



On the Record: The Rio Negro Campaign

Issue 7: Portillo Casts a Shadow Over Activism, July 14, 2000

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From the Editorial Desk

Three years after the signing of the peace accords that ended Guatemala's 36-year war, a new government has come into power. The country whose recovery and reconstruction have sat in limbo for three years is now faced with a startlingly odd leadership combination: the populist President Alfonso Portillo and the former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt, now president of Congress. While activists for peace and justice have faced formidable obstacles before, the new government promises to present the most serious challenge to confront them since the genocide of the 1980s.

The list of social ills plaguing Guatemala is a daunting one. Although the country is not destitute in resources, 80 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, and 40 percent suffers from malnutrition. The illiteracy rate is the second highest in Latin America. In a country where 80 percent of the 11.5 million population are peasants, five to six million own no land. Guatemala's majority indigenous population is particularly disadvantaged, as are its women.

To compound the misery, the atrocities of the war period remain unpunished, as do ongoing crimes against activists and ordinary people. Restitution for genocide, rape, plunder, and displacement resulting from over 600 massacres and the destruction of over 400 villages remains but a hope in the minds of the survivors.

The New Government

Last December, Ríos Montt's FRG (Guatemalan Republican Front) easily defeated the PAN (Party of National Advancement), the party of the business elite, in all municipalities except Guatemala City. A fundamentalist evangelist and retired general who presided over the most violent period of the war, Ríos Montt was banned by the Guatemalan Constitution from running for president. He chose the former leftist Portillo as his candidate for this position.

The combination turned out to be a winning one. Why? Progressive analysts give several reasons. An important factor is the anti-PAN vote. PAN proved itself to be aloof from the

people's needs and saturated with corruption. After presiding over the signing of the peace accords, it proceeded to flout the provisions that were crafted to reconstruct Guatemalan society and displayed profound disregard for the ordinary, disenfranchised citizens.

Activists further explain that Portillo, a man with a common touch and a master of symbolism, was an ideal candidate for the times. He campaigned throughout the country, addressing the crowd in blue jeans, boots, and rolled-up sleeves. He met with the heads of the Catholic Church, one of the most progressive in Latin America. These were things that the patrician leaders of the PAN had never thought of doing.

Portillo has been described as a political chameleon. In the early 1970s he was close to the revolutionaries, and later passed through the Christian Democrat and Social Democrat parties. In his latest campaign he showed proficiency in use of the progressive discourse, adopting slogans of the URNG (the legalized party of the revolutionary front).

Meanwhile, Rios Montt had his own strengths. He still inspires fear among many of his victims, the campesino (peasant) and indigenous majority of Guatemala. At the same time, he has been at the head of two powerful movements: Christian fundamentalism, and the paramilitary PACs (Civil Defense Patrols), which at one time numbered 800,000 members. As such Rios Montt is an authoritarian father figure who caters to people's fear in a time of insecurity. Common crime has risen dramatically since the end of the war, as a result of the legacy of violence that has become ingrained in Guatemalan culture. Rios Montt promised to bring this chaos under control, just as he had promised when he took power in a coup in 1982.

Thus Guatemala is now led by Rios Montt the authoritarian, and Portillo the friend of the people—almost a good-cop/bad-cop pair. Because of Portillo's association with the FRG, grassroots activists are extremely mistrustful of him. And yet, his dazzling promises, and some of his actions, have been sufficient to make many withhold judgment.

In Portillo's lengthy inaugural speech on January 14, he touched upon all of the social problems plaguing Guatemala and promised to tackle them enthusiastically. His overarching theme was inclusiveness, and he promised to confront racism and sexism, bringing the indigenous and women into the government. He swore to tackle corruption and do away with impunity, promising to solve the 1998 murder of Bishop Gerardi swiftly.

In Portillo's own words, he promised to 'stand up to powerful interests' and 'eradicate privilege.' He also promised to bring the army under civilian authority, initiate decentralization of government, reform the justice system, and reduce social inequities. He promised to make the recommendations of REMHI and the Truth Commission (two reports on the crimes of the Guatemalan government during the war) governmental policy commitments. In the middle of his speech, Portillo dedicated a moment of silence to the 200,000 who died in the war.

