

DOMESTIC COALITIONS FOR REFORM IN COSTA RICA

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In our discussion of reform coalitions in Costa Rica, we will confine ourselves to major movements as exemplified by active political reform groups. A reform group for our purposes may be understood to mean an organized, visible group wanting to make changes in the existent political, social, or economic structure of the country.

There are problems with terms such as liberal, conservative, and progressive. These terms are used differently in Central America than in other places. A liberal usually is one opposed to the church controlling schools, or exercising too much power or influence in state or economic matters. But liberals do not necessarily favor social or economic changes. These people are called progressive. A conservative favors the retention or expansion of the role of the church in the society, and favors maintaining the status quo in economic and social matters.

Another problem in tracing the development of reform coalitions in Costa Rica, is that these movements did not always evolve in a straight and easily defined line. Sometimes the Christian Democrats acted more like conservatives, and at other times were practically in the Communist ideological camp. In addition, there is considerable overlapping between groups. We find people of one philosophy involved with other types of reform movements. Such an example is Communist leader Manuel Mora, first involved with a Christian democratic movement, then founding the Communist party, and for a short period, working for the presidency of a basically conservative person. At times, one group of reformers occasionally merged with, or even formed associations with groups representing other ideological tendencies. However, in studying this period we can see that several patterns of behavior do emerge.

We can see that there were three main reform groups or tendencies. They were the Catholic reform groups, now called Christian Democrats; the Marxist-Communist groups; and the Social Democrats. Secondly, the times most reforms were enacted were when reformers made, or were thrust into temporary alliances with other groups. Finally, since the 1948 Civil War the major reform thrust has been limited to administrative

matters; the expansion of primary thinking patterns; or promoting a democratic system of free elections.

We are now ready to see how reform movements evolved in Costa Rica.

THE EARLY DAYS

Throughout most of its history the country was controlled by a group of coffee growers and import-export people who lived in the "Meseta Central", and the Banana industry (chiefly United Fruit Company), who had their lands along the route of the Atlantic Coast Railroad. These groups were basically conservative but there were elements of Nineteenth Century Liberalism.

In the latter part of the Nineteenth Century, they enacted several liberal reforms, such as secular and free elementary education; secularization of the cementaries; disbanding of religious communities; the expulsion of the Jesuits, and the abolition of the death penalty. For the most part, the liberals guaranteed freedom of expression. There was a safety valve in that one could acquire land, although not in a desirable area.¹ All of these factors made the situation in Costa Rica less critical than in other Central American countries. This might explain why the reform movement arrived late in Costa Rica.

The first reform movement was the Catholic reform movement, which would be called today, the Christian Democrats. It had its ideological basis with Archbishop Thiel's pastoral letter of 1893. Thiel had been exiled during the height of the fight over liberal reform laws. After his return, he organized a Catholic Religious party (called Union Católica). Its purpose was to take power and repeal the liberal legislation. Thiel, sounding almost contemporary, said in a pastoral letter:

"La situación inflacionista creada por la gran dependencia extrema y económica de la infraestructura económica costarricense... la fuga de oro y plata, la mala balanza de pagos, el mal uso del crédito internacional... (ha resultado) que los salarios de los jornaleros y artesanos había bajado mucho... Debía volverse más activo el valor del justo salario según el valor de la moneda."²

Thiel's motives are suspect in view of the political climate of the moment. But the new ideas of Rerum Novarum were introduced into the country, and the pastoral letter served as a basis for later reform groups to function within the parameters acceptable to at least some elements of the Catholic Church.

The principles of the Catholic reform movement were taken up by young Jorge Volio, who in 1902, started publishing *Justicia Social*, which

expressed the doctrine of Catholic unionism.³ Helping Volio in this venture were Rafael Calderón Muñoz (father of future reformist president, Rafael Angel Calderón Guardia), Carlos María Jiménez (future advisor in Calderon's government), and ironically, the future archconservative archbishop, Rafael Otón Jiménez.

