

Geopolitical Security Poses Ideological Dilemma for West

FOR social reformers who believe in the primacy of tax-and-tenure changes, the political significance of the global environmental movement must not be underestimated. Ecological awareness has compelled people to think about land - broadly defined by classical economists to include all the resources of nature.

Paradoxically - with a few exceptions - environment campaigners have failed to focus on the significance of tenurial laws and tax policies. Over the next few years, however, the ideological debate about property rights may surface via a new route.

The globalisation of the economy will intensify the despair of an increasing number of people, and the easy access to arms will multiply the local insurgencies. To contain these conflicts, the peace-keeping powers will be increasingly confronted by the institutional causes of discontent.

Haiti is a case in point. The US government is the peace keeper now that the authoritarian rulers have been ousted. But this has not satisfied the peasants, who want to reclaim their land. And that has placed US troops in the middle of an ideological dispute which creates problems for official policy in Washington.

Land reform is seen by the Aristide administration as the cornerstone of the strategy to raise living standards. But the US, while wanting peace on the island, is uncomfortable with the sight of peasants attacking landlords. Haitians are particularly worried by the rightward shift in policy in Washington, where Republicans now control Capitol Hill.

THE SUCCESS of the communists in the Nepal elections dramatises what could now happen on an increasing scale. As one of the ten poorest countries in the world (annual per capita

income: £112), Nepal needs drastic action if the welfare of the citizens is to be improved.

A mandate for reform was handed to the Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML) communist party in the November elections, who have declared a determination to reform land ownership. The ceiling on holdings is to be lowered, with compensation promised for owners who are deprived of their land.

But this model - based on the redistribution of land - is one that has failed in those Third World countries that have tried it. The political will to experiment with new approaches is absent, because at the heart of the problem is the issue of who is to hold power. As Solon Barraclough (retired director of the UN Research Institute for Social Development) put it:

"Land reform necessarily implies a change in power relations in favor of those who physically work the land at the expense of those who traditionally accumulate the wealth derived from it."*

Rural uprisings have peppered the history of the Third World throughout this century, but no country has succeeded in developing a formula for bringing prosperity for everyone. "Such conflicts had been endemic in the past but rather easily repressed or resolved by ruling oligarchies with the support of the state," notes Barraclough, who adds,

"...land reforms evolve according to complex political dynamics that are to a large extent unique for each time and place. Generalizations can be made, but they are necessarily so abstract that at best they only provide working hypotheses about some of the processes, social actors and institutions that should be examined in any particular situation. This may not be helpful for anyone seeking general 'laws of motion' governing social

change, but the real world is a messy place."

In fact, if you know what you are looking for - the fundamental source of the conflict - the picture is not quite so confusing; and nor are the practical solutions beyond definition.

THE landowning elites fight hard to obstruct those reforms that would actually succeed.

Solon Barraclough, who has travelled extensively in the poor countries, acknowledges that "The need for massive and profound land reform remains throughout much of Latin America," but he adds:

"It is often as difficult politically to bring about improvements in rural services, working conditions, human rights, collective bargaining and progressive tax reforms as it is to redistribute rights to land".

There we have it. He reflects the general view that economic and social development is a many-stranded process, rather than a single evolutionary strategy that would emerge from the grassroots - if the correct conditions for liberation were introduced. Yet he admits that the present approach is flawed, for he notes: "There is little space in the neoliberal paradigm for popularly based development strategies promoted by states that are accountable to their peoples. So prospects for land reform look bleak.."

So we find that the ultimate problem is an ideological one. If the so-called peace-keeping nations are to ease the burden on the poor - and on their own taxpayers, who fund the military.

* Solon L. Barraclough, "The Legacy of Latin American Land Reform", *NACLA Report on the Americas*, Nov/Dec 1994, p.17.