

Everyday Forms of Organization

WHILE MANY MIGHT NOW fondly reflect back on the 1950s as a period of peace and prosperity, at the time observers saw this decade as anything but that. For example, in its retrospective review of political events of 1953, *El Comercio* observed that few years in the history of the republic had been as turbulent. According to the newspaper, nothing was permanent on the continually shifting political landscape where intense passions could destroy anything and everything. Even respectable institutions came under scrutiny, and important leaders fell from their high pedestals when their feet were shown to be made of clay. The newspaper editors were not convinced that politicians were taking the country in the right direction.¹

Labor strikes, coup attempts, and other visible manifestations of unrest and protest gained public attention, including coverage in the newspapers. Mundane and less spectacular practices were less apt to register in the media, but more accurately reflected the ongoing organizational processes. Covert surveillance proved to be particularly useful in charting these everyday efforts to build a strong and viable left. Evidence that emanates from CIA records demonstrates that far from disappearing, in the face of overwhelming opposition militants continued to build their organizations across the 1950s. Even more significant, intelligence gathering reveals the types of conversations and debates that took place within the left. What emerges evident is a form of praxis—political action that was informed by serious intellectual reflections.

For the communist party, its most high-profile activity in 1953 was the interpellation that communist party leader and labor senator Pedro Saad conducted in congress of José María Velasco Ibarra's conservative minister of government Camilo Ponce Enríquez. Although Saad lost the censure vote against the person who had become the left's primary opponent, the concerns laid bare in the midst of those debates highlight the issues that were of primary interest to the communists. Furthermore, as became unmistakably apparent, the surveillance and repression of leftist activities did not only come from outside of the country.

Many times, socialists and communists encountered a more ferocious hostility to their activities from domestic opposition. In order to advance their struggles, the communists would need to overcome those exacting challenges.

Theory and Action

On August 25, 1952, a month after the fifth PCE congress, the local committee in Guayaquil held an extraordinary meeting at communist headquarters to receive reports from party leaders.² CIA monitoring of that event indicates that the agency's surveillance of the PCE did not end with the party congress but continued at an intense pace. The agency maintained a particular concern with investigating coastal activities where the party unquestionably now had its base of operations. As with the fifth congress, it is not immediately apparent who conducted the investigations or how the documentation was compiled, but detailed information reflects a dedication of significant resources to the surveillance of the party.

Faulty coordination in advertising the August 25 meeting resulted in the attendance of only fourteen members. Party chief Enrique Gil Gilbert was in Quito, so Marco Tulio Oramas presided. Oramas informed those present of plans to reorganize communist cells. The Guayas provincial committee aimed to send delegates to visit all of the cells to verify that they were operating properly. Each cell was to hold regular meetings in a defined location. All members were expected to attend and to be current with their dues payments. Leaders instructed cells to emphasize a campaign against the military assistance pact that Ecuador had recently signed with the United States, and to denounce the treaty through public events, distribution of handbills, and collection of signatures for their peace campaign. According to Lilo Linke, the pact provoked less resistance in Ecuador than elsewhere in the hemisphere "because the Communist Party is so weak." Further hindering their efforts, the government presented the agreement as a logical continuation of the provision of naval bases on the Pacific Coast and Galápagos Islands during the Second World War.³ While that may be the case, the CIA surveillance reveals the presence of concerted and ongoing efforts to build a campaign against imperial penetration of the country.

At the local committee meeting, Segundo Ramos, the secretary general of the FPTG, discussed labor unrest at the Witting Shipyard. Ramos blamed the problems on the United States supervisor Francis Vincent Coleman. The workers had gone on strike and needed communist support in order to achieve their goals of better pay and working conditions. The strikers' legal representative

Jorge Maldonado Renella, who Patricio Cueva Jaramillo had wanted to expel from the party at the previous month's congress because of his shirking of party responsibilities, cautioned "that the new Velasco administration would attempt to wipe out all labor unions and federations." Perhaps he had taken the criticisms to heart, because now he advocated that the PCE needed to work energetically to mobilize the unions in defense of their interests. A CIA case officer added a comment that the party leadership described the FPTG as "their federation," as if it were an adjunct of the PCE. The economic challenges that labor unions presented to United States hegemonic control over the hemisphere remained at the forefront of the minds of those in the intelligence agency.

Even as the party organized political actions, cadres also engaged in study and theoretical reflection in order to gain a better understanding of their current environment. Jorge Arellano Gallegos held a series of classes in his house in Quito for members of his cell. In addition to Arellano, seventeen cell members attended the meeting, of whom the CIA was able to identify twelve. The first session lasted for about an hour. Arellano traced the history of the Bolshevik Revolution and explained different theories of how a revolution would emerge, including a discussion of Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin's arguments that a revolution could only be victorious through the combined force of the peasants and an urban proletariat. Arellano compared Russia before the revolution to Ecuador's current neocolonial status under Yankee control, and proclaimed "that Ecuador should follow the example set by Lenin and Stalin in throwing off the bonds of capitalism." He pointed to the USSR as the center of a global proletarian revolution. The gatherings were part of a concerted effort to fashion a more dedicated and effective core of party members to advance their revolutionary agenda. The CIA, for its part, dismissed the study sessions as nothing other than political indoctrination.⁴

In addition to charting the contents of the discussions that militants had inside the party, CIA surveillance also serves to record ongoing organizational efforts at local, regional, national, and international levels. CIA officers had a natural tendency to exaggerate internal conflicts—the same discord that party leaders wanted to keep under wraps—but more useful are the insights that information reports provide into how the party structured itself. For example, the CIA reported that the party's Pichincha province central committee sought to strengthen its organizational structure "by insuring that each local cell is directed by energetic well-qualified individuals." To realize this goal, the committee transferred Simón Pérez, a member of the Pichincha executive committee, from the Pedro Saad cell to the new Goya cell (apparently named after the Spanish painter Francisco Goya who through his artwork denounced Napoleon's

invasion of the Iberian Peninsula in 1807), with the hope that doing so would strengthen the Goya cell. The provincial committee also instructed each cell to select a complete slate of officers, including a secretary of propaganda.⁵ A fortified cell structure was key to advancing the party's ideological agenda.