This periodical did not last too long, because it ceased publication when Volio went off to study in Louvain, Belgium, where he became imbued with the progressive ideas of Cardinal Mercier, author of the Social Code of Malines.⁴

Father Volio was ordained a catholic priest, and came back to Costa Rica, where he started another newspaper. (*La Nave*). However, he gave that up to fight against the American Marines in Nicaragua, and then in the revolution against the Costa Rican Dictator General Frederico Tinoco. For his part in this fight, Father Volio was granted the title of Brigadier General in the Costa Rican Army.

In 1923 General Volio founded the Partido Reformista, the first real reform party in Costa Rica. This party grew out of Volio's inspiration, and the organization which had been set up by the slightly Marxist, "Confederación General de Trabajadores". Actually, Volio made this union and adjunct of his party.⁵ Many future Communist leaders, including Manuel Mora (founder of the Costa Rican Communist Party) worked with Volio in the 1923 electoral campaign.

The platform of the Partido Reformista called for: a new constitution which would make the government more responsive to the people: health and accident laws, encouragement of cooperatives, prison reform, nationalization of the subsoil with state control of natural resources, agrarian reform and limitation of landholding, enforcement of the direct taxation laws passed in 1916, a civil service system, the reopening of the National University, free universal high school education, and religious toleration.

The campaign of 1923 was memorable for its vehemence, and for something new—the discussion of social issues in an electoral majority; therefore, the new congress had to decide between the first two candidates—ex-president liberal Ricardo Jiménez, and ultra Catholic conservative Alberto Echandi.

Volio's party had five seats in congress, and was therefore the power broker. His deputies voted for Ricardo Jiménez and the Jiménez faction helped elect Volio as one of the Vice-presidents. Many people felt that Volio had sold out especially when the Jiménez party agreed to pay his campaign debts.⁶

An outstanding example of this was Manuel Mora who said that as a

result of the sellout by Volio, he came to the conclusion that the only course of action was to form a Marxist Party⁷, or as Mora's brother Eduardo says... "Volio did not cover the necessities and aspirations of the working class in a moment when the capitalist world was precipitated in a sharp crisis."⁸

Whatever the case may be, Volio's partnership with Jiménez resulted in the passage of a workers compensation law, the first real bit of social legislation.

Volio began to lose favor, and began to have trouble with the conservative Catholic oligarchy.⁹ He was eventually defrocked and financially ruined. However, the Christian democratic trend hung on during the 1930's with the formation of several unsuccessful political parties. In these parties Volio, Calderon Muñoz, and Carlos María Jiménez were particularly active. These movements are then a direct link to the reforms of the Calderón Guardia regime in the 1940's, the period of greatest social reform.

However, before we take up the Calderon reforms we have to trace the development of the Communist Party, because they were important in the passage of these reforms.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE COSTA RICA COMMUNIST PARTY UNTIL 1940

The movement toward a communist party began in the beginning of the present century when the existent workers' organizations, which were really mutual assistance associations, began to become real trade unions. Two people associated with this movement were Omar Dengo, an educator and social activist Carmen Lira, writer, founder of the Kindergarten movement in Costa Rica, and one of the future leaders of the Costa Rican Communist Party. Dengo and Lira published a periodical called *Hoja Obrera*, as an organ of the "Sociedad de Obreros". *Hoja Obrera* was one of the first Marxist oriented periodicals, and attracted people to their point of view.

In 1910, Joaquín García Monge, the famous publisher of *Repertorio Americano* joined Lira and Dengo to establish the "Centro Germinal", with the avowed goal to... "educate workers with a sociological vision."¹⁰

The Marxist oriented Centro Germinal served as a popular university and attracted intellectuals and many of the students studying in the law school; the most important being Manuel Mora. The Centro Germinal was finally broken up by the Tinoco Dictatorship, but the labor movement struggled on.

Besides having a great influence on intellectuals, the Centro spawned the "Confederación General de Trabajadores", the country's first major labor union. In 1910, the CGT in conjunction with a new organization called the Centro Socialista, led a successful general strike.¹¹ This act secured an eight hour day, and was the beginning of Marxist domination of the labor movements.

