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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

WEEKLY SUMMARY

Special Report

Christian Democracy in Latin America

Secret

No. 38

3 March 1967
No. 0279/67A

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Approved For Release 2005/01/27 : CIA-RDP79-00927A005700020004-6

Approved For Release 2005/01/27 : CIA-RDP79-00927A005700020004-6

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CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA

The decisive victory of Eduardo Frei in the September 1964 Chilean presidential election led many to hope that Christian Democracy would develop significantly throughout Latin America, competing with Communism on ideological grounds and offering an alternative, democratic route to social and economic progress.

No such trend has yet developed. The Christian Democratic movement's appeal is to students and middle class, a relatively small percentage of the population in most Latin American countries. Its concepts of basic social reform and the dignity of the human person may appeal to the workers, but they still cast their vote on a pragmatic basis for the least objectionable of the established parties that have an immediate chance of governing.

The movement's progress is likely to be hampered by its lack of strong leaders and effective labor organizations to compete against the entrenched positions of other political movements.

Current Balance Sheet

The Christian Democratic movement is generally agreed to be of current political significance in only four Latin American countries--Chile, Peru, Venezuela, and El Salvador.

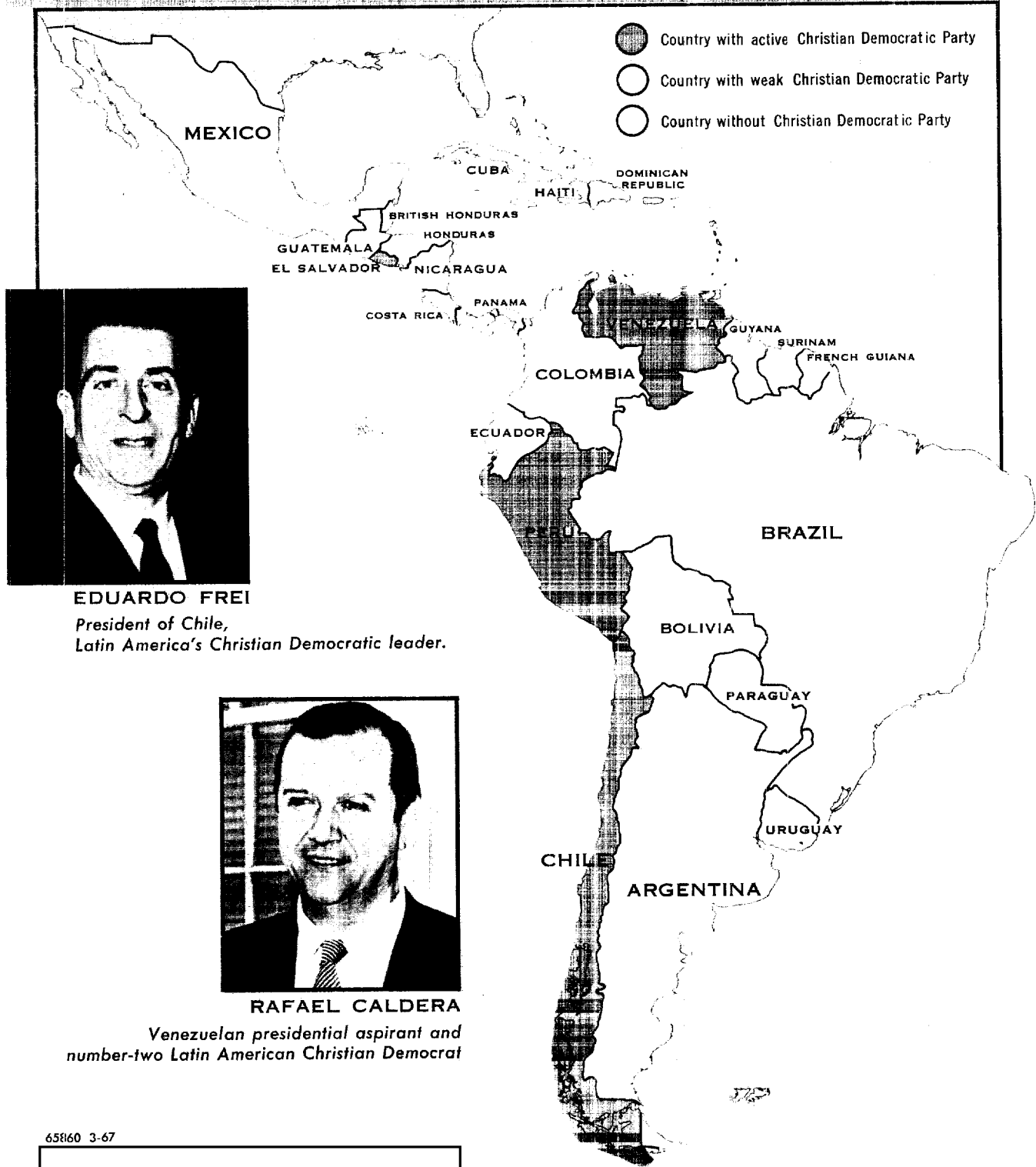
In only one of these--Chile--is the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) the governing party. Frei's solid victory in the 1964 presidential election was followed by an even more impressive showing in the March 1965 congressional election. However, the party's reform program has run into difficulty in the upper house of Congress, which is still controlled by the opposition; no progress has been made in weaken-