On the coast where the party was stronger, on August 8, 1953, the Guayas committee of the PCE held a provincial conference in Guayaquil at the home of Franklin Pérez Castro.⁶ Gil Gilbert presided over a preparatory session with sixteen members who established an agenda for the conference that would begin that same evening. Twenty delegates attended the inaugural session that commenced with a history of the PCE before proceeding to an examination and critique of the activities of the thirty cells that existed in the city. Of those thirty, only six or eight were truly active, and even among those attendance was sporadic. The session devolved into a long and heated debate late into the night with exchanges of accusations as to who Narváez was to blame for the shortcomings. Many of the allegations and underlying conflicts followed along lines similar to those at the previous year's party congress.

The discussions continued the following morning. Cesario Valverde of the Jesús Menéndez cell who had attacked Manuel Medina Castro at the fifth party congress now faced particularly harsh criticism for accusing Pérez Castro of bribing supporters to vote for him in order to retain his position on the provincial committee. In particular, Valverde had accused Juan Pío Narváez and Marco Tulio Oramas of being blind followers of Pérez Castro, and who had gained their loyal support by providing them with free meals in his home. From interpersonal conflicts, debates swung toward international issues with much broader political implications. Some party members moved from criticizing Valverde for his statements against other party members to denouncing him for claiming that the USSR had ordered Trotsky's assassination and declaring that the expulsion of deputy premier Lavrentiy Pavlovich Beria was unjust. Valverde acknowledged having made these statements, and defended his position with the claim that he was not the only one who held those views. He contended that Oramas had raised the same issue at a FPTG meeting. As for naming Narváez and Oramas as lackeys of Pérez Castro, Valverde said that if they felt guilty perhaps it was because there was some truth to the rumors. As with other conflicts, it is difficult to determine how much of the attacks could be traced to interpersonal tension and how much might be due to political or ideological differences. Rather than the doctrinaire imposition of a party line from outside or above, these debates reflected an environment in which members did not hesitate to articulate their differences of opinion.

The CIA report notes that the meeting then turned on Bernardino Poveda and Abelardo Santos from the Puerto cell. They faced charges of receiving 300 sucres from J. Federico Intriago to support him in his election to the Guayaquil municipal council in exchange for his support for the formation of an agricultural colony. Poveda and Santos allegedly pocketed the money and did nothing to support Intriago, nor did Intriago help the Puerto cell secure the land they needed to form the cooperative. Julio Olmedo Muñoz faced additional accusations of campaigning for Intriago behind the back of the PCE, the same issue that had divided Nela Martínez and Alfredo Vera at the previous year's party congress. Olmedo allegedly told his clients that they did not need to pay their bills if they would vote for Intriago. Opportunism appeared to be a problem on all sides. Although Intriago emerged out of the liberal party, the conservative Ponce later named him as minister of economy after his election as president in 1956. Intriago faced additional charges of involvement in other scandals in that post.⁷ It was not without good reason that communist party militants questioned involvement with such a shady character.

Even with all of the complications that involvement in electoral campaigns introduced into party organization, delegates at the conference selected Alfonso Quijano Cobos and Enrique Gil Gilbert to head the ballot for the Guayas provincial council in the upcoming November 1953 elections. Oramas and Olmedo, despite the complaints against their actions, would be the candidates for the Guayaquil municipal council. The meeting concluded with elections for the provincial party committee. A delegate asked the assembly to analyze the activities of each nominee so that only those with clean records would be selected for leadership positions. This led to further acrimonious sparring that eliminated many nominees. Finally, the meeting elected a committee with the labor leader Guillermo Cañarte as the secretary general.

CIA surveillance allows scholars to peer deeply into the organizational structures of a local party. What the agency's information gathering efforts reveal are sincere militants engaged in critical and open debates over how to advance their struggles. As with making sausage, the process was not always pretty but what emerges apparent is a small but devoted group of communists who remained committed to realizing their vision for a more just and equal world.

Interpellation

When Paredes was secretary general the PCE actively engaged with rural struggles in Indigenous communities. Under Saad's leadership, the party turned

instead toward strengthening its alliances with labor unions and participating in parliamentary maneuvers. Saad excelled at using his position as labor representative in the federal congress to advance a working-class agenda. He effectively used that space to engage in sustained attacks on the left's archenemy and current minister of government Camilo Ponce Enríquez. One of the most noted examples of Saad's use of parliamentary maneuvers came with his interpellation of Ponce in September 1953.⁸

Opposition to Ponce extended well beyond the left, and in fact the inspiration for the interpellation came from different quarters. The previous December, Velasco Ibarra had exiled his previous ally and CFP leader Carlos Guevara Moreno to Peru under charges of plotting to overthrow his government. On September 12, 1953, Guevara Moreno announced that he would return from Lima to Guayaquil, but Velasco Ibarra bared him from entering the country. Hundreds of Guevara Moreno's supporters gathered at the airport in Guayaquil to welcome him, but when they learned that the government would deny him entry they began to throw rocks at the police. In the melee, one person was killed and sixteen police officers and an undetermined number of civilians were injured. Officials arrested more than thirty people, including four minors. Undersecretary of interior José Bucheli said that "professional agitators" had planned the protest. He attributed the disturbances to the CFP, communists, and elements representing other ideologies.⁹

The decision to bar Guevara Moreno from returning to Ecuador along with shuttering two opposition newspapers led to political pressure to censure Velasco Ibarra's government. Finally, on September 19 after a marathon thirteen-hour session the Ecuadorian congress voted seventy-three to fifteen against a motion of censure of Ponce.¹⁰ Conservative domination of congress, which *El Comercio* described as "a docile instrument of the executive" that blindly followed the president's orders, made the outcome a foregone conclusion.¹¹ Nevertheless, while the motion failed it provided the left with a visible venue in which to highlight their complaints about the government's rightward drift. It also offered the public an opportunity to observe a direct confrontation between politicians with extremely divergent views.