The development of the Costa Rica Communist Party was renewed after they recovered from their disillusion with General Volio's Reformist Party. A short lived, but popular university was organized by Joaquín García Monge, to take up the void left by the disappearance of the Centro Germinal, and a new labor union called the "Unión General de Trabajadores" replaced the CGT. In 1928, pressure by labor to reopen the popular university led to Manuel Mora forming the "Asociación Revolucionaria de Cultura Obrera" (ARCO). Finally, in conjunction with the UGT Mora founded the Costa Rican Communist Party, June 6, 1931. He was elected its first Secretary General, a post he still holds today!

The Party called "El Bloque de Obreros y Campesinos" published a weekly newspaper, organized various pressure groups, and continued organizing labor. In 1932 they elected two members to the San José municipal council, and in 1934 they elected two deputies to the National Assembly, where they regularly denounced foreign companies and the abuses of authoritarian minded President León Cortés.¹²

However, the most important accomplishment of the Communists was their leadership in the great banana strike of 1934, and the Turrialba Sugar Workers strike. These two successful strikes won the Communists the allegiance of the workers in these zones, which they still command today.

Toward the end of the 30's, the Communists began to tone down their rhetoric, and tried to make alliances with local parties, thus following the Popular Front idea in Europe. In 1939, they actually made an alliance to support the candidacy of ex-president Ricardo Jiménez.¹³ But the deal became unglued when Russia signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler. Mora ran for the Presidency in 1940, but lost by a huge margin to Dr. Rafael Angel Calderón Guardia, son of conservative Catholic—but progressive minded—Dr. Rafael Angel Calderón Muñoz.

THE REFORMS AND PROBLEMS OF THE CALDERON GUARDIA ADMINISTRATION

Calderón Guardia came to office with the blessings of the power structure and with the help of some elements who had been shunted aside by the ruling groups.

Basically, the Calderón government was composed of men who had

been out of favor with previous administrations. They were pro-Catholic and conservative in ecclesiastical matters, but progressive in economic and social questions. Notable among these people were General Volio, Carlos María Jiménez, ex-president Julio Acosta, Calderón's own father, and finally the newly appointed archbishop Víctor Manuel Sanabria Martínez. Sanabria was an intimate friend of the Calderón family. He came from a humble background and was imbued with the idea of doing something concrete to help the working class.¹⁴

Calderón Guardia himself had also been influenced by Cardinal Mercier while studying in Belgium. He came to power feeling that... "The Costa Rican state has a social function (which is)... to guarantee to all the inhabitants a minimum of well being"¹⁵, and as a guide to doing this he espoused the doctrine "of the encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius IX as synthesized by Cardinal Mercier."¹⁶ Thus the Christian democratic ideal was in power with Calderón.

Calderón's first reforms were to reopen the National University, extend a program of building low cost housing, and the establishment of a system of Social Security in 1942. Calderón got these through Congress by the prestige of his great election victory and the support of the general population. However, his administration began to meet increasing opposition partly caused by his own intransigent attitude and growing fear of the entrenched economic oligarchy.

In the second part of his program Calderón wanted to write social guarantees into the Constitution and then pass a labor code guaranteeing workers the right to unionize, strike, and in general be treated as equals. This program ran into increased opposition. According to Manuel Mora, the government was about to be overthrown until one night he went to the Presidential residence to tell Calderón of a planned coup against his government by conservative interests, and that Mora agreed to save the government, if Calderón would reorganize his government to help the working classes. The only thing wrong with this is that Mora cannot remember the date, and there is no other corroborating evidence. Calderón denied this story.¹ But whatever did actually happen, Mora and Calderón became more closely allied. Archbishop Sanabria helped the rapprochement between the two groups by authorizing Catholics to join the Communist Party.

