

# The Agrarian Question Confronts the Aquino Government

Eduardo C. Tadem

**O**n January 22, 1987, 19 demonstrators were killed and dozens injured by police and Marine forces at the foot of Mendiola Bridge which leads to the Presidential palace. The casualties were part of a large assembly of rallyists led by the leftwing Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP or Philippine Peasant Movement) demanding that the Aquino government immediately adopt and implement a minimum agrarian reform program.

The Mendiola Massacre came as a shock to supporters of the 11-month old government that had come to power by ousting a dictatorial regime which was notorious for its unparalleled human rights abuses including violent acts of suppression of the right to dissent. The tragedy also illustrates the gravity of the problems that Corazon Aquino continues to face as she moulds a new era for Philippine society and its people. Mendiola 1987 also depicts the seeming inability of the government to prioritize its goals and programs and set clear perspectives for long lasting reforms.

## Agrarian Reform Policy

For almost a year since Corazon Aquino assumed the Presidency she failed to directly address the task of reformulating an agrarian reform agenda. She did not make any major pronouncement on what her government's commitment is towards resolving the centuries-old land problem. A two-paragraph press release issued by the Malacañang information office (but drafted by the Presidential reorganization commission in March 1986) which made reference to undertaking an expanded and comprehensive agrarian reform program was the first and last time that any positive pronouncement on the issue had been made. On at least one occasion, though, the President was quoted by major dailies as saying that Hacienda Luisita (a 6,000-hectare sugar estate owned by

her family) is not covered by land reform because it is not tenanted.

In the meantime, the economic conditions of the rural population deteriorated further. Costs of agricultural production remained unreachably high for small producers and rural poverty levels remained as they were before the February revolution. Economic difficulties brought about by lack of access to and absence of control over the land continued unabated.

The basic changes promised by the February revolution appear to have been confined to the arena of hopeful expectations without any real and lasting impact on the daily livelihood of the people. Prior to the December ceasefire agreement, it had been reported that the New People's Army (NPA) had grown from the 1985 figure of 16,000 to 22,000 thus belying predictions that the leftist insurgency would die down with the ouster of Marcos. The fact is, the principal causes of the lingering rural unrest still haunt the countryside and thereby continue to fuel the insurgency.

Of course, no miracles can be expected in one year and no one is demanding that rural poverty, unemployment, and landlessness disappear overnight. In fairness to Cory Aquino, there have been laudatory preliminary strides made in the area of dismantling the authoritarian structures of the previous regime. It is also reasonable to assume that because of intermittent threats coming from rightwing military forces, the government was effectively prevented from carrying more far-reaching economic reforms. On the other hand, it could also be argued that certain matters simply had to be taken care of for the simple reason that they held the key to the stabilization of Aquino's administration and would pave the way for conditions favorable to the implementation of an economic recovery program.

## The Rural Sector

Agrarian reform is one such vital issue. Existing inequalities in landownership and access to agricultural resources which are rooted in a semi-feudal past have been the chief cause of rural unrest and countless peasant rebellions. The backwardness of the productive units associated with the existing tenurial patterns have also been major impediments to the development of the forces of production in agriculture. Landowner capital was trapped in the soil and rents were simply squandered in non-productive social and political activities.

## Government Agencies Proposals

None of these happened. Instead agrarian reform simply became one of the many programs inserted in the overall proposals of two government agencies, the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA), which is the official economic planning body, and the Presidential Commission on Government Reorganization (PCGR). Nevertheless, the recommendations of the two agencies were noteworthy and useful as reference points from which the Office of the President could have proceeded.



Given the above, what was expected of the new government upon its assumption into power was a clear and unequivocal official policy statement pursuing agrarian reform. Cory Aquino could have made a major policy speech on this matter before a rural audience. In recognition of the paramount importance of the program to Philippine society in general and the agrarian population in particular and the ineffectivity of the existing bureaucracy, the creation of powerful special governmental bodies exclusively tasked with drawing up a land reform program would have necessarily followed.

