

Why Did Colombia's Bomb Its Own Palace of Justice?

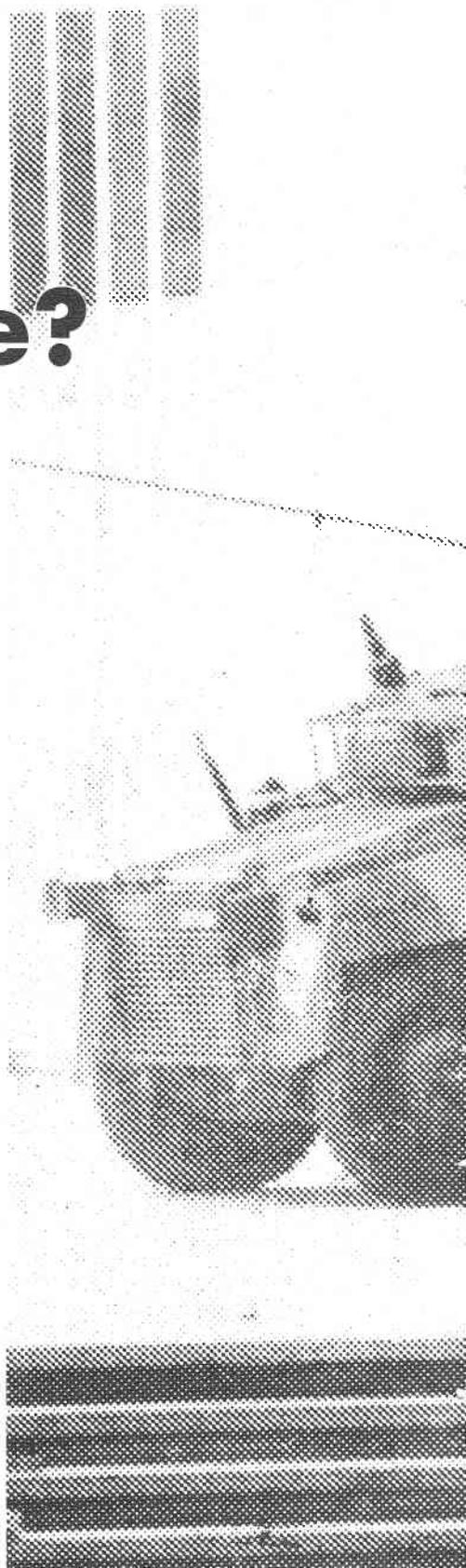
In November 1985 Colombia's "Palace of Justice" was seized by several dozen men and women of the M-19 Movement who demanded that the Supreme Court, then in session on the building's fourth floor, hear a 52-page lawsuit they had come to file against the government of President Belisario Betancur. They accused him of "betraying" a year-old truce between guerrilla organisations and his government which he himself had initiated.

Apparently these guerrillas had expected negotiations. In one of their most famous actions, in 1980, M-19 took over a cocktail party being held by the ambassador of the Dominican Republic and held 36 ambassadors hostage for over two months while conducting talks with the government. This time, the Betancur government, which had granted amnesty and even small government stipends to hundreds of imprisoned M-19 members under the terms of the truce agreement, brought in heavy artillery. Cannons punched holes through the marble walls of one of Colombia's most important buildings in the heart of the main square in its capital. The soldiers slaughtered everyone in the building, including many employees and half of the country's 24 Supreme Court Justices. Among

them was its Chief Justice, who had frantically telephoned Betancur to beg him to make the soldiers stop shooting. Betancur refused to come to the phone. A man who identified himself as an M-19 leader later told the press, "We never expected the bestiality of driving tanks through the front door."

Why did M-19 so badly underestimate what would happen? Why did the Betancur government carry out this apparently abrupt change in policy? These questions are addressed by the following slightly abridged article taken from the November 1985 issue of *Alborada Comunista* (Communist Dawn), newspaper of the Revolutionary Communist Group of Colombia, a participating organisation of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement.

A short summation of the guerrilla movements in Colombia may be in order for many readers. A nation of 29 million inhabitants, a great many of them peasants ruled by feudal landlords and chiefs, Colombia has been in the midst of or between civil wars throughout its history. The present guerrilla movements have their roots in the period known as "La Violencia," 10 years of civil war between the Liberal and Conservative parties beginning in 1948. It ended in a power-sharing agree-



Government



ment between the two parties. But in many of the country's rural areas, the control of the central government was never re-established. Mass upheavals among the peasants in the 1960s were accompanied by the rise of a variety of organisations calling themselves revolutionary, including the very influential Communist Party of Colombia (Marxist-Leninist), which then supported Mao Tsetung's China.