What more could a Guatemalan seeking justice want from a president? Implementation, of course. While people were swayed by Portillo's discourse, no one who has lived through the promises and lies of generations of Guatemalan politicians is banking on his speech alone. However, certain of Portillo's actions have already attracted attention.

For example, he has appointed prominent progressive activists to some high-profile posts. Otilia Lux de Coti, an indigenous woman and former member of the Truth Commission, was appointed Minister of Culture; former director of REMHI Edgar Gutierrez was appointed Secretary of Strategic Analysis; and Miguel Angel Reyes, former member of the URNG political-diplomatic team, is now executive secretary of the Secretariat of the Peace.

The more skeptical commentators call these appointments 'decorative fixtures.' Perhaps more meaningful in the long run may be Portillo's stance against the economic elite. In formulating his economic policy, Portillo bypassed CACIF, the committee representing business leaders on economic policy matters. Furthermore, he all but declared war on monopolies, taking on the sugar industry that is controlled by one family. And while the Guatemalan Constitution does not allow a civilian to be Minister of Defense, Portillo appointed a colonel to this post, necessitating the retirement of 20 generals who would otherwise have been in the position of taking orders from a lower-ranking officer.

Portillo has outlined a program for discussion of what he calls the 'Pact of Governability,' a plan for further implementation of the 1996 peace accords. The Pact of Governability is to be developed through dialogue over the coming months between the political structure and civil society. Its main elements include: human rights, demilitarization, decentralization, rural development, reform of the educational, political, and justice systems, human development, and prominently, a 'Fiscal Pact' promoting progressive tax reform. Finally, Portillo has promised to abolish the Presidential Guard and pressed for civilian control of the National Police.

Activists Unite

The above-described promises and measures by Portillo have caught the attention of the international community, Guatemala's business elite, and Guatemala's activists. All are waiting to see what he will do next -- some wishing for his success, and some for his failure.

Progressives and international officials alike describe a contest between Portillo and the business community of Guatemala. Historically, the wealthy minority has benefited greatly from the existence of a strong military and a weak government. War-related displacement enriched landowners by providing them with a desperately poor campesino labor pool, not to mention the 'abandoned' land that they expropriated. However, the international community clearly cannot continue to support the government of a lawless nation. Thus, in spite of the presence of Rios Montt, international officials are cautiously backing Portillo, in the hopes that he can succeed in creating an atmosphere of legality in Guatemalan politics and rationality in the Guatemalan economy.

These goals require breaking the monopolies, reforming the tax system, and ending corruption. All of this harms the entrenched business class, so it is highly questionable whether Portillo can succeed. With great resources at their disposal, business leaders can destabilize the economy by leading strikes and taking the government to court. This has already started.

During a meeting with a NISGUA (Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala) delegation of North American activists in April, US Ambassador to Guatemala Prudence

Bushnell said, 'My message to the private sector is, 'You have to change. The conquistador era is over. Now globalization is taking place.'

Ambassador Bushnell's comment puts the international community's approach to Guatemala in perspective. For the Guatemalan economy to be integrated in the global system -- that is, for there to be a 'stable investment climate' -- legality must be made to prevail. Thus, while globalization subordinates domestic well being to international economic demands, in the short run the people of Guatemala could benefit from the development of modern state functions, such as the subordination of the military to civilian control. The international community is pressing for this, and Portillo is ostensibly working for it.

At this point, there is no guarantee that Portillo will succeed. Activists in human rights organizations do not perceive him as their friend or spokesman, but for the most part they are withholding condemnation, aware of their opportunity to press Portillo to live up to his promises. Henry Morales, an activist from the Mayan umbrella organization Tzuk Kim Pop, told NISGUA, 'The government is promoting and promising a revolution regarding land, impunity, governability, and the economy. We think this is impossible, but they are giving us an instrument to say, 'Do it.' So we push this, and create a precedent.'

Frank LaRue is a labor lawyer and director of the Center for Human Rights Legal Action (CALDH). He said, 'We have never had such a serious challenge before us as we do now with this government. Because with the repression, and then with the Arzu government, we knew the rules of the game.' LaRue characterizes Portillo as someone who is trying to break the power of the business elite and considers this to be the most promising part of Portillo's agenda. However, he points to a great danger, as do most progressive activists, of co-opting the resources of the human rights movement.

