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The Shining Path of Peru

The history of South America is filled with turmoil and upheaval. Riots, revolutions, and bloodshed can be found in almost every country on the continent if one were to look hard enough. Some think that this kind of radical opposition to forms of government is a thing of the past, but one need look no further than Peru for proof that contradicts such a belief. The Sendero Luminoso, or the Shining Path, is an extremist militant group that has made their presence known through their actions, and has left a wave of simultaneous fear and fascination in their wake. While the Peruvian government assures its citizens that the terrorism is a problem that is being dealt with, an even bigger problem remains; one that enables the Shining Path to keep on shining. The issue of poverty and the government's continued position of overlooking the downtrodden has allowed the Shining Path to gain power, and until the issue is dealt with, the Shining Path will never be dimmed.

The Shining Path was born in 1970 in the remote location of Ayacucho, high in the Peruvian Andes. Ayacucho was, and still is, one of the more impoverished sectors of Peru.¹ Partially because of its location, and also because of its lack of resources, the Peruvian government had ignored Ayacucho long before Abimael Guzman founded the Shining Path. While a philosophy professor at the University of Huamanga, Abimael Guzman first developed his ideas for the Shining Path after studying the writings of China's communist leader, Mao Zedong. Guzman, who also goes by the name Comrade Gonzalo, was a fiery communist who believed that there should be an abolition of "the national market economy, industry, the banking system, all foreign trade, the use of currency, and the establishment of a communal village-oriented economy based on a system of barter exchange."² Guzman eventually left his university and began to recruit young followers for his new radical organization.

Guzman's first recruits were mostly young and poor Indians. These were easy targets for the Shining Path, since many of them likely had nothing else in their lives. Initially the Shining Path seemed like another radical

¹ Rapoport, David C. **Inside Terrorist Organizations**. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 109.

² Rapoport, 113.

protesting group that would do no harm, except speak out against the Peruvian government. Then, in 1978, the group disappeared, and many Peruvians believed that the cult had simply dissolved.³ However, the Shining Path had just gone into hiding in order to plan their first violent attack.

In 1980, the Shining Path strung together a series of attacks on polling places in Ayacucho during the presidential election.⁴ These would be the first documented attacks by the group, and by 1985, the Shining Path would be directly responsible for carrying out a total of 6,758 documented attacks against the Peruvian government.⁵ During this time, only twice did the Shining Path issue any written documents (once in 1981 and again in 1982) that explained who they were and what they wanted. Generally organizations of this type are more concerned about getting as much information public as possible, but the Shining Path believe in the concept of "propaganda by the deed," or actions speaking louder than words.⁶

From 1980 until 1992, Abimael Guzman and the Shining Path organized violent assaults against the Peruvian government, recruiting members when they could, and killing others when they created problems. Guzman was finally

³ Rapoport, 111.

⁴ Rapoport, 111.

⁵ Rapoport, 118.

⁶ Rapoport, 111.

arrested in 1992, while doing extensive bombings in Lima, the country's capital, and sentenced to life in prison. When he was interviewed, Guzman said that the Shining Path was on the brink of victory, and that the Shining Path's ideology, Gonzalo Thought, was nearing the title of Gonzalism, a belief that included genocide.⁷ Although their leader was behind bars, members of the Shining Path continued to wreak havoc. Although the Shining Path is less prevalent than it was in the 1980's, it still remains responsible for bombings and attacks in Peru today.

In order to understand why the Shining Path has been able to last for more than three decades, it is imperative to look at their beliefs and members, and why so many continue to join. The majority of the members of the Shining Path are of the lower class. But that does not mean that just because someone is poor, they are more likely to join in a revolution or a violent, radical organization. Many scholars do argue, however, that peasants will "consider rebellion when they judge their right to subsistence to be seriously threatened."⁸ In the case of Ayacucho, the majority of the population was poor, and

⁷ "Still Shining After All These Years." *The Economist*. Vol 373 Issue 8399 (10/30/2004): 44.

⁸ Mario Fumerton. "Rondas Campesinas in the Peruvian Civil War: Peasant Self-defence Organisations in Ayacucho." *Bulletin of Latin American Research*. Vol 20 Issue 4 (Oct2001): 472.