Sanabria wrote that the "problem of the workers... are of such urgency that something should be done, and this is clearly the will of Christ for the priesthood of our time."¹⁸ Mora, softening the Communist Party's line, said:

"We may have to make sacrifices in our ideological camp, but Costa Rica will move forward."¹⁹

At this time Moscow announced the dismantling of the Second International. The Communist Party was reborn under the name "Partido de Vanguardia Popular".²⁰ The Archbishop, in response to a letter from Mora said:

"I judge the program of the new party sane... these doctrines are consequently without encumbrance to conscience. Catholics, if they desire, can join this new group."²¹

Thus was completed the third link of the "menage a trois" between the Government, Communist Party, and the Catholic Church which resulted in the enactment of a far reaching set of social legislation.

First, several guarantees were entrenched in the constitution, then a labor code was enacted guaranteeing rights of unionization, paid vacations, maternity benefits, protection against arbitrary dismissal. These reforms which were opposed by conservative groups were enacted only by the combined forces of the Communist labor groups putting pressure on congress by street demonstration, Sanabria demonstrating that the church approved, and Calderón using government pressure.

The public high point of the tripartite cooperation occurred on Independence day, September 15, 1943, when the head of the Communist Party, the Archbishop of San José, and the President all arrived together in a jeep and spoke from the same platform. From then on the marriage began to have problems.

The international climate changed. The United States began to put pressure for severance of ties with Communist parties. Jacobo Shifter²² has investigated this and Professor Junkins, will assuredly have much to say about this.

Archbishop Sanabria became a little disenchanted with the increased power of the Communists in the government. In 1945 organized a new Catholic Union (Confederación Costarricense de Trabajadores "Rerum Novarum") under Father Benjamín Núñez. Núñez later became an intimate advisor of José Figueres and served in government until last month, when he quit his post at UNESCO because of the Pope's ban on clergy serving in government posts.²³

Calderón became more isolated, and had to rely more on Communist support. An opposition of emerging middle class, disaffected groups in the Coffee-Merchants' class, and larger landholding sectors in the country united under the leadership of José Figueres to oust the Calderón forces in the bloody 1948 Civil War.

SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT

This brings us to the last group of reformers, the Social Democrats.

The Social Democrats had various antecedents. Part of them go back to the administration of Alfredo González Flores who tried to put in a direct income tax in 1916, but was overthrown.

Another element is the APRISTA movement and the liberal Presidents of Colombia in the 1930's.

One of the strongest influences, on the development of the Social Democratic movement was Roberto Brenes Mesen, a Costa Rican, educated in Chile, who had taught for many years at Northwestern University. Late in life Brenes returned to his native country and began to attract an almost fanatical following of university students and young professionals.²³ Brenes advocated establishment of ideological political parties to replace the personalistic political grouping which had existed. He also taught that it was necessary to analyse the country's problems and work out a master plan to resolve them.

One of the chief components of Brenes circle was a group called the "Cultural Association of University Students". This had been formed by a group of friends and educators who clustered around historian Carlos Monge Alfaro and the educator Isaac Azofeida.²⁴ Originally organized under the guidance of the Colombian ambassador this group gravitated to Brenes and in 1949, in Brenes' living room they founded the "Centro para el Estudio de Problemas Nacionales".

The Centro became a nucleus for mostly middle class professionals and students from the new university. It was an exclusive group with membership by invitation only. Although its membership never exceeded 200 it exerted a great deal of influence by its monthly magazine *Surco*.

Throughout its five years of existence the Centro made many proposals for the betterment of education, agriculture, and public administration. However, their main thrust was placed on the improvement of the political process and on exploring the formation of ideological rather than personalistic parties. They felt that the government was controlled by a political oligarchy and that democracy could only be restored by the creation of political parties based on issues rather than personalities.

The center's attitude toward the social reforms was neutral at best. A reading of the various issues of *Surco* gives the impression that they were not firmly in favor of the social legislation of Calderón Guardia.²⁵ Or, as Isaac Felipe Azofeifa said, "They were like embarrassed conservatives, saying that the measure was acceptable in principle but in reality opposing it by saying that it needed more study."²⁵

The center became actively involved in politics at the time of the 1944 elections. After the elections they became vehemently anti-Calderón. In March, 1945, they merged with "Acción Demócrata", a group led by José Figueres and formed the Social Democratic Party.

