

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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The Opposition Speaks

Hotel Sucre Palace  
La Paz  
Bolivia  
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

My friend, Alberto, and I were watching the massing of the hordes of Bolivian miners who were in La Paz for the inauguration of the new President, Hernán Siles Suazo. Alberto is a quiet, undemonstrative person whose voice is ordinarily pitched so low that his close friends refer to him as "The Mute." Today, however, he had been exceptionally excited and continued talking rather loudly (for him) through the speeches given by several MNR (Nationalist Revolutionary Movement) officials to the miners, who stood ranked about with dark, somewhat sullen faces not much in keeping with the carnival aspect of their brightly painted tin hats.

Alberto and I had talked politics many times but almost always in a theoretical way, strange in view of the Bolivian tendency to personalize political events and problems. I was quite surprised when he turned to me as the miners cheered for the last speaker and said: "The animals are being fed by their keepers. Do you know that not one of these indians can read much less write? That they are having their first political experience without being in the smallest way prepared to meet its challenge? That their votes are equal to those of my friends and myself? The President has the gall to call this a "democracy" but I'd call it anarchy. Why is it that your government can't see what's happening here?"

In my journal I had copied two published comments which identify the opposing points of view on "what's happening here." The first appeared in La Nación, a pro-government daily of wide circulation, 17 August, 1956 and read:

"Truly the great events of April, 1952 /when the MNR overthrew the then existing government/ marked the destruction of the old regime's instruments of control and the establishment of new ones which opened the way to a true and profound revolution...The National Revolution with a conscious and planned effort is seeking economic independence and political consolidation...."

The second introduces a recently published book strongly critical of the MNR and its leaders, A Nation on the Cross (Un pueblo en la cruz) by Alberto Ostria Gutierrez. It reads:

"In Bolivia, there is a farce and a drama.

"The first, framed by the government of the Nationalist Revolutionary Movement (MNR), has been diffused to all parts of the world through the dithyramb of an able and incessant propaganda.

"But, the other, the drama of Bolivia, remains unknown.

"Nevertheless, in the drama is the truth of the Bolivian nation - crucified in misery, deceit and sorrow...."

Alberto, although once in favor of the MNR, would have subscribed to the second comment now - as he made abundantly clear over many cups of coffee later in the day. We were joined in the coffee shop by two of his friends who jumped into the discussion with a passion which suggested that the fate of the world was at stake. One, who looked rather like an overly tragic Don Quixote (with the effect spoiled by huge buck teeth), offered his comments in such a lugubrious fashion that he made me feel as if we were on the very edge of disaster. The other, small and rotund, made up for this by the laugh with which he ended all his statements. This somehow wasn't very funny since it was too close to a nervous giggle but at least it contrasted with the gloomy faces of Alberto and Quixote.

What they told me that afternoon I have summarized below as an example of what the opposition to the MNR government believes has happened and is happening in Bolivia today.

They pointed out that the elections of 1951 were in effect nullified when a military junta seized power after the results were known. In these elections, Victor Paz Estenssoro, leader of the MNR, gained more votes than any other candidate but less than a majority. On the grounds that Paz was being denied his constitutional right to govern, MNR partisans led by Hernán Siles Suazo were successful in overthrowing the military with the help of General Selemne, a member of the junta, who, among other things, opened the Army's arsenals to the revolutionaries. With victory established, Paz took office but refused to convene Congress which, according to law, should ratify his election. Thus, he continued to govern until August 6 of this year as an unconstitutional president. "But, he's always pretended to be a truly democratic president. Words are wonderful things," Alberto remarked.

In the elections, the traditional enemies, the MNR and the Communist party, joined forces with Juan Lechín's Syndicated Federation of Bolivian Mine Workers to elect Paz and joined as well in the revolt. Since then, these groups have lost some of their separate identities within the Movement's organization. "You should always remember that they're still Communists or fascists no matter what they call themselves today," Quixote concluded.

The Army, which lost to the revolutionaries and their allies, the police and the carabineros, was not only discredited after April (the month of the revolt) but was also reduced to a shadow of its former self. This was done through the imprisonment and exile of high ranking officers, the giving of indefinite leave to the soldiers and, perhaps most important, the distribution of its weapons and ammunition to workers', miners' and farmers' syndicates. In February of 1953, it was decided to organize the "Army of the National Revolution" staffed with those officers identified with the intentions of the MNR.

