

Chile: The Lesson That Venezuela Learned?

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While in exile, I was lucky to be part of the process of changes staged by the Chilean people up until Pinochet's coup d'état.

I can summarize my experience with the chess player's maxim: "Attacking is the best defense," a truth I painfully attested to in the case of Chile. As it often happens, these changes were soon challenged by the corporate sector with a number of attacks that the government failed to rebuff with a firm hand, taking a soft, conciliatory line on them instead of joining forces with the people against the saboteurs. Encouraged, the attackers reinforced their siege, whereas frustration and disappointment got the better of the ordinary citizens backing the process. Therefore, the time was ripe for the coup to succeed.

Overview

Having reached maturity in their struggle as well as in their conscience, the Chilean people became disillusioned with the Christian Democrat government and elected Unidad Popular's candidate Salvador Allende despite the smear campaign unleashed against him by the big owners.

Calmly and without taking any spectacular revolutionary measure, the government moved on and tried to implement the agrarian reform law enacted by its predecessors, decreed considerable price reductions for essential goods, and accorded the right to strike.

For their part, the poor were gaining ground:

The workers took control of industries where damaging actions like sabotage against production were committed, and prepared to defend themselves against right-wing paramilitary gangs tolerated by the police.

Organized by production sectors (in textile, metallurgical, shoe and other industries) like in any other country, they established another, more agile group, the "Industrial Cordons", geographically divided into production areas where workers from every branch united for self-defense and combat and planned mobilizations that included blockades and occupation of factories.

Also the marginalized and peasants, who seized lands to demand a faster agrarian reform, took part in self-defense preparedness.

Shopkeepers responded to the price reductions with hoarding, giving rise to shortages and thus forcing people to buy their goods in the black market at very expensive prices. The people reacted by condemning and publicly exposing the hoarders.

As the great media unleashed the usual smear campaign the right made aggressive public demonstrations in full view of a dismissive police.

As the driving force behind the coup, the American empire had already revealed its criminal intentions before Allende's inauguration by ordering the murder of Army commander Schneider for refusing to mount the coup. A crime, needless to say, that has remained unpunished.

Instead of taking any action against the saboteurs that the people had unmasked and denounced, the government hogtied the popular advance on the grounds that they were being supported by the "constitutionalist military", who were worried about the peoples' actions. One of such "constitutionalist military" was Pinochet.

"Confiscated" factories

As mentioned above, the workers occupied factories where irregularities were discovered and for which a provisional manager was appointed by the government. Called "confiscated" factories, they implemented labor self-management to some extent. A tomato sauce factory was seized after the boss tried to have it closed down by neglecting to buy raw materials during the harvest time. Once confiscated, the workers decided to produce much-needed canned baby food. Another factory where luxury furniture was manufactured was devoted to the production of affordable furniture. Clearly, when revolutionary awareness increases among the workers, solidarity replaces selfishness.

These were the factories attacked by fascist gangs that the workers decided to defend given the police's inactivity.

The end

The right kept undersupplying the economy while its media howled accusations against the government. Anti-government rallies and unfettered fascist violence were rampant while the regime prohibited self-defense, which of course encouraged the right-wingers and disheartened the people.

In June 1973 the Empire staged a "testing coup" to pinpoint where popular resistance was stronger. Once detected, those who took part in the action "surrendered" and the repressive forces proceeded to inflict cruel punishment on the sources of resistance thus detected (Cerrillos cordon, "Nueva Habana" village, the seamen who refused to take part in the coup, the mapuches, etc.), all under Allende's government and on account of his inaction.

In September, Pinochet's coup took place by extraordinarily violent means to make sure the courageous Chilean people could be defeated. And they killed Allende, who bravely refused to surrender and whose last speech had condemned the "treacherous military who until very recently swore their allegiance".

Perón's Argentina

I had already taken part in another similar event: Argentina in 1955, when the Yankee government mounted a coup against Perón. There was also a testing coup in June to find pockets of resistance, and then the real one in September, just like in Chile. There too the government put a curb on anti-coup activity and even punished those who opposed, with

similar results: the right became bolder and the people lost heart, which paved the way for the September coup's success.

Guatemala

A year before, the exiled Peruvian left discussed the case of Guatemala (another imperial coup). Both the Communist Party and APRA (on the reformist left at the time, not the current empire's lackey) believed that Arbenz's government was going too fast and therefore making a mistake. I joined the party that stated further progress was needed to avoid disaster, a current and a conception that led me to participate in the Argentinean and Chilean processes.

Venezuela learned

All indications are that Venezuela learned the lesson. Yesterday in "El Comercio" daily an alarming article headlined "A civil war in the making" decried the "threat to the militia" of "armed groups parallel to the Army".

We know it will only be a "civil war" if imperialism and its servants dare to overthrow Venezuela's legitimate democratic government.

Naturally, what concerns that newspaper is pleasant and reassuring for us.

Another piece of good news coming from that country: far from pushing Chávez back, the shortage of foodstuffs caused by hoarding merchants makes the Venezuelan president move forward to warn that if they keep hoarding supplies the supermarkets will be nationalized and assigned to the people's "community councils".

Way to go.

It goes without saying these are different times, not those of a Chilean nation surrounded by gorilla governments in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia and Uruguay, but the epoch of a failed coup d'état in Venezuela and the victories of Morales in Bolivia and Correa in Ecuador.

Defeat can also teach a valuable lesson.

Hugo Blanco was leader of the Quechua peasant uprising in the Cuzco region of Peru in the early 1960s. He was captured by the military and sentenced to 25 years in El Fronton Island prison for his activities. While in prison, he wrote Land or Death: The Peasant Struggle in Peru (Pathfinder Press, 1972), which is must-reading for anyone who wishes to understand the struggle of peasants and indigenous people in Latin America for liberation.

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