For example, activists question whether the conclusions developed during the intensive discussion process of the Pact of Governability will be binding ones. If not, the process will have wasted several months of activists' time. For this reason, many organizations are waiting to see whether their participation can have a concrete effect before they consent to joining the process. There is precedent for skepticism, since Portillo has already requested advice of Mayan and women's groups in nominating government officials, only to subsequently ignore their advice.

Activists also view the appointment of some of their progressive colleagues with great suspicion. They say that these colleagues have been taken into the government in a way that leaves their constituencies behind, so that the progressive officials are now detached from their base. Most activists refrain from condemning their colleagues' willingness to work with Portillo, but few are very hopeful that these people will be able to effect significant changes.

Edgar Gutierrez, new Secretary for Strategic Analysis, is said to be the only progressive appointee who may be able to wield concrete power. He holds a position comparable to that of the US National Security Advisor and has already removed several dozen officials left over from the previous government. As such, Gutierrez is part of Portillo's attempt to develop civilian influence over the intelligence establishment.

This endeavor may be a manifestation of serious conflict between Portillo and Rios Montt. Rios Montt's main power base is the military network that he cultivated from the early 1980s. This includes some elements of the army, as well as the remnants of the PACs. This network is being revived and has its representatives in Rios Montt's Congress. While Rios Montt thus has the support of the military and the evangelical church, Portillo's support comes from unorganized masses of peasants. So if there were to be a showdown between the two leaders, no one would bet on Portillo.

Many activists, however, doubt that there is truly a conflict between Rios Montt and Portillo. Portillo has not made concrete moves that threaten Rios Montt. On the contrary, the arrest of the alleged murderers of Archbishop Gerardi is an attack against the previous government, and as such, came cheaply. Similarly, the 20 generals who had to retire when Portillo appointed a colonel as Defense Minister were not close to Rios Montt, but of a faction that did not support him. And Portillo's Defense Minister is not an individual who has great influence in the army.

In concrete ways, the military and Rios Montt's FRG overwhelmingly retain the balance of power in Guatemala. The National Police is supposed to have been put under civilian control, but most of its officials are 'recycled' ex-military forces. By virtue of its experience and efficiency, the military branch of the intelligence community wields far more influence than the (civilian) Secretariat of Strategic Analysis. In Congress, 'Portillistas' are an insignificant force. Further, the FRG has a strong presence in the executive branch of government, in the person of Vice-President Francisco Reyes.

If Portillo were to become so bold as to put into effect a genuine campaign against impunity, Rios Montt would have to be an early target. Many activists think that the resulting conflict would be resolved with a swift coup. However, it is just as likely that the collaboration that brought the pair to power will continue. After all, Portillo provides to the outside world the 'civilized' face that Rios Montt otherwise lacks. In the present arrangement, Portillo is Guatemala's best hope for international financing.

At issue is US military aid to Guatemala, currently under suspension. Ambassador Bushnell asserts that resumption of this aid will not be appropriate before the military acknowledges that it perpetrated atrocities during the war and apologizes-not a likely prospect. But the U government may be of a different opinion on aid to the military, as it is now considering an aid package that would resume assistance. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has encouraged resumption of military aid. In a recent development, a Senate subcommittee rejected this proposal, and the issue awaits discussion in the House of Representatives.

Another likely way that the United States would increase military involvement with Guatemala is through 'Operation Maya Jaguar,' an anti-drug program. This project proposes to bring US military officials into Guatemala to provide drug interdiction training to the police force. Besides compromising Guatemala's sovereignty, such a move would increase the re-militarization of Guatemalan society, and probably do very little to staunch the flow of drugs through Guatemala. After all, gangsters close to the government and military are implicated in this business.

Of great interest to the progressive community of Guatemala is the idea of decentralization.

Lack of resources at the local level is a great obstacle to community participation in development. The NISGUA delegation spoke about this with Rigoberto Queme Chay, the indigenous mayor of Quetzaltenango. Mayor Queme noted that practically every social problem affecting his city could be ameliorated if a higher percentage of the national budget went to the municipal government.

These problems include traffic control, water supply and electrification, environmental protection, and educational development. It is the opinion of Mayor Queme and many other democratically minded activists in Guatemala that these problems could be solved more efficiently at the local level. A major problem is, of course, that the taxes received by the Guatemalan government will not pay for these projects. But funds that are now available should be placed under local control.