The NEDA April 1986 proposals viewed agrarian reform as a way of carrying out "redistributive justice" for "those who till the land." The agency also projected the expansion of the program to "include natural resources and other crops" with small farmers as the target beneficiaries. In its May 1986 reorganization proposal for the Ministry of Agrarian Reform (MAR) the PCGR underscored the concept of "land to the tiller" as the main guide for agrarian reform and regarded the program as "essentially a redressal of injustice, a measure designed to redistribute wealth, in order to build a broader-based

democracy while uplifting the rural population economically and stimulating increased agricultural production”.

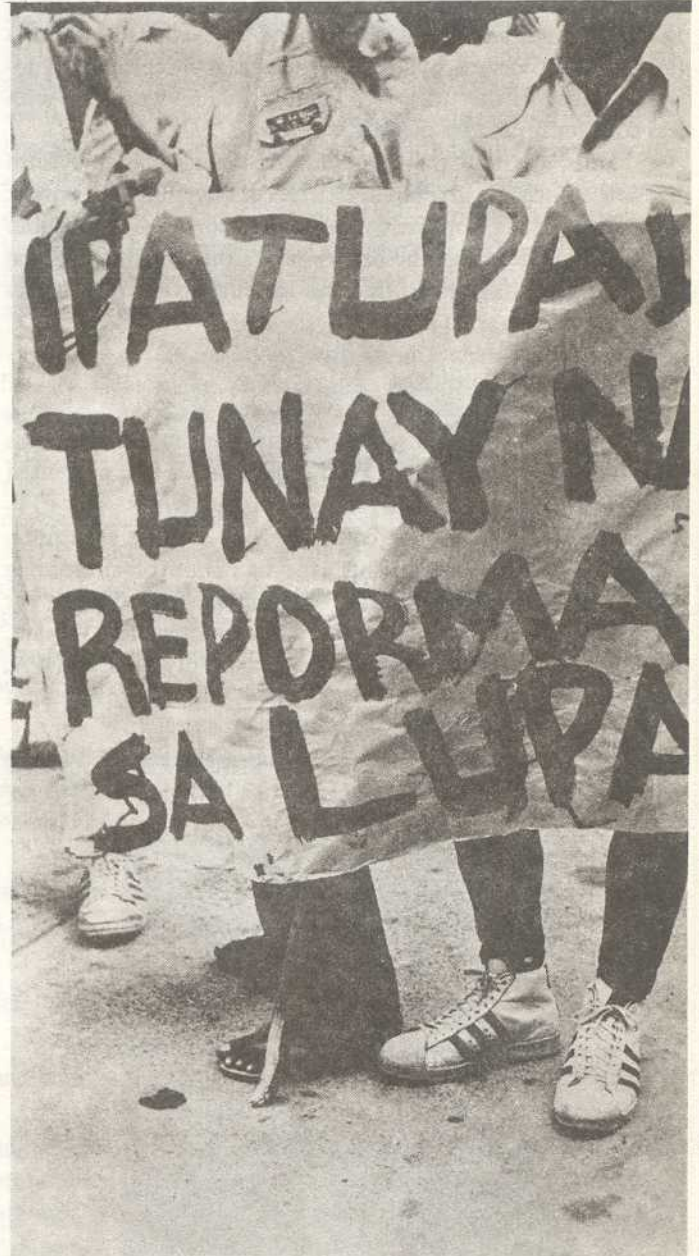
A draft Executive Order submitted by PCGR to the Office of the President for Cory Aquino's signature on December 8, 1986 declares it “a policy of the State to completely abolish all remnants of feudalism and all other types of unjust tenurial arrangements”. The EO also states that the government shall “establish owner-cultivated, economic family-sized farms and collectively-owned/cooperatively-cultivated farms as the foundation of Philippine agriculture, . . . prohibit absentee land ownership, rechannel and divert landowner capital in agriculture to industrial development”.

