

Centro cultural museo de la memoria

The Coup the Installation of the Dictatorship (First room)

On the 27th of June 1973, the Presidente Juan María Bordaberry decreed the dissolution of Parliament and with this act setting up a dictatorship, within a frame of escalation of coups in other countries of the South Cone of Latin America. In the case of Uruguay it was the third time, in the 20th century, that a constitutionally elected president made an institutional coup, even if it was the first time with the participation of the Armed Forces that acted as the head characters.

It was not a sudden occurrence but it was a question of the unraveling of a larger process of deterioration of the democratic political system. This was clearly recognizable from the year 1968 but the more profound roots should be located in the context of the Cold War, in the economic crises that appeared in the middle of the 1950's and the social conflicts originating from this situation. In this way, the abuse of certain legal instruments, the abundant repression and the fact the Armed Forces were given new functions, these things were strategies used from the last years of the decade of 1960 to stop the high political mobilization and the trade union activities and to suppress the activity of the urban guerrilla. This explains why, at the moment of coup, arrests, censorship and prohibitions already had take place. Moreover it had been stated that the use of torture of detained people was a common practice.

The repeated disposition of “quick means of security” (a constitutional instrument meant for exceptional cases) after the year 1968 admitted the suspension of the individual guarantees, the limitation of freedom of expression and of press, the prohibition of the right to go on strike and the restriction of the activities of the trade unions. They also decreed the “militarization” of functionaries of the public and the private sectors that were in conflict.

They searched repeatedly the premises of local universities and the increased use of force in the repression of the social protest. In spite of the massive rejection at the assassination of the student Liber Arce, the intensity of the repression augmented. The alliance between the militaries and the civilians who governed after the dissolution of Parliament, together with the orientation of the so called Doctrine of

National Security and of the economic neoliberal doctrine, tried to carry fourth profound changes in politics, in economics and in the Uruguayan society. Among its first steps the new regime suspended the activity of the political parties and decreed the dissolution of the National Convention of Workers (CNT) deciding the closure of all its premises and the arrest of their leaders. By a decree the workers' right to go strike was suppressed. At the end of 1973, they had intervened in the University and illegalized almost totally the political and left-wing students' groups. At the same time, the control that the regime had over the information that circulated in public was exercised by the censorship and the closure of many Medias, and this made in extremely difficult to spread information about this situation.

The year terminated with the installation of a State Council (“Consejo de Estado”), consulting organ, proceeded by Martín Echegoyen and integrated by other civilians, whose sessions were not public.

Líber Arce

Líber Arce was injured by the police on the 12th of August 1968 in the surroundings of the Veterinary Faculty (la Facultad de Veterinaria) while he was participating in one of the many demonstrations that were held that year as a protest of the storming and visitations of university premises. These visitations were prepared by Jorge Pacheco's government. He was a student of odontology and an active member of the Union of Communist Youth (la Unión de las Juventudes Comunistas). He died two days after that, 28 years old.

On the 14th of August a big crowd accompanied the funeral procession walking to the Buceo Cementary. The crowd was expressing indignation and disgust over this assassination.

From the following year and until today the anniversary of Líber Arce's death constitutes a symbolic date in memory of the “student martyrs”.

After the assassination of Líber Arce the names of Hugo de los Santos and Susana Pintos (1968), Heber Nieto, Julio Spósito (1971), Nelson Rodríguez and Joaquín Kluver (1972) were added on to this list of dead students, before the coup of state, as a consequence of State repression.

The Popular Resistance (Second room)

There were many forms of resistance and opposition against the dictatorship. They developed in different sceneries and with different strategies. Until this moment actions of resistance had basically been taken from the organized society, trade unions, skilled workmen and political parties. Still other dimensions of this resistance were yet to be incorporated which no doubt varied in function with the social groups and the geographic areas in which they took place.

