

# [One year ago, the political crisis that shook Guatemala lost ...]

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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In El Salvador, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) waged a war that ended in a stalemate, not in defeat. On election day, the FMLN could count on greater public sympathy than the URNG enjoys in Guatemala and still they were defeated. It is difficult to imagine a better outcome for the URNG.

For any president of Guatemala, the greatest challenge is to convince the army that civil society, as in the case of Costa Rica, functions reasonably well without it. Peace in Guatemala depends on defining a very different role for the national armed forces.

## FULL TEXT

One year ago, the political crisis that shook Guatemala lost Jorge Serrano Elias his presidency and saw him replaced with the respected human-rights ombudsman Ramiro de Leon Carpio.

For a country scarred by civil war off and on for more than 30 years, it was a sign of hope.

The war has claimed the lives of 100,000 people. Another 40,000 have disappeared. One million people within Guatemala have been uprooted from their homes; more than 200,000 refugees have fled to Mexico alone.

On May 25, 1993, Serrano seized dictatorial power. He was deposed by the army less than one week later. On June 5, Congress elected de Len president, a popular choice because of his outspoken criticism of the Serrano government and the army.

One year later, however, de Len's popularity as president has eroded considerably and his policies, so far, have had very mixed results.

The most impressive feat of the de Len government has been signing a Comprehensive Human Rights Accord on March 29 with rebel insurgents of the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG).

The accord represents, in principle, a major breakthrough. In practice, however, much remains to be done if war is to end and peace to prevail.

Several parts of the accord are promising. Both parties acknowledge that "all the agreements must be

accompanied by appropriate national and international verification."

This means, among other things, that the United Nations will be encouraged to operate freely throughout Guatemala. A U.N. delegation, arrived in Guatemala on April 25 to lay the groundwork for the verification process. Having the United Nations there will serve as a potential deterrent to heavy-handed security forces which for years have operated with impunity.

Still to come is a decisive test of de Len's credibility: whether the national armed forces can be held accountable for past actions. It is they, not the URNG, who have committed the worst of atrocities.

The government has agreed not to approve legislation "designed to prevent the prosecution and punishment of persons responsible for human rights violations." This suggests the Guatemalan military won't receive the amnesty protection it wants.

The president himself is in favor of establishing a Truth Commission that would, in effect, provide an official record of what happened during decades of counter-insurgency war.

The national armed forces are less enthusiastic. De Len's minister of defence, Gen. Mario Rene Enriquez Morales, has made it clear the Guatemalan military would only tolerate a Truth Commission that did not name human rights abusers.

Those who favor a Truth Commission are mindful that such investigations helped heal the wounds of war in El Salvador, Chile, and Argentina. Talks about establishing such a commission are under way.

The goals of subsequent negotiations are worthy but formidable. Issues to be discussed are: the repatriation and resettlement of displaced families; native rights; social and economic improvement; the role of the army in civil society; the transformation of the URNG from a fighting force to a political party; and constitutional and electoral reform.

Developments to date suggest that, even if consensus can be struck, the issues themselves will take a long time to resolve.

The high-profile return of about 2,500 refugees from Mexico in January, 1993, was to have been followed, between May and August that same year, by 8,000 people. Official statistics indicate that, as of January, fewer than half that number moved back to Guatemala from camps in the Mexican states of Chiapas, Campeche, and Quintana Roo.

Those who were repatriated often found themselves branded by the army and even government officials as guerrilla sympathizers and thus treated with suspicion or outright hostility.

De Len himself linked refugee families to the URNG, an unwarranted association that only serves to perpetuate a general climate of fear, distrust, and uncertainty. Being considered "subversive" in Guatemala is a label that can trigger death threats, harassment, kidnapping, torture, and murder.

Native rights are similarly intractable. Maya peoples speak more than 20 different languages and constitute about half of Guatemala's 12 million people.

In a country where any number of social indicators place Maya Indians among the most disadvantaged, their access to education is particularly unequal. Only one in four primary school students is Maya; only one in 10 secondary school students is Maya; and only one in 20 university students is Maya. Six of every 10 women in Guatemala cannot read or write. Three-quarters of non-literate women are Maya, whose schooling in rural areas is often rudimentary at best; only one girl in eight goes beyond sixth grade.

To his credit, de Len named a Maya Indian, Celestino Tay Coyoy, as minister of education, but the resources he has to work with are limited and the prejudices of the system he heads entrenched.

Equally entrenched are elite positions toward land and landholding.

Skewed patterns of land distribution lie at the heart of Guatemala's woes.

In Guatemala, 90 per cent of the farms are crowded into 16 per cent of the farming land while 2 per cent of the farms sprawl over 65 per cent of farming land. The best land is used to grow coffee, cotton, bananas, and sugar cane for export, not to feed malnourished local populations.

Eighty-five per cent of Guatemalans live in poverty, according to recent U.N. statistics, 70 per cent of them in a state of "extreme" deprivation.

The 15 per cent who live well do so not only because they enjoy the fruits of the land but because their taxes are among the lowest in Latin America. Their privileges will increase if the government goes ahead with a plan to assume private sector debts, a move which congressional president Vinicio Villar recently defended against public outcry.

Controversy also surrounds the role of the civil defence patrols, local militia established by the national armed forces in the early 1980s as part of its war against the rebels. And it is here that disappointment with de Len has been most acute.

Civil defence patrols exemplify just how much of a militarized society Guatemala is: 500,000 men perform civil defence duty, a number the army can raise to 900,000 if it needs to. Army control of civil defence patrols means that its influence extends to towns and villages throughout the country.

As human rights ombudsman, de Len was a fierce critic of civil defence patrols and advocated they be dismantled. As president, however, he insists they must be retained, despite evidence that links them directly with assaults, intimidation, illegal detentions, and assassination, especially in the countryside.

This turnabout, not surprisingly, has drawn him closer in allegiance to the army high command he once spoke out against. The army continues to be the most powerful and best organized institution in Guatemala. Its power clearly makes de Len fearful of acting in such a way that would provoke an army backlash.

Finally, major obstacles surround the dissolution of the URNG as an armed force and seem certain to slow its transformation into a political force. The rebels will be reluctant to demobilize until all aspects of the accord are working and their personal safety can be guaranteed. Then becomes the delicate business of turning clandestine backing into open support.

In El Salvador, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) waged a war that ended in a stalemate, not in

defeat. On election day, the FMLN could count on greater public sympathy than the URNG enjoys in Guatemala and still they were defeated. It is difficult to imagine a better outcome for the URNG.

Also difficult to imagine politics in Guatemala without some kind of military involvement. The national armed forces, at 47,000 men the largest and most professional in Central America, are led by officers whose training cultivates politics as a legitimate military preoccupation.

For any president of Guatemala, the greatest challenge is to convince the army that civil society, as in the case of Costa Rica, functions reasonably well without it. Peace in Guatemala depends on defining a very different role for the national armed forces.

Perhaps during his second year in office, de Len will find the courage to confront the army, reduce its authority and pave the way for change.

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### Illustration

Caption: 2 photos: ARMY EVERYWHERE: A year after human-rights ombudsman Ramiro de Leon Carpio became president, (Sygma photo) army's influence still extends into towns and villages. Map: Guatemala

## DETAILS

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