Rumors had circulated for months that Saad wanted to present a series of charges against the government minister. At the end of August, Saad had told an assembly of workers that the indictments were in the pipeline, although he was vague on details.¹² Over the next several days, the media reported on his plan to bring charges.¹³ On Friday, September 11, Saad together with the congressional deputies Joel Cevallos Cedeño, a socialist from Manabí, and Guillermo Grijalva

from Carchi presented eight questions to which they wanted Ponce to respond. The government's decision the following day to bar Guevara Moreno's return provided the legislators with the political impetus to bring the accusations in front of the entire body.

The list of complaints against the administration was eclectic, and reflected the range of enemies that Velasco Ibarra had made during his first year in the presidency. The first question asked under what legal authority Ponce had closed the opposition Guayaquil newspapers *La Nación* and *La Hora*. The wealthy banana exporter Simón Cañarte owned both papers and had financed Velasco Ibarra's electoral campaign. His support had assured his victory by building a bridge between the caudillo and Guevara Moreno's populist CFP. When political differences led to a falling out between Velasco Ibarra and Guevara Moreno, Cañarte's newspapers supported the CFP. In revenge for this betrayal, Velasco Ibarra ordered both papers shuttered. Their closure and the arrest of their reporters had led to international condemnation, including from the Inter-American Press Association's Freedom of the Press Committee.¹⁴ The British ambassador quipped that the closing of *La Nación* and *La Hora* was not without merit, but still that "Ecuador is one of the few democratic countries left in South America and the suppression of a newspaper gives a shock to the body politic."¹⁵ Both papers remained closed for four months until Velasco Ibarra finally allowed them to reopen.

The second item questioned Velasco Ibarra's violation of the autonomy of the Central University in Quito. The third raised the issue of illegal detentions. The fourth concerned Ponce's intervention in other ministries to act against worker interests. The fifth touched on the issue of an August 6 massacre of agricultural workers on the Merced hacienda in the parish of Pintag just outside of Quito. The sixth inquired into a loan for the colonization of the Amazon. The seventh concerned the confiscation of material sent from Europe to the bookstore *Librería Ecuador*. And, finally, the eighth asked why Ponce had ordered the ministry of public works to intercept mail sent to *Librería Ecuador*.¹⁶ In relation to the third item, one of the petitioners attached a lengthy list of illegal detentions starting with an attack on Evangelicals in Cotacollao on March 8, 1953, and concluding with the arrests in Guayaquil on September 8, 1953, of the student Eduardo Flores, president of the Unión Democrática Universitaria (UDU, University Democratic Union) and Franklin Pérez Castro. The list detailed eleven more alleged violations between those two events, including the illegal detention of labor leaders, political activists, student radicals, journalists, and many more. Miguel Macías Hurtado, a deputy from Guayas and one of Guevara Moreno's

closest and most trusted supporters in the CFP, added a ninth question asking what right Ponce had to evict Guevara Moreno from the country and to prevent him from returning.¹⁷ Opposition to Ponce's policies had momentarily united a diverse range of politicians who otherwise would not have collaborated and even might have been mortal enemies. The United States Embassy reported that Ponce was nervous because he knew "that some of his acts were without good legal justification."¹⁸ He had a valid reason to be anxious.

Telegrams flowed into the senate from around the country, some backing Ponce and others Saad.¹⁹ A committee in defense of democracy in the working-class neighborhood of San Roque in Quito distributed a handbill in which they announced their support for the interpellation. "Ponce Enríquez has imprisoned and tortured students, workers, and simple citizens, and has allowed the murder of Indians," the statement read. He "has closed newspapers, seized books, and imprisoned trade union leaders. His government has led to an increase in the misery of the people." In contrast, "the democratic legislators have defended the interests of the people, fighting against new taxes, for an increase in wages and salaries, for price controls on food, for democratic liberties, and for national independence." The interpellation was not against religion, as some opponents had claimed. Rather, "it is the struggle of men and women who live in misery, who have no bread or shelter, against the exploitative landholders headed by Ponce Enríquez." The committee called on all people regardless of political or religious beliefs to support the interpellation and the permanent struggle for democratic freedoms and better life conditions that it represented.²⁰ Saad hoped to advance his political struggle through such popular expressions of support.

In what strains the limits of credulity, the United States Embassy reported a rumor that communists were considering murdering Saad and blaming the minister for his death. According to this theory, the party leader and deputy's death would trigger a "Bogotazo" similar to the protests that occurred on April 11, 1948, with the assassination of the Colombian populist Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. The PCE responded with a handbill charging Ponce with planning to kill Saad to avoid the interpellation.²¹ These competing narratives indicate the heightened level of tension that coursed through the current political environment.

Finally, on Friday, September 18, 1953, the day arrived on which Ponce would have to face the charges leveled against him. *El Comercio* published an editorial in support of the questioning:

Today the interpellation will be made of the minister of government, which is a legal and democratic act that in no case can be allowed to become cause

for scandals or much less to provoke acts of force or agitation without a civic sense of any kind.

The editorial proceeded to note that it was well known that the government held a majority in congress and undoubtedly the body would vote in favor of the minister. Nevertheless, the paper defended the right of the legal process to proceed forward for the betterment of the country. The editorial called for the interpellation to be conducted in a respectful and measured fashion.²² Meanwhile, telegrams in support of Saad continued to flow in from labor and other groups.²³

The joint session of congress convened at 5:15 in the afternoon. *El Comercio* reported that the visitors' gallery was full of spectators who chanted against communism, socialism, liberalism, and the CFP, and cheered in support of the minister of government. The conservatives had packed the hall, and Saad would be facing an antagonistic audience. Alfredo Chiriboga Chiriboga, the country's vice president who presided over the session, asked for quiet in the chamber, and stated that the gallery would be cleared if the visitors did not remain silent. The secretary then read out the constitutional provisions that allowed for the interpellation and the charges that the minister faced. Article 55 of the 1946 Constitution granted a joint session of congress (*congreso pleno*) the right to "examine the official behavior of the ministers of state, and censure them if there is a reason."²⁴ Legally, Saad could not be denied his day in court.

