

THINKING ALOUD

Democracy's Future in Latin America

By Amitai Etzioni

CHINA FELL to the Communists, despite strenuous American efforts, partly because of an imbalance between the objectives of U.S. foreign policy and the means available to secure them. A similar discrepancy now exists in Latin America where the U.S. favors elected governments but appears incapable of protecting them against military coups: Seven elected governments have been unseated since President Kennedy took office in 1961, including four this year alone, and the governments of Colombia, Venezuela and Costa Rica today have good cause for concern about their future.

Perhaps one reason for the present U.S. predicament is the absence of a realistic picture of conditions in Latin America. In most countries where the military has seized power, for example, it was the predominant national force even before leaving the barracks; the change was merely from one form of military control to another, not a sudden leap from democracy to military dictatorship. The coup in Argentina illuminates the pattern.

To many North Americans, Argentina's recent history reads as follows—1958: election of Arturo Frondizi to the Presidency; March 1962: temporary suspension of democracy by a military coup; July 1963: restoration of democracy with the election of Dr. Arturo Illia. This simple view assumes that, like a faucet, democracy can be turned on and off, and then on again. Yet the fact is that Argentina knew little democracy under Frondizi. His four-year rule was marked by 34 "crises"—the Argentine term for the 34 occasions when the military drove to the door to warn the President against veering too far from the course it approved. On countless other occasions, Frondizi cleared his policy with the generals over the phone; often he simply followed the policy he knew they favored. When in 1962 he thought his

popular following strong enough to support an independent move and refused to endorse the ouster of Castro's Cuba from the Organization of American States, he himself was ousted. Thus on the 35th "crisis" the tanks did not stop at the gate—they crashed it.

Nor was democracy restored in mid-1963. The Army denied the followers of Juan Peron, a large and important segment of the population, the right to participate in the election; and radical candidates who were too active were either arrested or harassed. Although welcomed with hopes reminiscent of the beginning of Frondizi's reign in 1958, the new President has to operate under the old code. Like his predecessors, he will have to keep his policies within the boundaries set by the various military factions or be unseated. And in Argentina, as in most of Latin America, the latter is the more likely possibility.

This is not to say that the military always exercises exclusive control, although it may occupy the government palace or the barracks behind it. Almost invariably it forms a coalition with some other group, such as the landlords, the industrialists, or even the labor unions. In other words, it tends to tolerate a range of policies consistent with its views and acts mainly as a powerful veto group. Even in Venezuela, where the military is not particularly strong and apparently prefers to wait at least until the popular President Romulo Betancourt finishes his term next month before making a move, this is in some measure true. Yet when the small pro-Castro Venezuelan terrorist group intensified its activities and killed several Army men, Betancourt felt constrained to waive the constitutional rights of his country's two extreme Left-wing (but non-Communist) parties; otherwise, he might well have found himself entering premature retirement.

In Honduras and in the Dominican Republic the civilian heads of state were less successful than Betancourt as tight-rope walkers. Ramon Morales, the elected President of Honduras, first worried his generals by introducing some mild Leftist reforms (though he

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is a staunch anti-Communist). When he further alarmed them by forming a loyal civil guard, he was summarily evicted.

Morales' removal marked the 136th coup in the 142 years since Honduras won its independence. Such a tradition is not erased by an election, any more than eight months of democracy under Juan Bosch was sufficient to rehabilitate the Dominican Republic after 30 years of Rafael Trujillo. The military might return to the barracks tomorrow, as it already has in Peru and Argentina, but this will not make democracies of these countries. The military veto will continue to be decisive, and therefore much heeded during and after the elections.

It is here that the North American view is often naive. The return of the Army to barracks, when combined with national elections, is generally regarded as "a first step" toward democracy. But such optimism is seldom justified, not only because the elections are usually manipulated, but, more importantly, because this "first step" is rarely followed by the logical second step: by the Army permanently retiring from politics and allowing the gradual evolution of democracy. Instead, elections merely mark an interval between coups. When the military retreats behind the scenes, it does so mainly because it desires a respite from the mundane job of running the civilian government, as well as from the in-fighting that usually develops among its politically active factions. After a brief time-out, however, the troops are ready once again to mount the tanks that practically know their own way downtown. Thus, in Latin America the difference between most elected and military governments is one of degree: the elected are not democratic, and the military do not completely ignore civilian needs.

IT IS NEVER wise to equate democracy with elections, which are regularly held by totalitarian governments from the USSR to the UAR. The critical requirement of democracy is orderly change in government, in accordance with the people's freely expressed desires. And this entails much more than mere ballots and voting booths.