Today, every major political tendency in the opposition has its own army. Many of their soldiers are second and third generation professional guerrillas. The pro-Soviet Communist Party (PCC), along with its legal and electoral apparatus, also leads the Revolutionary Colombian Armed Forces (FARC), an army of 10-15,000 men and women, mainly peasants whose pay and living conditions are said to resemble those of their brothers and sisters in the state armed forces. The FARC has long controlled an entire department without overwhelming government interference. The PCC's 1980 Congress called for this basic programme: "Isolate pro-imperialist militarism, rely on the democratic forces, including, obviously, those of the traditional parties, call for amnesty, support the truce proposed by the guerrilla movements and demand political reform."

The second largest force, said to have one or more thousands of armed men and women under its command, is the M-19. This organisation is linked to the Western European socialist parties. Its programme says that it struggles to bring about the "existence of a true representative democracy" in Colombia. Its full name, April 19th Movement, comes from the date of the 1970 national elections stolen from the populist candidate by the armed forces and the other parties. Other important guerrilla forces include the EPL (People's Liberation Army), which arose out of one of the many splits in the now defunct old PCC(M-L). The EPL and the pro-Albanian party behind it which has usurped the PCC(M-L)'s name abandoned armed struggle in the countryside based on the peasants and instead carried out what it considered urban

guerrilla actions. Politically it is usually to be found alongside (if slightly to the "left" of) the explicitly pro Soviet CP. Its most recent programme, like the others just cited, calls for "a constitutional reform arrived at by a directly elected constituent assembly" — which in fact is how more than one of Colombia's several reactionary constitutions came into being.

The FARC signed the government's proposed truce in March 1984. The government then brought its troops to bear on the other, much smaller organisations. The EPL and later M-19 signed in August of that year. However, in June 1985 M-19 announced that it considered the truce to have been ended by the Betancur government's failure to live up to the agreement. — AWTW

At 11:45 in the morning of November 6th, a commando unit of the M-19 guerrilla organisation seized the Palace of Justice in Bogota, in order to carry out discussions within the framework of the "dialogue" about "violations" of the truce and other questions related to the "peace process." Starting from this moment and for the next 28 hours, bloody combat took place between the guerrillas and the defenders of the reactionary state. At 3:30 in the afternoon the following Thursday, the official massacre ended amid rubble and the incinerated bodies of more than a hundred men and women, including, apparently, according to official sources, the entire guerrilla unit.

Commander in Chief Belisario launched "the biggest urban counter-guerrilla operation in the world," with the intention of showing the world's reactionary governments how it's done. The disposition of forces included 25 tanks specially outfitted for urban counter-guerrilla warfare, armoured cars, rockets, helicopters, airborne assault units, every conceivable kind of bomb and over 5,000 soldiers, police, "intelligence" operatives and DAS agents in Red Cross uniforms, armed to the teeth. All of them sent to "Defend Democracy, Boss!" as the pig colonel who commanded the military operation put it

on radio and TV.

The bombing of the temple of bourgeois justice, with more than 400 people in it, forced the guerrilla commando to change its plans. They hadn't counted on this official response. The events during the "seizure of the Palace" and afterwards manifested the splits within the ruling classes, the true character of M-19 and the polarisation among the masses in the face of the national political situation.

The international bourgeois support which poured in from all over Latin America, the U.S. and Europe applauded Betancur's "firmness of character" and the rapidity with which he confronted the situation. Taking his actions as a model for how "terrorism" should be dealt with, the call came from Mexico to found a "worldwide front against terrorism," against communism in this period of crisis. In short, as Belisario Betancur said, "our struggle is that of democracy against terrorism;" "you have to take sides."

The Dynamic of the Contradictions

Despite what has happened the ruling classes and the Betancur government are not going to give up the banner of "peace." The various contradictions within Colombian society are not all manifesting themselves with equal intensity. A careful study of the national political situation shows that what has been sharpening is the contradiction between the forces within the country which are representatives of the two imperialist blocs. Together with the sharpening of this contradiction, the contradictions among various forces of the pro-Western bloc are also sharpening, including those in power and those in the unarmed or armed opposition.

Betancur's proposed policy for a "peace process" or "opening" — his amnesty, armed truce, pardon for the guerrillas and proposed reforms — have not been welcomed by some sections of the ruling classes. Some radically pro-U.S. sections have brought strong pressure against it, criticising the policy as a whole, the handling of the guerrilla groups and the terms of the deals and agreements. The proponents of what they call "restricted

democracy" have not opposed the policy of "democratisation" itself, taken to mean the promotion and strengthening of democratic regimes, but they have criticised the Executive and the policy of "creating an opening." Since the beginning of the "armed truce," Betancur has praised M-19's stand and in turn M-19 has consistently defended his policies. The contradiction between M-19 and Betancur, as well as the contradiction between M-19 and some typically pro-U.S. circles, including some among the armed forces, sharpened with the seizure of the Palace; but this was a process in which M-19 gradually lost the support of sections of the bourgeoisie linked to Europe. This does not mean that Betancur is not pro-U.S., which he certainly is, but that his stand is to play cards with the pro-Soviet forces in order to shore up the pro-Yankee camp.

