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Intelligence Memorandum

THE PROSPECTS FOR TORRES AND BOLIVIA

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
19 February 1971

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Prospects for Torres and BoliviaSummary

Over 180 governments have tried to rule Bolivia in its 145 years of independence. This chronic instability has always made it risky to forecast the future course of Bolivian politics. The political situation has deteriorated since President Juan Jose Torres Gonzales seized power in October 1970. He has not provided strong leadership, and he has been unable to obtain the solid support of any significant group. The military has been weakened, both by its own leaders and by Torres, and it might not be able to offer unified resistance to a leftist coup attempt. An attempt to seize power could come from within the government or from the majority faction of the Nationalist Revolutionary Movement (MNR). Whatever happens, no government seems likely to provide stable, effective leadership.

Note: This memorandum was produced by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated within CIA.

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The Military

1. Traditionally, the armed forces have provided the base for political stability. The army has demonstrated its power to make and break presidents, most recently in September 1969 when it overthrew a constitutional civilian president and installed Gen. Alfredo Ovando Candia in the presidency. At a minimum, the armed forces have always had the common goal of maintaining their institutional existence and unity.

2. The military lost significant prestige and unity when Ovando was overthrown in October 1970. The country was treated to the spectacle of its military leaders lacking the backbone to consolidate a coup they had initiated and individual military units offering moral support to opposing sides. Torres eventually stepped into the vacuum with little more than the acquiescence of a divided military institution. The military were further demoralized in January 1971 when Torres moved swiftly to neutralize actual or potential plotters within the armed forces. The known or suspected dissident leaders were removed, and many have been sent into exile. Even military units that were associated with coup plotters were symbolically punished by having their names and regimental insignia transferred to remote areas.

3. This combination of demoralization, dispersal, and disgrace has reduced military unity to a new low level. The extent of the decline cannot be estimated reliably. Individual military units might try to unite behind a strong leader, as they did in October, and attempt to seize power. The failure of the previous attempt, however, combined with the military's increasing internal problem raises serious questions as to whether this attempt could be successful. If the military's problem is as severe as some observers believe, it could prevent concerted military action, even in the face of a common threat. It might even create a situation in which unit commanders would sit on the sidelines in a political struggle, wait until an obvious winner had emerged, and then throw him their moral support. Political indecision

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among military leaders is not new. It was demonstrated in October and again in January. If the armed forces cannot maintain their previous role as the final arbiter in Bolivian politics, the basis for political stability has been seriously weakened.

Torres and the Left

4. Many elements on the left expected the Torres administration substantially to change Ovando's policies. They believed that they had played a major role in Torres' gaining and retaining the presidency, and they expected to be repaid with a significantly more leftist government. He has not adopted the more extreme policies being pressed on him, however, and has received only lukewarm support from the far left. Leftist groups are so competitive and divided that they have not presented a united front. Doubts about the real "revolutionary" nature of the government, combined with Torres' weak position, have convinced the left that it will achieve more success by maneuvering outside the government than by trying to exert influence from within.

5. Several of Torres' proposals that would be expected to gain leftist support have generally been received without enthusiasm. His promise of a new constitution and general elections has been attacked because of the growing belief that any elected government will only serve the interests of the small upper class and not be "truly representative" of the poor, uneducated lower classes. His agreement to establish a "popular assembly," with some of the powers of an appointed legislature, has been lost in the in-fighting of the various leftist groups, each of which is trying to gain control of the organization. Torres has offered to permit members of civilian parties to join the cabinet, but their reaction may be negative because such participation would identify them with his government.

6. The degree of radicalism of individual leftists and groups determines whether they oppose or mildly support the government. Juan Lechin, the extremist leader of both the powerful miners' federation and the national labor confederation, has stated flatly his

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opposition to the government. Lechin is personally ambitious and appears unwilling to support any government that he does not control. Torres has been trying to undercut Lechin's position by encouraging the mine unions to take their problems directly to a presidential representative. He has also visited mines to reiterate his gratitude for the miners' support in January. Radical students and the pro-Chinese Communist party also oppose the government. The pro-Soviet party does not support the government as a whole but does approve some specific government actions. This is in line with official Soviet propaganda that endorses the "progressive" nature of Torres' government but is subtly encouraging him to accede to more of the leftist demands.

7. Torres has had some success in obtaining the backing of the faction of the Nationalist Revolutionary Movement (MNR) that is headed by former President Hernan Siles Zuazo. Despite Siles' title as "in-country" head of the whole party, his real control is limited to a minority faction, and he cannot offer significant support to the government. Nevertheless, Torres and Siles have been trying to work together, and a member of the Siles faction is now serving as an adviser to Torres on proposed government decrees. Recent references by Siles to the country's future and to revolutionary nationalism are strikingly similar to Torres' previous statements. Siles is making a major effort to assert the primacy of his faction and his personal strength within the party.

[Redacted]

In early February, Siles and Paz met in Peru to reaffirm Paz' position as head of the entire party and Siles' role as temporary chief until Paz returns to Bolivia. [Redacted] the press reports that the two reached agreement on political strategy, [Redacted]

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The Alternative to Torres

8. There is no indication that an attempt will be made to overthrow Torres in the near future. No group is known to have enough strength to succeed at present, and all probably think that it is useful to let Torres stay in power while they attempt to improve their respective positions.

9. Because of the armed forces' weakness, it seems highly unlikely that the military could at this time initiate a move to overthrow the President. If their disorganization is as extensive as the most pessimistic observers believe, the armed forces would not even be able to present a unified front in reaction to a power grab by other groups. This leaves any new coup plotting to the left.

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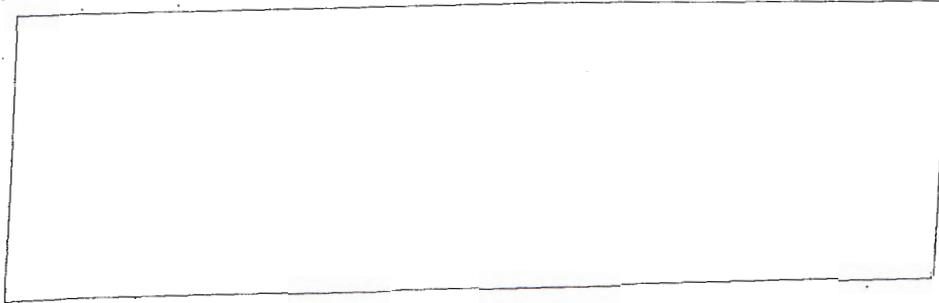
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14. It does not appear that the Torres government will be overthrown in the near future. Bolivian history and Torres' weakness make it probable, however, that a coup will come eventually. Whoever Torres' successor may be, he will not be able to count on a united military institution, and he will face increasing internal instability.

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