Saad proceeded to lay out his reasons for initiating the charges against Ponce. He proclaimed that the government's policies and violations of the constitution had brought political unrest and an economic crisis to the entire country. The government had engaged in undemocratic measures. Imprisonments and violations of peoples' rights continued without end. The country faced the choice of remaining under the current autocratic system, or returning to the rule of law. Saad declared that those who brought the charges were simply complying with their responsibilities as representatives of the people. He asserted that this interpellation grew out of respect for the constitution. The communist leader denied that any political interest underlay the interpellation, or that they were seeking political advantage through this process. They were not engaging in the interrogation as members of a political party. In fact, he noted, those who brought the questions came from different parties. Rather, the interpellation reflected the will of the Ecuadorian people, a defense of the constitution that the government had violated countless times, and an act in support of democratic rule.

After a lengthy debate over procedural issues, Ponce began a defense of his actions. He presented an overview of the history of Ecuador's political development,

highlighting that for much of its existence the country had followed a path of anarchy and demagoguery. Saad stopped the minister to thank him for the history lesson, but asked him to limit his comments to the questions currently under consideration. Despite the interruption, Ponce continued his exposition, synthesizing the dates of the various constitutions that had been promulgated in Ecuador. The minister contended that Ecuadorians lived under an abstract idea of freedom, something granted by a deity that could be lost if care was not taken to defend those rights.

The minister then proceeded to respond to the charges one by one, starting with the closure of the newspapers *La Nación* and *La Hora*. Ever since he had assumed his cabinet post on February 18, the papers had launched virulent and personal attacks against him, and over the following months this had risen to the point of inciting rebellions that presented a serious threat to the stability of the government. Whereas Saad had charged the minister with having violated the constitution, Ponce countered that the government had taken the step of closing the papers to preserve public order. The minister contended that the constitution not only defended the rights of free speech, but also placed responsibilities on those who made public statements. The problem existed only with certain papers that acted in an irresponsible manner, and therefore was not a systemic issue. When the media operated responsibly, the minister declared, the government respected them, but when they acted in a criminal fashion the government would sanction their activities.

Ponce then read his correspondence with the Central University's rector in response to the second question concerning the alleged violation of the university's autonomy. He asked why a government minister could not correspond with a university rector without risking violation of the law. Furthermore, the accusations concerned the FEUE, which Ponce maintained was an organization that was neither related to the university nor comprised of university students but instead was a political group with its own agenda that attacked the ministry of government on a daily basis. That the FEUE acted in such a fashion was unacceptable, he declared. Ponce also criticized the UDU at the University of Guayaquil that was associated with the IUS based in Prague. Its only concern was to spread Marxist propaganda with the goal of undermining Ecuador's constitutionally established government. As evidence of the UDU's communist orientation, the minister pointed to a telegram he had received from the IUS demanding the release of the student leader Luis Arcentales. Ponce said that as an Ecuadorian and a member of the government, he would fight to prevent Ecuador from falling under Moscow's domination and being trapped behind

the “iron curtain.” He contended that the government had to act to counter the subversive threats emanating out of the university, and was justified in doing so because Ecuadorians were a Christian and Catholic people.

The third issue concerned allegations of illegal detentions, and Ponce said that he would provide the congress with documentation to respond to each accusation. The minister began with the first charge concerning the arrest of Evangelical preachers in Cotacollao. In March, local Catholics attacked Protestant Evangelicals who were proselytizing in the northern suburb of Quito. Police had to intervene to reestablish order.²⁵ Ponce justified their arrest as a response to an attack on the Catholic religion that violated Article 168 of the constitution that sanctioned actions that contributed to public unrest. Conflicts with Evangelicals had been going on for some time, and communist support for their rights can be interpreted as either a principled defense of freedom of religion or an opportunistic exploitation of an issue to attack an extremely Catholic and conservative minister.

The second case concerned Nelson Chávez, the secretary general of the railroad union, who for years had been fighting for the rights of those workers. Chávez gained heightened animosity from conservatives when he traveled to Beijing in October 1952 to attend the World Peace Congress. Upon his return Ponce charged him with subversive activities, which led the head of the government-owned railroad company to fire Chávez under accusations “of fomenting disorder for political reasons.” Chávez had organized a strike in opposition to the government’s rigorous antilabor measures that included a plan to reorganize the railroad and eliminate jobs with the intent of purging leftist workers. Ponce charged that the strike was part of a communist plot and ordered the labor leaders arrested and other workers fired in an attempt to undermine their union.²⁶

At this point, the congressional leadership ruled that the documentation regarding the multiple charges that Saad had raised was well known, and that there was no need for Ponce to respond to each one, and therefore they would pass on to the fourth point. Cevallos Cedeño, one of the four deputies who had brought the charges, objected and insisted that the congress should hear a full response to each item. Although several deputies supported Cevallos Cedeño, the procedural vote went against him. Saad protested that the congressional leadership was impeding the interpellation process. Despite these protestations, Ponce proceeded on to the next question.

Ponce denied that he had intervened in other ministries to act against worker interests, including the firing of railroad workers and teachers. Since all of the

ministries were part of the same executive branch, Ponce argued, the complaint of intervention in other branches of government logically made no sense and therefore did not violate any constitutional provisions. In terms of the specific issue of separating the leaders of the railroad union from their employment, the minister contended that the government had simply recognized the decision that the company had made in order to maintain internal peace and order in the face of a threatened general strike. In a second case of a fired journalist, the action was justified for security concerns because he had engaged in open opposition to the government.

The fifth question addressed the massacre at La Merced. A long history of exploitation on the estate had led to rising tensions with the Indigenous workers finally forming a union to press their demands for better treatment. On August 6, the workers attacked a particularly abusive overseer when he broke from the tradition of providing women with a portion of the potatoes that they were harvesting for their own domestic use. When the owners called in the police to put down the protest, the officers responded with lethal force leaving three workers dead, fourteen injured, and twenty-five imprisoned.²⁷ The minister justified the use of violence with the contention that the owners of the hacienda had requested that the police intervene to reestablish order. It was only for that reason that the government had sent a squad of seven police officers. Furthermore, the protesters had injured the police as well as a local priest who accompanied them in the hopes of appeasing the workers. Ponce contended that the violence the officials faced justified the armed response, and that the issue was one of following judicial procedures rather than an administrative matter. In fact, Ponce expressed surprise that only two days earlier a judge had ordered the release of the protesters who had been detained. This action had been taken even though those charged had set fire to a granary on the hacienda and damaged more than 1,200 quintales of wheat.

