

POLITICAL CULTURE AND REVOLUTION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE TUPAMAROS'  
FAILED ATTEMPT TO IGNITE A SOCIAL REVOLUTION IN URUGUAY

A Research Paper

by

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Introduction

The emergence of the National Liberation Movement-Tupamaros (MLN-T) posed a radical threat to Uruguay's entrenched ruling class and to the anti-Marxist ideological integrity of South America during the Cold War. Perhaps even more significant, the Tupamaros' pronounced rejection of electoral democracy challenged the Uruguayan masses to abandon more than six decades of democratic political tradition and national identity in order to follow the example of the Cuban Revolution. Consequently, the Tupamaros' incendiary rhetoric and daring acts of defiance failed to immediately resonate with a society in which political violence was unacceptable and virtually unknown. An unwavering commitment to democratic governance and faith in their nation's robust welfare system best characterized Uruguayans, who were recognized as South America's most contented citizens throughout the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, as early as the late 1950s, the country's exceptional status was in question. Uruguay's plural-executive style of government and over-extended socioeconomic programs were unprepared to handle the strain of renewed economic competition brought on by the reopening of global markets in the wake of World War II. The resulting popular discontent at rising inflation and stagnant wages unmasked the presence in Uruguay of the same class-based cleavages prevalent throughout the rest of Latin America, and this tragic revelation planted the seeds for social revolution.

In the midst of a lingering economic crisis, popular frustration at the government's apparent incompetence met with increasingly reactionary security crackdowns against labor and

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Alexander, introduction, *The Tupamaro Guerrillas*, by Maria Esther Gilio, trans. Anne Edmondson (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 1-3.

student protesters. For the MLN-T founders, these actions amounted to government repression and legitimized armed resistance. Quietly organized in the years between 1962 and 1966, the Tupamaros' membership took on a multi-ideological composition. Although admittedly a political action movement, they avoided philosophical squabbles because their commitment to the use of direct action provided a rallying point for frustrated militants from every political persuasion. The MLN-T launched its guerrilla offensive during the months following the 1966 national elections and continued to fight through late 1971. They focused their operations in Montevideo because in addition to housing half of the nation's population, the capital city's matrix of high-rise buildings and winding streets provided the country's best guerrilla refuge. Raiding banks, casinos, factories, and other symbols of upper-class power and United States imperialism, the Tupamaros' primary objective was to build a popular political consciousness around the assertion that Uruguay's traditional power structures were corrupted beyond repair, and that nothing short of their total destruction would bring satisfactory change. In spite of the inherent conflict between society's traditional convictions and those of its homegrown revolutionaries, public opinion toward the Tupamaros remained favorable during the late 1960s. Unprecedented cooperation among leftist groups leading up to the 1971 elections offered yet another indicator of the general public's demand for reforms. Specifically, a leftist coalition called the Broad Front (FA) sprang up and excited the working class that it might rival Uruguay's traditional oligarchy in the 1971 elections. At this time, the revolutionary movement reached a critical stage in its development. Opting to ally itself with the newly formed Broad Front and declare a voluntary ceasefire ahead of the elections, the Tupamaros made an incredible blunder. By respecting the elections, they departed from the wisdom of guerrilla tactician Carlos Marighella and allowed the government's forces to regroup. In late December of 1971, the

MLN-T finally revived its dormant operations, but this placed them squarely in contradiction to Che Guevara's theory that revolutions cannot be sparked in any country so long as the appearance of constitutionality remains intact. Nevertheless, the guerrillas were overmatched by the improved intelligence and preparedness of the combination police and military forces. By the end of 1972, the Tupamaros were irrelevant as an opposition force, with almost its entire membership captured, killed, or in exile.

While Uruguay's uncharacteristic economic and political instability accounted for the materialization of the MLN-T, the root cause of their demise remains open for debate. Theoreticians of social revolution are quick to point out the obvious necessity of popular support to nourish any prospective revolutionary vanguard; however, public opinion polls and personal testimonies suggest that although the MLN-T's actions were increasingly considered criminal rather than political, the Tupamaros' popularity held steady during the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, given their proven ability to defy the government with relative impunity and their intelligent, persuasive appeal to the hearts and minds of the Uruguayan people, why were the Tupamaros unable to mobilize the masses into a revolutionary force aimed at toppling the repressive and ineffective government? Through extensive analysis of relevant primary sources, including United States government documents, MLN-T communiqués, and texts from prominent leftist publications, this essay responds to the preceding question by arguing that a nation's political culture can be a determining factor in its experience with social revolution. In this case, despite leading the world's most successful urban guerrilla insurgency, Uruguay's Tupamaros failed to spark a social revolution because the general public stubbornly embraced

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<sup>2</sup> "Tupamaros: If There Isn't a Homeland for All, There Won't Be a Homeland for Anybody," *Tricontinental*, 57, (1970): 10-2.

electoral politics rather than violent direct action as its preferred means to achieve national reforms.

### The Democratic Dynasty

In order to fully appreciate the role of electoral democracy within Uruguayan culture, one must first have an understanding of the country's political history. Following decades of bloody civil wars waged between the two traditional political factions, the Blancos and Colorados, President José Batlle y Ordóñez finally achieved national stability during his first term in office (1903-1907) when he defeated Blanco leader Aparicio Saravia's last revolutionary attempt. Known as the "pacificador y modernizador del Uruguay," Batlle was elected to a second term in 1911, which he used to implement a program of socioeconomic reforms, known as "batllismo."<sup>3</sup> Expanding far beyond the means of most nations in the western hemisphere, "batllismo" provided the majority of Uruguayans with a comprehensive social security system that included healthcare, pensions, and easy access to education. As Batlle's nationalistic economic policies flourished, so did labor union activity. Similar to many of its neighbors, the Uruguayan economy was closely controlled by the government; however, unlike most Latin American countries collective bargaining was encouraged as an integral component of the new socioeconomic and political order.<sup>4</sup> The Worldwide Depression of 1929 presented the only serious challenge to "batllismo." Under the extreme stagnation brought by the depression, Uruguay's extensive state welfare system was exposed for its reliance on robust economic conditions to fully function. Nevertheless, the onset of World War II offered timely relief as world markets for meat and wool were reopened. The "Batllistas," those in government who

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<sup>3</sup> Lincoln R. Maiztegui Casas, *Orientales: Una historia política del Uruguay, Tomo 2: De 1865 a 1938*, (Montevideo: Planeta, 2005), 151, 164-5. Quotation translated by Woodruff: [pacifier and modernizer of Uruguay].

