

Bolivia: The Restrained Revolution *

By RICHARD W. PATCH

ABSTRACT: A true revolution occurred in Bolivia in 1952, and its consequences continue to be strongly felt. The revolution triggered such extreme measures as nationalization of the tin mines, agrarian reform, neutralization of the army, and universal franchise, but the leaders of the revolutionary Nationalistic Revolutionary Movement are essentially moderates. The economic consequences of the revolution have been a serious inflation and declining productivity. The major accomplishment has been social—the integration of the majority of the population speaking indigenous languages into the social and political life of the nation. This resulted more from the self-assertion of that mass than from the actions of the revolutionary government. The Nationalistic Revolutionary Movement was early sympathetic to national socialism, but it was rejected by a popular revolt in 1946. Succeeding governments were unable to preserve order and the second accession of the Nationalistic Revolutionary Movement to power in 1952 was the alternative to anarchy. The Indian population organized syndicates independent of the government and forced enactment of an agrarian reform. The government now has the allegiance of the Indians and miners, but its maintenance is made difficult by an economic stabilization plan. After eight years, Bolivia is still a democracy, but it requires assistance to continue to reject the apparent advantages of totalitarianism.

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THE word "revolution," like many another in our insufficient vocabulary of terms describing complex political and social movements, is overused and underdefined. Particularly with reference to Latin America, the word has been so often used that it has become synonymous with a range of changes from the relatively insignificant trading of power between leaders at the pinnacle of a stable political pyramid to profoundly significant upheavals in which social and political institutions mutate to new and unexpected forms.

Since the wars of independence, there have been few changes of the latter type in Latin America. Such a revolution did occur in Bolivia in 1952, and its consequences will continue to work themselves out in new social, political, and economic adjustments for many years to come. The Bolivian revolution has been little reported, and such reporting as has been done has been confined to economic aspects. But events in this Andean country, where a formerly depressed majority of persons speaking Indian languages have achieved not only emancipation but power, carry a vital message to students of Latin-American nations in which an economic segment's political power is likely to be inversely proportional to its numbers.

The revolution is also worthy of note because events subsequent to the shift of power in 1952 do not conform to the stereotype of revolutions in underdeveloped nations. The Bolivian revolution is genuine in its irreversibility. It took place rapidly, both in actual fighting and in the destruction or reform of long-standing institutions. Its leaders were early forced to extreme measures, from nationalization of the tin mines to destruction of the army and partition of the estates among Indian tenants. Yet this complete, rapid, effective revolution has remained

in the hands of men who are essentially moderates—at least in comparison with any conceivable leadership which might have arisen in their place. The reign of moderates during periods of revolutionary change is notoriously brief, but this nation, in spite of its hectic history as a republic, emerged from its most critical trial under the leadership of men who accept the responsibilities of government, who use feelings inspired by nationalism to achieve domestic integration rather than to promote external strife, and who subject themselves to the rigors of a policy of austerity rather than seek the easy popularity of utopian promises. In this sense these men are moderates. And they are still in power.

THE MEASURE OF REVOLUTION

Before 1952 Bolivian society and its power structure were cast in the mold of the Spanish colonial institutions which persist in many Latin-American republics. In Bolivia, the mold was particularly rigid because over half the population spoke the Aymará and Quechua languages and, thus, were considered Indians. In this tight society in which exploitation was justified by social distance, it was the function of institutions such as the *latifundio* to define the status of these persons as serfs—beyond the pale of the urban, Spanish-speaking society; without hope of mobility. They were unpaid laborers in an agricultural system which supported the status symbols of the few while yielding a meager subsistence to the mass of tillers. The revolution not only placed the land in the hands of the men who cultivated it, it also destroyed the institution of *latifundio*, and went far towards replacing the castelike status of the Indians with a class concept of *campesino* in which mobility is possible.

