

Events through 1930

Introduction

Between 1928 and 1930, the Cuban political scene remained quiet while Machado proceeded with the construction of the Cuban Central Highway, built new schools and medical buildings, trained new teachers, negotiated for more favorable terms with the United States, and pushed his nation toward light industrialization. Unfortunately, the Great Depression hit Cuba extremely hard, and limited the immediate scope and effects of his reforms. The United States raised barriers to external trade, banks began to recall loans, and the market for Cuban sugar refused to emerge from the doldrums which had plagued sugar growers and refiners throughout the 1920s. Because Cuba's economy was so closely tied to the United States, America's reaction to the depression had devastating results for business on the island.

Concurrently, political opposition to Machado's government emerged from two sources. First, the Nationalist Party, led by Mendieta, spearheaded overall Cuban opposition to Machado. Mendieta's most bitter charge against Machado was the alleged unconstitutionality of his second term in office accruing from the changes to the constitution engineered by Congress and the Constitutional Assembly. Second, student unrest grew at the University of Havana. They formed factions under a variety of names and usually took their cues from the their elder compatriots led by Carlos Mendieta.

Machado charged that the only other political groups willing to associate with the Nationalists were the communist party,¹ and none of the newspapers of the era accorded them much significance. Ironically it was the respect for ideals and principles of Cuban democracy that is portrayed as the driving forces of opposition to Machado's government. Yet, Mendieta and Menocal, leaders of the Nationalists, resorted to military rebellion and asked for US intervention whenever it suited their personal political agendas, regardless of its effect on the long term viability of Cuban independence and welfare.

The Artemisa Affair

The first political violence occurring as a result of this opposition arose on May 18, 1930. Mendieta and the Nationalists (who were "simply an association of unsuccessful politicians and nothing more²") held an open air rally, unlicensed by the state, in Artemisa.³ The meeting was widely publicized and was designed to arouse greater opposition to Machado. Police and army forces were on hand at the gathering and did not prevent them from meeting. Lieutenant Alberto de Silva, a police officer, approached the leaders of the meeting and asked the speaker to cease at one point. Receiving an apparently acceptable answer, Lieutenant de Silva quietly took a seat to listen as the speech continued. Then unaccountably, he was physically attacked by

¹ Machado MSS, Box 1, Folder 8, IV-26.

² Ibid., Box 1, Folder 8, IV-26.

one of the Nationalists. Army troops immediately moved to intervene and shots were fired from both sides. De Silva was found on the ground with a bullet through his skull, one other soldier was shot to death, and two civilians died of wounds inflicted by unknown parties. The Nationalist party newspaper, El Dia, announced "The First Bloodshed" the following day.⁴

Noting the brief flurry of concern following the Artemisa affair, US Ambassador to Cuba Henry Guggenheim noted nonetheless that events had settled considerably within a week or two of the tragedy. The island remained calm, the people unconcerned. Cuban newspapers were free of "violent criticisms of attacks of any kind, and it is obvious that a calmer and more optimistic attitude . . . prevail[ed]."⁵ Even so, Guggenheim spoke with President Machado and asked that some of Mendieta's party be allowed to enter the administration to quell their discontent. Machado appeared quite willing to compromise to ameliorate political tensions and soon promised to introduce laws to allow new political parties, such as the Nationalists, to form and run for office and also to permit the reorganization of existing parties. This legislation was in fact proposed by Machado and sent to Congress for action.⁶

³ Francisco Ferrara to Harry Guggenheim, private letter, March 4, 1930, Havana, 837.00/2797.

⁴ Havana Post, May 30, 1930, p. 7.

⁵ Guggenheim to Secretary of State, June 23, 1930, United States Department of State, Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1930, Vol. II, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1930), 649. Hereafter FRUS-1930.

⁶ Chargé Reed to Secretary of State, July 18, 1930, FRUS-1933, Vol. II, p. 651-52.

