

Genesis of the next revolution

by Luis Barrios

The possibility of a future scenario modeled on the Nicaraguan revolution cannot be overlooked in the tiny and densely populated Republic of El Salvador. The spontaneous eruption of political violence and civil war is imminent not only because Nicaragua's recent revolution is potentially exportable, but also because the severities of economic and social deprivation in this country invite revolutionary response. Already a major groundswell of conflict and polarization is visible in many parts of El Salvador, promising to escalate into a wider crisis of national proportions. At present the nature of the governmental system is such that repression comes first and politics is secondary. Personalism and authoritarianism run rampant while Revolution with a capital "R" stands in the wings waiting to enter the social and political system, with violence as the only alternative.

Impending Crisis

All the variables which normally constitute conditions that give rise to social disequilibrium are present in El Salvador. This predominantly agrarian nation has the smallest territorial size of any continental American country (5240 square kilometres) but also the densest population for all of Latin America (215 persons per square kilometre). The chronic overcrowding of El Salvador's 5.3 million people is further complicated by an annual population growth rate of 3.4 per cent which has sustained itself for the past decade. These factors alone exert formidable pressures on the unresolved problems of inequitable land ownership, unemployment, and the lack of basic services.

In the past decade the problem of intensive demographic pressure was aggravated by the closure of the border with Honduras after the so-called "Soccer War". Prior to the 1969 war Salvadoreans migrated into Honduras and occupied a sizeable amount of land across the frontier thus helping to relieve internal population

pressures. Now with the population expected to double within 20 years, the relocation of Salvadorean farm peasants and tradesmen is bound to cause not only increasing internal tensions but international ones as well. In addition, the predominantly rural composition of El Salvador's population (approximately 60 per cent) means the persistence of illiteracy, low productivity, health problems, low technology, low skills and feudalistic social structures.

Most of the productive *latifundia* which constitute approximately 50 per cent of the arable land are held by some 300 extended families, while the *campesinos* (rural workers) — the great majority — hold only 10 per cent of the land (*minifundia*) in plots of usually less than ten hectares. The scarcity of land coupled with its unequal distribution results in gross inefficiency of land use and uneven economic growth in the agricultural sector, which accounts for 25 per cent of the GNP, 75 per cent of foreign earnings and 46 per cent of the labour force.

But these factors alone do not necessarily produce a revolution or political turmoil. Many Central and South American states have similar conditions which more often than not result in long-term political stability, notwithstanding static economic growth. Certainly, inequality is present everywhere in Latin America but in the case of El Salvador, small size and a well-developed communications system serve to heighten antagonism and dissatisfaction among people. The obvious imbalance between those who have and those who have not is highly visible in Salvadorean society, and the revolution of rising expectations engenders great political instability with each economic setback.

It is because of this that El Salvador serves to exemplify James C. Davies' "J-Curve" theory of revolution. According to Davies, it is not an absolute amount of inequality that encourages revolutionary behaviour. Instead it is relative deprivation (the gap between what people expect and what they get) that facilitates political and social violence. Davies posits that revolution will likely occur when "a prolonged period of rising expectations and rising gratification is followed by a short period of sharp reversal, during which the gap between expectations and gratification quickly widens and becomes intolerable."

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