Taking the long view, this is the crucial aspect of the revolution. No modern nation finds it easy to bring an alien culture with a long and conscious history, speaking a different language, and with an attributed racial identity into a national, urban, Westernized society. Consider how much more difficult the feat is when the culture apart is not a minority, but a majority with the potential for wielding not strategic but absolute power. The Bolivian revolution accomplished the formal integration with such success that true social adjustments to the new laws and decrees are proceeding with surprising rapidity.

But, as in all revolutions, the social adaptations are the most difficult to detect. Much nearer the surface are the economic results of the changes. In Bolivia, the economic catastrophes have been so dramatic as to obscure all else. An inflation of 6,000 per cent in four years, the conversion of the tin mines from the nation's greatest asset to its most persistent liability, the decline in agricultural production—all are undeniable and important consequences of the revolution and its reforms. But they are not the only measure of the revolution.

Nor are the originally avowed goals, the ideology, the intent of the revolutionary leaders reliable explanations of the revolution as it took place. Superficially, the drastic changes might be seen as the work of a single man, Víctor Paz Estenssoro, the founder of the revolutionary party, its durable conspirator, and the compelling leader who has twice been elected president of the republic. But, if he and his party have left their stamp on the changes, they have also been borne along in the current of events and ideas which for many years swept the nation to revolutionary change. To give credit—or

blame—for the revolution to Paz Estenssoro and the Nationalistic Revolutionary Movement (MNR) is to ignore that current. And the early pronouncements of the MNR now seem to bear little relation to actual policy as it has developed.

THE ROAD TO REVOLUTION

The country's recent history begins in 1920 with the fall of the self-styled Liberal Party. The Liberal Party and its predecessor in power had maintained a stable and strongly conservative government for thirty-six years. The principal platform of these governments was constitutionalism—respect for law and established order above all else. It was a period of financial equilibrium, expansion of the railroads and mining industry, but nearly complete disregard for the welfare of the impoverished urban population, of the tin miners, and of the 60 per cent of the population who were called Indians and who lived in abject dependence and poverty. The Latin-American phenomenon of *cansancio*—a popular tiredness with the existing government, a desire for change under the impression that any innovation would be an improvement—undermined the long conservative reign. At the same time, no coherent ideology emerged to fill the void after the regime fell. But two related propositions gained wide acceptance: first, that nationalism in the sense of a basic attack on national problems and the protection of territorial integrity was desirable and inevitable; and, second, that revolution was a legitimate and perhaps necessary means of political and social reform. These ideas were undoubtedly distilled from imported doctrines of Marxism and the ultranationalistic socialism of fascist Germany and Italy. No party, however, managed to give

the themes sufficient clarity, and they remained in ferment until they crystallized in the crisis of the Chaco war.

The Chaco War

Many threads led to Bolivia's unfortunate war with Paraguay over the disputed area of the Chaco. Bolivia still smarted from its defeat in a war with Brazil in which it lost valuable rubber lands and its ignominious loss of the War of the Pacific in which Chile seized Bolivia's coastal strip, intensifying the country's isolation in its mountain fastness. Cut off from the Pacific, Bolivia began to look toward the Atlantic and the river ports which would give access to it. Such river ports existed in the Gran Chaco where national jurisdictions were poorly defined. Bolivia began to arm. As part of its preoccupation with national socialism, it imported a German general staff officer who trained and equipped a modern army which was believed to be superior to anything Paraguay could produce. Petroleum was discovered in lands bordering the Chaco. Ardent nationalism appeared to coincide with patriotism, with a new outlet to the sea, with economic advantage, and with the possibility of a quick and decisive victory over a neighbor for the first time in over a century of lost wars.