The very same morning of the 27th of June 1973 when the decree of the dissolution of Parliament was presented, the National Convention of Workers (la Convención Nacional de Trabajadores) decided to demonstrate their repugnance to the institutional breach by starting a general strike with occupation of places of work. The type of struggle, which the student movement joined, counted on an important participation in Montevideo as well as in the departments in the interior parts of the country. It lasted until the 12th of July in spite of the constant eviction of the occupied factories and the illegalization of the CNT and the following posting of persons wanted by the militaries and the capturing of leaders.

Except the arrests of hundreds of people in opposition, during the course of the strike there were also the assassinations of the activist Ramón Peré and Walter Medina while they were participating in measures of anti-dictatorial protests.

On the 9 of July under complete repression people managed to set up a manifestation in the avenue "18 de Julio" with important support from the people. The manifestation was quickly and violently repressed and dissolved. The journalist Rubén Castillo summoned this meeting by reciting a poem by Federico García Lorca in his radio program. The verses repeatedly indicated "At five o'clock exactly in the afternoon"("a las cinco en punto de la tarde....")

After this incident and the definite heaving of the strike, during several years people could not arrange big public concentrations with the aim to reject the regime. Within the frame of an intensive repression, the most important actions of resistance against the dictatorship were made secretly and outside the country. It adopted the most varying forms, as for example creating leaflets and bulletins, collecting money, meetings in family homes or making campaigns of solidarity.

State Terrorism

During the dictatorship the process of annulations of the State of Justice was finished. A system planned to use extreme vigilance and repression was set up. Formulated to “discipline” the society as a whole. Without any kind of control the groups responsible for the breach of the democratic institutions transformed the state into an agent of terror towards the inhabitants of the country. This very situation was created in the countries of the region, which made it possible to organize a repressive coordination that passed the national borders. The secret intelligence system that, from the end of 1973 and the beginning of 1974, enabled the exchange of information between the dictatorships of Latin America’s South Cone (“El cono Sur de América Latina”) and the transnational repression called “Plan Condor”.

The Supervised and Controlled Society

The predominant repressive system during the dictatorship was complete. It embraced the different spheres of the life of persons who saw their daily life affected in varying intensity. In this respect the working places of study, public events and the Medias were strictly controlled and this restricted immensely the possibility of meetings and expressions. The dictatorship also strongly affected the individual's private life in such a way that family reunions and meetings with friends were put under suspicion. The official discourse was that of “reestablishing the order” and the “refoundation” of a country in which it was necessary to “extirpate” the roots of the “subversion” in all the environments. This required the whole society to take part. People should be implicated and moreover they should avoid manifestations that criticized and they should collaborate in this process. This frame created fear of being reported by whoever (neighbors, fellow-workers) and nourished new behaviors, such as talking in a very low voice or in an evasive tone or act as if you were always supervised.

The massive limitation of political and labor rights was then another form of surveillance and control of the whole society. In the public administration several mechanisms were introduced to detect and dismiss functionaries, such as the announcing of the Institutional Act No. 7 that made it possible to pass the staff to “availability” as a first step to dismissal on the request of a declaration “oath of faith towards the democratic system of the Government”. Referring to these and other

resolutions – like “the certificate of competence for public tasks” issued by the respective sections of the Police, the Uruguayan dictatorship elaborated a classification of the citizens (A, B and C) according to their political trustworthiness. Obtaining a “C” responded to different reasons – in many cases to participation in social or political activities during previous years – and disabled the person to obtain or maintain his employment. The political and ideological persecution was especially severe in the pedagogical field. A significant lot of displacement took place there.

The prisons

The big prisons of the dictatorship. The Military Establishment of Imprisonment No 1. (el Establecimiento Militar de Reclusión No. 1) (known by the people as the Prison of Libertad) situated in the department of San José, 53 km from Montevideo near the town Libertad was inaugurated as an exclusively masculine prison. This took place on the first of October 1972, the same date as the first prisoners were received. They came from the prison-house of Punta Carretas. The following years until the 9th of March 1985 it is estimated that 2,873 political prisoners passed this place. 1,400 persons lived there at the same time.

