

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CRT - 23
Calculated Risk

Hotel Bolivar
Lima
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

"What a week - lots of circuses but no bread," a friend of mine said yesterday.

He was expressing some of the perplexity which a week of unsettling incidents has fixed upon the limeños. Serious rioting in the streets, a workers' strike, suspension of certain constitutional rights and what seem unjustifiable arrests of various political leaders have jarred, amazed and confounded the public. No "bread" in the sense of some meaning to these events has been produced.

Certainly no one here denies the spectacle value of mobs coursing through the streets, hurling stones and rocks, shouting obscenities (some marvellously imaginative) and burning busses. Nor is the theatrical reaction of the government which quickly declared a state of siege and populated the city with armed soldiers and police considered unimpressive. Nor will the spectators soon forget the half shuttered store fronts where business as usual was carried on behind the partly drawn metal blinds, where the customer often had to stoop to enter through a child high door cut into the shutter, giving a furtive worried air to commerce.

In spite of one death from police bullets, a multitude of injuries among rioters, police and the general citizenry, and the lawlessness explicit in the burned out skeletons of busses and the rain of broken glass lying on the streets, all of this might be entertaining to the macabre and even diverting to the average man. Except for one factor: the government's actions during these events are not entirely explained. Even circuses require rationalization.

Two non-political events, occurring together, inspired the street riots. First, the transportation companies announced that fares in busses and trolleys would be raised. Second, the employees of the International Petroleum Company struck over wage increases, and were joined in sympathy walkouts by other workers' syndicates.

The increased fares had not met with any enthusiasm from the public but it seemed as if they would be tolerated as but one more rise in the cost of living to which the limeños have become accustomed. The strike was intended as orderly, and promised to be more frustrating than anything else since the bank workers' syndicate was involved and money, especially for wages, would be scarce.

But, perhaps taking an ill advised cue from the recent Brazilian student demonstrations on the same theme, the secondary school pupils in Callao and Lima began to protest the fare increases and before long were attacking the busses and trolleys as they lumbered about the city. Not satisfied with a hail of words and stones, the demonstration ended with the youngsters setting fire to several busses and demolishing installations of the transportation companies. Mixed into these mobs were groups of striking workers who, having little else to do, had been trying to convince stores still open to shut down, sometimes with threats, more often by persuasion. Some of them got caught up in the mob emotion displayed by the students and the many adults who had joined them, and contributed their bit to the destruction.

Order was not restored until late in the day when large detachments of the police and military finally dominated the upheavals. Fed by these unexpected happenings, the crop of rumors in the city sprouted hugely and were spread to all neighborhoods by the phone and street corner conversations. Everyone was hunting among the rumors for some political significance to the authorities actions, and the ultimate invention was that a military junta had taken over which planned to ignore the elections.

Even an innocent air force pilot contributed his share to these "bolas" as they are called: he was flying one of Peru's Hawker Hunter jets when he broke through the sound barrier. The resulting "bang supersónico" was heard around the city and brought police into the streets looking for a bomb while anxious parents hurried to local schools to bring home their children.

On the day following the riots, the government declared a state of siege and the knots of armed men thickened at strategic points, and, after a time, the city accepted a new sound: the muted clapping of mounted police squads as they made their rounds over the asphalted streets.

As part of the siege state, the citizen's right to warrants before search and arrest and to due process before being expelled from the country were nullified. The public had an ambivalent reaction to this: the students' rioting grated an already sore Lima

conscience after previous disturbances (CRT - 22) and the people wanted order restored, but, at the same time, the suspension of civil rights seemed to add just that political flavoring which rumor was seeking, and loud criticism followed.

Then, as if to confirm the worst fears, the government began to arrest political figures - as well as students and others implicated in the riotings - with a truly catholic taste. Into jail went pradistas, belaundistas and the leaders of APRA. The certainty jelled that this previewed a government determination to continue itself in power after July 28, the inauguration date of the new president. The rest of the week was passed by in feverish speculation.

Today, however, the new fares took effect and no new riots occurred. The strike was called off and business returned to normal, although the banks were abnormally swamped with currency starved clients. The political prisoners were released one by one, although the apristas are still held, but will probably leave jail later in the week. Only the armed men still remain as a token of what happened last week.

The political implications of the government's actions seem at first obscure. The men arrested were not involved in the rioting nor strike. In fact, if anything, they were model citizens who had just assisted in a generally fair national election and seemed prepared to abide by its outcome (in which Manuel Prado seems to be the official winner). Moreover, the tampering with civil rights was taken as an excessive and menacing gesture. The public was justifiably puzzled.

There is an interpretation, however, which many find satisfactory. Out of pride in itself and with an eye to July 28, the government has demonstrated that it cannot and will not be intimidated by any political group within the nation. This is not so curious a reaction in Peru where politics and revolution are never far apart. Especially, such a demonstration is directed against the apristas, self consciously revolutionary and determinedly radical. APRA has perhaps made too much of the size of its first public meeting in six years on the Thursday before elections, implying that here was a ready force to be mustered against those who might deny its will. Belaúnde, too, has spoken of "taking up the banner" should the reckoning of the elections show that he was cheated of victory by illegal methods.

One thing in the arrests stands out - members of all parties (except the government's own) were taken, as if there was a

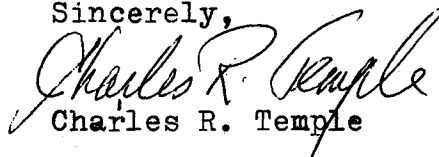
definite desire to test the reaction of all segments of the political body to see if they would respond with words or weapons to a show of strength.

If this reading is correct, the government took a calculated risk in a period of strained nerves and frayed tempers, and won its point. It tested the potential to violence of the public in political matters and found it low, which, in turn, points up the electorate's pride in the open elections of June 17 and its disposition to constitutionally approved political activity.

Further, the government has prepared the way for the orderly entrance of Manuel Prado into the presidential palace, and affirmed its own intentions to cede power when that happens. The Cabinet, in the absence of President Odría who is recovering from an operation to set a broken thigh bone, issued its own communication stating that the government intends to respect the voters' decision rendered through June 17's balloting.

There are less charitable and more pessimistic interpretations of what the government had and has in mind current in Lima, but even their champions are inclined to support the theory of the calculated risk since it promises future peace.

Sincerely,



Charles R. Temple

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