Revolutionary reform was forgotten when war was declared in 1932. Unfortunately for Bolivia, its German chief of staff had calculated without knowledge of the inhospitable Chaco—a desert during the dry season, an impossible quagmire after the sudden rains. The Paraguayans became practiced guerilla fighters and subjected the Bolivians to defeat after bloody defeat. Casualties were heavy on both sides. Bolivia was forced to impress thousands of Indians to supplement its elite corps. Officers attempted to impose

some unity by repeated discourses on the Indians' duties and obligations, and, incidentally, his rights, his citizenship, his equality before the fatherland. The war and the territory of the Chaco were lost to Paraguay by 1935, but it was the new experience and vision of the Indian veterans and the disillusionment with the senior army officers which would most profoundly affect Bolivia's future by clearing the way for revolution and by preparing a mass of people who would take advantage of the change when it came.

Secret maneuvers

The junior army officers, circumventing normal government and party channels, organized secret lodges in a movement called RADEPA (*Razón de Patria*, or Reason of the Fatherland) and dedicated to fascist ideals and revolutionary means. The lodges became infiltrated with Nazi ideas as fascism gathered force in Germany and Italy. The RADEPA installed Colonel David Toro as president in 1936. Toro responded to the pressures of nationalism and direct action by expropriating United States oil properties and creating a state petroleum monopoly. His successor, Lieutenant Colonel Germán Busch, 33 years old, took banking power from private hands to create the state controlled Central Bank. He declared himself dictator in 1939 and moved to require mine owners to surrender to the government all foreign exchange earnings from the sale of tin. However, before the measure took effect Busch was killed or committed suicide under mysterious circumstances.

This secret political maneuvering by a part of the military was not an outstanding success. Governments dominated by RADEPA attempted to increase the power of the state according to their ideas of socialism, but they

were unable to stir popular support or maintain effective public order. The political vacuum began to be filled in the early 1940's by the formation of half a dozen parties of varying tendencies, from the Nationalistic Revolutionary Movement, which was able to reach an understanding with the RADEPA, to a Bolivian Communist Party. The MNR, founded by intellectuals such as the university professor Víctor Paz Estenssoro, was able to combine the popular themes of nationalism and revolution with a program of government which included, in the beginning, the RADEPA's ideals of a powerful centralized state headed by the military.

In 1943 the RADEPA and the MNR deposed a president sympathetic to the Allies and installed Lieutenant Colonel Gualberto Villarroel. Paz Estenssoro became Minister of Finance. But the alliance was unstable and became increasingly unpopular after the defeat of the Axis. Finally, Villarroel was killed in his palace by street mobs, and his body was hung from a lamppost in the Plaza Murillo. The RADEPA was discredited, and the MNR was driven underground and into exile.

Political instability

One government rapidly followed another in the succeeding five years. New liberals tried makeshift reforms which were frustrated by landowners, mine owners, and parts of the army. Traditional governments enacted repressive legislation which could not be enforced by an atrophied administrative arm, but which did arouse new restlessness in the Indians and miners. Two presidents in succession resigned their posts and fled into voluntary exile. Bolivia was fast approaching anarchy through the failure of one faction after another to master the art of governing.

A presidential and congressional election was held in 1951. Paz Estenssoro, in exile, and many MNR congressional candidates received a plurality. But the army annulled the election in a last desperate move. A military junta governed briefly, then fell apart.

The revolution

In April 1952, it was plain that if Bolivia did not have an MNR government it would have no government. The party had planned a revolution later in the year, but the defection of one of the military junta to their ranks made revolution an immediate necessity. For this reason, and despite the radical propaganda of the MNR, the actual fighting of the April revolution was not a spectacular struggle between strong partisans of the old regime and the revolutionaries. The old regime no longer existed as a group with faith in itself and power to enforce its beliefs; it was a shattered conglomerate of special interests without the force or talent to impose the principles which supported their privilege. Fighting in La Paz was led by Hernán Siles Zuazo, rebel son of a former president, and Juan Lechín, a labor leader who calls himself a Trotskyite. Civilian irregulars and a portion of the army quickly defeated loyal army forces, and the MNR was suddenly in power.

