

6-24-2004

Regional Reluctance in Iraq

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Regional Reluctance in Iraq." (2004). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9210>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Regional Reluctance in Iraq

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Central America

Published: 2004-06-24

The US may be paying today in Iraq for the government it overthrew a half-century ago in Guatemala. June 17 marked the 50th anniversary of the overthrow of the Jacobo Arbenz government, the first truly democratically elected government Guatemala had ever had until then (see NotiCen, 2003-05-22).

As Arbenz's economy secretary, Alfonso Bauer Pais, told reporters recently, "In the history of Guatemala, with no exaggeration, there has never been a period that can compare to 1944-1954, because it began with attacking the vestiges of semi-feudalism...and maintained a position of dignity and sovereignty against the new imperialism." Bauer Pais is the last living member of the Arbenz government.

In 1954, the US was at the height of its anti-communist crusades, and Central America was the focus not only of the virulent policies of the day but also of the Dulles brothers, John Foster, the secretary of state, and Allen, chief of the CIA, the agency that engineered the coup. The Dulles brothers, stockholders in the United Fruit Company (UFCO), had a significant financial interest in seeing that pro-UFCO dictators remained in charge. Allen Dulles, prior to taking over at the CIA, was president of UFCO. John had been UFCO's lawyer. The US intervention ended a period in Guatemala known as the "Ten Years of Spring," which began with the overthrow of the dictator Jorge Ubico and the election, first, of Juan Jose Arevalo in 1944, and then, in 1950, of Jacobo Arbenz.

Arbenz permitted free expression, legalized unions, allowed diverse political parties, and initiated a series of socioeconomic reforms, the centerpiece of which was a moderate land reform that redistributed some of the unused portions of the very largest latifundias to the landless rural poor. The lands were not expropriated. The government bought them, paying the price the owners declared on tax documents. Poor campesinos were then allowed to buy them at low rates. Arbenz's own lands were included in the program. The idea did not meet with approval at UFCO, where 85% of the land it owned was uncultivated, and soon the US demanded more money than what the Guatemalan government had given.

Summing up the US concerns, Charles R. Burrows of the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs at the State Department wrote in 1953, "Guatemala has become an increasing threat to the stability of Honduras and El Salvador. Its agrarian reform is a powerful propaganda weapon; its broad social program of aiding the workers and peasants in a victorious struggle against the upper classes and large foreign enterprises has a strong appeal to the populations of Central American neighbors where similar conditions prevail."

In 1954, the CIA saw its coup succeed. Arbenz left, and Guatemala was restored to a dictatorship made safe for the fruiterers. A few years later, a civil war that would take 36 years to extinguish erupted, and somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 people died under circumstances of terror. A

fundamental tactic of the Arbenz coup was harboring the forces of a trumped-up opposition under the nominal leadership of Col. Carlos Castillo Armas, chosen to become president once Arbenz was dispatched, across the border in Honduras. This was the first, but not the only, time the US used Honduras as Battleship America in the region. Honduras harbored contra and US troops poised for invasion during the US-inspired contra war in Nicaragua in the 1980s.

Setting the stage for rejection

This intrusive use of national territory over the years set the stage for Honduras' rejection of participating in the US invasion of Iraq, according to Matias Funes, president of the Partido Unificacion Democratica (UD). The UD was against sending troops to Iraq and very much in favor of their early return following Spain's decision to pull out. While the linkage to the sea change in Spanish policy subsequent to the electoral loss of the pro-Bush government of Jose Maria Aznar is generally thought to have been causative (see NotiCen, 2004-03-18), Funes said a longer-standing national revulsion to invasion was at the root. He called the sending of Honduran troops to Iraq an "unfortunate act" in the foreign policy of Honduras, on a par with permitting the use of its territory for the overthrow of Arbenz. He added that Honduras never should have sent troops to the Dominican Republic in the 1960s, or to Haiti and to the Western Sahara in the 1990s, nor should it have allowed contra troops on its soil in the 1980s.