<sup>4</sup> Alexander, introduction, *The Tupamaro Guerrillas*, 1-3.

subscribed to Batlle's economic policies almost without question, thus breathed a sigh of relief and continued to expand Uruguay's admired welfare system until the end of the Korean War.

Politically, Uruguay quickly evolved into a stable democracy by realizing the necessity of holding regular elections, practicing peaceful transfers of power, and guaranteeing the full participation of all political ideologies. Contrary to the experiences of many nations in Latin America, full political participation was even extended to the Communist and Socialist Parties.<sup>5</sup> Further building off of the idea of political inclusion, since 1872 the idea of co-participation had been at the heart of every elected government in Uruguay. By ensuring the opposition party significant power and respect at the national and local levels, this system of power sharing was originally designed to dissuade underrepresented factions from inciting armed rebellions and to maintain national cohesion. As an additional consequence of this belief in cooperation, Uruguay experimented multiple times with a plural executive or *colegiado*, a system in which a committee is vested with presidential powers. Through constitutional amendments, varying forms of *colegiados* had been installed on three separate occasions (1916, 1942, 1952), but in each instance complaints of executive impotence and inefficiency led to a return to the traditional presidency.<sup>6</sup> Another unique facet of Uruguayan democracy was its "Ley de Lemas." This electoral law granted citizens the ability to vote for both the party of their choice and their favorite individual candidate from among several within each party. The reasoning held that political parties often split due to the stress of having to nominate only one presidential nominee for each election; therefore, Uruguayans preferred to allow multiple candidates to run for the same office. In tabulating the results, party votes were tallied first, and then the most popular candidate from the victorious party was declared the winner. Indeed, this system's complexity

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<sup>5</sup> Alexander, introduction, *The Tupamaro Guerrillas*, 2-3.

<sup>6</sup> Torcuato S. Di Tella, *History of Political Parties in Twentieth-Century Latin America*, (London: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 38, 55, 80.

often led to controversy, especially because its peculiarities allowed for the possibility that the president-elect had received far fewer direct votes than the leading candidate from the opposition party. Despite its intricacies and imperfections and with the exception of two short-lived coups d'état in 1933 and 1942, Uruguay's proud democratic tradition endured unbroken for the first seventy years of the twentieth century. Not only did this record of stability surpass any other in Latin America, it so rivaled the entire global community that Uruguay became known as the "picture of democracy."

### Utopia in Crisis

Uruguay's steep decline is most commonly attributed to the economic crisis that began in 1955; however, at least two other factors combined with the crisis to play prominent roles. First, in 1952, for the third and final time, a constitutional amendment established a plural executive government. The National Council of Government was comprised of nine members; six were to be from the majority party and three from the second-ranking party. The position of president within the council rotated among the six majority party members. Second, the influence of Uruguay's Communist and Socialist political parties expanded dramatically in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. The Communist Party (PCU) concentrated its efforts within Montevideo's urban labor syndicates and the Socialist Party (PSU) made a name for itself by organizing the long-neglected rural working population. As a result of these intertwined factors, by 1966 this once vaunted nation teetered on the edge of disaster and even the U.S. government looked on in deep concern.

The end of World War II and the ceasefire in Korea combined to cause a significant drop in the global prices of Uruguay's three main export goods: wool, meat, and hides. Instead of

remodeling the country's welfare system to better accommodate negative economic swings in accordance with lessons learned in 1929, the Batllistas had ignored the warning signs and pushed recklessly ahead. Therefore, starting in 1955, successive *colegiados* reacted helplessly as inflation ravaged Uruguay's lower and middle classes. The most common governmental response was to freeze wages. This only exacerbated the situation of the most vulnerable populations and bred agitation among the middle class and within rural and urban labor unions. By 1964, the annual cost of living increase reached 43 percent in route to 83 percent in 1967.<sup>7</sup> In a 1967 meeting with the U.S. secretary of state, Uruguay's foreign minister revealed the country's desperation by saying that "things were so bad that the government was psychologically prepared to consider the rationing of bread."<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, the situation continued to worsen. The economic data calculated in 1968 offers perhaps the clearest picture of Uruguay's fall from grace. With 20 percent unemployment and 169 percent inflation, Uruguay was the only "reasonably well-developed country in the world to suffer a pronounced decline in per capita output" between 1955 and 1968. This dismal economic performance was comparable only to that of Haiti for the same time period.<sup>9</sup>

The potential for growth among leftist groups began to catch the attention of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). While concluding that in 1964 there was "no immediate threat of insurgency in Uruguay," the CIA, nevertheless, felt leery of Uruguay's "democratic traditions" that allowed the Communists and their supporters to have "complete freedom of

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<sup>7</sup> "Uruguay's Continuing Economic Impasse," October 1968, National Security Files, Country File, box 74, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, TX, [hereafter NSF, Country File, Box 74, LBJ Library].

<sup>8</sup> "Economic Situation in Uruguay," 26 September 1967, National Security Files, Country File, box 74, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, TX.

