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The Hidden Costs of Terror

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The Hidden Costs of Terror

Abstract

In this month's featured article, former Peruvian president Alejandro Toledo (2001-2006) gives a thoughtful and insightful account of how post-atrocity accounting and reconstruction feels 'from the top'. What can an incoming head of state possibly do or say that will redress and repair the social and human costs of decades of violence? What about the centuries of injustice and inequality that fueled the flames? In fact Toledo did perhaps as much as he could, and more than many thought he would be able to, in recognising and beginning to address the ethnic, class, and institutional faultlines that tore Peru apart between 1980 and 2000.

Keywords

Human rights, Peru, Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Shining Path, Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement

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The Hidden Costs of Terror

by Cath Collins

In this month's featured article, former Peruvian president Alejandro Toledo (2001-2006) gives a thoughtful and insightful account of how post-atrocity accounting and reconstruction feels 'from the top'. What can an incoming head of state possibly do or say that will redress and repair the social and human costs of decades of violence? What about the centuries of injustice and inequality that fuelled the flames? In fact Toledo did perhaps as much as he could, and more than many thought he would be able to, in recognising and beginning to address the ethnic, class, and institutional faultlines that tore Peru apart between 1980 and 2000.

While no administration is perfect, Toledo's underwrote the valiant and painstaking work of Peru's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as it picked its way through the wreckage of almost 70,000 lost lives. Importantly, the Commission's report apportioned blame in a country that had grown used to skirting around both the truth and its consequences. In this way, the groundwork for the recent landmark trial and imprisonment of former autocrat Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000) was also laid. Fujimori's 2008 trial and 2009 conviction made history: the first American head of state ever to be held to account by his own people for corruption and crimes against humanity.

Toledo is right to draw attention to the importance of the InterAmerican Commission and Court on Human Rights: it was an early ruling from them that spurred Peruvian judges to reject attempts at domestic self amnesty. The ruling found an echo with other judiciaries in the region too. These days, at least in the southern part of the continent, the ideal that there should be 'no safe haven' for torturers is finally being made a reality. The northern part of the Americas could perhaps take note and learn lessons. Torture, disappearance and rendition carried out in the name of a 'war on terror' is now being exposed, repudiated and punished in the South. Will the north ever follow suit?

The parallels are more exact than the US and its allies would find comfortable. The 'war' against Shining Path guerrillas in Peru was finally won by conventional police work, not by massive 'homeland security' operations. (Shining Path ideologue and founder Abimael Guzmán was traced to a Lima hideout and arrested by civilian detectives following regular, patient, surveillance procedures.) Attempts to make a propaganda coup out of his downfall, putting him on public view in a striped convict suit in a makeshift cage, only created a backlash recruitment drive and escalation of action from increasingly fanatical followers. Is any of this sounding ominously familiar?

The promise of zero tolerance (read: 'scorched-earth' tactics, ending violence by escalating it), helped sweep Fujimori to power in the first place and later led a substantial portion of Peru's population to collude enthusiastically in its own repression. Fujimori systematically dismantled Peru's never-robust checks and balances, introducing hand-picked, anonymous judges to hand out life sentences in closed proceedings. He closed down Congress altogether, a move which went down particularly well with a public dazzled by the promise of a strong leader who would save them from amorphous, ever-present danger. In the end it was money scandals, more than

moral outrage, that caused Fujimori's downfall. The public was left to contemplate the dilapidated remnants of Peru's democratic political fabric.

The maxim that we often don't value what we have until it's taken away couldn't be more apposite. And unless we think ourselves somehow inherently smarter, luckier or less accident-prone than the Peruvian nation, Peru's trajectory should help us remember the value of constitutional freedoms, international legal regimes, and all the other limits to what states can do in the name of 'keeping us safe'.

Cath Collins has been associate lecturer in politics at the Universidad Diego Portales, Santiago de Chile since October 2007. She was previously Latin America Research Fellow at Chatham House London (The Royal Institute of International Affairs), before which she lectured in the politics of human rights in Latin America at the Institute for the Study of the Americas, University of London. She has lived and worked as a youth and community organizer in Chile, Brazil, Bolivia and the UK.