Besides the Artemisa affair, American diplomats record the beginnings of domestic terrorism. Bombings, targeting government officials, began to be reported. In one case, four were killed including one army officer, one ex-officer, and two civilians.⁷

Ambassador Guggenheim

United States Ambassador Harry P. Guggenheim met with Carlos Mendieta on many occasions in an attempt to reconcile the parties. Mendieta repeatedly called for US military intervention and Guggenheim always turned him down. While Mendieta blamed all of Cuba's problems on Machado, it was Guggenheim's opinion that:

the fundamental cause for any dissatisfaction that existed in Cuba was economic; that the country was left in an impoverished condition after five years of increasingly lower prices for sugar on which, unfortunately, the whole country depended; that the Government had undoubtedly made mistakes but, all in all, faced with this economic problem, it had governed well; that the country was poor at the present time, but if it should go through a period of political unrest, agitation and revolution, it would become bankrupt.⁸

Guggenheim told Mendieta that "the policy of the Union Nacionalista seemed to have but one end, and that was the resignation of President Machado; that obviously was not a very constructive policy."⁹ Mendieta argued that the current government was unconstitutional because the Constitutional Convention overstepped

⁷ Harry P. Guggenheim to Secretary of State, May 19, 1930, Havana, 837.00/2805.

⁸ Harry P. Guggenheim to Secretary of State, May 28, 1930, Havana, 837.00/2808.

⁹ Harry P. Guggenheim to Secretary of State, May 28, 1930, Havana, 837.00/2808.

its authority when it lengthened Machado's term in office. But, Mendieta also felt that some of the changes made by the Constitutional Congress were of great value, and didn't want them changed, only that part which affected Machado's presidency.¹⁰

Guggenheim on numerous occasions spoke to Machado and other leaders in the government, as well as to Mendieta and the Nationalists. Guggenheim felt that Machado "would be favorably disposed to the inclusion of members of the Union Nacionalista in his government." And yet, it appeared to Guggenheim that the "Union Nacionalista has as yet been unwilling to consider any compromise that does not include an agreement on the part of president Machado" to hold early elections.¹¹ Efforts to reconcile the differences between Machado and the Nationalists have failed "because the latter [the Nationalists] will not relinquish their issue of the constitutionality of the present administration." Unlike Sumner Welles, Guggenheim concluded that "the continued obstinacy of Colonel Mendieta and his associates in demanding Machado's resignation made it impossible to reach an accord." The Ambassador reported that Machado had "made every reasonable concession to his opponents." President Machado had agreed to "make it possible for the Union Nacionalista to organize as a party and to present candidates at the forthcoming elections."¹² The Nationalists further demanded that the President should resign if the Nationalists returned with a majority of Congressional and Senatorial seats. This would mean the Nationalists would have to elect 24 Senators and 59 representatives.

¹⁰ Harry P. Guggenheim to Secretary of State, May 28, 1930, Havana, 837.00/2808.

¹¹ Guggenheim to Secretary of State, June 23, 1930, Havana, 837.00/2809.

¹² Guggenheim to Secretary of State, July 22, 1930, Havana, 837.00/2815.

Machado agreed to this. He instructed Clemente Vasquez Bello, President of the Senate and of the Liberal Party, to draft such a law and send it to Congress. This was done, but as soon as Mendieta realized that Machado had called his bluff, he refused to accept the agreement. Guggenheim reported that:

It is my well considered opinion that President Machado has proceeded in this matter [of addressing the grievances of the Nationalists] in good faith and has been animated by a real desire to compose his differences with the Nacionalistas. There can be no question that he was disposed to make important concessions to them. He was even willing to take some of their leaders into his Cabinet and would probably have been persuaded to grant amnesty to the persons indicted in connection with the riot at Artemesia last May.”¹³

The Nacionalistas, however, showed themselves to be most stubborn and uncompromising. They have made much of their so-called ideals and demands for electoral reforms and have asserted that they represent a majority of the Cuban people. Yet when offered practically everything for which their program calls excepting the actual resignation of the President, Mendieta declined. The inference from this is obvious: in the last analysis, the Nacionalistas want only one thing, to satisfy their own personal ambition to get into office.¹⁴

In the middle of July 1930, Machado sent legislation allowing the Nationalists full access to all political privileges to Congress. Once Mendieta saw that Machado was serious about reform and allowing an opening for the Opposition, Mendieta backtracked and publicly rejected the very legislation he had been calling for earlier.