The revolution did not follow the rules. There was no class struggle. There was little loss of life. There was little fighting outside La Paz. There was no accession of the extremists, no reign of terror, no Thermidor. The keynote of moderation was struck by Siles Zuazo who named himself provisional president at the conclusion of the fighting, but he held the post only during the time it took Paz Estenssoro to fly to Bolivia. Paz assumed the presidency to which he considered him-

self elected by the invalidated balloting of the previous year. Siles became vice-president during Paz's term, then was himself elected president in the regular elections of 1956.

AGRARIAN REFORM

The important question was what the permanent results of the revolution would be. The mines were nationalized, but property once expropriated can be returned to private hands. The army was neutralized, but armies can be re-created. The unexpected and irreversible feature of the revolution was the organized emergence of the *campesinos* as a political and social force. The Indian population had taken no part in the fighting which installed the new government. For several months in 1952, there was little change in their lot on the *latifundios*. The MNR had plans for an eventual agrarian reform, but no planned reform could have been as sweeping as the one initiated by the Indians themselves and only formalized by the government decree-law of August 2, 1953.

The Indian organization which forced the reform upon the government had begun in the Indian villages of the upper Cochabamba valleys in the mid-1930's. It was another result of the Chaco war. The Cochabamba valleys contained Bolivia's densest population of Quechua speakers. It was in this area that the colonial institution of *reducciones*, the forced resettlement of Indians into new population centers dominated by a Spanish town, was pushed with vigor in the time of the viceroy Francisco de Toledo. The *reducciones* entailed many difficulties, and they were violently opposed by the *encomenderos* and by the superintendents of mines deprived of men for their labor levy. The institution of the

reducciones had a brief existence in the Cochabamba valleys as in the rest of Alto and Bajo Peru. It rapidly gave way to the new *latifundios*. But, in Cochabamba, a pattern had been set. The serfs lived in hamlets or villages, not scattered over wide areas as before and as they do today in many parts of Peru. These villages continued to be as strongly influenced by the Spanish towns in the twentieth century as they were in the sixteenth century. Indian interaction with the Spaniards was greater than, for example, on the Aymará-inhabited altiplano or in the Peruvian sierra. In all probability, the aspirations of the Quechua speakers in Cochabamba to the status of mestizo—to which they were certainly entitled by race—was more keenly developed than in other parts of the Andes.

The experiences of the Quechua speakers in the Chaco war, the assurances of equality, the description of their rights and duties, were sown in minds already prepared for a new status. After the war, the veterans returned to the *latifundios* as serfs, on land which was theirs only at the pleasure of the *patrón*, for which land they labored three days each week without pay, and for which the entire family owed many other obligations: a period of domestic service in the house of the *patrón*, a levy of firewood and wool, care of the live-stock of the *patrón*, and a cash payment, the ancient *canon*. The head of the family, the *colono*, *peón*, or *pegujalero*, as he was variously called, could be rented out as any other chattel by the *patrón* when the serf was not needed for work on the *latifundio*.

The Chaco veterans rebelled and formed an agrarian syndicate for the purpose of renting land for cash and escaping the feudal obligations of the *colonos*. At first they were successful, then the landowners also began to or-

ganize. They drove the syndicate members from their lands and homes. But this only strengthened the Indian organization. Able leaders arose. The syndicates spread slowly through the Cochabamba valleys before 1952, then rapidly throughout Bolivia after the revolution—with little help from the government. By late 1952 an organization existed, headed by a Quechua speaking *jefe maximo*, which united most of the Quechua speakers and some of the Aymará speakers of Bolivia. It owed nothing to the government and could act independently of it.

By 1953 the Quechua speakers began attacking rural landowners. The *patrones* and administrators of *latifundios* were driven from the countryside into the cities. Land, buildings, seed stocks, animals, vehicles, and machinery were seized and divided among syndicate members. It became dangerous to use the word "Indian," and the substitute, "*campesino*," came into vogue. Civil war became a menacing possibility when the *campesinos* threatened to attack the small towns. The government was forced to act and to act drastically. The result was the decree-law of the agrarian reform, signed in the Indian village of Ucareña under the watchful eyes of fifty thousand *campesinos*.