The judicial system was renovated and new appointments made of men sympathetic to the MNR, and, although the police and carabineros had taken part in the MNR's revolt, they too were purged of unwanted elements and emerged something less than a first class fighting force. As a source of power, the government continued to arm the rural populations, thereby creating armed militias responsible solely to the party. [ Juan Lechín, now president of the National Senate, expressed the party's attitude toward this step in October of 1952 as follows: "With rifles on their shoulders and a belief in their class, it is the dungaree army which will save the country and protect it from its enemies. It is the workers' and campesinos' militias which hoist the standard of revolution...." ]

The fat man went on: "Then, with true 'democratic' skill, they made the

MNR membership card the basis for getting a job in the government and almost anywhere else. I've got a friend who's a waiter in Chulumani [in the remote Yungas] because he couldn't find anything in La Paz without the card he never had."

He continued: "But the persecution didn't stop there. Anyone who spoke out against Paz or the government or the party was jailed or exiled and even his family was sometimes molested - they sent armed men to search and sack private homes."

Alberto added: "I think the worst feature, though, are the concentration camps." These appeared during the months of 1953 and 1954 in Corocoro, Uncia, Catavi and Curahuara de Carangas in the cold, high mining areas. Tales of torture and below minimum living conditions surround these camps [and have been verified in many reliable instances]. I told a story I had heard of a U.S. Embassy employee, a Bolivian, who was carried off and held for three months. During this time he was tortured in several vicious ways in order to find out if the Embassy was in touch with "counter-revolutionaries." The Bolivians received this story with knowing nods and, as it turned out, all three knew the man in question.

Throughout its tenure the MNR has adumbrated a propaganda campaign against opposition groups, lumping them together under the names of oligarchy, fascists, imperialists and enemies of the people. There has been little letup in this propaganda, either in official papers or in public speeches. [I had clipped an article from La Nación a few days earlier which gives the tone of this campaign. After having accused the Socialist Falange, now the main opposition party, of having violated the amnesty decreed during the elections, it went on to say:

"In spite of the precautionary measures adopted by the Minister of State, the leader of the fascists has escaped with his cohorts. The center of the MNR's National Political Committee in La Paz has been attacked with stones and bullets by the outrageous adolescents of the Falange. This is already serious provocation. The peaceful line taken by the MNR - the party of the masses - may be broken at any moment if these displayed attitudes, night time attacks and excessive insolence persist.

"The MNR does not want to have recourse to the armed militias and to mobilize them at once. It does not want to have to ready its armed campesino forces. It does not want to order the total mobilization of the armed campesino forces to restore order in the cities.

"But, if the disoriented fascist group insists and persists in its attitudes, we advise public opinion that the responsibility will fall upon the immature youths with the white shirts."

I suggested to Alberto and his friends that these MNR activities were pretty much in the pattern generally followed by successful revolutionaries in Latin countries - excepting the destruction of the Army and the planned arming of rural groups. Did they really expect anything different? The laughing man answered: "No, although it's about time that someone changed the rules of the game. But, surely your government and the people in your country can't accept the idea that these measures make up 'democratic action' or a 'popular revolution'?"

I pointed out that the MNR justified some of these activities as necessary in order to allow the introduction of laws for social reform which would otherwise never be sanctioned by the opposition. The group admitted that there was some justice in this attitude, but went on to criticize the actual steps in reform which the government had taken in this way.

The two major reform measures were the nationalization of the Patino, Hochschild and Aramayo mines (31 October, 1952) and the agrarian reform (decree of 2 August, 1953). The first was to provide funds to underwrite foreign purchases and to finance education and sanitary programs in the rural, i.e., indian, areas. The second was to put the land in the hands of the primary producers, the indians, and to abolish "four centuries of oppression of the campesinos of Bolivia" through the expropriation of large semi-feudal estates and the redistribution of these properties to the landless.

The enthusiasm among the MNR people and the indians for these actions ignored several factors of importance for the general success of the program. The mines were taken over at a time when production was declining and the quality of the ore decreasing, and when heavy investments of fresh capital were required to renovate existing equipment and prospect for new sources of metal. By abruptly expropriating the enterprises, the government inherited these problems (and created others, such as the exodus of foreign technicians from the country) without having the necessary capital with which to meet them. Even with regard to the alleged "punishment" of the owners (for their years of exploitation) the MNR actually failed, for the capital resources and private fortunes of the "Big Three" were banked outside Bolivia. They initially lost their properties, but, within the year, arrangements were worked out with the government to indemnify the stockholders and to give their interests a percentage of profits in exchange for refining and marketing tin.