<sup>9</sup> "Uruguay's Continuing Economic Impasse," NSF, Country File, Box 74, LBJ Library.

activity.”<sup>10</sup> The Communist Party was particularly skillful in organizing labor strikes, which became commonplace throughout the entire decade of the 1960s. Effective in the sense of getting the nation’s attention and building a strong labor contingent, the PCU-led strikes had the dual effect of hampering many of the government’s proposed solutions. As noted in a diplomatic telegram, sent from the U.S. embassy in Montevideo to the office of the secretary of state, Uruguay’s economy was essentially held hostage by labor stoppages despite the government’s insistence that wage issues would not be worked out under constant threat of strike.<sup>11</sup> No doubt compounding the CIA’s unease, were these words given in a speech by PCU First Secretary Rodney Arismendi at the May Day Eve rally, on April 29, 1964: “The people are fighting against want, to prevent the freezing of wages, and for social laws, but they are also moving toward the future . . . toward the seizure of power by their own hands.” Arismendi continued by citing the impressive trade union unity demonstrated by the event’s diverse attendance of working class, civil servants, and state workers, which he referenced in declaring: “If this tremendous force is let loose, no one will be able to stop it.”<sup>12</sup>

Despite the economic crisis and the National Council of Government’s impotence in enacting meaningful reforms, Uruguayans showed a hearty resolve in their faith that the electoral process might yield hope for a return to the golden years. In 1958, for the first time in 93 years, the Colorados were defeated at the polls and the Blancos seized control of the *colegiado*. Aside from its historical magnitude, this changing of the guard represented a most authentic demonstration of popular frustration. While power sharing had always ensured a significant

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<sup>10</sup> “Survey of Latin America,” 1 April 1964, National Security Files, Country File, box 1, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, TX, [hereafter NSF, Country File, Box 1, LBJ Library].

<sup>11</sup> “Security Measures,” 7 December 1965, National Security Files, Country File, box 74, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, TX.

<sup>12</sup> “Daily Report: Latin America,” 30 April 1964, National Security Files, Country File, box 1, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, TX.

Blanco influence in national policy, Colorado preeminence had been a fact of life in Uruguayan politics for almost a century. No more. In the best spirit of democracy, the public held the Colorado Party accountable using the most lethal weapon in its arsenal—the ballot. However, as the data given above indicates, the Blancos' ascendancy to executive power proved futile in stemming the country's deterioration. Once again, in 1962 Uruguayans voted in favor of the Blancos, but the cumbersome nature of the *colegiado* and the chronic fractionalization of the ruling parties continued to paralyze the government. Even the nine members of the *colegiado* were split between at least four different intra-party factions. According to the CIA, Uruguay's stable history was leading it to drag its feet on reforms, and in June of 1965 the intelligence agency reiterated its skepticism by writing: "The Uruguayan Government is accustomed to temporizing and there is no sign that it is prepared to take effective measures to remedy the situation."<sup>13</sup>

Fiery rhetoric, like that of Arismendi was commonplace among leftist leaders; however, the Communist Party's unquestioned primary goal was to concentrate on legitimate political activities. The PCU set out to attract the disillusioned members of the major political parties in order to increase the political power of its electoral coalition, the Leftist Liberation Front (FIDEL).<sup>14</sup> In fact, according to one of the Tupamaros' top leaders, Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro, the FIDEL's electoral focus leading up to the 1962 elections delayed the creation of an armed revolutionary movement in Uruguay. Distracted by its political ambitions, the FIDEL failed to honor its promise to support a land expropriation operation by a militant workers' union

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<sup>13</sup> "The Situation in Uruguay," 3 June 1965, National Security Files, Country File, box 74, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, TX.

<sup>14</sup> "National Intelligence Estimate: The Situation in Uruguay," 17 June 1965, National Security Files, National Intelligence Estimates, box 9, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, TX [hereafter NSF, NIE, Box 9, LBJ Library].

in the northern department of Artigas.<sup>15</sup> Despite its intense focus, the FIDEL achieved poor election results in 1962, only receiving 3.5 percent of the national vote.<sup>16</sup> Not to be discouraged, the PCU increased its membership from 10,000 to 15,000 between April of 1964 and June of 1965 and strengthened its control over organized labor.<sup>17</sup> By the next year, 80 percent of Uruguay's organized workforce was affiliated with the communist-controlled Center of Uruguayan Workers (CTU), and the FIDEL received 120,000 electoral pledges leading into the 1966 elections.<sup>18</sup> The PCU's surging base of support among university students and young militant groups actually began to spark rumors of a Brazilian military intervention. According to a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate produced in June of 1965, the communists were preparing to use "their labor leadership and paramilitary capabilities" to combat any coup attempts, while at the same time Brazil readied itself to intervene militarily to counter any serious takeover threat by Communists or leftist extremists.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the tensions were at an all-time high and peace seemed at stake; however, it would have been truly un-Uruguayan to shift the national focus away from the 1966 elections and the proposed constitutional amendment to scrap the *colegiado* in order to reinstitute a strong single executive.

The overwhelming conclusion of CIA analyses, U.S. State Department status reports, and Uruguayan politicians was that political violence would not erupt in Uruguay, owing to the nation's impeccable history of constitutionality and aversion to violence. In July of 1965, the U.S. embassy in Montevideo reiterated its opinion that the communists in Uruguay were not

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<sup>15</sup> Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro, *Historia de los Tupamaros: Tomo I: Los orígenes*, (Uruguay: Tupac Amarú Editores, 1986), 33-4.

<sup>16</sup> "The Uruguayan Government and the Left," 10 May 1968, National Security Files, Country File, box 74, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, TX.

<sup>17</sup> "Survey of Latin America," NSF, Country File, Box 1, LBJ Library; "National Intelligence Estimate: The Situation in Uruguay," NSF, NIE, Box 9, LBJ Library.

<sup>18</sup> "Communism in the Uruguayan Labor Movement," 26 January 1967, National Security Files, Country File, box 74, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, TX, [hereafter NSF, Country File, Box 74, LBJ Library].