The Newly organized Social Democratic Party called for:

Ideological political parties, constitutional reforms to guarantee better and more impartial government administration, fair elections, a civil service system, better health care, and improved labor law, nationalization of electric and water services, more state control over coffee and sugar, more cooperatives, and economic integration with Central America.²⁷ This, incidently, has been the major program of the present National Liberation Party.

This then is the basic pattern of reform movements in Costa Rica, but let us now conclude and see how these three basic reform elements have evolved. In the 1948 elections the Social Democrats and the entrenched agro-export interests supported conservative Otilio Ulate for the Presidency. A Calderón-communist alliance supported Calderón for reelection.

During the campaign, violence increased and some of the more moderate elements began to desert Calderón, thus leaving him—dependent on the Communists, who he used more for strong armed tactics.

These tactics were answered in kind by the other side. The situation became critical and after the annulling of the election a group headed by José Figueres overthrew the government in a bloody six week Civil War. Basically, Figueres united the emerging middle class, some elements of the conservative agro-export classes, the larger landowners in the country, and some non-definable catholic elements who were afraid of the spectre of communist domination of the country.

Figueres ruled for eighteen months. During this time he nationalized the banks, tried to punish the corrupt people he could catch in the former government, by creating special courts and confiscating property by decree.

After returning power to Otilio Ulate, Figueres was voted back into office in 1953 as standard bearer of the newly formed Partido de Liberación Nacional. Thus began a vital FLN domination of the country. This party, although out of office for twelve of the last thirty years has effectively controlled the Legislative Assembly and has largely prevented passage of legislation it does not favor.

Basically the PLN is a coalition of social democrats, middle class professionals, people in the country who still see Figueres as the country's

savior, increasingly more elements of the agro-export and manufacturing classes. In short, the party is extending its control and practically "PRI-izing" Costa Rica.

The Party maintains a school to train future leaders. President Monge was its director for several years. Graduates of this school and of its youth group have lately been taking their place in the Party's leadership. The party effectively controls the national printing press (Editorial Costa Rica), and much of the country's intellectual life.

Basically this party during its long existence has expanded the reforms of the 1940's. They have extended the social security system to everyone; nationalized and improved, telephone, water, and electric services; built thousands of new low cost homes, fostered the cooperative movement (with mixed results), and distributed some land. Probably the most important contribution is that they have institutionalized a system of free elections and have had a good record protecting freedom of expression.

The Calderonista-Christian Democrat elements has not fared as well. Calderón became embroiled in a series of unfortunate incidents. He led two unsuccessful counter-revolutions and when he ran for the presidency in 1962 received only 35 percent of the vote.²⁸ In 1966, he just about lost his following when he made a pact with his hated rivals Otilio Ulate and Mario Echandi to form a coalition party (Unificación Nacional) to back conservative José Joaquín Trejos for a successful bid for the Presidency.

The Calderonistas were an important element in Rodrigo Carazo's winning the election in 1978. But although, Calderon's son served as Foreign Minister the Calderonistas exerted little influence and certainly nothing was done to further the reforms on the 1940's.

Another group calling itself the Costa Rica Christian Democratic Party was organized in 1966. Their origins are in the German and Chilean Christian Democratic parties. They became an active part of the coalition that elected Carazo and supported the Calderonistas in 1982. At the present time an agreement to unite both Christian democratic parties is being considered.

The Communists remain a basically Moscow oriented group with Manuel Mora still its chief. They were prohibited from participating in elections until 1970. At the present time they have four representatives in the Legislative Assembly. After Mora dies there may be a struggle in the party for leadership and a possible turn to more violent actions.

Basically, the reform movement is stagnant in Costa Rica. Many people thought that new reforms would be proposed by the newly elected President Luis Alberto Monge. Monge represented the hope of the more progressive Social Democratic elements in the PLN. He came into office in

the midst of a grave financial crisis which saw an inflation rate of close to 100 percent a year, and a de facto devaluation of the national currency of about 400 percent. For this reason Monge has his hands full trying to stave off financial ruin, let alone think of major new social legislation.