In terms of the loan for the colonization of the Amazon, the sixth question on the list, the minister justified his actions based on security concerns, that the Amazon was a symbol of Ecuadorian nationality and that the region represented the country's future. The people who lived in the area needed access to transportation, and since the ministry of public works lacked funds the president of the country had requested the loan. As an Ecuadorian and a patriot, Ponce claimed he could not refuse to help his compatriots when they needed his assistance. Furthermore, he did not act alone but with the unanimous support of other administrators. In fact, he maintained, the loan had already been repaid and therefore that no damage had been done.

The minister responded simultaneously to the seventh and eighth questions concerning the confiscation of printed matter from the mail. He denied that he had ordered the ministry of public works to intervene with postal deliveries. In any case, Ponce justified government action in seizing communist propaganda that could damage the country's international relations, claiming that doing so was legal and legitimate. Ecuador was a Western democratic republic, Ponce contended, and needed to defend itself from foreign communist aggression. Upon investigating the existence of the *Librería Ecuador*, the authorities discovered that the bookstore only existed as a collection of communist propaganda in the house of María Luisa Gómez de la Torre. Although the mail service could have destroyed the books, instead they had returned them to Moscow from whence they had come. The minister argued that he was fully within his constitutional rights to take the action that he did. British ambassador Norman Mayers similarly challenged Gómez de la Torre's claim that the "books were purely literary works and not propaganda material." He maintained that the items "provide the channel for subsidising the Communist party funds, the proceeds of sale not being remitted back," even though the press had not reported their purpose as such.²⁸ Arguably, one person's propaganda is another person's art, and in either case disruption of mail delivery was a blow to the communist party's political agenda.

After responding to Saad's eight questions, Ponce warned that communist penetration had reached an unprecedented level in Ecuador. He asked how people could remain calm in the face of this threat. It was for this reason that the government would not tolerate the corrupting influence of communist propaganda. Ponce pledged that as minister of government he would apply the country's laws with all of its rigor and might in order to save the country from foreign influences. Anticommunist sentiments ran deeply through his presentation. Leftist sentiments presented the greatest challenge to his conservative politics and Catholic faith.

It was then Saad's turn to interrogate the minister. He began with the closure of *La Nación* and *La Hora*. As CFP publications, they were not sympathetic to a communist agenda. Saad's defense of them can be interpreted as either an opportunistic gesture to seek allies in a campaign against a common enemy, or a principled stance in support of freedom of the press. Saad took this second tack. He asked Ponce whether the government had evidence that the newspapers were engaged in seditious activities. Again, the minister defended his actions with references to the current 1946 Constitution, which led to debates regarding what current legislation regulated press activities and who had the right to interpret

constitutional provisions. Saad accused Ponce of leading the government toward a dictatorial regime that would freely engage in arbitrary acts of repression. Referencing specific constitutional articles and other legislation, Saad asserted that Ponce had violated the freedom of the press. The minister, naturally, was not willing to concede this point.

Saad stated that he would leave the second and third questions of violations of the Central University autonomy and of illegal detentions to his colleagues Cevallos Cedeño and Grijalva. Instead, as the senator representing labor, he turned to the fourth question concerning Ponce's intervention in other ministries to act against worker interests. Saad began with the firing of Chávez and fifteen other labor leaders and workers from the railroad under accusations of organizing a strike. The government had denied the workers their constitutional right to strike, Saad asserted. He stated that he had repeatedly asked the ministry of government for copies of documents related to this case but the ministry had never sent them. Fortunately, he received documents from the railroad company that demonstrated collusion between the government and the company to remove the workers. Saad also raised the case of Humberto Vacas Gómez who had been fired from his teaching position at the Colegio Nacional 24 de Mayo for his opposition to the government. Saad produced documents that supported his charges, and asked the minister how it was possible to deny his accusations of collusion between the ministry and those autonomous entities. Saad charged that Ecuadorians had been left subject to the government's political whims. The outcome, he asserted, was a violation of constitutional free speech rights.

In his questioning of Ponce, Saad apparently skipped over the fifth question regarding the massacre of workers at La Merced, or at least neither the official record of congressional debates in the legislative archive nor the newspaper reports in *El Comercio* make mention of any comments he might have made on that topic. In part that absence was predictable, and reflects a long-held division in the PCE between those in the highlands banded around Paredes with an interest in rural peasant and Indigenous communities, and those on the coast grouped around Saad with their base in urban labor movements. Even in both of these camps, the communist reach was limited, which left the PCE open to charges of exploiting other peoples' struggles when the party called attention to their oppression and exploitation. Even if that were the case, it is surprising that Saad would not raise the issue in his interpellation, if for no other reason than to weaken his political opponent.

On the other hand, perhaps that documentary record is in error. In his history of Indigenous struggles, the communist historian Oswaldo Albornoz

Peralta highlights Saad's interpellation of Ponce as putting responsibility for the massacre directly at the feet of the minister of government.²⁹ Furthermore, Ponce made a similar acknowledgment in his annual report on the ministry's activity. "The upheaval at La Merced immediately preceded the interpellation that senator Saad and others brought against the minister of government," Ponce stated in a summary of his activities, "and coincided with an intense campaign of insults and incitements made in Quito against the minister of government." According to Ponce, the interpellation "was not about isolated events, but on the contrary, planned and directed towards the achievement of an end." According to Ponce, all of this emerged manifestly apparent in newspaper reports at the time.³⁰ It could be that the ethnocentric attitudes that deemed rural Indigenous struggles not worthy of attention were not those of Saad but rather of the congressional recorder and media outlets. Alternatively, in the absence of an advocate such as Paredes who had long pressed for the rights of Indigenous communities, all sides may have been just as happy to let the issue slide.

Saad then turned to the seventh and eighth questions concerning the confiscation of material from the postal service, and again raised allegations of violations of constitutional rights and other laws. Saad reviewed the legislation regulating the handling of the mail, and declared that no provision existed to confiscate material transmitted through the post office. Furthermore, Saad denied that the publications in question challenged the country's peace and tranquility. Rather, they addressed topics such as philosophy, science, biography, and literature. Saad repeated previous statements that the minister could not demonstrate that the books violated the country's harmony.