As the 1st anniversary of the February Revolution approached, the proposals of NEDA and PCGR had yet to be acted upon by Malacañang. Then, the Constitutional Commission finished its draft provisions for agrarian reform thus rendering academic the earlier proposals. The Constitutional provisions, however, while containing landmarks, also include loopholes and unresolved points which are left to Congress to iron out by passing the necessary agrarian reform legislation. Positive aspects include the expansion of the program scope to include all agricultural lands as well as tenants and regular farmworkers and the recognition of collective ownership together with individual family farms. On the other hand, ambiguity marks the provisions for “just compensation” and “retention limits”. In a manner, the Commission failed to clearly mandate a thorough transformation of existing inequitable land tenure systems and left to Congress the task of resolving controversial aspects.

#### Why the Inaction

The inaction of the government on this vital question can be partly traced to the perception of Cory Aquino herself on what the President's role should and should not be. Anxious to dissociate her administration from the Marcos era, Aquino has been reluctant to wield the powers of her office in order to effectuate sweeping and drastic reforms. Where she has done so, e.g., the abolition of the Marcos Constitution and the closing down of the Batasang Pambansa (Parliament), she has been stung by criticisms coming even from her own Cabinet and the political alliance that supported her Presidential campaign. The fragile coalition of political parties that supported her rise to power consisting mainly of conservative liberals and even right wing elements was making sure that she does not go too far in reforming society.

The result was that after adopting what has been termed the Freedom Constitution, Cory would thereafter never again be as decisive. She has been content to let flow the normal and extremely slow processes of reestablishing the liberal democratic structures that are seen as solutions to destabilizing moves coming from both the right and the left.



*Land Reform: A century-old demand.*

The other factor is that within the Cabinet, there were then no strong and consistent advocates of land reform. The Minister of Agrarian Reform, while regarded as a sincere proponent of a new agrarian program, was seen as a newcomer in national politics and was not in a position to persuade his colleagues to accord the issue the proper concern it deserves. Other Ministers who should have been supportive, e.g., those in Agriculture and Food (MAF) and in Natural Resources (MNR), were viewed by farmers groups as more inclined towards solutions that merely address productivity issues with less concern for equity matters.

Thus, prior to the Mendiola massacre, agrarian reform had low priority in the highest circles of governmental power. Believing that her popularity was unquestioned, Cory Aquino simply allowed herself the luxury of waiting for the approval of the 1986 draft Constitution and the enactment by Congress of the needed agrarian legislation.

### Agrarian Unrest Continues

Meanwhile, rural discontent continued unabated. It was only the sheer moral authority of Cory Aquino that prevented a major escalation of insurgent guerrilla activities. The CPP-NPA-NDF tried to mount offensives but so long as Aquino remained popular and retained the adulation of an adoring public, such aggressive actions, while making good copy for the media, would remain marginal to the political mainstream. In the end, the NDF, acting on behalf of the CPP-NPA, entered into a 60-day ceasefire agreement with the government on December 10, 1986.

On another front, the organized peasantry started taking matters in their own hands. Unilateral land occupations by



*A woman bewails her tale at a KMP rally.*

farmers of idle and abandoned as well as foreclosed and sequestered lands have been reported. In Mindoro province, peasants took over 2,000 hectares of idle lands owned by persons known to be close to the previous regime. In Laguna, lands previously owned by a Marcos crony and since taken over by the Presidential Commission on Good Government (PCGG) were occupied and cultivated by its tenant farmers who defied the Commission's orders to leave. Ironically, the militant peasants were charged in court by the PCGG for "landgrabbing." In Bukidnon, 1,000 hectares of sugar lands previously cultivated by the Bukidnon Sugar Corporation (BUSCO) were also seized by farmers.