<sup>19</sup> "National Intelligence Estimate: The Situation in Uruguay," NSF, NIE, Box 9, LBJ Library.

willing to risk their freedom of action by engaging in violence because their primary interests were in preparing for the 1966 elections.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, the CIA pointed out that: “Uruguayans have acquired a certain pride in their country’s civilized approach to political matters and have developed a tendency to abhor violence.”<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the historically poor political performance of the left in Uruguay fostered a feeling of superiority and invincibility among the Uruguayan oligarchy. Because the communists were traditionally viewed as another legitimate group of politicians, not as members of an international subversive movement, neither the government nor the security forces saw subversion as a realistic threat.<sup>22</sup> One critical fact, however, continued to elude the intelligence analysts and Uruguayan politicians until at least August of 1967—the Tupamaros held no loyalty to the Communist Party or its commitment to “legitimate politics.”<sup>23</sup>

Fears of a Brazilian intervention were largely assuaged by the results of the 1966 elections, in which the FIDEL received only 65,000 votes, or 5.7 percent, and the constitutional amendment to bring back a strong presidency was passed. Clearly, Uruguay remained mired in economic stagnation and the government faced unprecedented public scrutiny, but the election of President Oscar Gestido was hailed as the advent of a new era in Uruguayan politics and economic policy. President Gestido’s earlier career as an army general provided the *mano dura* image that appealed to the Brazilian military junta and to those seeking greater fiscal discipline and a firm stance toward labor unrest. In addition, the prevailing notion of Uruguay as a nation of “talkers rather than fighters,” where “militancy has practically no appeal to the ordinary”

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<sup>20</sup> “Rio Arma Report on Military Situation Uruguayan-Brazilian Border,” 27 July 1965, National Security Files, Country File, box 74, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, TX.

<sup>21</sup> “National Intelligence Estimate: The Situation in Uruguay,” NSF, NIE, Box 9, LBJ Library.

<sup>22</sup> “Communism in the Uruguayan Labor Movement,” NSF, Country File, Box 74, LBJ Library; “Alertness to Potential Insurgency,” 8 August 1967, National Security Files, Country File, box 74, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, TX, [hereafter NSF, Country File, Box 74, LBJ Library].

<sup>23</sup> “Alertness to Potential Insurgency,” NSF, Country File, Box 74, LBJ Library.

citizen, continued to reign supreme.<sup>24</sup> For the majority of the population, the peaceful election and the amendment's passing served as testaments to democracy's ability to mandate sweeping governmental reforms even in times of national strife; however, in the minds of many dissatisfied Uruguayans, the time for patience and faith in democratic reforms had expired.

### Leftist Extremism in the Land of Democracy

On December 7, 1967, one day after President Gestido died from a heart attack, the leftist magazine, *Epoca*, published the MLN-T's "Carta abierta de los Tupamaros a la policia."

Effectively announcing the movement's presence and violent intentions, the MLN-T declared:

"We have placed ourselves outside the law" because "this is the only honest action when the law is not equal for all." "The hour of rebellion has definitely sounded for us," and "we should not be worthy Uruguayans, nor worthy Americans, nor worthy of ourselves if we do not listen to the dictates of conscience that day after day calls us to the fight," it continued.<sup>25</sup> With these words, the Tupamaros officially began operations in open defiance of the new government, now under former Vice President Jorge Pacheco Areco. In order to fully comprehend the meaning of this initial pronouncement of hostilities, it is vital to briefly review the process by which the MLN-T consolidated and arrived in Montevideo as a serious threat to Uruguay's upper crust.

The birthplace of the urban-focused Tupamaros was actually in the militancy of the rural-based Artigas Sugarcane Workers Union (UTAA) in the early 1960s. Raúl Sendic, a radical young activist in the Socialist Party, immersed himself in the conflict between the government

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<sup>24</sup> "A Survey of Communism in Latin America," 3 Dec. 1965, Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, [http://www.foia.cia.gov/browse\\_docs.asp?doc\\_no=0001281983&no\\_pages=0315&showPage=0001](http://www.foia.cia.gov/browse_docs.asp?doc_no=0001281983&no_pages=0315&showPage=0001) (20 October 2007).

<sup>25</sup> National Liberation Movement, "Carta abierta de los Tupamaros a la policia," 7 December 1967, as quoted in, *Uruguay: The Politics of Failure*, by Martin Weinstein, (London: Greenwood Press, 1975) 121. Quotation translated by Woodruff: [Open letter from the Tupamaros to the police].

and the marginalized sugarcane and rice field workers from Uruguay's interior, who were commonly known as *peludos*. Under his leadership, these oppressed workers marched to Montevideo on multiple occasions demanding parliamentary action on issues like land reform, wage increases, and workers' rights. Though largely unsuccessful in prompting lasting reforms, Sendic and his followers enlightened the urban population to the government's apathy toward the country's most impoverished citizens, sparking a national awareness. In July of 1963, at the urging of radicals within the FIDEL, Sendic and Fernández Huidobro both participated in the first reported example of cooperation between rural and urban extremist cells when a small group of militants raided the Tiro Suizo shooting club, just outside of Montevideo. The group successfully loaded several stolen rifles and boxes of ammunition onto a truck bound for the northwestern department of Paysandú, where a rural labor union had planned to forcibly occupy an abandoned plantation. Unfortunately, the truck flipped over during the drive, supplies were lost, and residual clues alerted the authorities to the union's plans.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, in a documentary video filmed in 1996, Fernández Huidobro remained resolute that "some defeats are more important than victories."<sup>27</sup> The value of this early failure was that it aroused the suspicion of the government and thus necessitated increased cooperation, cohesion, and clandestinity among the independent militant cells.

Also in 1963, Sendic's rural activism began to broaden the appeal of revolutionary action beyond the Communist and Socialist Parties. The Federation of Uruguayan University Students and the Federation of Uruguayan Anarchists each responded to the plight of the *peludos* by publishing scathing letters of criticism against the oligarchy. The students proclaimed the workers' right to "*tomar con sus manos lo que les corresponde, las tierras y el fruto de su*

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<sup>26</sup> Fernández Huidobro, *Historia de los Tupamaros*, 81-2.