People are waiting to see if the PLN government can save the country. If they fail, we might see more agitation of workers and leftist elements and possibly a move by right wing elements to limit or even overthrow the democratic government. If Monge fails, you might also see the Calderonista-Christian democratic alliance making much political capital out of the situation.

NOTAS

¹For a discussion of this see; John and Mavis Biesanz. *Costa Rican Life* (New York, 1944) and for a viewpoint which stresses the hardships of the working classes see: Jorge Mario Salazar, *Política y Reforma en Costa Rica 1914-1958* (San Pedro, Costa Rica, 1981), pp. 13-28 and Manuel Rojas Bolaños, *Lucha Social y Guerra Civil en Costa Rica 1940-1948* (San Pedro, Costa Rica, 1979), pp. 14-20).

²Pastoral Letter as cited in James Backer, *La Iglesia y el Sindicalismo en Costa Rica* (San José, 1974), p. 41.

³Vladimir de la Cruz, *Las Luchas Sociales en Costa Rica 1870-1930* (San José, Costa Rica, 1980), p. 61.

⁴Salazar, p. 48

⁵Backer, p. 65

⁶Public address, delivered June 6, 1966, by Manuel Mora at the Centro de Estudios Sociales, San José. (The author was present). Also see Bernardo Van der Laat Echevarría, "Apuntes sobre el movimiento de Liberación Nacional y el concepto de partido ideológico y permanente," (San José, 1965), p. 4.

⁷Mora address, *Ibid.*, and Personal Interview with Manuel Mora in his home, San Pedro de Montes de Oca, Costa Rica, June 19, 1968.

⁸Eduardo Mora, *Historia del Movimiento Obrero Internacional* (San José, 1969), p. 80.

⁹Backer, p. 69.

¹⁰De la Cruz, p. 79.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 99.

¹²For a discussion of the politics of this period see: Theodore S. Creedman, "León Cortés y su Tiempo", in *Anales* (de la Academia de Geografía e Historia de Costa Rica). Años de 1967-1969 (San José, 1971).

¹³Theodore S. Creedman, "The Political Development of Costa Rica, 1936-1944: Politics of an Emerging Welfare State in a Patriarchal Society." Unpublished Ph. D. thesis, Department of History, University of Maryland, 1971., p. 103, Hereafter cited as Creedman, thesis.

¹⁴Backer, pp. 85-90.

¹⁵Rafael Angel Calderón Guardia, *El Gobernante y el Hombre frente al Problema Social Costarricense* (San José, 1942), p. 31.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁷Personal interview with Rafael Angel Calderón Guardia, San José, April 26, 1966.

¹⁸Letter from Sanabria to Father José Vicente Salazar as cited in Ricardo Blanco Segura, *Monseñor Sanabria* (San José, 1962), p. 258.

¹⁹*Trabajo*, June 19, 1943. *Trabajo* was the weekly newspaper of the Costa Rican Communist Party.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Letter, Sanabria to Mora, June 14, 1943, as cited in Blanco, p. 89.

²²See Jacobo Schifter, *Costa Rica: 1948 (Análisis de documentos confidenciales del Departamento de Estado)* (San Pedro, 1982).

²³Abelardo Bonilla, *Historia de la Literatura Costarricense*. Tomo I. (San José, 1967), pp. 184-185.

²⁴Van der Laat, pp. 6-7.

²⁵Creedman, thesis, pp. 172-177.

²⁶Personal interview with Isaac Felipe Azofeifa, Ciudad Universitaria, December 23, 1969.

²⁷Carlos Araya Pochet, *Historia de los Partidos Políticos: Liberación Nacional*, (San José, 1968), pp. 44-45.

²⁸Eduardo Oconitrillo, *Un Siglo de Política Costarricense*, (San José 1981), pp. 179-186.