The disagreements within the ruling classes revolve around the pro-Sovietism of the PCC and the FARC-UP. That is why the ruling classes are clearing the way to deal with them. So "why doesn't the M-19 keep its promises, why does it just create problems instead?"

On March 20th 1984, the FARC set up a mass organisation, the Patriotic Union (UP), to struggle for a "return to normalcy," "for a reform of political customs," with the main slogan, "make way for reform." The government is giving the pro-Soviets all the guarantees they need to allow them to participate "constitutionally" in elections. In this way the "democratic opening" has been drawing lines of demarcation: on the one hand, the M-19 and the EPL; on the other, the FARC. In a year of armed truce, it has become obvious which of these the government considers more important in its "peace" agreements and which is the principal contender with the ruling classes: the pro-Soviets.

From this point of view, "defending democratic institutions" doesn't mean attacking only M-19 and the other groups of the so-called "Guerrilla Coordinating Committee." Above all it means attacking the PCC and the FARC-UP. The Palace massacre clearly shows that

the government is willing to talk and negotiate only with the "mature, serious, veteran" guerrillas of the FARC. Under current national conditions, there is no way the regime can carry out the "peace process" just using machine guns. The contradictions within the ruling classes over how to negotiate with the guerrillas and the summation of what happened at the Palace will not lead to cancelling the "peace process," but rather to focusing their twin policies of negotiation and repression and strengthening their unity, above all in defense of their reactionary state.

The opinions put forward by the heads of the different political parties have gone no further than referring to "the deterioration of the peace process;" they've claimed that the government has been "soft" on the guerrillas but nobody has called for rejecting the "peace process." Further, the strongest criticisms have come from among supporters of the government. After the army's massacre, even those who demanded Betancur take action against subversion and added their voices to the army's exaggerations, still support the government. The opinions of the "great" reactionary party leaders are clear and not at all accidental. The pro-U.S. Conservative Alvaro Gomez and the pro-U.S. Liberal Carlos Lleras Restrepo essentially agreed in their statements that "as important as the lives of persons (i.e. bourgeois leaders) may be, the most important thing was the defense of institutions," and that, "since the armed forces are the defenders of the constitutional order, they acted quite properly." Both these men raise a hue and cry about the struggle against "terrorism."

The Palace seizure demonstrates the Marxist-Leninist truth that the army is the principal aspect of the state, which is why "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." The reactionaries defended their political power with their guns because some of them believed it was in danger of being seized by M-19.

The power of the Executive has been being strengthened to the detriment of the legislative and judicial branches for some time now.

Political power is defended with guns, and not with the jurisprudence of the judges. But this affair also shows that bourgeois democracy (of the old type) is a hollow and formal reality in the face of the reactionary power of imperialism. With the order to level the palace the essence of what the regime sought to accomplish was this: on the one hand it wanted to show just who has state power, and on the other with this army action it sought to convince the masses that armed revolutionary struggle is useless.

Confusion and indignation arose in various quarters which could find no explanation for why Betancur had said in his first speech that "During my government not a drop of blood will be spilled" and, nevertheless, several hundred people have already been killed in confrontations between the guerrillas and the army, and hundreds have been tortured or "disappeared," even without counting the massacres of November 6th and 7th. The "Palace massacre" was a rude shock for some people who used to consider the government "progressive." For others, the most backward, it was a demonstration that a "strong" government is needed to fight "terrorism."

The pro-Soviet PCC and the FARC-UP also seem to have benefited from this situation. The dynamic of the contradictions, especially the contradiction between the representatives of the pro-U.S. and pro-Soviet forces, has not been extinguished; in some ways it has grown sharper. Characterising the M-19 action which all the Colombian and foreign press had labeled terrorist, the PCC called it "an attack carried out by madmen, isolated from the masses, at a time when the country is facing new and dangerous conditions," when "right-wing enemies of peace" (i.e. the pro-U.S. forces) have been strengthened. For the pro-Soviet forces, what happened will not change their tactical plans. Although a certain hardening of the regime is foreseen, the agreements between the government and the FARC are not considered in danger.

The pro-Soviet forces and their army will not take up armed actions without taking into account the

situation in Central America and the balance of forces in the whole world. Before taking such action they need to broaden their influence among the masses and build up their guerrilla front; they need to win public opinion among other guerrilla forces, and now more than ever to struggle for reforms in order to consolidate their zones of influence.