<sup>27</sup> Heidi Specogna and Rainer Hoffmann, *Tupamaros*, videocassette, First Run/Icarus Films, 1996.

*trabajo, rebelándose contra el hambre, la ignorancia, la explotación, la injusticia.*”<sup>28</sup> For their part, the anarchists declared solidarity “*con todos aquellos que, de una manera u otra, luchan por la verdadera transformación revolucionaria de la sociedad.*”<sup>29</sup> By 1964 the founders of the MLN-T were actively recruiting from among the ideologically diverse militant population, and for the next two years the Tupamaros lay relatively dormant. These were the years in which the movement made its decisive move from the interior to the urban sprawl of Montevideo. Despite the unease of key leaders like Sendic with the urban setting, according to an interview with a Tupamaro identified as “Urbano,” the prospect of a rural guerrilla *foco* was “practically nil,” due to the fact that Uruguay has “neither vast jungles nor mountains.” To compensate, Urbano points out that the Tupamaros studied the French resistance to Nazi occupation and the urban element of the Algerian struggle.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the MLN-T felt well prepared as it lay in wait, training, planning, and stalking its targets until the opportune moment in 1967 to make its bold explosion onto the national scene.

### The Campaign for National Liberation

The Tupamaros, as a revolutionary guerrilla force, were truly “indigenous” to Uruguay. In other words, Uruguay’s thick culture of peaceful electoral democracy was not lost on the revolutionaries as they developed their strategy. Even the most cursory analysis of their tactics reveals that the Tupamaros realized from the very beginning that the most important aspect of

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<sup>28</sup> Federation of Uruguayan University Students, “FEUU: El miedo de los privilegiados,” 20 September 1963, as quoted in, *Historia de los Tupamaros: Tomo I: Los orígenes*, by Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro, (Uruguay: Tupac Amarú Editores, 1986), 95-6. Quotation translated by Woodruff: [to take with their hands that which belongs to them, the lands, the fruit of their labor, rebelling against hunger, ignorance, exploitation, injustice].

<sup>29</sup> Federation of Uruguayan Anarchists, “FAU: El país cruje,” as quoted in, *Historia de los Tupamaros: Tomo I: Los orígenes*, by Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro, (Uruguay: Tupac Amarú Editores, 1986), 97-8. Quotation translated by Woodruff: [with all of those that, one way or another, fight for the true revolutionary transformation of society].

<sup>30</sup> “Tupamaros: If There Isn’t a Homeland for All, There Won’t Be a Homeland for Anybody,” *Tricontinental*, 58, (1971): 8.

their campaign would be to justify to the general public their selection of violence and extra-constitutional means for challenging the Pacheco government. Although brief in its explanation, the 1967 “Carta abierta” drew a clear distinction between purely criminal behavior and that undertaken by the MLN-T. By claiming that they knowingly placed themselves “outside” a legal system that existed only to “defend the spurious interests of a minority in detriment to the majority,” the Tupamaros attempted to carve a niche within society’s conception of legitimacy.<sup>31</sup> This desire to appear legitimate continued to serve as a theme in the movement’s propaganda throughout its entire lifespan. Likewise, accounts of Tupamaro guerrillas taking extra care to avoid creating innocent victims and to accomplish their direct action missions from a moral high ground were widespread. Finally, there exists no better indication of the movement’s obvious regard for popular opinion than in their surprisingly low number of victims. Eduardo Rey Tristán’s research concludes that in seven years of operations, the MLN-T was only responsible for 40 deaths.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, while the contemporary image of urban terrorism is sure to include suicide bombings and indiscriminate rocket attacks, the Tupamaros belong in a purely “Uruguayan” category of fighters.

The guerrillas’ primary mode of communication with the public, aside from acts of violence or “expropriation,” was through occasional releases of brief manifestos. On rare occasions, they also circulated the transcripts of quasi-interviews. In all, the goal of the MLN-T’s propaganda campaign was to declare the movement’s intentions and goals, and to air its principal complaints against the oligarchy. One of the best examples of their efforts to distribute propaganda took place in the Montevideo suburb of Pando, on October 8, 1969. After occupying the city’s police and fire stations, as well as two banks, the Tupamaros left behind leaflets that

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<sup>31</sup> National Liberation Movement, “Carta abierta de los Tupamaros a la policía,” 121.

<sup>32</sup> Eduardo Rey Tristán, *La izquierda revolucionaria uruguaya, 1955-1973*, (Madrid: CSIC, 2005) 341.

enumerated various offenses committed by the oligarchy against the people and declared their intent to answer government repression with action.

Freedom of thought does not exist. They have shut down daily newspapers, closed the courts and political parties; Parliament is useless. Hundreds of prisoners fill the jails and military barracks. Firings are by decree, condemning hundreds of families to hunger. . . . In the face of all this there are only two roads to follow: be quiet and accept it, or rise up and resist. We base ourselves theoretically and actively on the second course. . . . We too can make prisoners of those who are responsible for this situation.<sup>33</sup>

The majority of these complaints corresponded with President Pacheco's use of emergency powers to establish special security measures on June 13, 1968.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the Tupamaros' protest did little to sway Pacheco from using increasingly broad interpretations of his constitutionally endowed powers to limit the visibility and stunt the burgeoning popularity of the MLN-T. In fact, on December 7, 1969, the *New York Times* reported that the President placed a ban on any media reference of the Tupamaros "without terming them common criminals." Apparently, Pacheco's "action was taken after a Gallup poll showed considerable popular support for the guerrillas."<sup>35</sup>

By 1970, the MLN-T realized that its missing link was a well-disciplined military vanguard. Therefore, in an audacious maneuver, the guerrillas actually approached the Uruguayan military in 1970 offering an alliance. Confidently disclosing that the movement's ranks already included members of the armed forces, as well as members of the Blanco and Colorado political parties, the Tupamaros formulated a creative argument to convince the military that the true threats to the nation's sovereignty were the government and "those who contribute to public misfortune." "We are not enemies—how could we possibly be

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<sup>33</sup> National Liberation Movement, "Tupamaros: Sermon for Uprising and Resistance," as quoted in, *Tricontinental*, 46, (1970): 43-4.

