

Peace at last? Not so fast, Guatemala

W. GEORGE LOVELL

Far from demonstrating that three years of peace after three decades of war in Guatemala have created the conditions for democracy to flourish, the results of the Nov. 7 election reveal, instead, a sorry state of affairs. Apart from high voter turnout, there is little reason to celebrate an electoral outcome that appears to guarantee that Guatemala's future will be as fractured and confrontational as its horrific past.

Garnering nearly 48 per cent of the vote, Alfonso Portillo, the presidential candidate of the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG), is the undisputed first-round winner. Mr. Portillo, whose rightist party espouses the virtues of law and order, finished well ahead of Oscar Berger of the ruling, National Advancement Party (PAN), which is centrist and pro-business. Mr. Berger, former mayor of Guatemala City and a member of the wealthy elite that controls — and lives very well from — Guatemala's abundant resources, received 30 per cent. Alvaro Colom of the New Nation Alliance, a coalition that includes former combatants of the guerrilla insurgency, finished a distant third with 12 per cent. Because Mr. Portillo did not attain the required 50 per cent needed for an outright victory, he will face Mr. Berger in a runoff on Dec. 26.

Why should these developments concern us? The first reason has to do with Mr. Portillo's violent personal history, which includes the admission that, in Mexico in 1982, he shot and killed two men, then fled the scene to avoid prosecution even though he claims he acted in self-defence. Although a judge cleared up the case four years ago, Mr. Portillo only publicly conceded his part in the incident in September. Remarkably, he manipulated the event to turn it into an electoral asset, allowing one campaign ad on television to allude to the affair by pronouncing: "A man who can defend his own life can defend yours." Indications are that, with widespread preoccupation about public safety and a dysfunctional justice system in Guatemala, Mr. Portillo's gunmanship increased his popularity.

Another worry has to do with the FRG's founder and secretary-general, retired general Efraim Rios Montt, Mr. Portillo's mentor. Gen. Rios Montt won a seat in congress and will serve as the legislature's next president. Called "The General" by FRG supporters and introduced at political rallies as "Our Maximum Leader," Gen. Rios Montt ruled Guatemala in 1982



Alfonso Portillo celebrates results of the Nov. 7 election.

AP

and 1983, when human-rights atrocities in the country's civil war reached levels that a United Nations Truth Commission in February established as genocidal.

Of more than 200,000 civilian casualties between 1962 and 1996, the Truth Commission attributed 93 per cent of all deaths to state security forces. About 83 per cent of the victims were Maya Indians, predominantly a disadvantaged underclass constituting half of Guatemala's population of 11 million. The Truth Commission was "able to confirm that, between 1981 and 1983, the army identified groups of the Mayan population as the internal enemy, considering them to be an actual or potential support base for the guerrillas." Massacres, the Truth Commission determined, were "not isolated acts or excesses committed by soldiers who were out of control," but rather military manoeuvres that "obeyed a higher, strategically planned policy, manifested in actions which had a logical and coherent sequence."

The Truth Commission called for an end to the impunity that protects Guatemala's military hierarchy, maintaining that there can be no peace without justice, which must include indictment for Latin America's worst human-rights violations.

Interviewed about war crimes by the newspaper Prensa Libre, Gen. Rios Montt was asked: "What is your opinion of the findings of the Commission for Historical Clarification, that while you were in office acts of genocide were committed?" He replied: "During my presidency, in 1982 and 1983, never was I informed of any act of this nature. I was neither aware of, nor did

I give orders about, such occurrences. We issued specific orders: Every commanding officer is responsible for what happens or can happen in his area of operations." As then commander-in-chief of the army, his refusal to accept any responsibility for wrongdoing is one shared by high-ranking fellow officers.

Another cause for apprehension is the behaviour of FRG followers when faced with results at the polls that go against their expectations. Despite an impressive showing in municipalities across Guatemala, not every electoral district fell under FRG control. Two that did not included the country's largest cities, Guatemala City and Quetzaltenango. FRG tactics in those locations revolve around challenging election tallies. The FRG alleges, for instance, that votes were bought or were undercounted, that FRG supporters were intimidated, and that transportation arrangements were disrupted. These charges were levelled despite statements issued by international observers that no irregularities, let alone flagrant improprieties, were noted.

An especially nasty disturbance took place in the town of Purulha in Baja Verapaz. There, following the announcement that the PAN incumbent, Sebastian Castro Garcia, had been re-elected mayor, a riot broke out. Incensed that their candidate failed to win by only 26 votes, FRG supporters mounted barricades and set tires alight at the entrance to Purulha. They then bombarded Mr. Castro's house with stones and threatened to lynch him. More than 200 riot police were sent to deal with the situation. Their presence, however, failed to reassure Mr. Castro, who re-

signed as mayor "to avoid a more serious confrontation and unnecessary blood-letting." Other FRG flare-ups were reported at Chiquimulilla, Chuarrancho and Culpala.

Geographically, the election results exacerbate an already problematical rift between the capital and the provinces, between a more industrialized and urbanized core around Guatemala City and the more rural, agricultural peripheries north and west, south and east. Of the 22 departments that make up the country, the FRG won in 21, with only Guatemala City and the rest of the Department of Guatemala secured by PAN. The resentment, if not contempt, that marginalized inhabitants in the countryside harbour toward privileged residents of a primate city, who enjoy far more than their fair share of state revenue in health, education and social spending, is a common grievance throughout Latin America, but particularly acute in Guatemala.

Finally, it was a PAN government, headed by outgoing President Alvaro Arzu, that signed a "firm and lasting" peace accord on Dec. 29, 1996. The defeat in a referendum held in May of constitutional reforms designed to institutionalize key elements of the accord — increasing indigenous rights, creating a new police force, curtailing military authority — cast doubts over the viability of the entire peace process.

Poised for victory in the runoff, with Mr. Portillo in the presidency and Gen. Rios Montt running congress, the FRG could easily choose to have nothing to do with a political initiative that many of its members see as the work of their party's adversaries. It is even less likely that the FRG will act on the Truth Commission's recommendations.

Impunity, then, seems destined to persist, not only for the intellectual authors of 626 documented army massacres but also for those responsible for the still unsolved 1998 murder of human-rights advocate Bishop Juan Gerardi. Coupled with the daily indignities that haunt the impoverished lot of 85 per cent of Guatemala's population, the peace accord that was signed three years ago may prove neither firm nor lasting.

♦ ♦ ♦

W. George Lovell teaches geography at Queen's University in Kingston. A new edition of his book, *A Beauty that Hurts: Life and Death in Guatemala*, will be published next year by *Between The Lines*.