

Nonviolent Insurrection in Ecuador: The 1944 Glorious May Revolution

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Abstract

In her 1988 book *Nonviolent Insurrection in El Salvador: The Fall of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez*, Patricia Parkman describes a 1944 military-civilian rebellion and a subsequent civic strike as an example of a nonviolent movement which successfully removed a brutal dictator from power in Central America. On May 28 of the same year, a similar alliance with a strong and active presence of women, students, Indians, peasants and other elements of civil society similarly brought an end to the Carlos Arroyo del Río government in Ecuador. These types of general strikes are common in Latin America, but are rarely interpreted as examples of nonviolent movements. This paper applies Parkman's theoretical model to Ecuador with an eye toward understanding how a peace perspective can lead to a better understanding of social movements in that country.

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On May 28, 1944, a coalition of workers, students, Indians, peasants, women, and young military officers joined forces in Ecuador's "Glorious May Revolution" to overthrow the increasingly unpopular presidency of Carlos Arroyo del Río. With a declining economic situation and a growing fear that Arroyo del Río would not respect the outcome of the upcoming June elections, popular pressure grew for political change. The 1944 revolution began at 10 p.m. on the evening of May 28 with the military garrison in the coastal port city of Guayaquil revolting against Carlos Arroyo del Río's government. Until 7 a.m. the next morning, dissidents attacked and burned the *cuartel de carabineros*, the barracks which housed the repressive police force that defended oligarchical interests and formed Arroyo del Río's main base of support. The army, which was a strong rival of the *carabineros*, claimed "the support of all the people, principally students, workers, and intellectuals," and declared that it had rebelled "to put an end to the hateful tyranny of traitors whom we can no longer tolerate." The military denied that it desired to take over the government. Rather, power "will be placed in the hands of civilians who will guarantee an immediate return to normality." This would not be a traditional military or palace coup which has seemingly plagued much of Latin American history.¹

The next morning, masses of people flooded the streets to demand deep-seated reforms that would address their grievances. It was a time of euphoric optimism which seemed to signal

¹"Proclama de la Guarnición Militar de Guayaquil," in Universidad de Guayaquil, Facultad de Ciencias Económicas, *28 de mayo de 1944: documentos* ([Guayaquil]: Departamento de Publicaciones de la Facultad de Ciencias Económicas, 1983), 171. For detailed examinations of the May 1944 revolution, see Sergio Enrique Girón, *La revolución de mayo* (Quito: Editorial Atahualpa, 1945); Manuel Araujo Hidalgo, *El 28 de mayo, balance de una revolución popular: Documentos para la historia* (Quito, Ecuador: Tall. Graf. Nacionales, 1946); Universidad de Guayaquil, *El 28 de mayo de 1944: testimonio* ([Guayaquil]: Litografía e Impr. de la Universidad de Guayaquil, 1984); Silvia Vega Ugalde, *La Gloriosa: de la revolución del 28 de mayo de 1944 a la contrarrevolución velasquista*, Colección Ecuador/Historia (Quito, Ecuador: Editorial El Conejo, 1987); Carlos de la Torre, *La seducción velasquista* (Quito, Ecuador: Ediciones Libri Mundi, Enrique Grosse-Luemern, Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales FLACSO-Sede Ecuador, 1993); Carlos de la Torre, "Velasco Ibarra and 'La Revolución Gloriosa': The Social Production of a Populist Leader in Ecuador in the 1940s," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 26:3 (October 1994): 683-712; and de la Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America*.

the emergence of new social relations and the end of exclusionary state structures. Popular uprisings in Guayaquil, which resulted in the deaths of several hundred people, spread the following morning to the highland towns of Quito, Cuenca, and Riobamba. The military declined to come to the aid of the embattled government, refusing to use repression to defend the interests of the oligarchy. Some lower-level officers and soldiers even provided overt support to the revolutionary movement. With the elimination of Arroyo del Río's repressive *carabiniero* police forces, students organized into Guardias Cívicas Urbanas patrolled the streets, but reported no problems. In Quito, protestors encircled governmental buildings paralyzing their operations. Street demonstrations congregated on the Plaza de la Independencia where people sang the national anthem, cheered populist leader José María Velasco Ibarra, and speakers made impassioned calls for social change. By the evening of the 29th about half of Quito's population was in the streets in support of the uprising. Women's committees played an important role in these protests, including helping organize a human enclosure around the Government Palace that gained the surrender of the men stationed there. Having lost virtually all of his support, Arroyo del Río resigned from the presidency on May 31. The military leaders who participated in the uprising asserted that "we, the men of the people, captured the government, and we set up a popular regime, the most democratic in this America."² Writer, feminist and leftist leader Nela Martínez assumed the role of Minister of Government in the transitional government. In the countryside, Indians and peasants joined the uprisings. Long-time Indian rights activist Dolores Cacuango led Indigenous forces in an attack on the army barracks in the northern highland town of Cayambe. Ecuador, one author observed, finally "was in the hands of its legitimate owners."³

This type of civic action was not unique to Ecuador. To place the May Revolution in a broader historical context, it is well to remember that weeks earlier a general strike in El Salvador led to the removal of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez from power. The fall of this dictator on May 9, 1944 had repercussions throughout the region, with these events inspiring uprisings in Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. The most famous and longest lasting of these

²Girón, 122.