The agrarian reform has not accomplished all that some had hoped. Agrarian reform, like revolution itself, carries the magical aura of miracles worked overnight. But, in this hard world of realities, agrarian reform in Bolivia, as in other countries, meant temporarily lower production, greater consumption by the producers and a smaller surplus for the towns, an unwieldy bureaucratic administration, and long delays in placing the actual title in the hands of the new property owner. But the agrarian reform, together with an extended franchise without a literacy test, placed the

seal of government recognition on the *campesinos'* new status as small farmers. They are still the lowest class of a class conscious society. But they now have the potential of upward movement in that society, which they did not have when they were members of the caste-like group of Indians.

MASS VS. INDIVIDUAL CHANGE

It would be a mistake to overstate the present extent of the change from Indian to mestizo. There are still many families on the altiplano and in the more remote areas of the sierra and *puna* who consider themselves Indians. Their cultural world remains much the same as in the seventeenth century. They live a wretched existence which can be called subsistence only by virtue of an extraordinary physical adaption to a grossly insufficient diet. They still maintain themselves in dogged isolation from the rest of the world they have come to fear.

Even in the more accessible areas where colonial *reducciones* established a tradition of interaction between Indian and Spanish speakers and where agrarian syndicates flourish, the new *campesinos* have not suddenly been integrated into the society of Western-oriented townspeople. The former Indians are, instead, a new class which gives a different shape to the new society.

The *campesino* class is not a mass of individuals eager to leave their relatively poor agricultural lands and to ape the manners and mores of mestizos, as in a process of simple social mobility. Particularly in the Cochabamba valleys, the *campesinos* are undergoing a genuine process of acculturation in the sense that entire communities are beginning to display behavior characteristic of the dominant Spanish-speaking culture. This is more unusual than it sounds, because

a normal pattern of change in the Andes is for the individual to become a mestizo by leaving his highland community of birth, rejecting his Indian background, and assuming all possible mestizo status symbols. The individual who becomes a mestizo by this route, however, finds himself part of a despised "cholo" minority in a world dominated by urban upper classes to which he cannot aspire. This is properly described as a process of social mobility—an individual affair in which neither the Indian nor the mestizo communities are importantly affected.

In the formerly Indian communities of Bolivia, on the other hand, the group itself is the agency regulating the adoption of mestizo traits. The individuals within the group proceed at the same pace, with few persons standing out as "more mestizo" than the others. Neither is there strong motivation physically to leave the community nor to reject identifiably Indian behavior patterns. Rather, the individuals are participating in a true cultural change, as a group, which promises to create a new culture retaining some indigenous features but, as a whole, closely resembling present small-town mestizo patterns. From this group, which now has the characteristics of a lower class, mobility within the next generation to any level of national society will be possible, especially for persons taking advantage of the public school system.

Education has become a basic aspiration of *campesino* communities. Most persons hold the aspiration not for themselves but for their children. Many communities have accepted the national government's offer to provide teachers for any village which builds a school. The situation and the potentialities of the *campesinos* have changed radically since the revolution. But, as stated before, this change is not apparent in ways which immediately strike the eye.

The *campesinos'* houses are the same, their food is the same, although there may be more of it, their clothing changes only slowly towards the Western styles of the mestizos, although school children now use the purchased uniforms once the prerogative of the Spanish-speaking children. There is no rush to acquire status symbols, because there is a deep sense of the ridiculousness of a person wearing a necktie, for example, when that person is unable to speak Spanish. Sewing machines, bicycles, and Italian accordions are becoming common possessions among the *campesinos*, but they are only weak indicators of the change which has taken place.