The Cuban House of Representatives rejected by 86 to 1 Machado’s message and his bill for electoral reform which would have allowed Nationalists to campaign

¹³ Guggenheim to Secretary of State, July 22, 1930, Havana, 837.00/2815.

¹⁴ Guggenheim to Secretary of State, July 22, 1930, Havana, 837.00/2815.

and run in election. After the Nacionalistas issued their manifesto rejecting Machado's effort (which they had agreed to earlier), Machado gave Congress a free hand on voting for this bill. This is the first time the Cuban legislature had refused to assent to an executive message from Machado. Liberals, Conservatives, and Populists all rejected Machado's bill.^{15,16} The legislature rejected this reform bill because Mendieta publicly denounced it when it contained everything Mendieta had asked for in the first place, with the exception of the direct resignation of the President.

Instead of organizing to take part in the November Congressional elections as provided for in his compromise with Machado, Mendieta campaigned for a postponement of the said elections. Had the Nationalists been as popular as he proclaimed, postponing the elections would have been foolish since Machado offered to resign from office if his party lost their Congressional majority. Had Mendieta possessed the support he boasted of, his Nationalist Party could have garnered a majority in Congress and forced a constitutional showdown. Instead, Mendieta opted for violent revolution.

Guggenheim felt most of Cuba's troubles were economic and any change in the government would not solve its basic problems, and yet hoped that Machado would allow some concessions to the opposition. Never the less, the Ambassador's opinion of Machado remained high:

President Machado has probably administered the country better than it has ever been administered before. He has also made some serious mistakes. He has succeeded in stamping out brigandage and in greatly modifying graft and corruption, and he has accomplished notable public works. He has used high-handed methods, justifying himself by the undoubted fact

¹⁵ Guggenheim to Secretary of State, August 8, 1930, Havana, 837.00/2821.

¹⁶ Reed to Secretary of State, October 4, 1939, FRUS-1930, Vol. II, p. 667.

that it would have been impossible to accomplish reforms against political enemies and grafters in the face of a corrupt press without using strong measures.¹⁷

Oppositionist contacts with the military were exploited as they began enlisting support among enlisted men. They found a receptive audience here because of recent reductions in pay and allowances. Because of Cuba's economic situation, Army and Navy pay was in arrears since October of 1931.¹⁸

Ex-President Menocal Re-Emerges

Into the midst of the burgeoning imbroglio stepped former Conservative President Mario G. Menocal announcing he would attempt to mediate between the Administration and the Opposition. The US Chargé Edward Reed commented that most Cubans believed in fact that Menocal himself sought to become president again in 1935, if not earlier.¹⁹

The emergence of Menocal signaled a new phase in the development of opposition to Machado's government. Carlos Mendieta, head of the Nationalists, offered Menocal leadership of all elements of the opposition. This signaled Mendieta's acknowledgment of his own relative lack of popular sympathy. Menocal was well known and more popular than Mendieta; but it is surprising nonetheless because Mendieta had been a constant and bitter critic of Menocal's presidential administration. In spite of Mendieta's public praise of Menocal, the latter insisted that Mendieta, even though the leader of

¹⁷ Harry P. Guggenheim to Secretary of State, May 28, 1930, Havana, 837.00/2808.

¹⁸ Guggenheim to Secretary of State, January 4, 1932, Havana, 837.00/3222.i.

¹⁹ Reed to Secretary of State, October 4, 1939, FRUS-1930, Vol. II.

the Nationalist party, "had no right to speak for any opposition in the country." Rather Menocal proclaimed that he alone "could speak with authority for those opposing the government."²⁰

Soon after Menocal reappeared as an active political figure, one of his first steps was to approach the US representatives in Havana and demand that the United States invoke the Platt Amendment, intervene, and depose President Machado. Reed, the American Chargé pointed out to Menocal that this was precisely the opposite attitude he had exhibited when he was president earlier. Menocal's government had sent repeated notes to the United State insisting that intervention not occur under the Platt Amendment or in any other way since it violated Cuban sovereignty. This did not seem to have any impact on Menocal's position.²¹

Calls for intervention came from Cubans working in the United States as well. In early April 1930, Iturralde issued a declaration from New York City calling for US military intervention into Cuba under the Platt Amendment.²² Attorney Rafael Iturralde, circulated a tract called "Terrorism under the Cuban Dictatorship." Despite the allegations regarding Machado's repressive government, Iturralde's associates in Havana freely published outlandish accusations against Machado in Cuban newspapers without interference.²³ Guggenheim referred to these tracts by reporting "exaggerated acts of tyranny have been privately circulated by the opposition in Cuba to stir up revolution and are disseminated by the Junta in the United States." The tracts were for

²⁰ Guggenheim to Secretary of State, October 23, 1930, FRUS-1933, Vol. II, p. 668.

