

Imperialism and Revolution

Episode #27



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The ultimate failure of neocolonial
“democracy,” 1940-1952

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In last week’s episode of *Imperialism and Revolution*, we saw that under the tutelage of U.S. Ambassador J. Butler Wright, Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista initiated democratic reforms during the period 1937 to 1940, culminating in a Constitutional Convention in 1940, which developed and approved an advanced constitution for its time, including recognition of the rights of workers and women and of the principle state intervention in the economy; and including restrictions on foreign ownership of land and the abolition of large landholdings. And we saw that Batista, supported by the Communist Party, won the democratic elections of 1940 against the reformist but anti-communist candidate Ramón Grau. With the appearance of democracy during a favorable economic

period, Cuba had arrived to be a “perfect neocolonial system.” The perfection, however, was short-lived, and in this episode of *Imperialism and Revolution*, we look at the failure of the neocolonial system in the period 1940 to 1952.

Although economic conditions were favorable during the Batista presidency of 1940 to 1944, there were serious economic problems, including the expansion of unemployment in some sectors and an increase in the cost of living, as a result of decline in the purchasing power of the national currency. With support for the Batista government falling, the Authentic Cuban Revolutionary Party led by Ramón Grau was able to present itself as the “great hope” of the people and to win the elections of 1944, defeating the presidential candidate selected by Batista. In accordance with standard reformist rhetoric, Grau had promised support for all sectors. He proposed to harmonize labor-management relations, without necessarily implying support for the workers in just demands that infringe upon the interests of the national bourgeoisie. He

promised agrarian reform, without specifics, and without challenging the interests of the landed oligarchy. And he proposed to increase economic and cultural relations with the United States.

The Authentic Cuban Revolutionary Party was a party of the reformist national bourgeoisie, formed principally by an emerging industrial bourgeoisie. However, the Cuban industrial bourgeoisie continued to be economically weak relative to the landed estate bourgeoisie that controlled sugar production along with U.S. capital. New industrial enterprises were created during World War II, taking advantage of new possibilities created by the war, but the number of new companies was not great, and some of the new investments in industry came from the landed oligarchy. Thus, the Cuban industrial bourgeoisie did not have sufficient economic and political power to propose a project of Cuban national ascent through the protection of national industry and the strengthening of the domestic market by elevating the purchasing power of the people. Although some members of the Cuban industrial bourgeoisie and the Authentic Cuban Revolutionary Party proposed such reforms, conditions were not favorable for such a project of import-substitution industrialization combined with concessions to worker's wage demands, inasmuch as it would have provoked conflict with far more powerful sectors, namely, the Cuban estate bourgeoisie and foreign capital.

The Grau government arrived to power in 1944, therefore, without the capacity to pursue a genuine national project for economic and social development. The members of the government, however, found new opportunities for personal enrichment. The Grau government created new forms of plundering the public treasury, surpassing the level of corruption that had been previously established by Machado and Batista. The Italian-American Mafia in the United States, which had entered Cuba in the 1920s and had concluded lucrative agreements with Batista, found a new partner in the Authentic Party.

The turn of the Grau government from the promise of reform to corruption was disheartening to the people, given the role that Grau had played in the Revolution of 1933. In response, the Orthodox Party of the Cuban People was established in 1946, proposing important economic and political reforms rooted in the Constitution of 1940.

Meanwhile, the Authentic Party had nominated Carlos Prío for the presidential elections of 1948. Prío had good reformist credentials. He had been a prominent member of the University Student Directorate of 1930 and a member of the Grau "government of 100 days" of 1933. But in spite of his previous connections to reformist tendencies, Prío as president from 1948 to 1952 did not deliver on his promise of reform. Unrestrained corruption continued during his presidency, and his government's economic program supported the interests of the Cuban oligarchy and foreign capital. The incapacity of Prío to effect reform gave further stimulus to the rise of the recently formed Orthodox Party.

In 1948, when Grau selected Prío as his successor, Eduardo Chibás, who had been a prominent member of the Authentic Party, accepted leadership of the Orthodox Party. Chibás was backed by the industrial bourgeoisie, and he was enormously popular among the people. A master of fiery speech who attacked both the Left and the Right, he launched a battle against corruption, putting forth the slogan "shame on money." Jesús Arboleya, however, considers that his speeches were superficial and that his criticisms of the United States did not go beyond imperfections in the neocolonial system. Nonetheless, he likely was headed toward winning the presidential elections when his campaign was brought to an end by his suicide. Of this astonishing event, Arboleya writes that Chibás' "false crazy acts were constant news in the press, including various suicide attempts to gain the attention of the people. In 1951, one of these attempts, broadcast live on his radio program, cost him his life, which created an immense commotion among the people, and which conferred mythical virtues on him from that moment."

Meanwhile, Batista was preparing for a return to power. He had formed the Unitary Action Party and had been campaigning for president in the 1952 elections. However, it was evident that the Orthodox Party was headed to victory, in spite of the death of Chibás. Accordingly, in order to check the popular movement, and with the support of the national bourgeoisie and international capital, Batista carried out a

coup d'état on March 10, 1952, shortly before the presidential elections. The chiefs of the army and the police were replaced with the military officers who had been involved in the coup. The Congress was dissolved. The Constitution of 1940 was abolished. The presidential elections of 1952 were canceled.

For decades, the Cuban system of representative democracy had been characterized by the pursuit of particular interests; deception; robbery of the public treasury; periodic repression of popular movements, including the assassination of leaders; and the replacement of representative democracy by dictatorship, when the popular movement emerged as a serious threat. By 1952, the people were disgusted and disheartened by representative democracy. They rejected the Batista coup of March 10, 1952, but they also received it with indifference. As Jesús Arboleya comments, "Nearly no one would cry for the loss" of representative democracy.

A notable exception to the popular indifference was a document submitted to the Emergency Court of Havana on March 12, two days after the coup. The document maintains that Batista had committed crimes for which, if he were to be sanctioned according to the law, he would be imprisoned for more than 100 years. And the document maintains that society requires a legal order rooted in historical and philosophical principles. The author of the document was a 25-year-old lawyer, whose name was Fidel Castro, and who subsequently would demonstrate that he possessed the capacity to seize the historic moment and bring the Revolution to triumph.

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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