



The Passing Show

Guatemala: The screaming grows louder

Today's Passing Show
By W. GEORGE LOVELL

WHEN A MILITARY coup ousted Romeo Lucas Garcia from the presidency of Guatemala on March 23, there were quiet hopes that the abysmal human rights record of Central America's most populous republic would at last be improved. Anything (so it seemed) that replaced the government-orchestrated terror of Lucas Garcia, whose regime was responsible for an estimated 27,000 killings in Guatemala between 1978 and 1982, would surely signal an improvement in the lives of ordinary people and herald a movement towards something more decent and acceptable. Alas, these are bleak times in Guatemala, and in bleak times things can always get worse.

The story is as complex as it is tragic and, since events are at this moment still unfolding, it will take many years of piecing together fragmentary evidence before an accurate post-coup history of Guatemala can be reconstructed. However, a review of the past six months, from March to September, from a spring of hope to an autumn of despair, should help to place the dismal circumstances of Guatemalan life into some kind of perspective.

For a month or so following the coup there were heartening indications that an effort was being made, internally, to put Guatemalan affairs in order. During this time, the military junta which succeeded Lucas Garcia was responsible for arresting prominent members of the previous government, including the ex-president and his brother, and charging them with corruption and abuse of public office. Initially, this act did much to place confidence in the leader of the junta, General Efraim Rios Montt, as a man of personal integrity, as someone who could be trusted.

Was he not, after all, a devout, born-again Christian, a member of a California fundamentalist group called Church of the Word? Apart from his distaste of graft, Rios Montt also seemed to appreciate something of the value of human life: when fraudulently denied victory as a Christian Democrat in the rigged presidential elections of 1974, he did not order his supporters to take to the streets in protest. Instead, he settled, albeit for a price, for "exile" in Madrid as military attaché. Such judgment, and Rios Montt's character in general, were viewed as being primarily responsible for the decrease in the number of killings in Guatemala in the days immediately following the coup — a lessening of violence that was particularly marked in larger towns and in the capital, Guatemala City.

By the end of April, however, the coup and its aftermath had taken on a slightly different complexion. Toward the end of that month, the United States announced that it would resume arms sales to Guatemala (which had been terminated during the Carter presidency because of human rights violations) on the grounds that the Guatemalan government was now behaving more respectfully toward its citizens.

CONSIDERING THE United States' past disposition to intervene directly in Guatemalan political life (a coup funded and organized by the Central Intelligence Agency in 1954 overthrew the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman), and in view of the extremely bad relations between Washington and Lucas Garcia, it required little mental exertion to draw a connection between Uncle Sam and the new military junta, and to imagine the figurehead role Rios Montt was expected to perform, particularly in improving Guatemala's tarnished international reputation.

On May 12 came the new junta's first real test. At 11:30 that morning the Brazilian embassy in Guatemala City was taken over by members of a peasant organization known as the Committee for Campesino Unity (CUC). The group, in attempting to draw world attention to the situation in Guatemala, ran the grave risk that their peaceful occupation would meet the same fate as that of an earlier demonstration in January, 1980, at the Spanish embassy. In that case, Guatemalan security forces, against the entreaties of the Spanish ambassador, had stormed the building and set it alight, killing 36 people. Fortunately, the occupation at the Brazilian embassy passed without incident and ended with the demonstrators being guaranteed a safe conduct to Mexico.



Guatemalan riot police were called out after presidential elections in March

However, one of the CUC's demands was that a statement be distributed to the national and international media. This statement was one of the first concrete documents which cast the March 23 coup in an entirely different light. Part of it reads: "We wish to denounce before our people and the peoples of the world the brutal repression which the indigenous communities of Guatemala are suffering at the hands of the military junta's army. We wish it to be known that this junta of generals and colonels, since last March 23, has not only continued the policy of massacres and destruction practised by the previous military governments, but in some regions has intensified the massacres to levels never before experienced. Since March 23, far from seeing an end to the massacres, we have seen the junta continue and intensify the massacres."