²¹ Guggenheim to Secretary of State, October 23, 1930, FRUS-1933, Vol. II, p. 668.

²² Guggenheim to Secretary of State, April 1, 1930, Havana, 837.00/2803.

²³ Guggenheim to Secretary of State, June 30, 1930, Havana, 837.00/2810.

publication in American newspapers and were meant to influence the development of the the Shipstead Resolution: “American lawyers working on contingent fees add fuel to the fire in their hopes of settling doubtful claims against the Cuban Government by a blackmailing process.”²⁴ Despite the slander in the press and various degrees of crack downs on the press in Cuba, Machado’s attempts at repression and censorship were half-hearted at best. Guggenheim reported that serious attempts had been made by the Machado government to “lift the ban against expressions of opposing opinion.” The Ambassador said that the press enjoyed “a very wide latitude in its comments” and that “political meetings of opposition groups have been permitted and speeches highly antagonistic to the government have been made public.”²⁵

This is not to argue that Machado allowed anything to be printed without fear of repercussions. Machado eventually responded to Iturralde’s provocations by shutting down his law firm. When Machado left in exile, Iturralde leveled civil claims against many of Machado’s properties as compensation.

Congress Free to Oppose Machado

In early May 1930, the Conservative, Popular, and Liberal Parties began to debate whether or not they should continue to support President Machado and his legislative agenda. Several leading Conservatives and Liberals suggested that the time “had arrived for putting an end to ‘political cooperation.’ ” The Conservative

²⁴ This appears to be repeating itself in the 1990s with the Helms-Burton Act and legal claims proceeding against the Cuban government.

²⁵ Harry P. Guggenheim to Secretary of State, May 28, 1930, Havana, 837.00/2808.

party nevertheless voted to continue cooperation and the Liberal party voted unanimously for “independent action.”²⁶ Conservatives already elected to office (as opposed to Conservatives who had joined the Nationalist party because they could not get elected or were rejected by their own party) announced that they will freely oppose the government whenever they feel like it. Machado rejoined by declaring that all parties would enjoy a free hand in the 1930 elections. But on May 16, 1930, the Nationalists reiterated their refusal to engage in voting or campaigning, even if permitted.²⁷

Conclusion

Despite rumblings from Mendieta and the Nationalists, Machado’s achievements remained “factual and beyond doubt.”²⁸ Congressional elections of 1930 yielded no mentionable change from the preceding elections. The newspapers seemed amenable to this situation because it was widely recognized the Menocal sought a third term for himself, and that Mendieta was merely a sore loser trying to make amends for his loss to Machado in 1924. Machado continued Cuba’s tradition of jailing and then quickly releasing political prisoners. By January 25, 1930, Guggenheim reported that “nearly all of the political prisoners have been set free, including all of the leaders of the opposition.” An amnesty law was enacted on

²⁶ Guggenheim to Secretary of State, May 2, 1930, Havana, 837.00/2802.

²⁷ Guggenheim to Secretary of State, May 16, 1930, Havana, 837.00/2806.

²⁸ Harry P. Guggenheim to Secretary of State, May 28, 1930, Havana, 837.00/2808.

January 13, 1930.²⁹ The effects of the Depression would continue to build along with violent opposition to his government, yet all in all, 1930 was a good year for Cuba and Machado.

However, dark days were ahead and the revolutions first martyr was created when 25 year old student leader Raphael Trejo was killed when a massive student demonstration was dispersed by the police on September 30, 1930. He would come to symbolize the “tyranny” of Machado’s administrations against idealistic youth, and as time went on more of Havana’s residents came to sympathize with the student’s goals and plight.

²⁹ Guggenheim to Secretary of State, January 25, 1930, Havana, 837.00/3227.