

Imperialism and Revolution

Episode #24



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The rise of Batista

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In the last two episodes of *Imperialism and Revolution*, we have looked at the popular movement against the dictator Machado from 1930 to 1933, which culminated in a short-lived independent, progressive government of September 4, 1933 to January 15, 1934. That “government of 100 days” included former Army sergeant Fulgencio Batista, whose rise in the Cuban political landscape is the subject of today’s episode.

By 1933, revolutionary, reformist, and fascist organizations had emerged in opposition to the Machado dictatorship. In the revolutionary wing, the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) and the National Confederation of Workers (CNOC) were

organizing and educating urban and agricultural workers, and the Revolutionary Union of Antonio Guiteras was sustaining a guerrilla struggle in the countryside. In this situation, the U.S. government, concerned that its interests would be compromised by the coming to power of the popular revolution, began to search for a way to end the Machado regime in a manner that would preserve a neocolonial republic in accordance with its interests. Sensitive to growing anti-imperialist sentiment in Latin America, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt wanted to avoid military intervention and to present U.S. imperialist policies with a more democratic face. Roosevelt named his personal friend Benjamin Sumner Welles as U.S. ambassador to Cuba, and assigned him the task of bringing to an end the political conflict by means of personal mediation. Wells, who arrived in May, proposed the restoration of constitutional guarantees and the holding of new elections, combined with a clampdown on the activities of the revolutionary opposition. The proposal was rejected by the revolutionary organizations, which continued the anti-Machado offensive.

In August, the leadership of the PCC and the CNOC organized a general strike, and they put forth several social and economic demands, and they called for departure of Machado. Machado countered with a proposal for the acceptance of the social and economic demands, but with his remaining in office. The leadership of PCC and CNOC recommended acceptance of Machado's proposal, but the workers, meeting in assemblies, decided to continue the general strike. They wanted the dictator to go. The leaders of PCC and CNOC conceded to the workers' desires, and the general strike continued.

On August 12, high-ranking army officers rebelled. They were concerned that the possible triumph of the popular revolution could provoke a U.S. military intervention, which could lead to the dissolution of the Cuban armed forces. In this circumstance, Machado was compelled to resign.

With the flight of Machado, U.S. Ambassador Wells maneuvered to establish a government that would be capable of frustrating the popular revolution. He pressured the Congress to designate as president Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, a bland politician who possessed a level of popular support, by virtue of being the son of the first President of the Republic of Cuba in Arms, established in 1869 during the first Cuban war of independence. In accordance with the desires of the US ambassador, Céspedes was designated president on August 13.

The Céspedes government was supported by the Cuban plantation owners and the reformist opposition to Machado, but inasmuch as it was a creation of the United States, it lacked legitimacy among the people. The workers continued with the wave of strikes, directed by committees elected by the masses, putting forth economic, social, and political demands. At the same time, the Communist Party of Cuba, the Revolutionary Union, and the University Student Directorate sought to bring down the Céspedes government, each using different strategies. The Céspedes government responded with vacillating proposals. It was a moment of anarchy, which included executions of Machado government officials by popular groups.

On September 4, 1933, sergeants, corporals, and enlisted men seized control of the military base of Columbia. The "sergeants' revolt" was a product of class factors. The officers, who proceeded from the upper and middle classes, lived in a privileged manner, and they were abusive toward non-commissioned officers and enlisted men, who were from the lower classes and earned low salaries. In addition, non-commissioned officers were disheartened by the role that the army had played during the Machado regime, lowering its prestige among workers and peasants. As a result, revolutionary and reformist ideas permeated the non-commissioned officers, and they had significant contacts with Antonio Guiteras, the Revolutionary Union, and the University Student Directorate.

Leaders of the University Student Directorate joined with the rebellious sergeants to form the Revolutionary Group of Cuba, which declared itself to be the Provisional Revolutionary Government of Cuba. It announced a program that reflected the reformist proposals of the University Student Directorate, including the convoking of a constitutional assembly, affirmation of the principles of representative democracy, the establishment of special tribunals for the trial and punishment of officials of the Machado government, protection of the life and property of citizens and foreigners, and recognition of the good faith and patriotism of the members of the Céspedes government. The Revolutionary Group received the support of the units of the army, navy, and police throughout the country, so that chiefs and officers were replaced by sergeants, corporals, and soldiers across the nation.

Among the members of the Revolutionary Group was Sergeant Fulgencio Batista. He suggested that the key leaders of the rebellion in Columbia, located in Havana, travel to the cities of Matanzas and Pinar del Río, in order to control the uncertain situation in the barracks of these cities. This enabled Batista to personally conduct negotiations in the early morning of September 5, with respect to the first public proclamation by the recently created Revolutionary Group. The "Proclamation to the People of Cuba" was signed by sixteen civilians, two ex-military men, and only one military man in active service, Batista, who

signed the document with the self-designated title of “Revolutionary Chief Sergeant of all the Armed Forces of the Republic.” Later that same day, Batista issued a public statement in the name of the armed forces, signed by him, and he met with the U.S. ambassador. Batista thus was immediately identified in the public mind as the leader of the sergeant’s revolt. When the other leaders returned to the capital, they decided to accept what had transpired, including the new prominent role of Batista, rather than undermine the sergeant’s revolt through an internal struggle for power.

On September 5, the Revolutionary Group established a collective presidency of five persons, implementing a proposal that had been put forth a month earlier by the University Student Directorate. The “Pentateuch,” as it was called by the people, could not function, because ideological divisions among the five prevented agreement. So it was dissolved on September 10, and Dr. Ramón Grau San Martín was named President. During its five days of life, the Pentateuch promoted Batista to the rank of colonel. The era of Batista had begun.

During the Grau “government of 100 days,” Batista had effective control of the Army, and he led the right-wing faction of the government, even though he did not hold a ministerial post in the administration. With the approval of the centrist, reformist faction of the Grau government, the Army of Batista engaged in violent repression of the Communist Party. The reformist faction was in favor of social and economic reforms, but anti-communist.

Batista supported the interests of U.S. imperialism and the Cuban plantation owners. On the day of the September 4 coup, Batista began to meet on a regular basis with Ambassador Welles, who was impressed immediately, and he soon came to view Batista as the best hope for an order consistent with US interests. By the end of October, Wells and Batista had arrived at a plan to replace Grau with Colonel Carlos Mendieta as president and with Batista as head of the armed forces. At first, there was opposition to the Batista-Wells plan by the Cuban elite, as a result of the fact that Batista was a mulatto of humble origins. But as the Grau government came to be increasingly influenced by the revolutionary faction of Guiteras, Wells and his successor, Jefferson Caffery, continued to lobby for the replacement of Grau.

Under pressure, Grau resigned on January 15, 1934. Mendieta was installed as president on January 18, and the Mendieta government was recognized by the USA on January 23. Thus emerged a government that, as expressed by Cuban scholars, was “delivered by Caffery, directed by Batista, and represented by Mendieta.”

This is Charles McKelvey, speaking from Cuba, the heart and soul of a global socialist revolution that struggles for a more just, democratic, and sustainable world.

Sources

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