Abimael Guzman preyed upon their fear and jealousy of the upper class. He painted the government as a greedy and uncaring entity that worried only about the upper crust of society. In a sense, he was proven right, when in the mid-70's, the Peruvian government began ignoring labor and peasant organizations, and giving preference to business owners and foreign investors. At the same time, the national debt began to rise, and to counteract the negative effect the government cut urban workers' benefits, as well as their rights.⁹ Sometimes, after the Shining Path had passed through a particular town, the Peruvian military would appear in the town and kill innocent peasants for withholding information.¹⁰ The government itself was helping Guzman recruit followers.

The Shining Path was able to keep recruits because of what is called the leader-follower relationship. These relationships include four properties: the group leader is believed to possess unique vision and superhuman qualities, the group leader's views and beliefs are unquestionably accepted, the group leaders orders and carried out also without query, and the leader is given unqualified support

⁹ Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh. "From Revolutionary Dreams to Organizational Fragmentation: Disputes over Violence within ETA and Sendero Luminoso." *Terrorism & Political Violence*. Vol 14 Issue 4 (Winter2002): 70-71.

¹⁰ "Shining bloodstained path." *New Internationalist*. Issue 321 (Mar2000): 19.

and devotion.¹¹ These qualities are ideal for a group like the Shining Path that believes that they are being persecuted or ignored and left to die. A charismatic leader can appeal to someone who is struggling, and who is in need of guidance.

The Shining Path also initially appealed to the sympathies of those who did not want to join, but who were questioning the role of government, or who simply felt sorry for those who were so unfortunate. Members were able to pass through towns in Peru without fear of being handed over to the police, and sometimes the Shining Path even repaid some poorer towns with goods that they had taken from their assaults.¹² They also did some grassroots organizing in their early stages, including setting up literacy programs in poor Indian villages, and preaching non-violent protest.¹³

Although the Shining Path itself holds the majority of the responsibility in creating such a radical group, the Peruvian government aided in more ways than just aforementioned ones. Initially, the government did not even recognize the Shining Path, blaming the attacks on small insurgencies that would die out quickly. When the Peruvian

¹¹ Rapoport, 112-113.

¹² Fumerton, 473.

¹³ Zirakzadeh, 77-78.

government captured Guzman, they stopped searching for any other members, because they believed that by cutting off the head, the body would die.¹⁴ In both instances, the government underestimated the Shining Path, and Guzman used this to further show that the government was too busy to worry about anything that involved the lower class. In 1990, Alberto Fujimori became dictator of Peru, and immediately went after the Shining Path. Although he did succeed in capturing Guzman, Fujimori also plundered the nation of its wealth, taking copious amounts of Peru's money for himself and his friends. This crippled the economy, and led to infighting in the government and policing agencies that were assigned to hunt down the remaining Shining Path members.¹⁵ Today, the Peruvian government, under the Toledo administration continues to alienate the lower classes, putting the military in charge of the majority of Peru's 24 regions, and sometimes resorting to violence to stop laborers from striking. Both Toledo and Fujimori also declared that the Shining Path was dead, and that terrorism was no longer present in Peru,¹⁶ even though it is clearly evident.

¹⁴ Alejandro W. Sanchez. "The Rebirth of Insurgency in Peru." *Small Wars & Insurgencies*. Vol 14 Issue 3 (Autumn2003): 191.

¹⁵ Sanchez, 192.

¹⁶ Sanchez, 189.

Even without the figurehead of the movement, the Shining Path remains an entity that can still strike fear into the hearts of Peruvian citizens and especially its government. Abimael Guzman, with his openly Maoist and Marxist beliefs, went from being a small college philosophy professor to a leader and demi-god in one of the most radical and violent groups in the history of Peru. Although the Peruvian government still claims that the Shining Path is done for good, there remains a small following that will continue to believe in the Gonzalo Thought, and if the government continues to act towards poverty and the less fortunate the way that it has been, it is without question that the movement will rise again, with or without Abimael Guzman. Although the Peruvian government did not create the Shining Path, it enabled such a violent group, whether it was through corruption, passivity, or simply because they would not address the needs of the working class. Karl Marx once said that a revolution would occur as soon as the lower class got tired of being misrepresented and taken advantage of by the ruling class, and in Peru, the Shining Path exemplifies his belief.

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