For democracy to work, the majority of politically conscious citizens have to be so committed to its principles that if their party loses an election they will not turn to the Army (assuming it is aligned with them) or form an Army of their own to repeal the results. Such a commitment to democracy is acquired in part through education in the formative years at home; it is later cultivated in the school, and reinforced by the press, television and other means of mass communication. The point is that the democratic personality must be able to withstand the high level of frustration involved in permitting an opponent to take office without succumbing to the temptation of barring him by the

use of force. Unfortunately, the typical family structure of Latin American countries is more like that of Southern than Western Europe; it does not provide the setting for such tolerance to frustration. Nor do most of the schools or the mass media encourage it.

But even where the democratic tradition does exist, it can only be maintained when the ruling party is responsive to all major segments of the population and does not use its power to favor some groups at the expense of others. From the enormous gap in Latin America between rich and poor, between city and countryside, and between favored ethnic groups and neglected ones, it is clear that this requirement also seldom prevails. On the whole, existing governments do the most for those who need the least. Similarly, when the neglected groups do take over, as in Mexico, the privileged classes have real reason to fear for their property, if not for their lives. Both sides tend to resort to violence, either to protect their position or to enlarge it, since what political machinery there is does not provide any peaceful means of adjusting conflicting claims.

A government has to be at least partially effective if a country is to support democracy and reject rule by military junta. When governments are regularly thrown into the kind of political and economic chaos that one finds, say, in Brazil; when they cannot maintain law and order, as is the case in Colombia's countryside; or when they are mismanaged by a President who is drunk most of the time, as in Ecuador before the recent coup—it is small wonder that few tears are shed if the military takes over. When corruption and favoritism dominate the civil service and political parties do not reflect the views of the major social groups, but instead serve as vehicles for opportunists eager to build their fortunes and advance their friends and relatives, democracy is reduced to a thin veneer—the removal of which soon exposes the harsh political reality.

Still, democratization is possible in Latin America. True, few of the region's republics have the necessary components for achieving it. But this simply means we must recognize that the process will be a slow one, as indeed it was in the West. Those who would support it must be prepared to face many setbacks, as well as decades of patient and constructive work.

The Kennedy Administration believes that extensive social and political reform offers the best solution to the area's problems. Reforms, it is felt, will undermine the appeal of Communism, will improve the standard of living, and will allow more freedoms. Yet these various goals are not all that harmonious.

Take, for example, the problem of economic development. Some aspiring democratic governments choose to yield to the demands of their people and divert many major resources from capital investment

to immediate consumption; others fail to foster development because they are simply too ineffectual. Then there are non-democratic governments which push development ruthlessly, adopting such measures as forced resettling of peasants and drastic agrarian reform and achieving success largely by ignoring their people's distressed condition. Should the United States encourage the overthrow of these non-democratic governments and support the backward democracies?

In matters of security, too, some elected Latin American governments do not see eye to eye with the U.S., while several of the military governments are among the most loyal followers of policies laid down in Washington. Frondizi, for instance, would not support U.S. efforts to oust Cuba from the OAS, though the generals who unseated him did. Is Washington to support the elected governments opposed to its views, and discourage military coups that would bring these countries into line with U.S. foreign policy?

To further complicate the situation, U.S. businessmen exert pressure on the Administration to get along with the government in office wherever they have large investments. In Lima, United States corporations are believed to have favored resumption of diplomatic recognition and aid immediately after the July 1962 military coup. In Venezuela, a visitor cannot long escape the conclusion that the foreign oil companies would quite willingly trade Betancourt's Left-leaning democracy for a government more congenial to their own interests, whatever its political coloration.

Nor does Congress give the Administration a free hand in defining its Latin American policy. The list of requirements a country has to meet before the

U.S. is allowed to help it (and hence the government in office) increases with each year. Even a visit to Castro's island by a head of state is enough to create troubles on the Hill for a Latin American republic, as President Aldolfo Lopez Mateos of Mexico recently discovered. It is no secret either that some members of U.S. military missions feel their Latin American counterparts constitute the best organized and most reliable anti-Communist, pro-American group in the area. Thus the Administration must play the juggler in its effort to formulate an effective and coherent Hemisphere policy.

Perhaps even more important, the instruments available for promoting U.S. policy are meager, imprecise and quite unsuited to accomplishing the goals set by the Administration. Except in some extreme case, for example, the use of military force to advance U.S. goals obviously has to be ruled out because it would alienate so many Latin Americans. Even the most progressive minded people I met in Latin America would rather leave Haitian tyrant François Duvalier in office than have U.S. Marines remove him and revive—to use their phrase—Yankee “gun-boat” diplomacy.