Saad attempted to use Ponce's own actions against him. On July 19, 1944, when serving as foreign minister in Velasco Ibarra's second government he had signed Decree 302 that denounced those implicated in the disastrous 1941 war with Peru. That action underscored the inalienable rights of people. At this point, the liberal senator from Esmeraldas César Plaza Monzón angrily protested Saad's statement, declaring that these were personal rather than political issues. Saad responded by saying that he would publish the charges in the press, and ended his statement by once again underscoring his argument that the minister had violated constitutional guarantees.

Cevallos Cedeño and Grijalva then took their turns at bringing charges against the minister, including underscoring points that Saad had already made and touching on other issues that Saad had not addressed. In his responses, Ponce returned to the theme of a fear of communist infiltration, particularly in educational institutions. He declared that the government enjoyed popular

support, and would continue to do so regardless of the charges brought against him. He also stated that because of his belief in his god and country the government would not fall. It was those nationalistic and theocratic attitudes that demonstrated a wide gap between Ponce and his communist opponents.

It was almost midnight when the CFP deputy Macías Hurtado finally had an opportunity to raise his question of the expulsion of his party leader Guevara Moreno, which again sparked debates concerning constitutional rights and threats to the country. Furthermore, Ponce charged that in exile Guevara Moreno had maintained contact with Peruvian exiles, which demonstrated the danger he presented to the country. Once again, the minister resorted to nationalistic and xenophobic sentiments to defend his actions.

Numerous representatives came to Saad's defense. Benjamín Carrión, a socialist and senator representing media interests, began his comments by defending the Casa de la Cultura, which he had founded, from the minister's charges that it was a center for communist indoctrination. He emphasized that Ponce had completely evaded the questions placed to him, and failed to provide a constitutional basis for the closure of *La Nación* and *La Hora*. Alfredo Pérez Guerrero, also a socialist and senator for higher education, similarly defended the universities and the CTE from the minister's attacks. Both senators represented a unified left opposition to the conservative minister's political stances.

At 1:45 a.m., Ponce left the chamber and the congress entered into debate over the charges. Saad argued that what they had just witnessed was the reality that the country was currently experiencing. He observed that the minister effectively dodged the questions that they had brought. Saad criticized Ponce for steering the discussion in a doctrinaire direction when in reality the charges had little to do with those issues. The communist deputy denied that he had interviewed Guevara Moreno in Lima as Ponce had charged. Saad pointed out that the PCE had always been opposed to the CFP, and that the minister was only trying to denigrate the legitimacy of his party. Ponce had effectively played at cleavages between his opponents.

In an attempt to refocus the conversation on a united attack against the minister, Saad charged that Ponce had not been able to respond with arguments, but only used sophistry to hide from the charges. If the congress accepted Ponce's contention that a minister could determine whether or not a law was constitutional, Saad contended, Ecuador would be living in a frank and open dictatorship. He accused the minister of attempting to control Ecuador through a repressive political police. Saad closed his statement with a declaration that he was confident that the congress would vote to censor the minister of government.

Despite demands from some deputies to continue the debate, at 4:20 a.m. the chamber moved to a vote on the motion. Despite Saad's best efforts, with a conservative majority in the congress the outcome was a foregone conclusion. The motion failed with seventy-two votes against and fifteen in favor. Elections matter. At 6:20 a.m., the marathon session finally came to a close.

Mail Intercept Operations

The confiscation of communist propaganda from the mail that Saad denounced in the interpellation relates to larger issues of CIA surveillance and the obstacles that the PCE had to overcome to advance their political agenda. From the beginning of CIA operations, information reports point to the presence of undercover agents in the Ecuadorian government. One example is the interception of an airmailed circular with the return address of a commercial firm in Paris that Saad received via a Syrian business in Guayaquil. The CIA case officer was aware of the contents of the circular, which denounced the Marshall Plan and outlined the special conditions that Latin America faced in countering a United States imperial agenda.³¹ Subsequent CIA reports reference instructions that Saad received "from Europe through clandestine channels" that indicate the ongoing presence of a successful spy operation despite communist attempts to evade surveillance.³² PCE treasurer Gómez de la Torre also received a letter from Moscow concerning the provision of paper supplies. The correspondence was the result of a conversation that Paredes had during a recent trip to Warsaw. The particulars in the CIA report, including the date of letter (December 11, 1950) and a description of the letterhead (Mezhduna Rodnaja Kniga, Moscow), in addition to the contents of the letter points to the presence of an intercept in the Ecuadorian post office.³³ All indications are that these operations had been in place for years and probably predated the CIA—most likely as a continuation of FBI and other previous investigations that included collaboration with Ecuadorian state security forces.

In his exposé of CIA operations in the early 1960s, Philip Agee describes the intercept operation in which an agent in the central post office in Quito provided the agency with the incoming airmail pouch. A CIA officer opened, read, and photographed letters of interest, and returned the letters to the post office on the same day for delivery. The officer reported the contents of the most relevant correspondence to CIA Headquarters in Washington and perhaps other stations.³⁴ Although intelligence officers did not always understand the information they acquired and were willing to exaggerate its importance to satisfy their

superiors, these operations provide historians with access to a level of detail on communist activities that otherwise would not be available.

Naturally, communists sought ways to counter this surveillance. A CIA report from 1948 on international communist movements acknowledged that parties only sent routine communications through the mail, preferring instead to communicate important orders verbally. When that was not possible, couriers might carry written instructions, but with the additional protection of codes and secret ink. When the mail was used, correspondence was typically sent to cover addresses, or hand carried across borders and posted domestically to prevent surveillance of international mail. In Ecuador, a communist cell had infiltrated the post office and extracted mail addressed to their comrades for personal delivery. That the CIA was aware of this level of communist penetration of the mail service highlights the detail of information that the agency was able to acquire. Recognizing an awareness that opponents were reading their correspondence, the agency admitted, “documents purporting to contain ‘orders’ or ‘instructions’ from one Party to another have thus far been generally found to be forged.”³⁵ While fake documents could be useful for propaganda purposes, they are less valuable as intelligence or historical sources. If the most crucial information was only communicated orally, that also means that some of the most important records of communist activities have been lost to history.