Other forms of peasant resistance have been noted. In the Cagayan Valley in northern Luzon, Massey-Ferguson's plan to occupy 5,000 hectares of idle sugar lands is being opposed by local peasants and landless workers. In the nearby 8,000 hectare Madrigal estate, farmers are asserting their right to cultivate the land. In Isabela province also in northern Luzon, the Land Bank is unable to collect rent from farmers in the 12,000-hectare Hacienda San Antonio-Sta. Isabel.

On another front, peasant organizations, non-governmental groups (NGOs), farmer support institutions, and concerned individuals continually held consultations among themselves and organized conferences. Foremost among these were the KMP annual Congress, and the Nationwide Consultations on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (NCARRD). The result was the drafting of a number of alternative agrarian reform proposals which were enriched by valuable inputs from peasants and rural workers themselves.

The NCARRD held more than 200 grassroots consultations involving 10,000 participants from May to August of 1986 at the village, municipal, provincial and sub-regional levels. Two national consultations were conducted from May 13-16 and from August 7-8 of the same year. The following principles were adopted by NCARRD participants as a basis of a land reform program:

1. "That land must be given to the actual tiller of the soil whether tenant or farm worker;
2. "That the right to the land be founded on the concept of stewardship wherein human beings are only caretakers of God's creation and no one and no group has the exclusive right to enjoy and use the gifts of creation to the deprivation of others;
3. "That land reform must include all agricultural lands whether public, private, or church-owned, cultivated or idle, foreclosed or sequestered, haciendas, ranches and plantations, foreign-controlled lands, pasture lands, fishponds, saltbeds, and U.S. military bases;
4. "That land reform be expanded to cover all crops; and,
5. "That the rights of cultural communities to ancestral lands and their customary laws be recognized and respected."

### The Insurgency Angle

What was also difficult to understand is the apparent incongruity between the official response to the farmers' demands and the presumed awareness on the part of government sectors that the success of the prevailing ceasefire with the CPP-NPA-NDF and the possibilities for negotiating an enduring peace hinge foremost on the sincere resolution of the agrarian question. The ceasefire expired on February 6, 1987 and the NDF, charging the government with "insincerity in solving basic problems," has since refused to return to the negotiating table.

The resumption of hostilities between the NPA and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) has raised fears of a return to the brutalities and human rights abuses which characterized the previous regime's counterinsurgency record. This fear is founded on the widely-held perception that the AFP, while calling itself "New," still retains its Marcosian characteristics and has not been purged of undesirable elements.

True enough, the ugly face of the armed conflict immediately surfaced. On February 10, 1987, 17 farmers were massacred by Army troopers after an earlier encounter with NPA guerillas which resulted in the death of an Army Lieutenant.

### Insensitivity Led to Mendiola

The government's initial responses to the farmers' demands were unfortunate and revealed a seeming lack of sensitivity to the difficulties being experienced by a great majority of the rural sector. Presidential procrastination was then used by anti-Aquino elements in the still to-be-reformed military establishment to stage a violent confrontation with the Left in Mendiola. It has also been suggested that certain hardline elements within the Left secretly desired such an encounter in order to prove correct its boycott position during the snap Presidential polls and its "No" campaign in the plebiscite. This view is purely speculative, however, and is based more on circumstantial factors than solid evidence. For example, it is well known that some elements within the Left assume that Cory Aquino, while enjoying credibility and infinitely more popularity than her deposed predecessor, is basically no different from Marcos in her political inclinations and directions. What is indisputable though is that Presidential indecision and halfheartedness on people's basic demands eventually paved the way for the Mendiola killings.

In any case, the January 22 massacre set back the democratization process and called into question the civilian authority's ability to exercise effective control over the military. More disturbing is the perception that the present Centrist government lacks leadership and foresight as far as basic issues like land reform are concerned and is inept in preventing critical situations from arising. Notwithstanding the landslide ratification of the Constitution last February 2, 1987, this view from more perceptive observers is not likely to change

unless there is a clear and noticeable shift in the pattern of governmental decision making.

