

Venezuela's Democratic Rule Fails to Faze Security Police

11/1/76
By Joanne Omang

Washington Post Foreign Service

CARACAS, Venezuela, Oct. 31—When leftist Jorge Rodriguez died under interrogation by the Venezuelan security police—DISIP—last July, the fact was not revealed by his outraged comrades, as would have been the case in most Latin American countries. His death was announced by the government itself, which promptly fired the DISIP commander.

Venezuela is a democracy, complete with election campaigns every two years and a highly vocal press. The fact that they exist alongside a secret police capable of killing suspects points out some basic differences between U.S. and Latin American concepts of popular rule.

The fact that persons with past ties to DISIP have been implicated in the Oct. 6 bombing of a Cuban airliner—a case that DISIP is now investigating—tells something about the purposes for which the secret police often come into being.

It can be argued, as some Venezuelans are, that the “plumbers” unit set up in the Nixon White House to stop leaks and disrupt the Democrats was the beginning of what would here be called a security police force. DISIP originated in the same manner, if under more extreme conditions—with a chief of state who demanded personal loyalty and felt he was being undermined by his enemies.

Romulo Betancourt had more apparent reason than Richard Nixon to feel that way when he became Venezuela's president in 1958. After spending years in jail and exile, Betancourt and his Democratic Action Party overthrew dictator Marcos Perez Jimenez and called elections, the first in 10 years and the second since the country was founded.

Perez Jimenez had been identified with his secret police, whose murders and tortures had contributed to popular support for his ouster.

Betancourt abolished the secret police. “We got along fine without them

until the terrorism began,” recalled a party loyalist.

Guerrillas inspired by Fidel Castro's Cuban revolution of 1959, which Betancourt's party had supported with money and arms, rose against Betancourt. The president turned violently anti-Castro. At the same time, refugees coming out of Cuba included many former intelligence agents who had worked against Castro under the old Fulgencio Batista regime. Landing in Caracas, they were asked for advice and eventually put to work against the Cuban guerrilla threat.

“The whole thing was seen as a threat to the party as much as to democracy, which was still very new and not really understood then,” another activist explained. “The police leaders were picked specifically for their loyalty to Betancourt's party and to Betancourt, who was afraid the old Perez Jimenez gang would use the troubles to try to get back into power.”

DISIP, then called DIGEPOL, or General Police Directorate, grew in the early 60s to more than 1,000 persons, many with U.S. training in counter-insurgency. They were openly suspicious of any groups that criticized Betancourt or his party. The Cubans “weren't hidden or secret, just part of the team,” recalled a now-prominent leftist politician who underwent interrogation during that period. “We could always tell them by their accents,” he said.

The interior minister in charge of the police at this time was Carlos Andres Perez, who is now president. Like many current members of the government, he had engaged in anti-government clandestine action against the Perez Jimenez regime, spending time in jail and exile as a result. He turned what he knew on the Cuban terrorists, developing a reputation as a tough cop over a tough police force. His adversaries called him “the assassin.”

That reputation helped Perez get the strong support from the right that won him the presidency in 1973, but it

required the services of a Madison Avenue advertising firm during the campaign to replace the image with the progressive center-leftist, one Perez cultivates today.

“He wants to be remembered for helping the poor and developing the country and international brotherhood and all that, not for the days he was torturing leftists,” an opposition politician said.

As the guerrilla threat weakened at home under Perez' attack, however, the strong-arm DIGEPOL techniques came under increasing fire from within Betancourt's party. At the same time, CIA involvement was being scaled down here.

When the social Christian Copei Party took power in 1969, President Rafael Caldera reorganized DIGEPOL and changed its name to DISIP, Security and Preventive Intelligence Directorate. Most of the old Democratic Action Party loyalists, including most of the Cubans, left the organization. Other Cubans and new Caldera troops came in.

An exception to this rule was the Cuban refugee Luis Posada Carriles, a former Batista security agent who now is one of four men charged in the Cuban airliner sabotage in which 73 persons died.

Like many other anti-Castro Cubans, he did Miami CIA work and joined the Venezuelan security police under the Democratic Action Party. Posada stayed on through the Caldera government, however, and was rewarded for his shift in alliance with one of DISIP's operations directorates in 1971. During this period he maintained “A casual acquaintance,” in the words of the U.S. embassy here, with FBI agent Joseph Leo in the course of Leo's work as the embassy legal attache.

When the Democratic Action Party came back to power in 1973 under Perez, Posada was fired. He set up a private detective agency equipped with high-powered radios, hiring a part-time Venezuelan news photographer, Hernan Ricardo Losana, to do



United Press International

ORLANDO BOSCH

... many trips, many passports

field work for him. Ricardo, 25, was arrested in Trinidad the day of the plane crash along with Freddy Lugo and faces trial with Posada in Venezuela.

The Venezuelan government has denied that another Cuban exile, Ricardo Morales Navarette, has DISIP ties. But he clearly had the authority to throw out three American reporters last week after they recognized him from his days in Miami.

Another figure in the case, the militant anti-Castro leader Orlando Bosch, has been in and out of Venezuela on a variety of passports and at least the tacit assistance of DISIP. He and Posada were arrested together at the outset of the plane crash investigation.

The coexistence of all these Cubans, their ties with DISIP and President Perez' avowedly pro-Castro foreign policy is only one of several contradictions in the Venezuelan brand of democracy. Perez defied Betancourt in "normalizing" relations with Castro, whom he sees as an important third world leader, and accepted the resulting division within the ruling party as the price of modernization, even though it may cost future elections.