Chapter 7
The Promise of APRA: 1930–1950

From the early 1930s APRA held out the promise of becoming a mass opposition party with a viable agenda for modernity and political change. Founded by the exiled Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre as a pan-American movement in 1924, it was transformed into a national political party in 1930. APRA immediately won affiliates among professional, middle, and working classes of the towns and gave an ideological boost to the formation of popular fronts, unions, and cooperatives to replace the old workers’ associations. These were heralded as forming the fabric of a new kind of civil society under the party’s wing. According to Tarma’s aprista pioneers, everybody in the town who was serious about political change had welcomed the APRA Party. Some referred back to Adolfo Vienrich, claiming that he had also been their “maestro” (teacher). But once in power as part of a coalition government under the presidency of José Luis Bustamante, from 1945 to 1948, APRA was disappointing. Not only did the party prove unequal to the challenges facing government at the time, but APRA was also seen to turn into another centralist, Lima-based party, callously seeking to impose its political will on subject provinces.

The focus of this chapter is on the paradoxical radical promise held out by APRA, and how Tarma experienced new province-state relationships that came to the fore in the short period when APRA was in government. I begin by discussing the build-up of APRA’s local constituency, and how the party re-awakened popular radicalism and seemed to support provincial aspirations in the early days. I then discuss from a provincial perspective three critical areas in which Tarma experienced new relationships with the center. The first arose in connection with the sympathetic hearing APRA had first given to the restoration of local democracy and municipal autonomy. A second came as a result of market expansion and the greater integration of
the domestic economy. As a result of this, people in Central Andean towns suffered acute scarcity as local foodstuffs drained away to supply clamorous markets on the coast. A third is related to education and its provision and is focused on the question of who should take control. This arose with APRA’s attempts to politicize the education sector and decide on the deployment of teachers in the provinces.

Tarma’s Aprista Pioneers

A photograph survives of a group of 52 men staring fixedly into the camera. It was taken in the Hotel Bolívar in Tarma town. Almost all are dressed in suits and ties, and hold trilby hats. Most appear to be in their 30s or early 40s, and to be largely of white-mestizo ancestry. At the center is a bulky, unsmiling man in a dark suit and with a floppy bow tie, the young Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre. His presence confirms that the photograph was taken in 1931 at the founding meeting of Tarma’s Provincial APRA Committee. Seated next to Haya de la Torre is the new secretary general of the provincial branch, lawyer Pedro Macassi, looking serious and dapper in a dark suit. Sitting on the floor with gig-lamp spectacles is Francisco Palomino, pharmacist, who claimed to be the first tarmeño to join the party while a student in Lima. Behind him is Roberto García, secretary general of the truck drivers’ union. I got to know the three men some 40 years later in the 1970s when I lived in the town and was working in the archives. We reminisced about their political experiences and what had drawn young professionals to join APRA in the early days.

Pedro Macassi came from a radical family. A forebear had arrived from Italy in the late colonial period and settled in Tarma. Several family members had been schoolteachers and had joined the Unión Nacional in the Vienrich years. Macassi recalled his upbringing in a household openly critical of the property owners. Rather than becoming a teacher he chose to study law, a profession offering new openings for a younger generation of radicals. He left for Lima in 1915 to study at the University of San Marcos. But his studies were cut short in 1918 by his father’s death, when he had to return home to support his family. He began his professional career as secretaria del juzgado (secretary of the court) and then graduated to become a public notary. Almost all his clients came from the highland districts of Junín and San Pedro de Cajas. They were always the most belligerent and steadfast in defending their lands, but also the most threatened with dispossession. Community authorities would arrive at his office clutching precious land titles to pursue juicios (cases) against