

Imperialism and Revolution

Episode #25

Cuba

Fulgencio Batista

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Batista takes control

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In our last episode of Imperialism and Revolution last week, we saw that, in the context of a situation of anarchy in 1933, Fulgencio Batista seized the opportunity created by the Sergeant's revolt of September 4 to cast himself as the leader of the armed forces and to attain control of the military during the progressive "government of 100 days;" and that Batista subsequently negotiated with U.S. ambassador Jefferson Caffery the installation of Colonel Carlos Mendieta on January 18, 1934, with Batista as head of the Armed Forces, and with the new government recognized by the United States five days later. Thus came into being a government "delivered by Caffery, directed by Batista, and represented by Mendieta." Today, we look at Batista's consolidation of power.

Prior to the overthrow of Machado, the Cuban armed forces were subordinate to Cuban civil authority, and the chiefs of the army did not participate in the taking of political decisions. The role of the armed forces prior to 1934 was to carry out repressive measures authorized by the president and other civil authorities, in exchange for which the military chiefs were granted participation in the looting of the public treasury. But the sergeant's revolt of September 4, 1933, which led to the Grau "government of 100 days," and the installation of the Mendieta-Batista government on January 18, 1934, greatly strengthened the role of the military in political affairs. Federico Chang writes that "Batista and his army emerged as the true arbiters of the situation. The traditional political parties, fragmented and involved in endless fights that promoted their ambitions, only would occupy the space in governmental management that the formal maintenance of republican institutions required. Real power would be in the hands of the military chiefs, with Batista at the head."

In 1936 and 1937, Batista launched an effort to institutionalize the power of the Army. From February to April of 1936, a series of laws and decrees were emitted that created a number of institutions, all under the direction of the chief of the army. These new entities were dedicated to such tasks as the creation and operation of rural schools and the providing of social services and public health. By virtue of a law of August 28, 1936, the various institutions were united in the Corporative Council of Education, Health, and Welfare, which pertained to the military. These measures increased the power of Batista and the military, by giving them control over areas that normally are under the civilian authority of the government. The Corporative Council appointed teachers to the rural schools as well as health specialists, social workers, and administrators necessary for the various programs of social and health services. Moreover, the Corporative Council enabled Batista to improve his image, which had been severely damaged by what Chang calls his "well-earned fame as an oppressor of the people," earned during the Grau government. The programs of the Corporative Council involved the military with the rural peasantry, converting officers and soldiers into agents of social change that were improving the conditions of life. However, because of the paternalistic character of the program, its idealistic solutions, and its lack of technical support, the program generally has been interpreted as primarily intended to attain social support for the personal ambitions of Batista.

In August 1937, Batista presented yet another initiative, the Plan for Social-Economic Reconstruction, which was dedicated to improving the conditions of life in the countryside. The program was announced by Batista personally, and it was accompanied by an ample propaganda campaign that proclaimed its benefits to the people. However, the proposed program did not touch the large landholdings, which constituted the principal structural source of rural poverty. And although the proposed program would have provided some support to small and middle peasants cultivating sugar, it offered no support for landless peasants or for peasants who were not producing sugar. Analyses of the proposal maintain that, if it had been implemented, it would have led to loss of land and pauperization for 60% of peasant small landholders.

The Plan for Social-Economic Reconstruction has been interpreted as a further example of Batista astutely attempting to expand his personal power. He understood that he could not obtain the support of the workers and students through a program apparently designed for progressive social change, as a result of his previous repression against these sectors. Therefore, he was attempting to establish a social base of support in the rural population, which had less developed political consciousness and had been less directly repressed by the armed forces under his command. But the plan never attained the popular support that Batista had envisioned, as leaders of the popular movement provided penetrating analyses, exposing its deceptions and contradictions. In 1938, Batista announced its postponement, and it never was placed back on the agenda.

On the international plane, Batista fully cooperated with U.S. interest in increasing access to Cuban markets of U.S. industrial and agricultural products. The 1934 Reciprocal Agreement between Cuba and the USA reduced the tariffs on thirty-five articles exported from Cuba to the United States and 400 articles proceeding from the USA to Cuba. By increasing the Cuban percentage of U.S. imports of sugar, the agreement facilitated a recovery for Cuban sugar producers. However, the recovery was merely partial, because the Cuban share was still only half of what it had been in the period 1925-1929, before U.S. sugar producers began to lobby the U.S. government to reduce the Cuban share, in response to the effects of the Great Depression. The Cuban recovery, moreover, had limited advantages for Cuba, because the historic Cuban pattern of overdependency on sugar continued; sugar comprised four-fifths of Cuban exports. In addition, the agreement deepened overall trade dependency on the USA; by the end of the 1930s, Cuban trade with the USA reached three-fourths of Cuban foreign commerce.

Furthermore, the 1934 trade agreement, by reducing tariffs for U.S. manufactured goods, failed to protect Cuban industry and to defend the development of national industry. Federico Chang notes that, in this respect, Cuba was different from other Latin American countries of the period, which had a "solidly defined policy of import-substitution," seeking to develop national industry. He notes that the Cuban

oligarchy delivered “without reserve” the Cuban internal market, thus demonstrating its “complete subordination to the United States.” Its “most abject servility” was revealed in its declarations that “praised the negotiations with the U.S. government as ‘beneficial for the country.’” Similarly, Francisco López Segrera maintains that the 1934 commercial agreement frustrated possibilities for industrial development, reinforcing the position of Cuba as a consumer of manufactured products and producer of sugar. The agreement represented the mutual interests of U.S. imperialism and the Cuban sugar oligarchy. It deepened the unequal core-peripheral economic relation between the USA and Cuba, thus exemplifying the process of neocolonialism, in spite of Cuba’s formal political independence.

Since the times of José Martí, the Cuban revolutionary movement sought to break the core-peripheral relation and the neocolonial structures that sustained it. But in the period 1933-1937, the revolutionary movement was unable to overcome its divisions, in spite of its considerable advances in theory and practice during the 1920s and early 1930s. Batista was able to astutely combine repression of the revolutionary movement with concessions to the masses. As López Segrera observes, Batista employed rhetoric that “integrated the revolutionary and nationalist protest into a counterrevolutionary and anti-nationalist neo-populism, disguised as democracy and worker concessions.”

The story of Batista in the period 1934 to 1937 shows that dictatorships do not govern by force alone. Force is an important element of dictatorial domination, but so are economic concessions and ideological justifications. Even in a dictatorship, political stability requires a degree of popular acceptance.

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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