<sup>34</sup> "The Role of the Students in Latin America," *Tricontinental*, 34, (1969): 22-3.

<sup>35</sup> "Uruguay Decides to Censor Press," *New York Times*, dispatch of *The Times, London*, 7 December 1969: 122.

enemies?—because the plight of our Uruguay hurts us just as it does you,” proposed the letter.<sup>36</sup> Not unexpectedly, the military rebuffed the offer, but the Tupamaros quickly focused on yet another possible ally—the Broad Front political coalition. In a seven-point position paper, the Tupamaros again argued the point that the oligarchy was everyone’s common enemy. Although the MLN-T disagreed completely with the Broad Front’s focus on and faith in electoral democracy, it recognized that an alliance could prove to be valuable well beyond the 1971 elections. Along with smoothing relations with less militant factions of the left, the guerrillas reasoned that the coalition’s influence with organized labor could yield enormous results in the “mobilization of the working masses.”<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, the guerrillas’ constant desire to spark a mass movement only partially justifies its desperate outreach for alliances in 1970. The other half of the explanation stems directly from its increasingly violent campaign of sabotage, kidnappings, and assassinations that was risking the movement’s popularity with the general public.

Let there be no mistake, the Tupamaros were bent on inflicting irreparable damage and embarrassment on the Uruguayan state. As Brazilian revolutionary Carlos Marighella wrote in his book, *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla*, everything from their compartmentalized organizational structure to their declared objectives was designed with one thing in mind—“to leave no room for doubt as to the actual aims of the revolutionaries.” Although not published until 1969, Marighella’s theories and guidelines parallel the strategies employed by the Tupamaros with few exceptions. The “two essential objectives,” according to Marighella were the “physical extermination” of police and armed forces leadership and the “expropriation” of wealth from government, capitalist, and imperialist sources in order to secure funding for the

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<sup>36</sup> National Liberation Movement, “Tupamaros: Letter to the Military,” as quoted in, *Tricontinental*, 54-5, (1970): 34-7.

<sup>37</sup> National Liberation Movement, “MLN Position on the Broad Front,” as quoted in, *Tricontinental*, 62, (1971): 44.

guerrillas and sustain the revolution.<sup>38</sup> In seamless correspondence with the minimanual, the Tupamaros quickly became recognized for their ability to launch successful bombings, robberies, and kidnappings beginning in 1967.<sup>39</sup>

While robberies of banks and casinos often yielded large sums of money for the Tupamaros, the purpose of several break-ins was to steal documents and financial records aimed at exposing corruption and fraud committed by members of the oligarchy. Bombings and sabotage, on the other hand, were simply meant to harass and confound government and imperialist interests. For example, as Uruguay welcomed the Governor of New York, Nelson Rockefeller, during his official tour of Latin America in 1969, the MLN-T issued special radio broadcasts calling President Pacheco a “puppet of the U.S. imperialists,” and firebombed a General Motors automobile plant. The fire caused an estimated \$1 million in damages.<sup>40</sup> Kidnappings for ransom and for the general embarrassment of the victims were also a commonly used tool. The Tupamaros’ first such operation made international headlines. On August 7, 1968, Ulises Pereira Reverbel, a close friend of President Pacheco and the head of the state-owned telephone and electricity corporation, was kidnapped and held for five days. Following his release, the Tupamaros reportedly announced: “The future safety of public officials would depend ‘on the behavior of the repressive forces and the fascist groups at their service.’”<sup>41</sup> According to Urbano, the purpose of the direct action campaign was not only to demonstrate that

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<sup>38</sup> Carlos Marighella, “Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla,” as quoted in, *Tricontinental*, 56, (1970): 7.

<sup>39</sup> “Alertness to Potential Insurgency,” NSF, Country File, Box 74, LBJ Library.

<sup>40</sup> “Rockefeller: The Toll of Victims from His Tour,” *Tricontinental*, 42, (1969): 13-4.

<sup>41</sup> Malcolm W. Browne, “A Small, Elite Rebel Band Harasses Uruguayan Regime,” *New York Times*, 23 January 1969: 12.

the Tupamaros represented a legitimate power alternative for the people, but also that “just as [the guerrillas’] homes can be raided, so can those of the security agents.”<sup>42</sup>

The year 1970 represented a pivotal time in the life of the Tupamaros, marked most boldly by an escalation of bloodshed. In April they committed their first assassination, machine-gunning Secret Police Chief Hector Moran Charquero.<sup>43</sup> Then, on July 31, the MLN-T nabbed U.S. Agency for International Development official, Daniel Mitrione. Mitrione’s official responsibilities included advising the Uruguayan police forces on riot control techniques, but allegations ran wild that “he had educated the Uruguayan police in the art of mass repression and torture.”<sup>44</sup> An August 1 *New York Times* article added credence to the suspicions that he was involved in intelligence work when it stated that “he unquestionably knew more about the Tupamaro operations than any other United States official.”<sup>45</sup> Brazilian Consul Aloysio Mares Dias Gomide was also kidnapped on July 31, and only a few days later, so was American agricultural expert Claude L. Fly. According to Urbano’s interview, the kidnappings were originally carried out to facilitate prisoner exchanges and to prove the guerrillas’ ability to act with impunity. “The crisis in the Government increased, and the downfall of Pacheco appeared imminent,” but the advantage shifted back to Pacheco when his forces captured Sendic, added Urbano.<sup>46</sup> Following Sendic’s capture, along with that of several other MLN-T leaders, the government refused to negotiate and the Tupamaros were forced to act.

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<sup>42</sup> “Tupamaros: If There Isn’t a Homeland for All, There Won’t Be a Homeland for Anybody,” *Tricontinental*, 58, (1971): 3.

<sup>43</sup> Carlos Núñez, *The Tupamaros: Urban guerrillas of Uruguay*, (New York: Times Change Press, 1970), 47.