Loss of Support and Reformism

The pressure of the other Latin American governments against the Colombian government's negotiations with guerrillas may have some effect on the "democratic opening," since in some other countries it is more practical for the pro-U.S. regimes to take a hard line against the armed or unarmed opposition. In Latin America, there is for instance the example of the Manuel Rodriguez Patriotic Front in Chile, a basically pro-Soviet guerrilla group which has recently declared that the conditions have matured for a general insurrection against Pinochet. To this we would add that a basically pro-Soviet offensive, utilising mass actions for the defense of "democracy" and "the rule of law," would sharpen up conditions within their strategic vision of imperialist war.

It is an obvious fact that some sections of the bourgeoisie have been gradually withdrawing their political support for M-19, especially since the Mexico meeting between Betancur and Ivan Marino Ospina, then head of M-19, who was later assassinated. Recent editorials and articles in the newspapers *El Tiempo* and *Nueva Frontera* show that the bourgeoisie used to consider M-19 a formidable force because it enjoyed favourable public opinion. Today these same newspapers are saying that M-19 has lost that public support.

The much-discussed break-up of the "armed truce" and the later clashes in the department of Cauca, the taking of the town of Miranda there and of the town of Genova in Quindio, clashes in the department of el Valle, the attempted assassination of the head of M-19 and the assassination of Ivan Marino Ospina in Calle (el Valle), the attack on the Cisneros Battalion in Armenia

(Quindio), the attack on Army headquarters in Bogota and finally the seizure of the Palace of Justice, all during 1985, have led to a loss of prestige for M-19 among some sections of the bourgeoisie and the "left" petit bourgeois intelligentsia. Some of them believe that the "democratic opening" is the correct road to follow; they believe in the "peace process" offered by the pro-U.S. Betancur regime. All these facts have political significance for M-19, and this public opinion will not necessarily be channeled into pro-Sovietism, at least for now. Some circles tend to support the regime.

But the same can't be said of the broad masses, who in one way or another see that the road of armed struggle will ultimately be the only way out of poverty and oppression. The question is exactly who among the various political forces and guerrilla organisations in the field will be able to draw upon these sentiments.

War is a continuation of politics by other means. This is valid for reactionary and revolutionary political parties alike. In its action the M-19 clearly manifested a political and military line of "armed reformism." Since M-19's line and programme are reformist, its military actions have the same content. To fight for "reforms" and "peace" within the framework of the present state is to fight in order to negotiate. In the analysis M-19 did after the seizure of the Palace, it criticised the government's *erroneous* attitude in justifying what had happened: "this attitude only confronts us with the abyss of the government's senseless hatred and makes it even more difficult to work for peace by methods other than guerrilla struggle" (*El Tiempo*, 14 November 1985).

What are these other roads besides guerrilla struggle which lead to peace? What is being said is that armed struggle is not the way to win peace, nor independence, liberty and happiness for the oppressed. M-19 simply wants reforms: "We took the Palace of Justice for the sake of truth and democracy. Not to demand alms or to benefit ourselves, not to attack the courts of justice nor their representatives. We have never

attacked and never will attack the workers of the justice system (this is how Betancur referred to the judges at their funeral — *AWTW*). On the contrary, we went to the court of honour and law because the country has sufficient grounds to put this government on political and judicial trial, and because the Supreme Court and the State Council have demonstrated their conscience and dignity" (*El Tiempo*, 14 November 1985).

With this there's nothing to do but believe that they mean what they say. M-19 respects "constitutionality," bourgeois democracy, and its worn-out three branches of government. They believe in the rule of law and all they demand is that this capitalism have a "human face." Thus their military operation was to confront the Army and not to kill hostages. But they made a mistake. They didn't take into account the whole background, the previous actions and present position of the regime and its armed forces. Thus they did not and could not take into account the possibility that the army would "level the whole place," as it did. Since their line is reformist, not one of putting an end to capitalism as a system but one of making it more livable, their military orientation is rife with the same outlook. For M19 war is a continuation of their reformist politics by armed means. It is a bourgeois political and military line, in the social democratic style, and thus does not seek a correct solution to the country's problems....

For the revolutionary communists, the fundamental political principle is to carry out the New Democratic revolution, which means destroying the old bureaucrat-landlord pro-imperialist state. In military terms this means utilising revolutionary armed forces. Based on this fundamental political principle, there must be a communist party, the only guarantee of victory for the oppressed, which in a process going from smaller to larger arouses the masses, builds guerrilla zones and revolutionary base areas, building the political power of the masses of people. This is what is called revolutionary war, people's war.... □