³Raquel Rodas, *Nosotras que del amor hicimos...* (Quito: Raquel Rodas, 1992), 60. On the role of women in the May Revolution, see Ketty Romo-Leroux, *Movimiento de mujeres en el Ecuador* (Guayaquil: Editorial de la Universidad de Guayaquil, 1997), 162-63. On the role of Indians, see Vega Ugalde, 96.

was a massive civic strike of university students, teachers, and lawyers in Guatemala on June 23 that led Jorge Ubico's resignation on July 1. This opened the way for Juan José Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz's progressive reforms that radically transformed Guatemalan society. Similar student strikes in Nicaragua attempted but ultimately failed to remove Anastasio Somoza García from power.

In *Nonviolent Insurrection in El Salvador: The Fall of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez*, Patricia Parkman places these Central American strikes in the context of what she describes as “one of the most distinctive elements of a rich but neglected Latin American tradition of nonviolent political struggle.” Rather than coordinated by organized labor for class ends, these civic strikes draw on diverse social classes including students, professionals, shopkeepers, and white-collar workers united for common political objectives. Parkman describes the May strike in El Salvador as a classic example of a nonviolent insurrection that represents “a wider phenomenon of continuing importance throughout Latin America.” She argues that in a region where change is often seen to result only from armed struggle, these events illustrate the relevance of nonviolence as a means of political action in Latin America.⁴ This essay asks whether Parkman's interpretations of the fall of the Martínez regime as a nonviolent insurrection are useful for interpreting Ecuador's Glorious May Revolution.

Patricia Parkman expands on her analysis in a subsequent publication *Insurrectionary Civic Strikes in Latin America, 1931-1961* in which she analyzes sixteen civic strikes throughout Latin America. She does not include Ecuador's 1944 Glorious May Revolution in her discussion, but based on archives sources in the U.S. National Archives examines a much more obscure strike in 1933 which unsuccessfully attempted to force the resignation of President Juan de Dios Martínez Mera.⁵ The 1930s were a period of intense political activism and frequent changes of power in Ecuador, and it is doubtful that there were any aspects of this palace coup that would significantly distinguish it from other extra-constitutional changes of government from the same period. These events failed to result in any lasting or significant political changes.

⁴Patricia Parkman, *Nonviolent Insurrection in El Salvador: The Fall of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988), 2, 3.

⁵Patricia Parkman, *Insurrectionary Civic Strikes in Latin America, 1931-1961*, The Albert Einstein Institution: Monograph series Number 1 (Cambridge, MA: Albert Einstein Institution, 1990), 2.

The Glorious May Revolution largely meets the general characteristics that Parkman uses to describe insurrectionary civic strikes. The strikes appear to occur in waves, with one save being in 1944 at the end of World War II. Although the strikes appeared to emerge spontaneously, in reality they followed months or years of organizing. Unlike peasant revolts or labor actions that emerged out of one social class, these civic strikes drew on a cross-class alliance based largely on the “middle sectors” of an increasingly urbanized population. In addition, the strikes occurred during a period of economic crisis combined with a repressive government that seemed to close off the possibilities for constitutional solutions. Commonly, there was a fear that current leaders would establish themselves as permanent fixtures in power through the process of *continuismo*. Furthermore, these strikes lacked a charismatic leader with decisions being made by representatives from a broad coalition. Although violence often accompanied these strikes, it was not employed as an intentional or deliberate weapon in toppling the government. Rather, activists relied on mass demonstrations, petitions, and work stoppages. Subsequently, governments fell not because they had been toppled by armed force but rather their support and legitimacy had been removed causing them to implode into the power vacuum. Finally, Parkman notes a “demonstration effect” in which, for example, anti-Machado protests in Cuba in 1933 were echoed in the attempt to remove Martínez from power in Ecuador. Additional research may reveal inspiration for Ecuador’s May Revolution in the ouster of Martínez in El Salvador or other similar events. All of these factors that Parkman presents apply equally well to the May uprisings in both El Salvador and Ecuador.⁶

Parkman’s insurrectionary civic strikes share certain characteristics with New Social Movements (NSMs). For example, they are not class-based but rather emerge out of the politicization of new social (often urban) actors. Most scholars consider NSMs to differ from traditional political parties or labor unions in that they respond to a specific crisis rather than engaging in a project of historical transformation (such as taking over state structures). Insurrectionary civic strikes emerged out of a specific situation, but their intent to gain state power reveals that they shared an ideological heritage with more traditional revolutionary means.