A CIA informer cautioned that Colombian communists could be using greeting cards to communicate with their counterparts in Ecuador. A confidential information report identified Ana Moreno as a “prominent Guayaquil Communist” who received a New Year’s card from PCC leader Gilberto Vieira White. The card appeared innocuous, but on careful examination Moreno informed her comrade Medina Castro that a courier would come from Colombia with instructions for the party. Indeed, secretary general Vieira White did presently arrive in Quito by plane from Cali. This sequence of events led the CIA to conclude that the communists were using the mail to communicate surreptitiously with one another. What the CIA report does not explain is how they were able to acquire intimate details on Moreno’s actions, or why they were now conducting surveillance on a militant whom they had previously largely ignored.³⁶

Similar CIA operations intercepted information from other communication systems, including telegrams. One example concerned a decision to send Nela Martínez to the World Peace Congress in Paris. That congress in 1949 and the World Peace Council (WPC) founded the following year was part of the socialist bloc’s “peace offensive” or peace campaign designed to build global political resistance to US “warmongering” and aggression against socialist countries.

Under the guidance of the French physicist and activist Frédéric Joliot-Curie, the WPC advocated for universal disarmament, sovereignty, independence, and peaceful co-existence. It campaigned against imperialism, weapons of mass destruction, and all forms of discrimination.³⁷ In an information report on this development, a CIA case officer noted “that Martínez had received a personal invitation from Madame [Irène] Joliot Curie to attend the Congress.” The source of that intelligence “had seen the cablegram but had not noted the name of the cable company.” When the case officer investigated further, he discovered that the All American Cable Company had not transmitted such a cable. This led to the conclusion “that the cable was forged in order to account for Martínez’s sudden decision to attend the Congress.”³⁸ The use of the passive voice makes it unclear as to who would have forged the cable and why. Did Martínez take this step to justify her travel, or did the CIA’s agent do so in order to have something to report to the agency? And if the person in question indeed did see a cable, was this person a friend of Martínez’s, an informer in the cable company, or was this the result of some other surveillance operation? Unfortunately, the available documentation is silent on these issues.

Even though the CIA monitored a variety of correspondence, the agency was particularly concerned with the importation of printed materials. In one curious case, someone had mailed multiple copies of the Russian-language publication *Pražské Novosti* from Prague addressed (in English) to “The Legation of the USSR, Quito,” even though the Soviet Union did not currently have a diplomatic mission in that country. Apparently the Ecuadorian government gave the mailing to the embassy, and the CIA officer, military attaché, and public affairs officer all independently forwarded a copy of the periodical to their corresponding headquarters in Washington.³⁹ In February 1951, a case officer reported that A. D. Bolaños, a local agent in Quito, had received fifty copies in Spanish of the weekly newspaper *New Times* from the USSR. The party had also received periodicals in French and English, including a bi-monthly magazine *La Femme soviétique* for circulation among PCE members and Ecuadorian women in general.⁴⁰ Not incidentally, this interference in the delivery of material to Quito corresponded to similar meddling in Guayaquil that the CIA had reported as an example of the government’s heightened efficiency in the interception of propaganda material.⁴¹

The mail intercept operations continued throughout the 1950s and beyond. In 1956, the embassy’s PAO Walter Bastian reported that a limited amount of printed material reached Ecuador. Before the dissolution of the Cominform earlier that year, about one hundred copies of its periodical *For a Lasting Peace*,

For a People's Democracy was mailed to twenty people weekly who were then responsible for further distribution. Other regularly mailed material included the monthly *Czechoslovakia Today* and the *World Student News*. Not much of this material reached its intended recipients because "Ecuadoran postal authorities regularly and successfully intercept the bulk of the shipments of communist and satellite periodicals mailed into this country, at the rate of ten or twelve sacks the size of diplomatic pouches." Bastian estimated that the confiscations represented a loss of about \$500 USD per month for the communists.⁴² In 1957, the United States Embassy reported that the ouster of Czech diplomats closed the possibility of receiving funds, propaganda, and messages through that mission. According to the CIA, the communists then turned to the CTE as a venue for the receipt of international messages, and the party received "14 to 16 large mail sacks of communist propaganda" every month via that route. Even so, the current Ponce administration was realizing success in "intercepting and destroying large amounts of incoming communist propaganda," and that made United States officials happy.⁴³

The PCE faced overwhelming opposition, both domestically and internationally, to the realization of its political agenda. Ironically, CIA surveillance chronicles communist awareness of the challenges that they faced and the measures that they took in an attempt to overcome these barriers. Even in the face of these challenges, the committed activists were determined to continue their struggles.

Legislative Defeat, Propaganda Victory

The Pichincha provincial committee of the PCE responded to the attacks on Saad that emerged out of the interpellation with a pair of statements condemning Ponce and the ARNE. The communists denounced reactionary attempts to silence Saad, and called their leader the best opponent against fascism and the strongest supporter of democracy and freedom.⁴⁴ The PCE pointed out that during Saad's time in congress he had been the firmest and best defender of popular interests and most steadfast opponent of corruption and the violations of human rights and democratic guarantees. The party denounced government charges that the communists opposed religion, repeating what they had proclaimed on multiple occasions that they favored freedom of religion, consciousness, and thought. Furthermore, the communists fought against hunger and misery that resulted from government policies. The PCE pointed out that the government did not discriminate between Catholics and nonbelievers

when it engaged in massacres of Indigenous communities or enacted policies that hurt workers. Everyone, regardless of religious beliefs, suffered the consequences of wealthy landholder and capitalist policies. The party also rejected allegations that they were collaborating with the CFP in their attacks on the government. This was an absurd charge, the statement declared, as it repeated Saad's proclamation that communists had long been the firmest opponents of Guevara Moreno and his fascist forces. All of the terrorist attacks on the communists could not stop the forward march of the people. The PCE called on all democratic organizations and political parties to join them in a struggle against fascism.⁴⁵