### The Government Finally Acts

The bloody Mendiola incident jolted Malacañang from its complacent attitude. Cory Aquino was said to be "deeply shocked" over the tragic event. Over the objections of her security, she visited the injured victims in hospitals and consoled with families of the dead that same night and immediately called the Cabinet for an emergency meeting. A special citizen's commission was appointed to investigate the tragedy. Suddenly, top officials of the Presidential bureaucracy (many of whom were ex-street parliamentarians and human rights lawyers during the Marcos era) began awakening from their slumber and were now taking a closer look at agrarian reform.

A series of meetings with various peasants groups were held in Malacañang. Cory Aquino personally met with representatives of these organizations and their supporters from other sectors to hear their suggestions. It is important to note that other peasant centers outside of the KMP mainstream have expressed similar demands as the latter and would differ only in the methods to be employed. For example, an alliance of rural organizations and urban-based farmer support groups identified with the left-of-center Coalition for Peace presented the following proposals for immediate action in a dialogue with the President last January 28, 1987:

1. "The immediate use of all agrarian lands classified as idle and abandoned, alienable and disposable, and foreclosed and sequestered, and begin the process of land redistribution based on farmers' needs and their ability to pay;
2. "The implementation of social experiments on land reform in sugar lands particularly in Negros and Hacienda Luisita;
3. "In places where land transfer is not immediately feasible, e.g., coconut lands, land rents must be lowered; and,
4. "A moratorium on amortization payments on rice and corn lands subject to review of P.D. 27".

The Finance Minister, who has never been known for any significant pronouncement on agrarian reform, in his presentation of the government's economic recovery plan before the World Bank-engineered Inter-governmental Consultative Group, announced that "the present government has now set among its highest priorities the development of a comprehensive plan for accelerating implementation of the original land reform program . . ." and that "as soon as practicable thereafter, expansion into other areas shall be undertaken". Minister Ongpin then asked for foreign financing in the amount of \$500 million to fund land transfer proceedings, the redemption of previously issued land bonds from compensated landlords, and crop loans and expansion of extension services.



On February 1, 1987, the government publicly released its initial response to the KMP's January demands. This was prepared by a joint committee of the MAR and the MAF. Except on the question of terminating all amortization payments for tenanted rice and corn lands and some details on implementation of the transfer of Marcos or crony-owned lands, the committee virtually accepted all the KMP's proposals.

After a two-hour meeting between the joint government committee and KMP leaders on February 6, an agreement "in principle" was reached between the two panels for the government to immediately implement "a minimum land reform program". The two groups resolved to:

1. "Dispose of lands sequestered by government through the Presidential Commission on Good Government to qualified occupants or employees at affordable cost;
2. "That government banks and financial institutions expand the lease purchase program of foreclosed lands; and,
3. "That the Ministry of Natural Resources will accelerate comprehensive classification of public lands to determine which are alienable and disposable".

The MAR also released details of a five-year four-part comprehensive and expanded program to be implemented from 1987 to 1992. The first phase consists of the distribution of 557,000 million hectares of tenanted rice and corn lands. Phase II covers 939,000 hectares of privately-owned lands that were idle and abandoned, foreclosed, sequestered, voluntarily offered, and those marked for expropriation. The third phase includes 3.85 million hectares of large private farms such as plantation and haciendas. The last phase covers 5 million hectares of public alienable and disposable lands. Total area coverage is 10.35 million hectares which effectively includes the country's entire agricultural crop area. Phases A, B, and D will start this year while Phase C, which is considered the most difficult and controversial as it includes lands controlled by multinational and local agribusiness concerns, will be deferred until 1989. This grand plan was announced by Minister Alvarez in a press conference held in Malacañang on February 8.

#### Need for Coordination

Judging from these moves, it can be said that the government is now receptive to the demand to immediately undertake agrarian reform measures without waiting for Congress to convene late this year. Of course they only constitute a start, and a long-overdue one at that.