ing Marxist domination of the urban labor force; and Frei's moderation has been increasingly challenged by the left wing of his own party, which may capture control in the next two or three years.

The only other Christian Democratic party with a claim to a role in government is the one in Peru. It was brought into a pre-election coalition by the dominant Popular Action Party in 1963 and, although it gained only four percent of the votes, it holds two cabinet posts. Its voting strength has been weakened recently by the defection of a dissident faction which formed a separate Popular Christian Party.

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Venezuela's Christian Democrats (COPEI) have strong hopes of duplicating the victory of the Chilean party in 1968 and appear to have narrowed the gap between their 22 percent of the electorate in 1963 and the governing Democratic Action's 32 percent. COPEI Secretary General Rafael Caldera, one of the few Latin American CD leaders of international stature, is expected to be the party's standard bearer in his fourth try for the presidency. He has recently come out in favor of a politically expedient move to the right, thus filling the vacuum of the center-right of the Venezuelan political spectrum and opening new sources of support.

In El Salvador, the PDC garnered 31.2 percent of the votes in the March 1966 legislative election and one of its leaders, Jose Napoleon Duarte, retained the mayoralty of San Salvador. In less than six years the PDC has become the leading opposition party. It has little chance of capturing the presidency in 1967, but should be a strong contender by 1972, with Notre Dame - educated Mayor Duarte the likely candidate.

Applying even the most generous criteria to the judgment of potential, there are not more than four other CD parties--in the Dominican Republic, Panama, Brazil, and Guatemala--that might develop as moderately important forces over the next five years.

The Dominican Revolutionary Social Christian Party (PRSC),

led by Coanabo Javier, has abandoned, at least for the time being, the irresponsible policies it adopted after the April 1965 revolt and has moved toward the political center. The party has made its opposition to the Balaguer government clear, but has also indicated that it intends to operate within bounds acceptable to the President. The PRSC hopes that this moderate line will increase its following and enable it to improve on the poor showing it made in the 1966 elections. The party has developed a small but talented cadre, primarily from the university ranks.

The Panamanian PDC was registered some five years ago and polled only 3.1 percent of the votes in 1964. Although it continues a minuscule party, it has made significant organizational strides and its philosophy of social justice gives it roots lacked by most Panamanian parties, which are largely personalistic or tied to financial interests. The PDC is currently negotiating with the mass-based Panamenista Party of Arnulfo Arias--Panama's largest--in hopes of forming a coalition for the May 1968 elections. The CDs have offered to provide the Panamenistas with much-needed administrative skills in return for a share of the assembly seats in the next election. A long-range goal would be to acquire support within Arias' party and inherit his mass following when he passes from the scene.