Although Ponce concentrated most of his fire on the communists, he was equally opposed to the socialists. In his ministerial report the following year, he attacked the socialist party for its opportunistic defense of the interpellation. He accused their members of twisting the truth when they championed the actions of "a distinguished socialist, comrade Joel Cevallos, who advanced the accusations of beaten and massacred workers and peasants." Ponce charged that such statements were political nonsense that included assertions devoid of logic and failed to adhere to ethical standards of political behavior.⁴⁶

The socialists responded to Ponce's attacks with a statement that proclaimed that their party was engaged in a long-term struggle against the government's reactionary and totalitarian actions, and especially against the minister's vain and scandalous deeds. Their statement denounced among other things "the wealthy landholders' open complicity with the police murder of defenseless Indians." At the same time, the party sought to distance itself from communism. The PSE denied that it was under the control of Moscow, that it was part of any international movement, or that it received "Moscow gold." Rather, it was an autonomous organization that fought for the rights of the Ecuadorian people. Similar to the communists, the socialists declared that they were not opposed to religion. Instead, they called on workers, students, members of other democratic parties, and all progressive forces to stand up and fight decisively and energetically for the right to remain free rather than to become miserable slaves.⁴⁷

For his part, British ambassador Mayers belittled Saad's leadership in the interpellation as nothing more than a communist move toward the construction of a united front. He acknowledged that Ponce was guilty "of various arbitrary acts and measures of the last six months which were considered to be derogatory to the freedom of the press, of speech and of opinion." Ponce's adversaries called him "reactionary and illiberal, probably not without reason." Some of the minister's actions, such as the banishment of Guayaquil mayor Guevara Moreno,

“were urgently necessary, though unconstitutional.” Others, such as the arrest of *El Comercio*’s editor Jorge Mantilla Ortega, “were unnecessary and inexcusable.” Unfortunately, his behavior led to a united opposition among liberals and socialists. Opponents selected Saad to lead the attack because “he was the best orator available,” and because the passion that Ponce stirred was such that his enemies “cared little who led the attack.” Mayers concluded that “Saad did *not* dominate the debate as was expected of him,” but nevertheless “he got somehow to the spearpoint of the attack.” In providing leadership, Saad gained “well-wishers in quarters where sympathy with Communism is never thought of.” But this was also a double-edged sword, and led to the failure of the interpellation because of “the very fact of the improvised communist leadership.” Mayers pointed to this as the primary reason why the opposition did not realize more success in their attack. “The spectacle of a Communist, however eloquent and master of debate, declaiming against dictatorship (the alleged dictatorship of the present government of Velasco Ibarra) and demanding the freedom of the press was a bit too much of a good thing.” Even so, the interpellation was a propaganda victory for the communists because it was undeniable that Saad led a democratic attack, and he would be remembered for doing so.⁴⁸ The interpellation represented a political gain for Saad and his supporters.

The United States Embassy had a similar evaluation. Although Ponce avoided the vote of censure by almost a five to one margin, chargé d’affaires Thomas Maleady commented that from a legal or constitutional perspective Ponce did not perform well. The minister dodged the larger and more important questions rather than confronting them directly, and his answers tended to be vague and inconclusive. Maleady inferred that “while the embassy naturally is fully in favor of scotching Communism,” the nationalist and authoritarian tendencies of Velasco Ibarra, Ponce, and the ARNE was not a preferable alternative. “One extreme could be as bad as the other,” the chargé declared. He feared that a temporary period of political peace was evaporating in this perennially unstable country.⁴⁹

On October 3, the communists held a meeting in Cotocollao to celebrate Saad’s success. The party sold tickets for twenty sucres a piece, which included food and drink. A CIA officer commented that the meeting was more of a success than Saad’s interpellation given that the censure vote lost by a large margin. An informer noted that some PCE leaders considered Saad’s poor showing to be a major defeat for the party, and that Echeverría and Barreto were making moves to replace Saad as the party’s secretary general.⁵⁰ But both sides missed the point of the interpellation. At best censoring Ponce might have removed an

unpopular minister, but it would not have fundamentally changed the country's rightward drift. In contrast, Saad's strong showing helped brace against rising anticommunist sentiments.

A subsequent CIA information report highlighted the participation of Carlos Cueva Tamariz and Mario Veintimilla at the fiesta. Cueva Tamariz, the socialist party member, rector of the University of Cuenca, and senator, attended with his two sons, Patricio, the communist who had lashed out at fellow members in a self-criticism session at the previous year's party congress, and Mariano. Both in this document and in others, the CIA indicated their concern with the elder Cueva Tamariz's "pro-Communist activities."⁵¹ The British Embassy articulated a somewhat more measured assessment of Cueva Tamariz. Their report characterized him as "a Socialist with tendencies towards the Left of that Party." He was "one of the most qualified for office," and had demonstrated this through his performance in several governmental posts, including as deputy in congress, minister of government and education, and as socialist candidate for vice president in 1948. The British Embassy concluded that Cueva Tamariz was "a respected Socialist but difficult to place."⁵² It was Saad's ability to build alliances with such prominent political figures that so worried government officials.

Veintimilla, the other person the CIA officer mentioned in the report on the fete for Saad, had been an alternate for Ponce's seat as senator for highland agricultural interests. Veintimilla was "an elderly man from Cuenca" who said "he was too old to take an active part in the Communist movement, but that he anticipated the coming of a world-wide Communist revolution, and he hoped that it would come soon." Veintimilla also said that he had two sons who were members of the PCE.⁵³ While that may have been the case, neither the father nor his sons otherwise appeared in the CIA surveillance or played a significant role in the party. His presence, though, does point to the array of forces allied against Ponce.

COMMUNIST DEPUTY PEDRO SAAD'S interpellation of Velasco Ibarra's conservative minister of government Camilo Ponce Enríquez provided the left with an opportunity to place their political agenda on public display for all to see. Even though Saad lost the vote in congress, he gained respect because of his conscientious and serious engagement with important issues. That strategy also underscored his embrace of a peaceful and parliamentary path to power. Even so, a rising anticommunist tide in the midst of growing cold war tensions created significant obstacles for the left to advance its agenda. CIA surveillance provides

scholars with an opportunity to peek inside communist party structures to understand how militants organized themselves to advance their political agendas. That surveillance reveals that party members understood that their struggle would be long and hard, and despite the forces allied against them they were committed to staying in it for the long haul.