

How America Carries Out Latin American Coups in the New Political Era

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Global Research, August 11, 2014

[AlterNet](#) 4 August 2014

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

On 23 September 2010 the former Ecuadorian president Lucio Gutiérrez (deposed by a popular uprising in 2005) gave a talk to the InterAmerican Institute for Democracy in Miami, criticising his nation's socialists for their mysticism, incoherent Marxism and dangerous populism. He told his listeners that to end 21st-century socialism in Ecuador (the subject of his talk), it would be necessary to get rid of President Rafael Correa.

His speech is on record; there's a video that captures the thunderous applause it received. In the audience were Mario Ribadeneira, a minister in the government of Sixto Durán-Ballén (president 1992-96), when Ecuadorian neoliberalism was at its height; Roberto Isaías, wanted for fraud after the collapse of Filanbanco, Ecuador's largest bank, of which he was part-owner; and Mario Pazmiño, a former head of army intelligence, sacked by Correa in 2008 for having too close a relationship with the CIA.

A week later, on 29 September in Quito, a meeting of members of the opposition continued late into the night. Next morning, the leader of the Patriotic Society Party, Galo Lara, appeared on the Ecuavisa network's 7am show *Contacto Directo* (Direct Contact), talking about the Public Service Law that the national assembly had just passed. This ended certain privileges — bonuses, cash payments with medals and other decorations, Christmas gifts — for some civil servants, including the police. Though it granted other benefits, including overtime pay and access to social housing programmes, Lara claimed that "President Correa has snatched the toys out of the hands of the policemen's children — that's why he is afraid of being lynched. That's why he is packing his bags and getting ready to flee the country." An apocalyptic article by leading columnist Emilio Palacio was published in the daily *El Universo*.

At 8am, Correa learned that police officers were protesting against the new law at the Quito barracks. He called it a "misunderstanding," and said he would negotiate directly with the protestors. With interior minister Gustavo Jalkh, he left the presidential palace for the barracks, where 800 police greeted them with shouts of "The Communists are coming!" and "Out with the Chavistas!"

The disturbance was being organised by men in sunglasses, with radios and mobile phones, mingling with the crowd; among them it was easy to recognise Fidel Araujo, spokesman for Gutiérrez and a senior leader in the Patriotic Society Party. Correa's bodyguards managed, with difficulty, to get him through the jostling, insults and tear gas, and into the building. From a second-floor window, he attempted to talk to the protestors: "This law will improve your lives. We have worked for the police; look at everything we have given you."

‘Get him! Kill him!’

The crowd booed. Some shouted: “Get him! Kill him!” Correa lost his composure, and shouted defiantly: “Gentlemen, if you want to kill the president, here I am. Kill me if you want to! Kill me if you are brave enough, instead of hiding in the crowd like cowards!”

Four hundred soldiers had taken control of Quito’s Mariscal Sucre airport. The air base at Tacunga was also occupied, as were the national assembly building (by the security guards supposed to protect it) and the port and airport at Guayaquil, Ecuador’s economic capital. By 9am, groups of delinquents, aware that the forces of law had abandoned the streets, were smashing windows, looting shops and cash machines, and terrorising residents.

As in Venezuela in 2002, when Hugo Chávez was briefly detained during a failed coup, tens of thousands took to the streets to support the president. A section of the “democratic” opposition offered its conditional support. Another, led by Cléver Jiménez, head of Pachakutik Plurinational Unity Movement — the political wing of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (Conaie) — called (unsuccessfully) on indigenous and social movements to form a “national front” to demand Correa’s resignation.

Choking on tear gas, Correa took refuge in the police hospital, where he remained besieged until, at 8pm, he was rescued by an army special operations group and loyal elements of the police Intervention and Rescue Group. Police posted outside the building heard calls on their radios to “Get Correa out and take him away before the *chuspangos* (military) arrive” and to “Kill him, kill the president.” Correa finally emerged during an intense firefight. A soldier protecting him was fatally wounded; another, who had lent the president his ballistic vest, suffered a punctured lung. Correa’s car had five bullet holes, the escort vehicles 17. Ten people were killed and nearly 300 injured.

This was more than a spontaneous protest that had got out of control: For several weeks, the police had been bombarded with emails and pamphlets criticising the new law and misrepresenting its provisions. Certain factions accustomed to impunity resented the arrest and conviction of members of a national police unit, the Operations Support Group, for torture and disappearances. Some Ecuadorians would gladly have done without the Truth Commission, set up to investigate the repression of the 1980s. Add to this Correa’s social policies, his close links with the progressive governments of the region, Ecuador’s accession to Alba (the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America) and the closure of the US military base at Manta, and it is clear that the police had been manipulated. This led to a genuine attempted coup.