⁶Parkman, *Insurrectionary Civic Strikes in Latin America*, 3-5.

If guerrilla warfare is a continuation of politics by other means, so are these strikes. Some critics have asked what are so new about these NSMs. Political activists have always been involved in struggles with student, labor, peasant popular movements, and detailed examinations of case studies often reveal that “new social movements” are neither so new nor isolated from broader class and partisan struggles. Rather, there is a strong sense of continuity with traditional popular movements, with fundamental goals, strategies and tactics being similar (demonstrations, sit-ins, hunger marches to capital, petitions, letter-writing campaigns, etc.). In all cases, pressure tactics are employed with the goal of wresting concessions from state.⁷

Salvador communist leader Miguel Mármol was a participant in the events leading to the fall of Martínez’ government in 1944, and presents them in a different light than Parkman. Unlike Parkman’s emphasize on Martínez’ eventual fall on May 9, Mármol focuses on a failed civil-military rebellion of April 2 that launched the sequence of events leading to the dictator’s eventual departure. Rather than a spontaneous mass action, he describes a carefully and quietly planned conspiracy forced to be organized from the underground because of governmental repression. In his descriptions of the event, he emphasizes armed aspects with the Air Force joining the rebels and bombing the hated *carabinero* police. Mármol describes joining hundreds of others and going to rebel military barracks to offer to take up arms against the government. He proceeds to criticize the leaders of the failed April 2 revolt for lacking the courage to arm volunteers willing to fight the regime. Ultimately, it was not a mass movement but Martínez’ own excesses and abuses that led to a withdrawal of support, including a loss of support from the U.S. embassy that increasingly was pressed into the contraction of fighting a fascist military dictatorships in Europe while supporting them in Latin America.⁸

Like most people in Latin America, Mármol probably never seriously considered a Gandhian or King-type of disciplined non-violence as a viable strategy to achieve the goals of social justice that he desired. Mármol was a marxist-leninist, and marxist struggles have normally considered armed struggle to be the primary method of gaining control of state structures that

⁷Judith Adler Hellman, "The Riddle of New Social Movements: Who They Are and What They Do," in *Capital, Power, and Inequality in Latin America*, ed. Sandor Halebsky and Richard L. Harris (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 165-183.

⁸Roque Dalton, *Miguel Mármol* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1987), 417f.

could be used to restructure society. Nevertheless, unlike the seemingly neurotic fascination with violence that drove the U.S. civil war's John Brown, Peru's Shining Path guerrillas, and others to a quasi-religious belief that the evils of the land would be purified through the shedding of blood, Mármol does not betray any belief that violence in and of itself was a positive force. If anything, it was a necessary evil utilized only to gain a greater good. Armed struggle (unlike the U.S. rush to war against Iraq) is only a final (and unavoidable?) alternative when all other peaceful paths to social change have been exhausted. Politically, Mármol took an open, non-dogmatic line that argued for the need for both political and armed struggles, without privileging one over the other. The political struggle would be characterized by outsiders (like Parkman) as non-violent, even if this was not Mármol's explicit intent or philosophical orientation.

When the military in Ecuador or El Salvador refused to fire on peaceful demonstrators this was not due to a sudden discovery of a conscientious objection to warfare or a conversion to pacifism. Rather, it was part of an important undercurrent of a progressive tradition in Latin American armed forces. Often growing out of a class consciousness from working class recruits or the frustrated aspirations mid-level officers, such soldiers refused to play the role of lackeys for elite, conservative, monied interests. Over the course of the twentieth century, this opened a divide within the military much like it did within the catholic church, in which a popular church emerged that broke with its traditional alliance with conservatives. Joining rather than firing on protesters was therefore a *political* rather than *strategic* or *philosophical* decision.

Rather than a disciplined or philosophical non-violence, such actions appear to be just one more tool in a diverse arsenal of strategies. Parkman notes that "the extent and character of violence used by the insurgents varied considerably." In El Salvador "the nonviolent campaign ... unfolded even as preparations for a military insurrection went forward" and it included various aspects: propaganda, legal challenges, and diplomatic pressure.⁹ From this perspective, it is simplistic to counterpose violent and non-violent strategies, for indeed activists engaged in a much broader range of actions with some of them being more violent than others. As Mármol notes, even successful armed guerrilla movements rely on political actions that could be construed as

⁹Parkman, *Insurrectionary Civic Strikes in Latin America*, 12; Parkman, *Nonviolent Insurrection in El Salvador*, 46.

fundamentally non-violent in nature. But this does not mean that strict pacifists would embrace the broader insurrection as a non-violent alternative. Nevertheless, the unarmed nature of the broader popular movement in which the FMLN functioned in El Salvador in the 1980s drew in activists who otherwise would have been uncomfortable engaging in military actions.

