CHAPTER 5
The Return of the City-State?
Becoming Autonomous in a Sovereign Sense

With the presidential election of Rafael Correa Delgado in November of 2006, the anti-base opposition finally had an advocate in the Palace of the Government, and one who spoke the language of national sovereignty with a fervor not seen for at least the previous decade. For the six years prior to his election, the anti-base movement, both locally and nationally, had been working vigorously to frame the base problem most primarily as a sovereignty problem. Since the very signing of the agreement for the facility in November 1999, members of Movimiento Tohalli, Quito-based military analysts, and human rights organizations like INREDH And ALDHU had all made foundational to their opposition the claim that Ecuadorian national sovereignty had been and was repeatedly being violated by the Americans. As they regularly pointed out, the bilateral agreement for the facility was signed under highly irregular conditions, since the two-thirds congressional majority constitutionally required for the approval of all decisions involving foreign governments was simply bypassed via an executive-to-executive agreement (see chapter 1). Furthermore, not only had Ecuadorian sovereignty been compromised via this unconstitutional signing away of a piece of the national patrimony, but to add insult to injury, during the subsequent four years the US Coast Guard had sunk eight Ecuadorian-flagged fishing vessels in territorial waters. Citing their lack of fitness for navigation on the high seas according to international definitions of sea-worthiness, US personnel readily admitted to having destroyed these vessels that they had boarded on the mistaken assumption that they were engaged in narco-trafficking.
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or gasoline-running for the narco-traffickers. However, as activists regularly pointed out, the agreement for the base at Manta simply does not permit such destructions of Ecuadorian property, since all boarding of vessels is restricted solely to the Ecuadorian Naval Forces. From the perspective of anti-base activists, the Americans had clearly and consistently violated Ecuadorian national sovereignty, both in foisting an unratified agreement on the country in the first place and then in repeatedly violating the very terms of that agreement.

Since as early as 2000, passionate arguments about Ecuadorian national sovereignty had formed the central cornerstone of the anti-base movement both locally and nationally. Like growing numbers of anti-base activists throughout the world who have framed their resistance to American occupation on the grounds that bases are affronts to national sovereignty and national pride (Yeo 2012; McCaffrey 2002; Vine 2012), Miguel Morán’s very first attempts at mobilizing the local community drew heavily on discourses of sovereignty. As he narrated the history of the First Anti-Imperialist Conference convened at the LAICA University in downtown Manta in July of 2000: “Never before in Ecuador had all the [progressive] social sectors, including the Marxist left with all its divisions and divergences, and even the ecologists, the human rights activists, Christian base communities, syndicalists, indigenous peoples and blacks, united around a table to debate the future of Ecuador… [Despite all of our differences], at the end [of our discussions], the feeling of the need to defend our national sovereignty prevailed” (Morán-Gonzalez 2001: 7). Indeed, the first bulletin of the final declaration that emerged from that gathering indicates as much. “We resolve,” it concludes, “to reject and fight against imperialist interventionism in Latin America, particular in Colombia and Ecuador; to raise the principle of self-determination of our communities and the defense of our sovereignty” (129).

In Manta, however, as this discourse of sovereignty came to be deployed by more and more national organizations and the central government throughout 2006–2007 (a trend that has continued to accelerate in the years since), residents of Manta simply retooled, rescaled, and redeployed it so that it could instead be used as part of their defense of the American base in their city. Even when newly elected President Correa made a point of intensifying government investment in the long-neglected province of Manabí by building bridges in Bahía de Caraquez, improving the much-lamented roads, relocating the Subsecretary of the Fishing Industry to downtown Manta, and, most symbolically, holding the National Constituent Assembly in nearby Montecristi, the residents