“Presidents normally take the advice of their security team and don’t expose themselves to danger; they barricade themselves inside the Carondelet [presidential palace] and soon find they cannot get out,” said Oscar Bonilla, a member of the 30-S (30 September) Commission, set up to establish the truth about the event. Culture minister Francisco Velasco said: “The situation would have been ripe, after a few days of the rebellion growing in strength, for a group of army officers, working with opposition politicians ... to declare a power vacuum and intervene in the name of restoring governability.” Ecuadorians knew how the generals had behaved in the past, during the popular and non-violent rebellions against presidents Abdalá Bucaram (1997), Jamil Mahuad (2000) and Gutiérrez (2005): The army had abandoned them and assented to their deposition in order to calm the situation.

Saving the ‘citizens’ revolution’

Correa's recklessness in going to the barracks upset the intended scenario — a "constitutional" way out of the crisis — and saved the "citizens' revolution." That did not stop the opposition and media from presenting their own version of events: that there had been no coup, that the president had not been trapped and no one had wanted to kill him, that sole responsibility for the situation lay with Correa. An editorial by Palacio in *El Universo* called for the president to be brought before the International Criminal Court for "crimes against humanity," accusing him of having "ordered the army to fire on a hospital." The article prompted Correa to take *El Universo* to court; Palacio went into exile.

Abroad, most journalists repeated these views. "The opposition ... considers the president's recklessness and arrogance to be responsible for the excesses," wrote *Le Monde* (12 January 2011).

This rarely analysed episode is a textbook example of the new strategy for ousting an inconvenient head of state. The days when armed forces, with the help of the United States, overthrew constitutional, democratically elected governments are long gone. But since 1999, charismatic leaders from the left or centre left have come to power by mobilising the disadvantaged, and there have been *golpes* (coups) against them, and other attempts at destabilisation, in Venezuela (2002, 2003 and 2014), Haiti (2004), Bolivia (2008), Honduras (2009), Ecuador (2010) and Paraguay (2012). Conservatives have learned that bloodshed adversely affects international opinion, and that, in Latin America at least, a classic coup is no longer acceptable. So methods have moved on.

Psychological tactics, used in war, also play a major role in peacetime. The Chilean daily *El Mercurio* prepared the way for the September 1973 coup against Salvador Allende. Europe back then had publications capable of analysing and criticising propaganda but, with a few exceptions, this is no longer the case. Today, neoliberalism and an order imposed by the United States and the EU prevail. The growth of the Internet, and cut-and-paste journalism, have standardised news reporting in western media.

Scope for psy-ops

There is plenty of room for subtle psy-ops, including those where the participants don't know they are participating, to manipulate or destabilise governments, or create negative images of them abroad. These go well beyond necessary criticism of policies. The much-used term "populism" belittles the sometimes considerable social advances made in the target countries, and their achievements in reducing poverty and redistributing wealth; these sovereign choices are called "irresponsible" and "incompatible with democracy." Before the attempted coup against Chávez in Venezuela in 2002, public opinion was bombarded with rowdy headlines in *El Nacional* and *El Universal* — "Taliban in the National Assembly," "Black October," "Terrorists in Government" — and calls to overthrow the president.

The first element of the psy-ops aimed at press and foreign diplomats is to claim that "civil society" is demonstrating its discontent. Civil society is a magical expression: It sounds much nicer than "a mobilisation of the rightwing opposition," even when it refers to a section of society that wins only a small share of the vote in elections. During Venezuela's February 2014 crisis, "civil society" was replaced with "students," a far more acceptable term than "the far right in action." In Chile, two movements played a key role in preparing the coup against Salvador Allende: the Feminine Power group, with its empty saucepan marches in protest over (largely deliberately organised) shortages, and the Catholic

University of Chile Student Federation (FEUC).

Then, to reinforce the idea of a peaceful population opposing a dictatorship, it is useful to be able to point to innocent victims. In Venezuela in 2002, when “civil society” was demonstrating against Chávez, snipers killed several of its members, as well as some supporters of the president. This was the perfect excuse for a group of army officers to detain Chávez, who was accused of having ordered his “militias” or “brownshirts” to repress the opposition. Now *colectivos* (social, educational, sporting collectives) are being demonised and called “paramilitaries.”

Overthrow in Paraguay

Snipers were also used, indirectly, to provoke the overthrow of President Fernando Lugo in Paraguay in 2012. His opponents had called for his deposition ever since he came to power, and their opportunity came at Marina Kue, when a police operation to remove peasant squatters from farmland ended in a shootout that killed 11 peasants and six police officers. An inquiry blamed the deaths on the campesinos, who were accused of having ambushed the police.

Peasant leader Vidal Vega and other witnesses, who conducted a parallel inquiry, claimed that “infiltrators” had shot at both their companions and the police, provoking the shootout. After a hurried political trial, skilfully managed by the congress, the incident made Lugo’s deposition possible: He was accused of encouraging violence against landowners. Vega was later assassinated by two masked men.

Honduras, another member of Alba, had already been a guinea pig for the “constitutional coup” — the type most easily accepted internationally, provided the *golpistas* call it a “forced resignation” and encourage the media to refer to the “deposed president.” President Manuel Zelaya was deposed under false pretences in 2009: It was claimed that he wanted to be re-elected in violation of the constitution; in fact he had tried to hold a non-binding consultation on the convocation of a national constituent assembly.