The Brazilian PDC polled only four percent of the vote in

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1962, but the party had significant strength in three important south-central states (Parana, Sao Paulo, and Guanabara). Like all other Brazilian parties, it was abolished during a political reorganization under the Castello Branco administration. Most of its members then affiliated with the progovernment ARENA party and campaigned under its banner in the November 1966 congressional elections. It is unlikely that there will be any significant expansion in the number of political parties--the new Brazilian constitution sets down stringent standards that virtually eliminate the possibility of a repetition of the former proliferation of parties. The former PDC has made no attempt to reconstitute itself, but its former members will probably join with like-minded congressmen to pursue policies consistent with Christian Democratic ideology.

The Guatemalan PDC was only recently recognized as a legally constituted party. This group,

[redacted] has some strength in the youth and student movement and some growth potential among the campesinos who make up more than half the population. Current direction of the party leaves much to be desired; its leader, Rene de Leon, appears honest, but he has little organizational flair or popular appeal. With more vigorous leadership and the development of a middle-echelon cadre, the party might develop significantly--particularly if the incumbent Revolutionary Party (PR) administration fails to resolve basic problems confronting it.

The remaining nine Christian Democratic parties--in Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Uruguay--show scant promise of developing into forces of national importance over the next five years. Leadership of even modest stature exists only in Argentina (Salvador Alende, Horacio Sueldo) and Bolivia (Remo di Natale).

Party Youth Wings

As with all political groups in Latin America, the vast majority of CD party militants come from student organizations in the local universities. In most countries of the hemisphere, CD voting strength on the campus is much greater than the political strength of the parent party. A few examples illustrate this point: In Panama, the party polled 3.1 percent of the national vote in 1964 (and probably would poll not more than 5 percent today), but its university youth got 12.8 percent in the January 1966 campus election and 24.4 percent in January 1967. The Dominican PRSC received 5.4 percent of the vote in 1962 (and its present strength could well be lower because of internal divisions and leadership conflicts), but its youth wing on the campus garnered 40.2 percent of the vote in May 1966. In Venezuela, COPEI polled 22 percent of the vote in 1963; its student wing on the campus of Central University, however, polled 40.2 percent of the vote in 1966.

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Several CD leaders, most notably Frei in Chile and Caldera in Venezuela, have expressed considerable concern over the growing radicalization of party youth wings. In several countries the positions assumed by CD youth groups (or important wings) are almost indistinguishable from those of pro-Communist youth elements. In Venezuela, the wing of the COPEI youth headed by Marta Sosa is so "far out" it has earned the sobriquet "the Astronauts."



In Panama, the dominant wing of the CD youth has assumed positions at least as radical as the Communists. And in the Dominican Republic the Social Christian group in the National University, while differentiating itself from the Communist students on certain issues, has frequently taken a parallel line.

The great concern of responsible party leaders is that these students, as they progress from campus to parent party, will swell the ranks of the radical wings and push the parties further left. Other observers, however, expect the "hotheads" to mellow once they participate directly in party life and cope with hard political reality. Both views can be defended. Some mellowing is inevitable, but in the past ten years the demand for revolutionary (even convulsive) change has mushroomed--and among the youth the cry has assumed much greater proportions.



The Labor Arm

A major influence in the development of the Christian Democratic movement will be the actions and attitudes of its labor organization, the Latin American Confederation of Christian Trade Unionists (CLASC). So far, as an organized force, it has been a dismal failure except among the campesinos. Its only impact and sole purpose up to this time has been as a political action instrument with primary appeal to the working classes. In this role, it has earned a reputation for independent action and irresponsibility that has reflected negatively on the whole movement despite CLASC's vigorous claims that it is not subservient to the Christian Democratic political leaders.

In spite of the apparent differences between CLASC and

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the CD movement, a closer and more formal relationship appears to be in the offing. Last April, officials of CLASC who are also officers of the Christian Democratic parties met in Montevideo to arrange closer coordination between the two groups. To accomplish this goal, they proposed that both the CD party labor departments and CLASC be granted formal representation in the Christian Democratic Organization of America (ODCA), the regional grouping formed in 1949.