THE LEVELED SOCIETY

The revolution has leveled Bolivian society in two ways. The bottom mass has moved upward, and the upper class has virtually disappeared. Ownership of land through a period of time was once a prime indication of aristocracy. Expropriation of the *latifundios* put an end to the badge and to the income which accompanied it. The hyperinflation of 1952–1956 wiped out much other accumulated wealth. Commerce came to a near standstill. Opportunities for renewing wealth dried up. The economic climate and public opinion were such that these persons found it more comfortable outside Bolivia. Large numbers left the country voluntarily, some were exiled, few have returned. The exodus has left a critical lack of professional and managerial personnel. It has also left a void which will eventually be filled by a class in which status is achieved rather than ascribed.

NATIONALISM AS INTEGRATION

One of the reasons for the present moderation of the MNR is the realization of the power which resides in the

organized bloc of *campesinos*. The agrarian syndicates on occasion have taken measures in their own hands with dismaying consequences. But the MNR government has been largely successful in its courtship of the *campesinos* and in maintaining a counterbalance of power in the militias of the miners and the urban MNR Political Control Posts. But civil war between *campesinos* and townspeople remains a disturbing possibility. This, perhaps as much as the government's dependence on foreign aid, has dictated a policy of restraint and avoidance of extreme measures which might place salaried workers in conflict with the largely subsistence *campesinos*.

The MNR gave new impetus to sentiments of nationalism in a country with a long history of nationhood but in which nationalism is a new phenomenon. The banner of nationalism was raised in the 1920's after the fall of constitutionalism. The new philosophy called for a new approach to national problems which would supposedly transcend the legalisms of the old order. The emphasis on national problems permeated the universities, but it did not capture the popular imagination. It remained for the MNR to revive and direct the sentiment after national socialism proved to be a dead end.

The MNR aroused and used feelings of national pride to broaden its base of popular support, to identify the national good with the good of the party. It has been successful to the point where the only opposition to the MNR is the numerically small Bolivian Falange originally inspired by Antonio Primo de Rivera's Spanish movement. Since the MNR revolution, the Falange has mounted a number of limited but sanguinary revolts, none with any chance of success, which the MNR used to convince the population that opposition to the party is treason to the state.

PROBLEMS OF INTERNATIONALISM

In spite of the ardent talk of nationalism, the country is actually undergoing a remarkable experiment in submitting national interests to international supervision. The MNR is able to pursue its moderate course because of very substantial aid given by the United States. The United States has made the aid conditional on acceptance of economic recommendations of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In 1956 the IMF drew up a detailed stabilization plan which the government found itself forced to accept. The plan achieved foreign exchange stabilization by freezing wages, allowing prices to seek their level, sharply restricting credit, and eliminating subsidies which the government had given to offset the effects of inflation. The stabilization is somewhat illusory because the effect of domestic policies is small compared with the effect of the United States contribution to the national budget. There is no illusion, however, in the fact that the stabilization plan has created large political problems for the government. The tin miners had lived more from subsidies than from wages, which remain insufficient. Salaried workers suffered from the disparity between the price level which increased some ten times and the new wage level which only approximately doubled. Worst of all, credit operations nearly ceased, industries closed their doors when allowed to do so by the government, and the prospect for economic development receded. Bolivia's experiment with international supervision of its economic policies has not been an unmixed blessing.

The cloud in the sky is that continued austerity imposed by the stabilization plan on the salaried workers—an economic stability unrelieved by economic development—may at last provoke the townspeople to more radi-

cal and probably ill-advised approaches to the unsolved problems of massive poverty and national dependence. The most popular and least responsible partisan of extreme measures is Trotskyite Juan Lechín, recently elected vice-president of the republic. The Bolivian national revolution is unique in Latin America, both in having wrought great change with a minimum

of violence and in maintaining close ties with the United States. But those ties have not yet produced the dramatic results for which Bolivians continue to hope. Bolivia has weathered eight years of revolution without recourse to the crude machinery of totalitarianism. But a revolution within a democratic structure needs all the help and understanding it can get.