

# *Ecuadorean social groups, international delegations defend UNASUR*

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Quito, July 30 (RHC)-- Social and political organizations held an international forum over the weekend in defense of the Union of South American countries (UNASUR), in Quito, Ecuador. The conference aimed to generate awareness of the importance of the South American integration body and resist ongoing attempts to dismantle it.

The forum began with an ancestral ceremony and continued with workshops on the importance of regional integration processes, the current situation of UNASUR, and solidarity with the only South American integration body that has no United States or Canadian presence.

The forum was organized shortly after Ecuadorean President Lenin Moreno announced, on July 5th, that the building where UNASUR operates would be given to the National Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities (Conaie) to house the intercultural university Amawtay Wasi, which was shut down in 2013 for not meeting standards of quality.

Moreno's announcement sparked outrage among some who voiced criticism against the Conaie for "collaborating" with the attacks on UNASUR. However, other groups warned Moreno's announcement

was meant to create fictitious divisions among anti-imperialist struggles. The group Desborde argued: "While the government tries to divide us, attempting to oppose regional integration, we say NO!... Regional integration and the construction of an inter-cultural society are two sides of the same coin: the self-determination of peoples."

Bolivia recently responded to Moreno's announcement reminding him Ecuador cannot unilaterally make that decision because a consensus would be needed by UNASUR member states.

As Bolivia was taking on the pro tempore presidency of UNASUR in April, the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay and Peru, six of the international body's 12 member states crafted a letter to Bolivian Foreign Minister Fernando Huanacuni announcing their "temporary" withdrawal.

The countries cite what they claim is the "lack of direction and leadership" as justification for their decision, but political analysts in the region argue that the timing reveals ideological reasons rather than concerns over UNASUR's administrative and operational challenges.

The decision was announced days after the so-called Lima Group met in the VIII Summit of the Americas, held in Lima between April 13 and 14. The ad-hoc group created in August 2017, known for its anti-Venezuela stance and alignment with U.S. foreign policy, decided in February to ban Venezuela, a founding member of the Organization of American States (OAS), from participating in the Summit.

The measure was interpreted by many, including the Venezuelan government as a way to further isolate the South American country as part of ongoing United States-led economic and political pressure against President Nicolas Maduro.

The Lima Group's controversial decision divided the region into those backing United States' calls for further isolation of Venezuela, and countries, including Ecuador, Uruguay, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Cuba and Antigua and Barbuda, that upheld the "strict obligation not to intervene, directly or indirectly, in the internal affairs of any other State," a pledge made as part of the Proclamation of Latin America and the Caribbean as a Zone of Peace.

Now through a public and coordinated attack against UNASUR, the Lima Group launched a campaign against those left-leaning governments in the region who are resisting the return of United States dominance and its interventionist approach towards the region.

While UNASUR is not a stranger to ideological differences, disagreements between member states had escalated since January 2017, when former Colombian President Ernesto Samper concluded his term as secretary general. Since then the inter-regional body has been unable to agree on a successor.

Argentinean legislator Guillermo Carmona believes UNASUR is not facing an impasse but rather a calculated attempt to dismantle and replace it. "During his pro tempore presidency, he (Macri) froze its institutional work... Now they attempt to question the bloc's lack of institutional functioning as a justification for withdrawal when its paralysis was promoted by Macri himself... In replacement of UNASUR, Macri has supported the creation of a sort of anti-UNASUR, the Lima Group, a club of the regional right-wing in charge of antagonizing popular and progressive governments in the region," Carmona explained in April.

Attacks on UNASUR have become more straightforward, especially from Colombian president-elect Ivan Duque, who said in a trip to the U.S. that his government will promote Colombia's withdrawal from UNASUR, calling it "a resonance box of the dictatorship."

Duque's stance is a clear example of how the potential dismantling of a sovereign regional integration project is being framed as the dissolution of an ideological body with no practical purposes, created by

“anti-Washington” governments.

It wasn't Venezuela's Hugo Chavez or any other progressive South American leader who laid the groundwork for UNASUR. The process of creating UNASUR began in 2000, when the neo-liberal government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso organized the first meeting of South American countries, without the presence of the United States.

Sovereign South American integration emerged not out of anti-U.S. sentiment but out of the regional necessity for common social, economic, environmental, defense and foreign policies not subordinated to countries outside of the region.

Sociologist Jorge Taiana explained in a recent interview “in 2000 they (South American countries) were about to reach 200 years since independence and they had never met alone, without the presence of the U.S.,” Taiana highlighted.

Since the mid-nineties, the heyday for neo-liberal policies in Latin America, the U.S. has tried to create the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) as a form of regional integration for trade liberalization. “We rejected the FTAA because it was a type of integration subordinated to the U.S. Non-subordination is one part, another is to build or strengthen a different type of integration, one among equals,” Taiana said.

The 2000 South American meeting led to the establishment of the Community of South American Nations in 2004. The community didn't flourish, but in 2008 with the vital backing of progressive leaders including Venezuela's Chavez, Ecuador's Rafael Correa, Bolivia's Evo Morales, Argentina's Nestor Kirchner and Cristina Fernandez, and Brazil's Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, UNASUR was created. Since then, the Union effectively intervened to uphold the democratic order and solve diplomatic crisis among neighbors.

When Rafael Correa suffered an attempted coup by sectors of the Ecuadorean police and military in 2010, UNASUR held an emergency meeting that concluded with a warning stating that countries, where coups threatened democracy, would suffer regional sanctions. That same year, UNASUR played a vital role in re-establishing diplomatic ties between Colombia and Venezuela after a deep diplomatic and military crisis in the border area sparked by accusations by Bogota that Venezuela was harboring guerrillas.

Furthermore, since 2009 the regional integration body has discussed revamping the regional security doctrine on debating a prohibition on the installation of foreign military bases in member states.

The surge of right-wing politics and governments in the region, as well as the election of Donald Trump in the United States last year, is threatening to reverse the significant progress that has been achieved in the region over the past two decades, with the main one being UNASUR.

Dismantling it could mean the end of a regional defense strategy, of the establishment of a common currency and the end of the South American Bank, projects which sought to consolidate territorial sovereignty not only from the U.S. but also independence from international financial institutions, and to promote a more favorable global market participation.

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