Another Honduran for whom the connection between the Arbenz overthrow and that of Saddam Hussein is palpable is Honduran human rights commissioner Ramon Custodio. Now 73 years old, Custodio remembers 1954. He was against sending troops to Iraq in the first place because doing so "keeps sending the same message to the world that we are an interventionist country or allied with those who intervene in the destiny of other countries."

In 1954, he said, honorable Hondurans never approved "renting the territory of their country to mercenaries," any more than they did with the contras in the 1980s. Hondurans also winced in March, when reaction to Honduras' sponsorship of a condemnatory resolution against Cuba before the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva brought up the Arbenz connection. Wire services reported that "human rights organizations maintain that Honduras has been a traditional 'peon' of the US, and used against other countries as occurred in the intervention against the government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala."

Guatemala, unlike its neighbors Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic, did not send troops to Iraq. President Oscar Berger announced his intention to do so, but the Army, without fanfare, announced that it considered homeland security its primary mission, and, no, troops would not be going. An internationally embarrassed Berger then announced that Guatemalan troops would not be going after all. He gave budgetary constraints as a reason for the reversal. But for others, Guatemala's own history with the US provided a more compelling rationale.

Some remembered that Arbenz was only the second head of state to be toppled by the CIA. The first was Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran, on Aug. 19, 1953. Arbenz fell ten months later. Just as Mossadegh and Arbenz had something in common, so did Castillo Armas and Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the US-installed shah.

Scholars have observed that both coups had horrendous long-term effects. "It's quite clear that the 1953 coup cut short a move toward democracy in Iran," said Mark J. Gasiorowski, a historian at Louisiana State University who began studying that coup in the 1980s. "The United States bears responsibility for this. Iranians wrote a constitution and elected a parliament early in the 20th century. Their progress toward democracy stopped after the Pahlavi dynasty took the throne with British help in 1921, but resumed after World War II. By the time of the 1953 coup, Iran was more free than at any time before or since." Gasiorowski made that comment at a November 2003 scholarly meeting on the subject in Chicago.

Commenting on the Arbenz coup, Stephen Rabe, University of Texas at Dallas historian, said, "The Guatemalan intervention of 1954 is the most important event in the history of US relations with Latin America. It really set the precedent for later interventions in Cuba, British Guiana, Brazil, and Chile. The tactics were the same, the mindset was the same, and in many cases the people who directed those covert interventions were the same." The question of whether there would ever have been a Saddam Hussein in Iraq had democracy been allowed to develop and flourish in neighboring Iran went unanswered at the Chicago conference, but the point was made that governments like Saddam's had learned to protect themselves during the "coup era" the US ushered in during the 1950s.

"Conditions in the world are more constricting today, and it is more difficult, I believe, to pull off coups," said Douglass Cassel, a Northwestern University law professor. Cassel saw this difficulty as a key to the US decision, once it had determined that it wanted to remove Saddam, to invade instead.

Rural Guatemala reflects and resists

The analysis provided by the academics in Chicago lacks the sharpness and depth, as one writer put it, of rural Guatemalans who lived through the nearly four decades of consequences of the Arbenz coup. From his vantage point in Cuarto Pueblo in the Guatemalan highlands, Artemio Lopez Vasquez told a reporter, "This Bush doesn't respect any organizations at the international level. He just applies his own law wherever he wants. I heard it on the radio last night, the UN inspectors found no weapons of mass destruction. There's no need for war. But Bush is stubborn, he won't accept this, and he's a very bad example for the world. This is not a government that loves peace....They are bypassing all international law. This is a dirty war." He added,

"The US government wants to destroy, but they don't construct anything. In Iraq, they say they will reconstruct the country after the war. I don't believe it." Neighbor Sabino Perez, who watched in 1982 as his village went up in flames, said, "You can give money to reconstruct a country after a war, but you can't reconstruct the lost humanity. You can build buildings but nothing can bring the dead back to life."

-- End --