The building situated in the quarter of Punta de Rieles 14 km from the centre of Montevideo had been used as a prison from the year 1968. In this year it was obtained by the state during Jorge Pacheco’s government in order to imprison arrested persons. From that date up to the beginning of 1973 it is estimated that approximately 400 political prisoners passed this place. In January 1973 the installation became the seat of the Military Establishment of Imprisonment No. 2. It was intended to be a high security prison for detained women. Immediately on the 16th of January the same year the first detained female prisoners arrived. They came from different places of imprisonment. Even if you cannot count with exact figures the estimation is that between 1973 and 1985 approximately 700 women stayed for a more or less long period in this place. On the 4th of March 1985 the 26 female prisoners who still stayed in Punta de Rieles were transferred to the fourth floor of the Central Prison. There they were liberated between the 10th and the 14th of March.

In 1972 several women who were detained in the military barracks of Tacuarembó and the Battalion of Engineers No 3 in Paso de los Toros were transported to the penitentiary of the town mentioned. It is estimated that between 1972 and 1977 during the time when the detained women were transported to the prison of Punta de Rieles – more than 100 women were prisoners in this place.

In Spite of the hard prison conditions those who were detained in these prisons developed many forms of resistance which were very important for the continuation of life and maintenance of their physical and emotional integrity.

The Exile

After the coup many Uruguayans abandoned their country to save their liberties and, in some cases, their lives. The economic crises that came in the preceding decade had already evoked the start a migratory process that became more serious with the dictatorship. It is estimated then that between 1963 and 1985 approximately 380,000 Uruguayans abandoned the country because of political and economical reasons.

The forms of departure and the ways to arrive to receiving countries were many, as well as the experiences of the different communities of exiled people scattered about in different continents.

In the first period the exiled people settled down in nearby countries, such as Chile and Argentina under the governments of Salvador Allende and Héctor Cámpora respectively, where an ideological climate favorable to the emigrants existed.

After the following coups in these countries (September 1973 in Chile and March 1976 in Argentina) and the systematic coordination of repression between the dictatorships of the South Cone of Latin America several exiled persons succeeded in leaving these countries and moving to places rather more remote. Others suffered imprisonment or death and some remain disappeared. This new phase of the exile also comprised other Latin American countries among which could be mentioned Mexico, Cuba and Venezuela and included many other destinations in Europe and Asia.

As this intensive mobilization took place during these years show, the exile was also a real front of opposition and denunciation against the Uruguayan dictatorship. In this

respect the actions of the exiled groups and of some exiled politicians, such as Zelmar Michilini (assassinated in May 1976) or Wilson Ferreira Aldunate, managed to raise important international condemnation of the dictatorial Uruguayan regime. To this should be added the exile of communities of the cultural sphere as was the case of the actors of the theatre “El Galpón” that came together as a group in Mexico.

The first persons that returned came at the same time as the first weak signals of the opening of democracy. In spite of this, shortly after the installation of the democratic government it was possible for a lot of people to return stimulated by the creation in March 1985 of a national commission of repatriation (“Comisión Nacional de Repatriación”) whose task was to facilitate the return of the exiled Uruguayans. Because of different circumstances – most important economic factors or family factors – many Uruguayans went on living in their respective places of exile.

The Disappeared People (fourth room)

Approximately some 230 persons kidnaped during the dictatorship are still missing. The majority of the illegal arrests were made in Uruguay and Argentina but it also took place in Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia and Colombia. Most of them were kidnapped in their homes or in the street by members of the repressive forces not wearing their police uniform or military uniform and in procedures that were not official or recognized by the respective States as such. Many of them were seen in secret centres of arrest in the different countries where they had been kidnapped and there is information about the fact that some of them were transported by secret flights to Uruguay, without knowing where they had been before this. During the kidnaping and/or in the respective centres of arrest some children were separated from their parents and illegally handed over to other families.

