

Free Speech

El Salvador junta no longer reform minded

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In the controversy concerning the alleged ideological persuasions of the organizers of "El Salvador Week" (*Excalibur*, Feb. 5 and 12, 1981), our understanding of what is actually taking place in that country has not been advanced.

The immediate sources of the civil war lie in the unsuccessful attempt of the civilian-military junta which exercised power from October 15, 1979 to January 3, 1980, to implement reforms. It was this junta that the United States first supported as a "centrist and moderate government with an encouraging direction."

Military figures had ruled El Salvador since 1931. The following year a widespread rebellion of both the urban and the rural masses, whose already precarious living standards had been severely reduced by the impact of the Great Depression, resulted in the massacre of approximately 30,000 people, mostly peasants and adding up to 4 per cent of the country's population. The massacre left a deep imprint on the political memory of all sectors of Salvadoran society. Specifically, the most powerful sector of the elite, the agricultural export oligarchy, acquired the habit of labeling all demands for reform communistic and subversive. The convenient label was also used to retain U.S. support in maintaining

the country's highly inequitable social order and its un-democratic political system.

Perhaps the most telling example of the elite's lack of flexibility and vision was provided by the 1972 elections. Enormous electoral fraud prevented the National Opposition Union, a coalition of three moderate but genuinely reform oriented parties of which the Christian Democratic Party was the largest, from acceding to power.

Arturo Armando Molina's government (1972-77) then proceeded to exile or imprison most opposition leaders. The repression escalated under his successor, General Carlos Romero (1977-79).

With the possibilities of peaceful change becoming increasingly remote, the younger and more militant members of a number of radical and reformist parties began to organize for a prolonged war against the regime in power. Most importantly, the Popular Liberation Forces emerged from a split in the Communist Party and the People's Revolutionary Army had its roots in a split from the Christian Democratic Party.

While the political regime became more and more repressive during the second half of the seventies, social conditions deteriorated for the majority of the population. The capital intensive industrialization of the 60s and 70s created few jobs, and urban unemployment and underemployment increased rapidly. Nevertheless, the aura of

modernity and opportunity in the cities continued to attract an ever larger stream of migrants from the abysmally poor rural areas where 2 per cent of the population owned more than 60 per cent of the land.

Only decisive action on reform and the creation of employment opportunities might have staved off increasing opposition and political polarization. The Salvadoran elite instead chose escalated repression as their primary policy instrument for coping with the worsening social and economic conditions of the majority of the population. In fact, the extensiveness and indiscriminate character of the violence unleashed by the Romero regime finally became an embarrassment to the U.S. It was thus, with the blessings of the U.S., that the centrist military-civilian junta came to power through a *coup d'etat* on October 15, 1979.

It is one of the falsehoods of contemporary U.S. foreign policy to pretend that this centrist junta is still in power.

The progressive and reform oriented members of the junta resigned during the first few days of 1980. They did so because they were unable to control the armed forces or to persuade the landlord class to accept basic reforms—specifically, a genuine agrarian reform and a sharing of political power with the country's popular organizations. The reforms these progressives had intended to carry out could not be enforced. The armed forces in fact increased their repressive actions during the

last months of 1979 under the legitimacy provided by the presence of these internationally respected civilians in the junta.

A political centre no longer exists in El Salvador. Most of the civilians who formed part of the October junta's last minute attempt to introduce reforms peacefully, now form part of the opposition. On April 2, 1980, the centre joined the left in the formation of the Democratic Revolutionary Front (DRF). The Front's first president was Enrique Alvarez, former minister of Agriculture in the October junta. He, along with other prominent members of the Front, was assassinated in November 1980 and his successor as DRF President is Guillermo Ungo, social democrat and also a member of the October junta.

The Democratic Revolutionary Front unites the armed revolutionary organizations with the Popular Social Christian Movement (a split from the Christian Democratic Party), the National Revolutionary Movement (a social democratic party), the National Confederation of Small Businessmen, the National and Jesuit universities, trade union and peasant as well as civic organizations.

The Christian Democrats who remained in the government as it turned into a front for right wing repression were criticized by Archbishop Romero before his assassination on March 24, 1980. The Archbishop asked those Christian Democrats to "analyze

not only their intentions, which no doubt are good, but the real effects that their presence in the government is having. Their presence is covering up, especially at the international level, the repressive character of the present regime."

It is because of this situation that former American Ambassador to El Salvador, Murat W. Williams, states that the "heterogeneous left must make up over 80 per cent of the Salvadoran population." Since the U.S. keeps insisting that the center is in power and only the left is in the opposition, Williams continues that according to this "distorted framework, used by the American government and some of the American press, one must place on the 'left' virtually the entire Roman Catholic hierarchy. Also on the left one must place even some members of the Salvadoran aristocracy, as well as intellectuals, academics, many lawyers and businessmen and the great mass of Salvadoran Catholics, both peasants and workers." (*The New York Times*, Sunday, December 29, 1980).

It is in this context that the U.S. is escalating its military aid to El Salvador and that several student organizations joined together to mount "El Salvador Week."

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