GUATEMALA

Joining the Iron Triangle

Anxious to resume military aid to Guatemala, but precluded from doing so by a Congress mindful of the Guatemalan military's notorious human rights record, the Reagan Administration has long sought to bring Guatemala into an "iron triangle" with the militaries of El Salvador and Honduras, taking advantage of the Guatemalan Army's counterinsurgency expertise, and solidifying the U.S.-backed anti-Nicaragua bloc. So it was that the U.S. Administration hailed the installation of the civilian government of Christian Democrat Marco Vinicio Arevalo on January 14 as a return to democracy. But the installation of a civilian government will change little and the real power in the country—the Army—will continue to rule. The true nature of this "democratization," created largely for U.S. regional purposes and international consumption, is revealed in the political and economic conditions in which the new government takes office.

Human Rights Abuses: 'More to Come'

While not at 1981-1983 levels, human rights abuses remain high. Disappearances and murder are daily occurances. The Guatemalan press has been reporting as many as ten murders a day in recent months—most blamed on the security forces. During the election campaign no candidate made any proposals to address the question of killings and disappearances. Cerezo, in addition to failing to call for an investigation into the whereabouts of Guatemala's more than 38,000 disappeared, has stated explicitly that government officials will not be tried for past involvement in human rights violations.

Indeed, say observers, given the reality of the all-powerful military in Guatemala, Cerezo will have his hands full in just attempting to put an end to ongoing abuses and, in the final analysis, little is likely to change.

Notice of this fact was violently served less than 24 hours after Cerezo claimed victory last month. In the late afternoon of December 9, Beatrice Eugenia Barrios Marroquin, an elementary school teacher, mother of two, and law student at the University of San Carlos, was seized by security forces from a taxicab in Guatemala City. Barrios was previously abducted in mid-November, and released after being tortured for three days. She then applied to the Canadian Embassy for refugee status, which was granted. She was to fly to Canada on December 10.

On December 13 the dawning of Guatemalan "democracy" opened with the discovery of her mutilated body. Her face bore marks of torture, her wrists were severed and, in a presage of Guatemala's future, on her chest was carved in ballpoint pen the message, "More is to come."

Army to Retain Control

Meanwhile, an estimated 500,000 Guatemalans have been displaced as a result of the Army's counterinsurgency programs, forced into areas under heavy army control known as "development poles." Many must live in "model villages," and thus are made dependent on the Army, often in food-for-work programs. All male adults are required to take part in "civil defense" patrols.

The Army has institutionalized its power under the guise of "Inter-Institutional Coordination for Reconstruction and Development" (IICS). Ostensibly a way to achieve cooperation among government agencies, in reality it is a way of formalizing military control by setting up a parallel government at the national, provincial and local levels that gives the Army the final say on all decisions. (See box for a sketch of the Guatemalan counterinsurgency program.)

Economic Crisis Spurs Elections

Why, then, did the Army want to see a civilian president? A civilian presidency is important for changing Guatemala's image, and so for obtaining more U.S. military and economic aid. This effort parallels the Reagan Administration's imposition of civilian officials on the military governments of El Salvador and Honduras, democratizations that have only been skin deep while systematic violations of human rights in both countries continue.

Congress has been reluctant to provide aid to a government with such a horrendous human rights record. The Reagan Administration has consistently tried to downplay the abuses and has favored increased aid as a way to ensure Guatemalan cooperation with U.S. policies in Central America.

The Army also acceded to the elections because it recognized that Guatemala's economy—which is facing its worst crisis in 50 years—could not stay afloat without massive and rapid infusions of U.S. aid; foreign currency reserves are exhausted, production has remained stagnant for five years, the value of exports continues to fall and unemployment has reached intolerable levels. Protests against the deteriorating economy last September left 12 dead and massive property damage in Guatemala City. A civilian government will help absorb some of the blame for this crisis.

Given Guatemala's unprecedented economic crisis, the cooperation of Guatemala's powerful private sector will further inhibit Cerezo's ability to initiate necessary reforms. In the past, the most influential private sector group, CACIF, has refused to accede to tax increases and instead has advocated decreased government spending, ending corruption and privatizing public enterprises to solve fiscal problems.

The conservative nature of CACIF makes it unlikely that the new civilian government will be able to make substantial fiscal measures. Professor Piero Fleijeses of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies says of CACIF, "Their view of the world remains simple and uncompromising. 'I got through my work and efforts what I wanted: no one can touch it and others can starve at my door.'"

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