The regional coordination of the repression was possible due to the similar ideology of the governments in the neighbouring countries (Plan Condor). In the same way repressive operations took place against foreigners who were staying in Uruguay.

The Restoration of Democracy and the Struggle for Truth and Justice (fifth room)

During 1984 the last steps of the process of transition towards a democratic regime were taken. During the process the tension and the pressure were going on. All this time imprisonment without motives still existed. Also torture of detained people was used. At the same time they continued closing temporarily or definitely mass media in opposition of the regime.

On the 16th of April 1984 came the news of the death of Doctor Vladimir Roslik. This death was a consequence of the torture that was inflicted on him in the Batallón de Infantería nr 9 de Fray Bentos. Some months later, on the 17th of November, Adolfo Wassem died in prison. He was a member of the MLN and a member of the group that the dictatorship considered as hostages. They were held imprisoned in inhuman conditions. They were transported to different military head quarters and dungeons all over the country. Because of the worsening state of his health and his decision to make a hunger strike, demonstrations started in June in order to ask for his liberation.

The cases of Roslik and Wassem is a proof of the all over existence of the repressive system of the dictatorship.

On the 18th of January 1984 started a general strike, the first since 1973. As an answer to this action the government announced the dissolution of PIT (Plenario Intersindical de Trabajadores), the central trade union. And during the following

months there were dismissals and sanctions against public employees and private workers.

Eleven years after the coups, on the 27th of June 1984, there was a general civil strike demanding freedom, elections without “proscription”, i.e. limitations of rights to vote and be elected and also amnesty for the political prisoners.

In July a second round of negotiations started between representatives of the political parties and the Armed Forces with the view of succeeding in finishing the existing regime. Between May and July 1983 the first round of conversations had taken place in Parque Hotel. They were a failure due to the Militaries’ unwillingness of negotiations. They practically proposed the same demands that had been overthrown by a majority of the citizens in the constitutional plebiscite of 1980. They also proposed the maintaining of the illegal repressive system.

Different from what had occurred in this first experience in which delegates from the government and from the political parties Colorado, Nacional and Unión Cívica had intervened, in the second step of negotiations with the Armed Forces representatives of the parties Colorado, Unión Cívica and Frente Amplio participated, in spite of the discrepancies of some of their sections. On the 19th of March 1984 Liber Seregni had been liberated.

Because of the case of Wilson Ferreira Aldunate (who had returned to the country on the 16th of June and had been imprisoned immediately) the convent of Partido Nacional had decided not to participate in any of the negotiation with the government.

During the conversations Partido Demócrata Cristiano was legalized (They gave the name and their place in the Civil Register (their “lema”), so that Frente Amplio could present their list in the elections). Partido Demócrata Cristiano together with other parties and personalities are the founders of Frente Amplio. By means of the Institutional Act No.18 the majority of the proscriptions were abolished and there was an oral agreement to liberate 411 political prisoners. By this several demands of the representatives of the political parties were reached.

In the last meeting in Club Naval there was an agreement about the characteristics of the arrangements of the transition. Up to today no written acts and agreements from these meetings have appeared.

At last on the 25th of November the same year 1984 General Elections were held under conditions of limitations of rights to vote and be voted and with 300 citizens still in prison because of political reasons. The result was a triumph for Partido Colorado with Julio María Sanguinetti and Enrique Tarigo as president and vice president. Líber Seregni and Wilson Ferreira Aldunate, the principal characters of Frente Amplio and Partido Nacional respectively continued without the right to vote or be elected. Ferreira was still in prison but was immediately released after the elections.

The installing of this first democratic government between the 15th of February and the 1st of March closed a period and at the same time it was an inauguration of a period of transition with large themes of discussions unfinished, among others the outstanding question of the difficult economic situation and the reports of violations of Human Rights under the dictatorship.