It is also observed that the entire governmental machinery still has to get its act together in terms of coordinating the efforts of various ministries who are now suddenly stressing agrarian reform. While each one agrees that land reform is a priority, specific aspects of the program receive different degrees of emphasis from the agency concerned.

The Minister of Finance worries that landowners will not be properly compensated and that the Land Bank, of which he is the Chairman of the Board, may be financially threatened



*Mendiola, January 22: Victim of Leftist adventurism or government insensitivity?*

### “Once Again, To the Streets”

Finally, impatient over the long silence of Malacañang on agrarian reform and alarmed that the Marcos program was still being used to define the parameters of the land redistribution strategy, the peasants once more took to the streets. On October 21, 1986, thousands of farmers and their urban supporters led by KMP marched to Malacañang to demand an audience with the President. They were promptly turned back by hundreds of riot police, military troops and barbed wire barricades at the foot of Mendiola bridge. The KMP denounced the “shabby treatment” they received. A coalition of farmers’ groups and agrarian reform advocates issued a strongly-worded denunciation of the government’s handling of the incident and reiterated the call for Presidential action on the KMP demands as well as on the proposals of NEDA, MAR, and PCGR. The silence from Malacañang was deafening.

### The KMP Minimum Program

This October action was followed on January 15, 1987 by a KMP-organized camp-in at the MAR office. It was here that the KMP called for the immediate adoption of a minimum agrarian reform program consisting of the following:

1. The confiscation of lands owned by Marcos and by his cronies and all other lands acquired through force and deceit and their free distribution to farmers;
2. The write-off of all amortization payments on lands under Operation Land Transfer as provided by P.D. 27 and the distribution of the titles to farmers;
3. The expropriation of private agricultural landholdings foreclosed by large banks;

4. The confiscation of idle and abandoned agricultural lands and their free distribution to the farmers;
5. The allocation of 25% or 1/5 of plantation areas for agricultural workers for planting crops for family needs;
6. The lowering of land rents and the gradual abolition of usury on tenanted lands;
7. The undertaking of a comprehensive study on the overall size of plantations planted to export crops;
8. The study of the overall scope of public lands and the possible use of portions thereof for resettlement purposes; and;
9. The establishment of resettlement projects on denuded public lands suitable for agriculture.

MAR Minister Alvarez initially pronounced the KMP demands “reasonable” and was reported by newspapers to be in agreement with the farmers’ proposals. Unfortunately, after consultations with Malacañang, Alvarez would give the standard official response: “Wait for the ratification of the Constitution”. The implication here is that the peasants should wait for Congress to enact the agrarian reform law before the President herself could act.

### Pitfalls of Congress Legislation

Congress, of course, will not convene until after the national elections on May 11, 1987 and even then no one knows when the body will deem it fit to start the process of drawing up the new land reform law based on the Constitutional mandate. Even then, the expected social composition of the legislature may only result in an agrarian reform law that would be less than adequate for the farmers’ purposes.

On the other hand, it is the opinion of various sectors, apart from the KMP, that there is a pressing urgency for the adoption of a new agrarian reform policy (at the very least) and that certain measures can already be undertaken by Cory Aquino even before Congress meets. A spokesperson of *Manindigan!*, a group composed mainly of businessmen, has asked Cory Aquino to use her temporary legislative powers and “promptly institute a meaningful agrarian program” and not pass on to Congress this “historic responsibility”.

The greatest apprehension of the peasants is that a Congress dominated by landed and other elite interests will interpret questions left unresolved by the Constitutional Commission to suit their narrow class interests. A legislative interpretation of “just compensation” to mean “market value” will effectively doom the program to failure. Either the farmer-beneficiaries will not be able to afford the price of the land or if government decides to subsidize the peasants, the necessary funding cannot be raised. Granting rights of retention to landowners without requiring them to be cultivators themselves would only serve to perpetuate absentee landownership. This will be a step backward for agrarian reform.