The problems of the agrarian reform were equally tricky. The farmer worked toward subsistence goals, and most often with antiquated methods and tools. As a result of the emotional propaganda connected with the reform, the indian's exuberance led him to usurp non-expropriable lands, including several model properties whose equipment was soon useless. The need to give each man his own piece of property produced a parcelization which often resulted in too small a patch to support a family unit. Capital which might have been inviegled into agricultural investment vanished. There was at first no apparatus to apportion lands, and the Agrarian Reform Council which was eventually formed was faced with a shortage of funds and personnel to expedite its work. Finally, the campesino added his bit to the confusion by protracted disputes over boundary rights and irrigation practices.

On the other hand, one idea had been securely planted among the rural populations: that the indian should be free to determine his own future. Alberto commented: "The trouble is that he doesn't know exactly what he wants. He may want to change and have a better life but he hasn't the slightest idea as to how this will come about. Whose fault is that but the MNR's?"

The three Bolivians might have summed up their criticism of the MNR and its government in this fashion. Repressive measures have been and are being enacted against opposition elements, descending to the barbarousness of concentration camps and sustained publicly by a continuing propaganda campaign which damns all who are not MNR adherents. The traditional source of military power has been shifted away from the Army to the armed indian syndicates. Neither the police nor the carabineros come up to these groups in manpower or firepower. A one-sided policy directed toward winning the support of the rural groups has been developed: they have been given weapons, nationalization of the mines and the agrarian reform and, although lacking previous experience in national politics and illiterate, they have received the franchise. There has been a failure to go beyond the first steps of nationalization and agrarian reform so that the social changes implicit in these actions have not as yet materialized beyond desire and hope, with the highly important exception that the indian has become conscious of his rights as a human being and will probably never be persuaded into a mute role again.

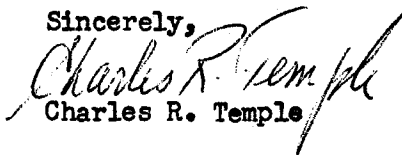
Alberto and his friends might have added that these things having been noted it still remains that little is clear cut in the present state of things. For example, the non-political social reformer is part of the MNR, the demagogue belongs as well to the opposition. The liberation of the indian from a semi-feudal condition has support even in the cities - the traditional source of opposition to such change - and among people who otherwise disapprove of the MNR. In spite of food shortages and long queues when rice or meat is on sale, the MNR is often blamed more in the way any government is when such things have to be. The MNR has its bully boys but many young falangists carry and use cachiporras - a metal ball and flail about the size of a blackjack with which one can whip, punch or jab depending on how he holds it.

But, Alberto and those who think like him, have not time at present for qualifications of this kind. For them the last four years of MNR rule have reduced the problem to that of freedom versus oppression. They seem to look at the government and the Movement as a dictatorial phenomenon, touted in its beginnings as an instrument of freedom but now used as a device for perpetuating the control of power hungry politicians. They are excluded and they want in with the MNR out.

A paragraph from a letter I received from an American with a lengthy Bolivian experience serves nicely as a postscript to the opposition's point of view. He wrote:

"The MNR, in the political sphere, has acted in a fashion which I would label oppressive and 'totalitarian,' and for this deserves little credit. In its economic activities it seems to have subordinated realities to wishes and to a concerted effort to win the approval of the rural indian at all costs. In the area of social change, it has tried to give the indian a new awareness of his role in the nation but has skimmed on advancing this much beyond the concept. In doing this, the party has implanted through its propaganda a hatred for the non-indian (except those members of the MNR), promised too much too soon and given arms with the injunction to use them in self-defense. This has created a potentially destructive climate of opinion among the indians, and what they might do if promises remain unfulfilled is not unimportant. Finally, in a way characteristic of governments based upon one-party rule, it has decreed itself the salvation of the nation and made contrary opinion 'un-Bolivian.' This just won't do and eventually the opposition will make its own revolution."

Sincerely,

  
Charles R. Temple