It is important to remember, however, that more often than not most of the violence in such uprisings was in the form of unprovoked aggression by security forces against unarmed demonstrators and innocent bystanders. And it is usually in this context that explicitly non-violent actions emerge. Rather than ratcheting up tensions in a situation in which protesters did not have the means with which to defend themselves and what could surely lead to a massacre, simple issues of self-preservation would lead activists to favor tactics that would not encourage violent responses. An indeed, as Parkman observes, there is a fundamental difference in strategy between a *huelga de brazos caídos* (work stoppage) that “implied a conscious choice of nonviolent action” and an anarcho-syndicalist inspired general strike “characterized by sabotage and fighting.”¹⁰ In this sense, activists choosing to pursue the strategy of a civic strike were specifically deciding on a non-violent tactic.

As the U.S. is quickly discovering in Iraq, it is one thing to dispose of a despot and quite something different to build a positive, constructive alternative in its stead. Mármol blames the ideological confusion of the Democratic Union Party (PUD) that posited Arturo Romero as a presidential candidate to replace Martínez as a factor in the failure of the April-May uprisings to make lasting change in El Salvador.¹¹ Similarly in Ecuador, the fall of Arroyo del Río led to the Alianza Democrática Ecuatoriana (ADE, Ecuadorian Democratic Alliance) taking power. The ADE established provisional ruling juntas in Guayaquil and Quito that would govern until their presidential champion and populist leader José María Velasco Ibarra could return to the country. The juntas announced a six-point political program which included agricultural, industrial, labor, and other reforms.¹² This rupture in the liberal elites’ domination over state structures led to an

¹⁰Parkman, *Insurrectionary Civic Strikes in Latin America*, 14-15.

¹¹Dalton, 434.

¹²Humberto Oña Villarreal, *Presidentes del Ecuador*, 3a ed (Quito: Multigráficas Sur, 1994), 53; Elias Muñoz Vicuña, “Prologo,” in *28 de mayo de 1944: documentos*, 10; George I. Blanksten, *Ecuador: Constitutions and Caudillos* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1951), 46.

explosion of popular organizing efforts as Indians and other subalterns increasingly agitated for their concerns. Workers, women, students, peasants, and agriculturalists all held meetings during the months of June and July to elect new leaders and put forward organizational agendas.

Leftists in Ecuador thought May 28 was the beginning of a Marxist revolution, but instead populists gained control who excelled at mobilizing the masses with inflammatory rhetoric implemented policies once in office that benefitted conservative elite economic interests. This subsequently led observers to blame the left for a lack of ideological purity in organizing the movement. Socialist intellectual Manuel Agustín Aguirre argued that the failure to achieve significant and lasting changes was due to the left's tactics and strategies, including engaging in a popular front strategy. Only a proletarian revolution, Aguirre concluded, could achieve the necessary revolutionary changes. Even outside observers noted that after struggling so hard for victory, it was a mistake for the left to trust their fortunes to a populist leader such as Velasco Ibarra.¹³ After a brief period of euphoria which appeared to be ushering in a new period of social relations with optimistic expectations of increased popular participation in political power, the country's elite reestablished their control. The lower classes were once again marginalized and excluded from political processes.

What this perhaps fundamentally boils down to is whether one privileges peace or justice in supporting a popular movement. Morally, we cannot use unethical means in an attempt to achieve worth goals, but likewise if the end falls significantly short of our goal we need to question the strategic and ultimate value of our means of operation. Few political activists in Latin America would consider themselves to be pacifists. In part, this is due to a lack of the development of a political culture that has valued non-violent strategies, and in part it is because icons of non-violence such as Martin Luther King have been imported as symbols of struggles for social justice rather than as examples of viable strategies. Nevertheless, as Parkman notes in her work, it is a mistake to ignore the significance of non-violent strategies inherent in social justice struggles in Latin America.

¹³Manuel Agustín Aguirre, *Marx ante América Latina: Homenaje a Carlos Marx por el centenario de su muerte* (Quito: Instituto de Investigaciones Economicas, Universidad Central, 1985), 116; Manuel Agustín Aguirre, "Breves memorias sobre la Revolución del 28 de Mayo de 1944," in *El 28 de mayo de 1944: testimonio*, 234; Blanksten, 69.