by the massive expenditures required for the land transfer phase. Minister Ongpin also thinks that the program should first concentrate only on 826,000 hectares of tenanted rice and corn lands and 939,000 hectares of publicly-owned, foreclosed, or voluntarily-proffered lands. His figure for tenanted rice and corn lands is less than MAR's estimate of more than 1 million hectares. As for other lands. His figure for tenanted future inclusion without mentioning a timetable. However, Minister Ongpin's estimate of what he calls the "maximum feasible area" for an extended land reform program is only 4.77 million hectares or a mere 42% of MAR's own estimates of total program coverage. The use of part of the \$500 million Land Reform Fund he is requesting from foreign sources for redeeming Land Bank bonds from former land-owners is also a possible source of disagreement with MAR.

Given such differing perceptions, there is a need to set up a mechanism for coordinating government moves regarding land reform. The MAR cannot alone implement the program as the cooperation of other ministries are needed. Accurate identification and the proper classification of lands so as to delineate land reform areas will have to be undertaken by the MNR. The provision of support services such as agricultural extension work, credit, and marketing is the concern of the MAF. Financial support for land transfer will have to come from the Ministry of Finance and the Budget Ministry. Infrastructure development, i.e., farm to market roads, irrigation

works, bridges, etc., is the domain of the Ministry of Public Works. The Ministry of Trade and Industry can help by undertaking rural-based industrial projects that will attract land-owner capital.

A possible mechanism for effective coordination of the multiple tasks involved in a comprehensive and long-term agrarian reform is the proposal of the Government Reorganization Ministry (PCGR) for Cory Aquino to establish a Presidential Commission on Rural Development (PCRD). As envisioned by PCGR, this commission will have agrarian reform as its centerpiece. Its standing committee will be headed by President Aquino herself with the Ministers of MAR, MAF, and MNR, and one farmers' representative as members. A draft Executive Order on the creation of this coordinating body also awaits action from Malacañang.

### Conclusion

It has taken the government a long time to undertake important moves regarding the land question. Even now, a unified policy still has to emerge. Thus, as of this writing, a policy pronouncement is still being awaited from President Corazon Aquino. Time is a crucial factor here and further delays can have fatal effects to efforts to consolidate the present regime and inaugurate a new life for the poor and long disadvantaged sectors of the population. **K**

"*Latin American Perspectives* has in its short lifetime acquired an eminent reputation among Latin Americanists both in the United States and in Latin America. It fills an intricate gap in our knowledge of this area which is not currently covered by other journals. I have long subscribed to this Journal and also urged my students to do so. I have also used several of the special issues in my classes."

Helen I. Safa, *University of Florida*  
President, *Latin American Studies Association*

# LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES

A Journal on Capitalism and Socialism



LAP is the leading progressive journal on Latin America, and publishes more work of Latin American scholars than any other North American journal.

LAP is not afraid to publish the controversial, the left of center, the revolutionary voices active in Latin American scholarship—voices that otherwise might not be heard. In Latin America itself, LAP is one of the most widely read journals to come out of the United States.

LAP provides a clear, multidimensional look at Latin America.

- economics—and the study of the moral, political, and social desirability of economic policies
- political science—and the patterns of social action that underlie the operation of nations, the struggle for power, the conduct and misconduct of governments
- international relations—particularly as they affect the nationalistic movements and internal problems of Latin American countries
- philosophy—theoretical, and applied to the hard realities of developing nations
- history—a critical view, with inside views of history in the making
- sociology, geography, anthropology, even literature . . . the personal, poetic comments of activists and revolutionary scholars

Frequency: Quarterly in February, May, August, and November

Rates:	One Year	Two Years	Three Years	Single Issues
Individuals:	\$18.00	\$36.00	\$ 54.00	\$ 6.00
Institutions:	\$46.00	\$91.00	\$136.00	\$12.00

On subscriptions outside the U.S., please add \$4 per year for foreign postage.

P.O. Box 5703  
Riverside, California 92517-5703  
(714) 787-5508