Mayor Queme told the delegation, 'The new government is talking about decentralization, but not taking any concrete action. For example, we are taking responsibility for education, but we have to look for funding. There is no educational plan in what the government is doing. Education has been privatized due to lack of effective policy. All the government does is give money to pay for teachers -- nothing more. They are washing their hands of helping with the rest. That's their idea of decentralization. The space for decentralization is actually being taken away. Right now, local security, education, health, and environmental projects are too expensive'.

The Challenge to Rios Montt

While only a short time has passed since the inauguration of the new government, community organizations are not waiting passively for Portillo to fulfill his promises. Several significant actions have been taken in just the last couple of months. For example, Nobel Peace Prize recipient Rigoberta Menchu has brought the case against impunity to the international arena by calling upon the Spanish Court to prosecute Rios Montt and two other dictators from the period of genocide, as well as several other high officials. The Spanish court declared in March that it would investigate the actions of these officials.

While this high-profile case will not have an immediate impact inside of Guatemala, it puts Rios Montt on his guard, keeping the issue in the news, and constricting his ability to operate internationally. Although he brushed off the case, saying 'The Spanish court cannot try me because there was no genocide in Guatemala,' he nevertheless recently curtailed his travel plans.

The human rights organization CALDH is pursuing a parallel case on the domestic front. Frank LaRue explained that CALDH is documenting evidence on genocide perpetrated by Rios Montt and the generals who ruled immediately before and after him, Lucas Garcia and Mejia Victores. CALDH kicked off this campaign at the beginning of May with a lawsuit against Lucas Garcia for ten massacres against indigenous villages, which took place in 1981 and 1982.

On May 3, CALDH held the first of a series of public forums in which survivors of these massacres spoke out about the crimes of Lucas Garcia and his associates. This was an unusual and highly significant event, because it marks the first time that Guatemalans have dared to

pursue such a high-profile case within their own court system. CALDH will turn the spotlight on Rios Montt and Mejia Victores in subsequent forums over the next six months. As such, CALDH is in the forefront of the movement against impunity, giving hope to those thousands who were terrorized into suppressing the memory of atrocities -- that they may yet have their day in court.

While the above-mentioned efforts involve a small number of activists based in the capital, the struggle against impunity is by no means so limited. Another significant event took place on March 31, when 10,000 campesinos traveled to Guatemala City, at their own expense, to demonstrate their demand for land reform. The first such demonstration since the elections, this was organized by CONIC, the National Indigenous and Campesino Coordinating Committee. Speaking to the NISGUA delegation, CONIC organizers listed a number of grievances that add up to misery for the average campesino: low wages, evictions, the high cost of land, lack of an agrarian policy, corruption in the use of funds set aside for land purchase, and chaos in the land registry system.

CONIC activist Justo Mendoza told NISGUA, 'The march resulted in an agreement with the government. The government has agreed to resolve evictions and land problems, to work on development. There is a new manager of the land funds. For these things, we will wait four months. This was signed. If they are not implemented, we will raise our demands and increase the pressure.'

The Advocacy Corner

These are just a few of the actions by brave Guatemalans who will not wait idly for their government to solve their problems. The consensus among grassroots activists in Guatemala is that while there is a grave danger of the new government coopting the movement for justice, now is the time to push forward. Every opening must be used to strengthen Portillo's resolve to fulfill his promises.

Concerned US citizens can provide significant assistance to the movement for justice in Guatemala, particularly because of the role of our government in that country. Some actions we can take:

1. Get informed: Several US organizations concentrate full-time on the issue of human rights and impunity in Guatemala. They provide regular updates and action alerts. Write them to be included on their mailing lists, and check their websites for links to more information about current developments in Guatemala

- **NISGUA-Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala:** email: NISGUA@igc.org
- **Rights Action:** email: info@rightsaction.org

2. Contact your representatives in the House of Representatives regarding the current proposal to reinstate military assistance to Guatemala.

3. Work to abolish the US Army's School of the Americas, responsible for the training of many

Guatemalan war criminals (and others throughout Latin America), and in the meantime, uphold Guatemala's suspension from that institution. For information on this campaign, see the '**School of the Americas Watch**' website.

4. Become an 'accompanier.' Accompaniers spend time in Guatemala providing security to activists and communities under threat. They have saved many lives this way. For more information, see **NISGUA**'s web page on the Guatemala Accompaniment Project.