Secondly, the permanent withdrawal of diplomatic recognition from all Latin American governments that do not please the U.S. would leave most of our ambassadors there unemployed. Actually, it is desirable to maintain an open line of contact with non-democratic governments, if only to keep in touch with the democratic opposition. Occasionally, this also proves a useful channel for encouraging democratization, as was the case not long ago in the Dominican Republic.



Economic support from the U.S. in the form of loans, grants, technical assistance, etc., yields comparatively feeble leverage in most Latin American countries. The stopping of U.S. aid to Duvalier in May 1963 after he re-elected himself to another six-year term, had little immediate effect. If the West continues to withhold its aid from Brazil, and if the government survives without it, Brazil may well declare a moratorium on its multi-hundred million dollar debts to Western countries, and save—by not paying interest and principal due—enough to keep going. Moreover, even when economic pressure is more potent, it is hardly likely to move a tyrant to exile himself, or to persuade groups opposed to progress that they should support development projects. The common compromise is to placate the U.S. by holding elections, without initiating the basic social changes essential for economic and political improvement.

THE OBJECTIVES of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America, therefore, must be brought into harmony with the means available. Proposing unobtainable goals only generates false hopes. And to begin with, it must be recognized that no force on earth can transform most of the countries in the Hemisphere into real democracies in the near future.

We can and should require of any country that it undergo a minimum of democratization, however. Only after policy brutalities, firing squads and imprisonment without trial are eliminated, may we associate with an essentially totalitarian regime without severely compromising our conscience and reputation. Dealings with such regimes should be kept at the most reserved and limited level of diplomatic relations, excluding all aid, technical assistance and trade subsidies, and focusing the condemnation of the Hemisphere upon them. If they do relent, as the Paraguayan government is reported to have done, they should be readmitted to the Western family of nations; if, like Duvalier in Haiti, they do not, the U.S. should exert every effort to support opposition groups short of shipment of troops, fully expecting that it might take years before the tyrants are brought down. Here there is no room for compromise.

Beyond this minimum admission requirement, the U.S. should recognize that democratization is a process, not a quality that a country has or does not have. It should encourage this process by tying economic aid more closely to progress: Assistance should be given to improve the educational and administrative systems. Support for new universities for the training of both political leaders and administrators might be one approach, serving to extend the spirit of mutual tolerance and responsiveness. Bringing Latin Americans to this country for training could also help, if carried out on a larger scale than at present. But the

U.S. should be the first to stress again and again that the impact of these and all other measures will not be dramatic. Most of the work has to be done by the Latin Americans themselves and will take time; democracy can neither be imported nor rushed.

The overriding importance of economic development should be freely admitted. Countries that foster democracy and economic progress simultaneously deserve special consideration, of course. But the U.S. should fully support all governments that push hard for development (including even autocratic regimes), as long as basic human rights are not violated.

While the meager instruments available to implement United States foreign policy should be used to support progress and to indicate disapproval of stagnation, not to mention regression, they should not be wasted on twisting the arms of countries to vote for U.S.-sponsored resolutions in the United Nations or the OAS. Getting others to denounce Castro might help score points with the voters at home, but this does not really hasten his downfall.

It is worth noting, too, that in the past the spread of Communism in Latin America has been countered in a way that has strengthened already over-sized military establishments. This drains both resources and manpower from development, and nourishes the very forces that subvert U.S. policy in the Hemisphere by preventing democracy from taking root. The same task could be accomplished more effectively, and without these undesirable side-effects: The Latin Americans could be asked to form a regional security force, similar to the growing Latin American Free Trade Area, under the OAS or some other regional organization. Such a pooling of national forces would allow the reduction of national military establishments as the regional organization grows. Also, it would remove military units from internal politics by stationing those of one country in another country or, better still, by merging the units of different nationalities.

To spur this development, the U.S. might consider stopping all military aid to national forces and shifting its assistance to a regional force. To the degree that individual Latin American military groups oppose the formation of a regional force, the U.S. has no choice but to protect the area from the outside by using its Navy and Air Force to block Communist invasion of Central and South America. The handling of small indigenous Communist groups should be left to the large local military forces, but they should not be supported with additional equipment. Shifting the emphasis of U.S. assistance from military to economic aid would accelerate progress—which is still the best way to inoculate Latin American societies against totalitarianism—and would weaken the forces that occasionally allow these countries to play at democracy, but not to pursue it as a permanent mode of life.