Zelaya was detained by commandos and put on a plane to Costa Rica; protests by his supporters were violently repressed. But the man responsible, General Romeo Vázquez, immediately handed over power to the president of the Honduran congress, Roberto Micheletti. The manoeuvre was perfectly executed: The military were seen to be “subject to civilian authority” and to be assuring a “presidential succession,” and Micheletti’s regime was soon renamed a “transitional government.” (In Venezuela, the generals and admirals had worked out this procedure in 2002, handing over power to the head of the Venezuelan federation of chambers of commerce, Pedro Carmona.)

In the past, the military held on to power after supporting an anti-government faction, but they now return to barracks, leaving a civilian dictatorship that is transparent: No one can accuse the president of being a new Pinochet. A few months later, the government holds “supervised” elections, the country is readmitted into the Latin American or international community, and the job is done.

End of the happy globalisation myth

The United States still sees democracy as necessary for the smooth functioning of the markets. The Latin American “new left” have freed themselves from US hegemony by

ending the great myth of happy globalisation, nationalising their natural resources and asserting independence. Under Nixon and Reagan, with their national security doctrine, things were clear: to keep control, the United States needed to wage total and absolute war. Under George W Bush, things were still clear: The United States was directly involved in the attempted coup in Venezuela in 2002.

In Bolivia, which under Indio president Evo Morales “has no masters any more, but partners,” US ambassador Philip Goldberg, appointed in 2006, developed close relations with the opposition in the Media Luna — the oil- and gas-rich departments of Santa Cruz, Tarija, Beni and Pando. From 2004 to 2006, Goldberg had been head of the US mission in Kosovo, and it was no coincidence that what happened next in Bolivia was balkanisation. From May 2008 the Media Luna departments held a series of illegal referendums to obtain approval for a statute of autonomy that looked very like a declaration of independence. Violence erupted. “Autonomist” shock troops occupied airports and government facilities. In September, paramilitaries murdered 30 peasants in Pando.

At no point did the *golpistas* issue any proclamation about taking power. As in Venezuela this year, it was about shedding blood, either through “spontaneous violence” or through government repression of it, making the country ungovernable, to ensure general condemnation of the government by the “international community,” so as to make the forced resignation or removal of the head of state acceptable. The story was supposed to be about the struggle against Morales’s “statist, authoritarian and indigenist” approach (“indigenist” here meaning populist), with Bolivia presented as a “Chavista satellite state.”

Morales, who had the support of the Union of South American Nations (Unasur), used popular mobilisation rather than military repression to thwart the coup. On 10 September 2008 the government gave Goldberg 72 hours to leave the country, and the separatist fever suddenly disappeared.

The US is still in the coup-support game. In the 2009 Honduras coup, the aircraft that took Zelaya to San José in Costa Rica stopped over at the mainly US military base at Palmerola, on Honduran territory.

Was the US behind 30-S?

“When I asked President Correa if the US was behind 30-S,” said Juan Paz y Miño, “he replied, ‘we don’t have any proof but... we can’t discount the possibility.’” Correa later ruled out any direct responsibility on the part of President Barack Obama, but hinted at CIA involvement: “What we know for certain is that there are [in the US] far-right groups, a great number of foundations that finance the many groups and conspirators who oppose our government.”

In 1983, the National Endowment for Democracy was established on President Reagan’s initiative, and under the auspices of the US Congress, to “promote democracy” around the world. Working with the US Agency for International Development, the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute and the US Institute of Peace, and with thinktanks and foundations including Freedom House and the Open Society Institute, it finances and gives ideological as well as technical support to political oppositions and NGOs.

In 2013/14, the Venezuelan opposition received a total of \$14m to fund election campaigns and the “peaceful protests” of 2014, which have all the appearances of an anti-democratic

rebellion. The Democratic Unity Platform received \$100,000 for an exchange project with Bolivian, Nicaraguan and Argentinian organisations, aimed at “sharing the lessons learned in Venezuela and enabling them to be applied to those countries.”

People mostly remember the attempted coup of April 2002, but the struggle in Venezuela has been continuous: In December 2001 employers organised a general strike; from December 2002 to January 2003 there were attempts at economic destabilisation through lockouts to paralyse the national oil company, and soldiers called for a rebellion from the “liberated territory” of Altamira Square, in the smart area of Caracas. In 2004 the first street barricades went up, and a hundred Colombian paramilitaries turned up close to Caracas. The struggle still goes on. “In this country,” said Venezuela’s interior minister Miguel Rodríguez Torres, “they apply what the left used to call a ‘combination of all forms of struggle’. And if you make a list of the people involved, they have remained the same since the start; it’s the same organisations ... What changes, every time, is the method.”

Maurice Lemoine is a journalist and the author of Sur les eaux noires du fleuve (On the Black Waters of the River), Don Quichotte, Paris, 2013. Translated by Charles Goulden.

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