in Yasuní?

As background information, it is worth remembering that on August 22, 2013, various collectives that came together and named themselves Yasunidos presented a request for a popular referendum to the National Electoral Council of Ecuador. The referendum asked the following question: "Do you agree that the Ecuadorian government should keep the crude oil in ITT, known as Block 43, underground indefinitely?" This popular referendum sought to protect the life and territory of the Tagaeri and Taromenane indigenous peoples and the other communities within Yasuní National Park.

Ten years later, on August 20, 2023, and after overcoming all kinds of obstruction on the part of the State, the Yasuní referendum took place. Simultaneously, a regional referendum held in the district of Quito sought to ban mining activities in another mega-diverse area of the country, the Andean Chocó. In this public referendum, almost 69 percent of Quito residents voted Yes to life over mining.

Lessons Learned

There was broad debate on the public referendum. The choice between maintaining extractivism or stopping it became central during the electoral process. Despite the fact that most of the presidential

candidates openly opposed keeping the oil in the ground, and the major media outlets showed a clear bias toward convincing people to vote against it, there was a positive response to the referendum—which received the support of 59 percent of the national electorate. None of the candidates received as much support.

According to the Constitutional Court ruling 6-22-CP/23, the Yes vote in the Yasuní referendum means that the State is obligated to carry out a gradual and orderly withdrawal of all activities related to oil extraction, and within a timeframe of no more than one year after the official results were made public. Furthermore, the State cannot take any action to initiate new contractual relationships to continue exploiting Block 43.

The Yasuní referendum leaves us with several lessons:

- Battles are long, hard, and at different scales. But it is possible to build ecological and social awareness. And we can prevail against the backwards forces that impose a cult of capitalism and extractivism—the spearhead of accumulation and dispossession.

- The way we fight for the future is by caring for life and nature, which is neither alien nor distant. Nature is the forest and its people, rivers and communities, the diverse beings and relationships in our territories. Nature is not an adversary; it is an ally. Current and projected disasters are not natural; they are created by global and local actions and inactions.

- These transitions—which are now inevitable—must involve not only curbing the expansion of extractive frontiers, but also recovering and restoring sacrificed territories. This is not just a battle for the future. It is a battle to rebuild what has been damaged, and to recover nature's regenerative capacity, the self-determination of peoples over their territories, and autonomy in the resolution of problems and conflicts.

There have been several attempts to violate the popular mandate, as well as assertions about the impossibility of applying it. The former Minister of Energy from Guillermo Lasso's administration said that "never in the history of the world has such an important oil field that produces almost 60,000 barrels a day been shut down." However, Petroecuador has already presented a timeline for closure, and it plans to start the shutdown on August 31, 2024. This gives us time to prepare for this process and to monitor it in the territory.

2024 will be a year of a lot of activity in Yasuní. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has a pending visit related to the case of Peoples in Voluntary Isolation, before it can issue its sentence on the lack of state protection. The peoples living in Yasuní are calling out the state's lack of compliance with economic, social and cultural rights, and its dependence on the oil industry.

There is also pressure from powerful groups with ties to the oil industry that are reluctant to lose a source of income. Figures related to the costs of decommissioning the block are tossed around—without any explanation—and many people are talking about new cases of corruption. There is no information on what the industry recognizes as the "assets and liabilities" that will have to be withdrawn.

2024 will be a year of much reflection; and there will also be proposals coming from defenders of life and nature, surely with the collaboration and help of nature herself. These are moments to rethink how to build utopia, and how to rebuild autonomy and sovereignty. This is a time to bring justice to areas affected by oil activity, with the solidarity of the whole country. And most of all, it is a time to

reconsider, from the ground up, the true costs and impacts of these oil operations—from exploitation, to withdrawal, to holistic reparation.

When we talk about oil operations, we know that there is a series of studies and procedures that companies have to present in order to obtain their license. One of these studies is the abandonment plan; what we didn't know until now was that "abandonment" does not mean merely bringing down platforms or abandoning wells.

A true repair of the Yasuní-ITT should involve removing everything, so that it looks like it used to—before these activities that never should have happened. This infrastructure must be dismantled and removed, the ecosystems must be rehabilitated, and the autonomy of peoples and nature must be restored, repaired and recovered.

Esperanza Martínez

Acción Ecológica