MAPUCHE HISTORY POLITICS AND DEMANDS

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(Ed. Note: The following essay, written by historian Augusto Samaniego Mesías of the University of Chile, originally appeared in La Nación. Samaniego offers a concise and relevant look back at the origins of today’s so-called Mapuche conflict.)

Historically, the poorly-named Mapuche conflict has been and continues to be the responsibility of the State of Chile. During independence and at the beginning of the Republic, the Araucano Nation for a short time praised itself and its virtues for halting Spanish colonization. During the remainder of the 19th century, in contrast, the leading economic and political classes imposed their dogma, building a Chile that was obliged to suppress the Mapuche Nation with force, relegating it to the least valuable, narrowest tracts of land. This lead to the creation of small farmsteads and the misery of the Mapuche Nation, while the privileged, non-Mapuche members of society accumulated capital and split the remain lands among themselves.

Furthermore, indigenous peoples and other poor farmers were the victims of land purchases often made under fraud or pressure. In total, at the beginning of this process some 4.5 million hectares stayed in the hands of private, non-Mapuche proprietors. In contrast, the state assigned only around half of a million hectares to be split between thousands of indigenous communities.

Today, different studies indicate that a concern has risen within civil society over the State’s treatment of Mapuche demands. It is undeniable that these demands are essentially derived from the collective rights of indigenous peoples - as recognized by the United Nations and the Organization of American States - as well as other instances of modern international law. The Chilean state has been incapable of ratifying Convention 169 of the UN system, despite the president’s commitment. The declaration of the rights of indigenous nations, approved by the United Nations (Sept. 13, 2007) and signed by Chile has thus become practically inapplicable.

Powerful special interest groups aggravate the fantasy of a non-existent Mapuche desire to break with the state. And even though they are not familiar with the approach of the Mapuche separatists, those who proclaim themselves authentic patriots write and talk about the concern of preserving Chile’s national and territorial unity. The truth is that these are the very same business and political players that divide the country between the indigenous and the non-indigenous, between the gentle Chilenos and citizens that defend their societal,
economic, union, and political rights. They insist in the written press, the property of a small consortium, private TV, and many radio stations that indigenous people are insatiable, that they halt “the progress” (their profits), that they act as puppets of “Marxist Agitators.”

This is how they hope to create fear about “a Mapuche uprising” in public opinion. They have recently accused the government and the Catholic Church of “trying to abridge the Constitution” simply for bringing an end to the hunger strike of a pro-Mapuche activist jailed as a “terrorist.” They seem determined on using of the state – as it was under the dictatorship that they so much enjoyed – to terrify citizens that mobilize behind these social claims.

In contrast to what the UN is demanding, the State continues to deny collective rights to the indigenous peoples. They may not exercise economic, social, environmental, and cultural growth and co-management of their ancestral territories, nor may they create autonomous policies tied to their lives in these territories. This has put Chile among the minority of Latin American countries that don’t recognize indigenous nations or their pluralistic and multicultural character in their constitutions. The legal denial of indigenous rights manifested itself when the legislature rebuffed the rather weak concept of indigenous territory that was included in legislation presented in 1993. This would have eliminated all current Chilean law concerning the natural resources present in said ancestral territories: water, forests, minerals, fish, shorelines, and oceanic coasts. All of these resources form the habitat of the historical existence as well as the present and future survival of the indigenous cultures and identities. It is in these areas that the mega-capitals or mega-estates obtain mega-profits from the forest, cellulose, hydroelectric, salmon, and industrial fishing industries located there.

“Is it legal and just that the forest business is allowed to exterminate great extensions of native forests? Is it fair for just one person like [Anacleto] Angelini to own 500,000 hectares of land, while we, the Mapuches, who number 1.5 million people, only have 300,000 hectares?” questioned Reiman Alfonso, president of the Ñankucheu Association.

The criminalization of the land claims and other Mapuche rights movements since 1991 involves applying the antiterrorist law imposed in 1984. The tendency has been to apply high penalties in order to discredit and frighten Mapuche leaders. These judicial rulings pivot, in large part, on faceless witnesses that seem anonymous. The powers granted to the Military Courts have twisted the legal process, protecting “agents of the State” from prosecution. An example is the case of the shooting death of the young Mapuche activist Alex Lemun. Today we mourn the Mapuche student. The investigation indicates the use of unjustified force.

In this context, the special reporter of the United Nations, Rodolfo Stavenhagen, recommended officially that “under no circumstances should the legitimate activities or social demands of the organizations or indigenous communities be criminalized and penalized. Authorities should not make criminal accusations taken from other contexts (terrorist threats, criminal association) so they can be used against to the social fight for land.” Yet, in spite of this, around 300 Mapuches have had lawsuits filed against them in
the Araucanía region since 2000. They were accused of making demands for their communities, and in approximately 10 percent of these cases, the Mapuche were charged with terrorism.

The truth is obvious: rightist political leaders want Chile to turn its back to the world and modern democracy so that their own economic and political interests can prevail. The rightists systematically thwart the possibility and necessity of living together in fairness, respecting the identity and the autonomous rights provided to the original Nations amidst a multicultural state.

The reoccurring theme in the political/state discussion regarding Chile’s indigenous populations aims at “integration with identity.” While it denies the legal recognition of equal collective indigenous rights, it equates this discussion, more or less, with the consensus and international norms. But implementation of “integration with identity” will enforce policies that tend to lead to the museumification and folklorization of elements of indigenous customs and the dismantling of their identity.

A recent declaration sent out by a significant number of historians – academics at important universities – calls for citizens to think, to understand, and to act so that indigenous demands are responded to. It also calls upon them to advance the democratic perspective and the worthy goal of respecting human rights, from which collective indigenous rights are currently exempt. (Ed. Note: Please see related lead story in today’s Santiago Times.)

SOURCE: LA NACION
Translated by Lauren Andersen