The plan has not yet been implemented, but eventual ODCA approval appears likely. Closer CLASC identification with the CD political movement may have an adverse effect on CD youth wings, which--being further left than their parent parties--have identified more closely with CLASC's revolutionary image. Since the first of the year, CLASC has intensified its efforts to create its own youth groups and appears to have made some progress, especially in Central America.

The Role of ODCA

In its 17 years of existence, ODCA has not evolved beyond a sort of fraternity held together more by negative factors such as hostility to the US, to capitalism, and to the oligarchies, than by any basic agreement among its members on doctrine or principles. Moreover, the individual parties have made very clear that they will fight any effort--whether

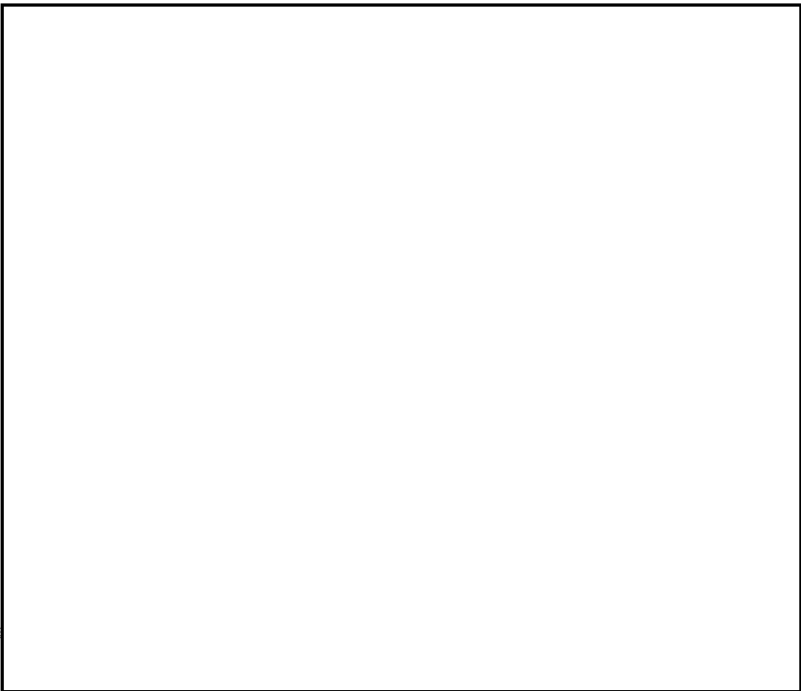
[Redacted] to impose standards

and controls that will impinge on their freedom of action.

In general, ODCA takes a slightly less hostile line on US policies than that of its member parties. This probably results from the influence of its president, Rafael Caldera of Venezuela. The organization's two vice presidents are Hector Cornejo Chavez of Peru and Rene De Leon of Guatemala. Tomas Reyes Vicuna of Chile is its secretary general.

Only in Central America has there been any move toward a more cohesive unit geared to area problems. A smaller regional group, the Christian Democratic Union of Central America, was organized last July. It now has five member parties, in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama, and a sixth may be formed in Honduras.

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The modest progress made by the Christian Democratic movement in the past two and a half years suggests that its development will be much slower and less extensive than many anticipated in the first flush of enthusiasm following the Frei victory.

One major problem is its failure to reach the lower social classes and to develop a significant worker base. Its strength in the universities and its ability to compete with Communist groups on the campus create unfounded optimism. The "inspirational" approach that attracts the college student has no comparable appeal among the inadequately educated lower classes.

Neither does a victory for one party seem likely to have

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any major effect on the fortunes of another. What appears to emerge from CD gains or losses in recent elections is rather solid evidence that the national parties will sink or swim on the basis of their own leadership

abilities, organizational talents, and approach to local issues. International events count for little, and the influence of ODCA and the successful CD parties for even less.

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