<sup>44</sup> “Tupamaros: If There Isn’t a Homeland for All, There Won’t Be a Homeland for Anybody,” *Tricontinental*, 57, (1970): 10.

<sup>45</sup> “Guerrillas Seize Two in Uruguay,” *New York Times*, 1 August 1970: 1+.

<sup>46</sup> “Tupamaros: If There Isn’t a Homeland for All, There Won’t Be a Homeland for Anybody,” *Tricontinental*, 57, (1970): 6.

On the morning of August 10, police found Mitrione's dead body in an abandoned car parked along a Montevideo street. The *New York Times* reported an immediate outpouring of government and public outrage, but the MLN-T claimed that justice had been done. President Pacheco is quoted as describing the murder as "the greatest attack this country's political institutions have faced in this century."<sup>47</sup> Conversely, the Tupamaros felt confident that popular sentiment would transcend this incident due to Mitrione's complicity in government abuses. Allegations of torture were nothing new in Uruguay by the time of Mitrione's execution. In fact, as of April of 1970, a three-month Parliamentary investigation into police torture was already underway.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, Urbano admits, "in [Uruguay] an action which results in death has great disadvantages," but he remains adamant that Mitrione received a fair hearing before a "revolutionary tribunal, and his crimes were serious enough to warrant his receiving the sentence he did." Most important, however, was the perception of the Tupamaros in the court of public opinion. With this in mind, Urbano explains that there are actions "which are very important in a revolutionary process which are not always understood immediately by the people." For example, the Mitrione execution may not have been palatable but it did effectively signal the existence of a "dual power" in Uruguay, "that of the repression and that of the Tupamaros." Still, he claims that the government chose not to publish the results of a Gallup Poll conducted following the death of Mitrione "because the number of people who opposed the execution, those who were in favor of it, and those who had no opinion were so evenly divided that it wasn't in the regime's interests to make the poll public."<sup>49</sup> In all, 1970 was a year in which the

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<sup>47</sup> "Kidnapped U.S. Official Found Slain in Uruguay," *New York Times*, 11 August 1970: 1+.

<sup>48</sup> Malcolm W. Browne, "Charges that Police in Uruguay Torture Political Prisoners Stir Scandal," *New York Times*, 7 April 1970: 15.

<sup>49</sup> "Tupamaros: If There Isn't a Homeland for All, There Won't Be a Homeland for Anybody," *Tricontinental*, 57, (1970): 10-2.

MLN-T reached out for help from several sectors of society, and the facts prove that as their use of violence expanded so did their desire for assistance.

#### The 1971 Elections and Breaking with Marighella

Entering 1971, the Tupamaros' membership reached an all-time high and was estimated at 1,500 active members; nevertheless, this election year brought the movement's undoing.<sup>50</sup> After starting the year with their most spectacular kidnapping, they inexplicably broke from the theoretical model that they had helped author beginning in 1962. In this way, their softened tactics and newfound tolerance of the country's electoral traditions resulted in a costly loss of momentum that ultimately spelled defeat.

On January 8, British Ambassador Geoffrey Jackson became the guerrillas' newest prisoner. Speculation immediately revolved around whether or not the government would alter its negotiating stance in light of the fact that the guerrillas held a full-fledged ambassador; however, the Tupamaros were the party that made the biggest shift in its policies.<sup>51</sup> While continuing to demand the release of over one hundred political detainees in exchange for Jackson, the guerrillas never threatened his execution. Instead, they kept the ambassador in perfect health, and, aside from spending eight months in captivity, upon his release Jackson refused to utter a condemning word about his former captors. His "amnesty" came about after a massive escape on September 6 from Montevideo's Punta Carretas prison freed Sendic and more than one hundred MLN-T fighters. With their ranks replenished and their leadership restored, Jackson's imprisonment was no longer necessary, and the Tupamaros were in a prime position to

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<sup>50</sup> Reuters, "British Envoy Kidnapped By Guerrillas in Uruguay," *New York Times*, 9 January 1971: 1.

<sup>51</sup> Reuters, "British Envoy Kidnapped," *New York Times*, 1.

launch a full offensive against the departing Pacheco government.<sup>52</sup> Instead, they declared a ceasefire ahead of the elections and in so doing committed their biggest blunder.

Upon restoring Ambassador Jackson to freedom the guerrillas issued the following statement regarding the impending elections:

We do not believe they will resolve the country's problems. Nevertheless they must be held, but on a platform which provides guarantees which are presently lacking. . . . It is not us, therefore, who seek to invalidate the polls. . . . Those who beat, torture, kill, imprison, organize terror squads. Those are the only ones conspiring against the elections. . . . If they persist they will feel our retaliation and they know it.<sup>53</sup>

This message represented a clear departure from their earlier stated goals of damage and destruction, in that the Tupamaros not only embraced the 1971 elections, but they also denounced the use of violence in order to allow the democratic process to work. While this decision is baffling, two possible explanations exist. It is conceivable that the MLN-T took notice of Salvador Allende's victory in Chile and reasoned that the Broad Front's wide support base could accomplish a similar electoral feat. However, this theory lost credibility when Urbano responded to his interviewer's question on the very topic of Allende. In his response, Urbano admits that the Tupamaros looked upon the leftist's victory in Chile "as a very positive thing," but "sooner or later," he predicted, "the presence of the people in arms" would be necessary to defend the program of government instituted by Allende.<sup>54</sup> Urbano's message, then, is that elections are not the final solution. The second and most likely possibility, is that the MLN-T envied the massive organizational effort being undertaken by the Broad Front, and it realized that the coalition's focus on the elections did not diminish the reality that it represented

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<sup>52</sup> National Liberation Movement, "The Fight to Liberate all Political Detainees," as quoted in, *The Tupamaro Guerrillas*, by Maria Esther Gilio, trans. by Anne Edmondson, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 227.

<sup>53</sup> National Liberation Movement, "The Fight to Liberate," 228-9.