THE JUNTA naturally denounced such allegations as false and without foundation, pointing to a fall in the body-count in towns and cities as evidence of its good intentions. The junta also attempted to bolster its image by offering, beginning June 1, an amnesty to all those who fought against it — an amnesty that was little heeded by the various guerrilla groups who continued to fight openly in the countryside against the national armed forces. Then, on June 9, there took place a "coup within the coup," whereby General Moracio Maldonado Schaad and Colonel Francisco Luis Gordillo were removed from their posts as members of the junta, leaving Rios Montt to be named President of the Republic.

One of the new president's first acts, on July 1, was to declare a state of siege, originally meant to be enforced for one month, then extended for another, and yet another. The purpose of the state of siege is quite simple: to legalize repression, to give the security forces an even freer hand in their fight against the alleged "communist subversives" they see at every level of Guatemalan society. If it had taken some time before the intent of the new regime became clear, there could be little doubt after the imposition of martial law: A more acceptable front, the resumption of U.S. military aid, declaration of a state of siege, and the employment of the full force of the state apparatus against all those perceived as a threat to the *status quo*. A government had officially declared war on its own people.

Although one of the main results of the state of siege has been a clampdown on the news that reaches the national press and then leaves the county, nonetheless enough information has filtered out to make it grotesquely obvious that very little has changed, especially in rural Guatemala, since the demise of Lucas Garcia. While repression by right-wing death squads in the larger settlement centres may have diminished, the indications are that terror by government troops still reigns in the countryside, particularly in the northwestern highlands of Huehuetenango and El Quiché, where the vast majority of the population belong to any one of a score of Mayan Indian groups (of a national population of some 7.2 million, about 60 per cent may be classified still as Indian). The barbarism thus crosses not only lines of class and culture; it cuts clearly across a racial division as well.

In July, there was some recognition of the gravity of the situation by the members of the parliamentary sub-committee on Canada's relations with Latin America. In a report presented to the House of Commons, the sub-committee re-

commended that the government of Canada "not resume development assistance to Guatemala until it is satisfied that the government of Guatemala has made serious efforts to reduce human rights violations."

This position was given solid support by the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) on Aug. 18, when that body released a report for the first half of 1982 which documented "a continuation of widespread human rights violations under the regime headed by General Efraim Rios Montt. Although the recent thrust of government violence has been aimed more exclusively at the Indian peasant population, there have been severe restrictions of press and political liberties, and political leaders, church officials, education and labor leaders continue to be harassed and worse."

The COHA report estimated that 3,000 people had already been killed in Guatemala since the March coup and bluntly stated that "Reagan administration rhetoric pointing to an improvement in the human rights situation in Guatemala since the bloody term of the Lucas Garcia regime is more a matter of the end justifying the means than a responsible assessment of the carnage that currently afflicts the country."

Another indication of the deplorable bloodletting being perpetrated against the Guatemalan people is the flight of thousands of men, women, and children across the mountains of western Guatemala and into neighboring Mexico. At the moment, as many as 40,000 Guatemalans, predominantly of Indian stock, are seeking protection in refugee camps in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, just across the border from their homeland. Reports from the refugee camps speak of entire villages being wiped out; of indiscriminate massacres; of rapes, torture, and decapitation; and the burning of farm houses, crops, and livestock by government forces as they apply scorched-earth tactics in their counter-insurgency war against suspected guerrillas. The Indians of Guatemala are tied to their land by an almost mystical bond. If they abandon the land of their ancestors for a refugee camp in another country, they do so for sound reasons, literally ones of life and death.

LAST WEEK, the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, a body affiliated with the Organization of American States (OAS), visited Guatemala on a fact-finding mission. The OAS has a long history of being dominated by the viewpoint of its most powerful member, the United States. It will come as no surprise, therefore, if the OAS commission paints a rosy picture of the present grim situation. They may well be deceived by the smiling face of Rios Montt and think of him, as he himself does, as being guided by God, enjoying a common evangelical bond with Americans in the White House, preaching as a chosen ruler to the people of Guatemala every Sunday night on a nationwide broadcast about love, the evils of alcohol, the joys of family life, and other such moral issues.

His pronouncements may reassure members of the middle class in Guatemala City, but it is doubtful that his words touch the hearts and minds of Indians who live in fear in the countryside. There, in the fields and forests of a beautiful but sullied land, the slaughter continues. Listen. Can't you hear? The screaming grows louder.

□ W. George Lovell is a Killam Research Associate, specializing in Latin American studies, in the Department of Geography at Queen's University.