

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Paul D. Almeida, *Waves of Protest: Popular Struggle in El Salvador, 1925–2005*. Social Movements, Protest, and Contention Series, volume 29. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 288 pp. \$US 25.00 paper (978-0-8166-4932-7), \$US 75.00 hardcover (978-0-8166-4931-0)

Most social movement theory has been generated from case studies of shorter-term movement organization activity in Western democracies. Almeida breaks from this tradition, providing an insightful longitudinal analysis of multisector resistance under differing economic and political conditions in El Salvador's history. As he examines waves of protest over time, Almeida focuses on several issues. First, he seeks to explain how oppositional forces generated resistance to authoritarian regimes when repressive government policies decimated the organizational basis for mobilization. Second, he elucidates the conditions that shaped activists' tactical repertoires and decisions to work for reform versus revolutionary restructuring. Third, the author raises the question of whether collective action theory needs to be amended to explain movements operating outside of advanced capitalist democracies.

One great aspect of this book is that its longitudinal approach enables the readers to not only see the effects of changing structural conditions across time, but also the links between cycles of resistance and repression. Almeida examines three waves of protest. First, he analyzes popular organizing from 1925–1962, focusing particularly on how the coffee export economy of the 1920s and 1930s created precarious economic conditions that, combined with regime liberalization, generated an active array of civic organizations. Under the leadership of Agustín Farabundo Martí, these groups staged an insurrection in 1932. When the state responded with massive violence, including a genocidal massacre that killed tens of thousands, popular organizing was suppressed for over thirty years. The second major wave of protest occurred during the 1960s through the 1980s. Here Almeida notes that reform-oriented movements were active from 1967 to 1972, then dissipated for a period before ascending into a radical and risky revolutionary period that culminated in a decade-long civil war. Here we see ties to earlier movements as the armed revolutionary forces took on the name of the fallen hero of 1932 — the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). Likewise, one of

the infamous paramilitary death squads of the 1980s named themselves the Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez Anti-communist Brigade, in recognition of the military dictator who ordered the post-uprising massacre. The third wave of protest addressed in the book is the post-war struggle against neoliberalism and globalization that has promoted the privatization of various services in El Salvador such as health care. One of the groups opposed to these trends is the contemporary FMLN, which has transitioned from an armed movement to a political party that is gaining greater representation in the Salvadoran political system. Thus, although issues change over time, the author enables the reader to see threads of continuity that tie these waves of protest together.

Moving beyond mere description of these historical moments of contention, Almeida puts forth a theory to explain why organizers sometimes use nonviolent approaches while at other times they can be either revolutionary or fairly quiescent. His basic argument is that authoritarian regimes usually limit social movement activity by restricting political freedoms, imposing sanctions on challengers, and denying access to state institutions. However, authoritarian leaders sometimes instigate periods of political liberalization that enable various civic organizations — such as unions, professional associations, and faith-based groups — to form and expand. When this occurs, previously isolated groups build coalitions, increasing their mobilization potential. These newly created civic groups and coalitions typically employ nonviolent (albeit often disruptive) tactics. However, when the state reverses its liberalization policies, by rescinding basic rights or increasing its level of repression, these civic groups are likely to become radicalized, calling for revolutionary restructuring. Thus state-sponsored repression can, at times, undermine resistance by raising the risks and costs of movement participation, as occurred after the 1932 Salvadoran massacre. Yet governments can sometimes inadvertently contribute to heightened levels of violent action if they attempt to strip away gains that these highly organized groups have accomplished.

This book has a number of praiseworthy elements. It is well written and easily understandable to those who are not Latin Americanists or social movement experts. It also provides a much-needed call to seriously consider social movements occurring in authoritarian settings and in lesser developed countries. Furthermore, it challenges the conventional assumption that movement trajectories are limited to phases of emergence, expansion, and decline; Almeida shows how periods of contention may be just one wave in a larger sea of long-term resistance.

Despite these strengths, Almeida sells himself short to a degree by not thoroughly unpacking the implications of his study for the field of

social movements. While he states that collective action theory may need to be amended as researchers include cases from authoritarian settings, he does not elaborate fully on the modifications that are needed. Instead, his findings from El Salvador are quite consistent with political process theory — one of the dominant models in the field. Almeida's contributions add nuances to this model by noting that political process theory assumes that mobilizing organizations already exist for those operating in democracies; in contrast, he notes that in authoritarian regimes, periods of liberalization are essential in enabling this mobilization base to form. He also expands our understanding of how threats shape movements, something that is not given sufficient attention by political process scholars. Yet the reader is not left with the sense that popular protest in El Salvador challenges traditional social movement theories in any fundamental way. Perhaps the most surprising finding of all might be that movements organize more or less in the same manner, regardless of the type of regime they confront. I wish Almeida had theorized about these issues more comprehensively.

Nonetheless, this book is still valuable for its careful analysis of popular mobilization in Salvadoran politics, the effects of repression, and its call for a broader view of movements — both geographically and historically.

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