<sup>54</sup> "Tupamaros: If There Isn't a Homeland for All, There Won't Be a Homeland for Anybody," *Tricontinental*, 58, (1971) 15.

“an important attempt to unite the forces that struggle against the oligarchy.”<sup>55</sup> The Tupamaros, therefore, gambled that the prospect of massive post-election support was worth the initiative lost in calling a truce for the elections.

Despite the logic employed by the MLN-T, the writings of Carlos Marighella and Che Guevara both condemn its decisions surrounding the national elections. Marighella’s *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla* covers this topic specifically. It explains that as a country falls into a revolutionary war, life in the city will be “unbearable” as police terror becomes routine. The minimanual continues, that as the oligarchy sees its legitimacy and control being whittled away, the ruling class will endorse elections and constitutional reforms in a last ditch effort to win back popular support. At this point, Marighella cautions the guerrilla not to become enamored with the idea of “redemocratization.” Instead, he implores: “Attacking wholeheartedly this election farce . . . the urban guerrilla must become more aggressive and violent, resorting without letup to sabotage, terrorism, expropriations, assaults, kidnappings, executions, etc.” “The role of the urban guerrilla, in order to win the support of the people, is to continue fighting,” he concludes.<sup>56</sup> Conversely, Che writes in his manual *Guerrilla Warfare*: “Where a government has come into power through some form of popular vote, fraudulent or not, and maintaining at least the appearance of constitutional legality, the guerrilla outbreak cannot be promoted, since the possibilities of peaceful struggle have not yet been exhausted.”<sup>57</sup> Therefore, the Tupamaros were clearly caught in an awkward situation. The decision to respect the elections was in complete contravention of their previously expressed preference for violence

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<sup>55</sup> National Liberation Movement, “MLN Position on the Broad Front,” 44.

<sup>56</sup> Marighella, “Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla,” 53-4.

<sup>57</sup> Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1997), 51.

over elections, and they were betraying both Marighella's and Che's well-respected theories of revolution.

In all fairness, it should be pointed out that the Broad Front received 304,275 votes in 1971. While this total is almost five times the number of votes received by the FIDEL in 1966, it only represented 18 percent of the national vote.<sup>58</sup> The Colorado Party candidate, Juan María Bordaberry, was elected president in a closely contested race with the Blanco Party. Most importantly, however, there is no evidence that any significant portion of the Broad Front's support base joined the MLN-T when it reopened hostilities in December of 1971.<sup>59</sup> On April 14, 1972, the Tupamaros launched its final major offensive, assassinating four security forces personnel in the same morning. In response, President Bordaberry declared a state of internal war, which allowed him to unleash the full capabilities of the military and the national police.<sup>60</sup> This lethal combination, along with the government's improved intelligence gathering led to a brutal, swift, and decisive victory over the guerrillas. In fact, by June of 1973, when the Parliament was dissolved and the military junta took power, the Tupamaros organization was literally nonexistent. Well-known MLN-T leader, José "Pepe" Mujica recalled the defeat in the video documentary, lamenting: "Our fate was ultimately sealed by the absence of a military wing. A vanguard of popular resistance. The bottom line: When Uruguay needed us most we were no longer around."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Martin Weinstein, *Uruguay: The Politics of Failure* (London: Greenwood Press, 1975), 126-7.

<sup>59</sup> National Liberation Movement, "Proclamation of Paysandú," as quoted in, *Tricontinental*, 73, (1972): 40.

<sup>60</sup> "The War and the Tupamaros," *Tricontinental*, 77, (1972), 30, 40.

<sup>61</sup> Specogna and Hoffman, *Tupamaros*.

## Conclusion

Without a doubt, the appearance of a well-organized guerrilla insurgency in Montevideo came as a jolt to a nation whose consistent ability to avoid the political and economic plagues suffered by its neighbors had earned it the nickname, the “Switzerland of America.” Half a century of political stability and economic prosperity created a nation so insulated by its own social welfare programs that its leaders were ill equipped to handle the disastrous economic slowdown of the 1950s. Even after witnessing Fidel Castro’s unlikely rise to power in Cuba, the thought of a revolution in Uruguay was laughable. The Communist and Socialist Parties seized upon the class tensions and labor unrest brought on by the economic crisis, but the PCU continued to insist that political tactics, rather than violent ones were the solution for Uruguay’s ailments. In spite of the doubts, emboldened leftist militants realized that Uruguay’s “strong democratic tradition” represented the “single most important deterrent to communist success in achieving its political goals.”<sup>62</sup> The founders of the National Liberation Movement, therefore, removed themselves from traditional politics and created the Tupamaros for a single reason—to ignite a social revolution in the land of democracy.

In the end, Uruguay’s political culture proved decisively strong in rejecting guerrilla warfare as a plausible solution to the country’s economic woes and government repression. It is clear that despite the Tupamaros’ attempts to legitimize the use of direct action and to win public favor by respecting the elections, society refused to embrace the guerrillas’ violent project. As noted by Mujica, the movement’s inability to endure long enough to offer an armed resistance to the military takeover reflected its failure to enlist the masses into a disciplined military wing.<sup>63</sup> This understanding, that political traditions are capable of thwarting revolutionary alterations to a

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<sup>62</sup> “Communism in the Uruguayan Labor Movement,” NSF, Country File, Box 74, LBJ Library.

<sup>63</sup> Specogna and Hoffman, *Tupamaros*.

nation's identity, though not groundbreaking, might shed light on unexpected areas of the field of social revolution studies. The Tupamaros' failure in Uruguay is an example of armed struggle's inability to overpower a society's faith in electoral democracy. Reciprocally, nations that have remained subject to internal conflict for decades at a time might also experience the same inertia acting against attempts to end the violence and install democratic institutions. This is a lesson not easily learned by contemporary proponents of democratization. Nevertheless, in order to fully grasp the challenges involved in truly revolutionizing an existing social order, the power of political culture demands increased attention from theorists and policymakers.

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