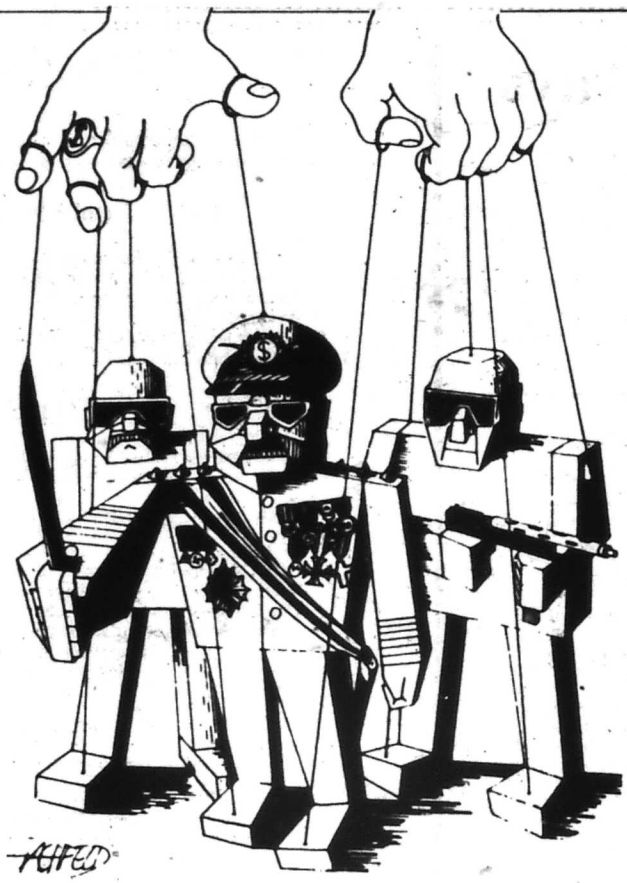

ELECTION DAY IN GUATEMALA

By DONALD McALPINE

'By keeping alive the myth of an international communist conspiracy in Guatemala, the military has justified its high profile in political life and has made its presence felt in every election since 1954'

OVER THE PAST few weeks much has been said and written about the elections scheduled to take place in El Salvador on March 28, a day when most of the eyes and ears of the world community will again see only what they wish to see, hear only what they wish to hear. The Republic of El Salvador has assumed this global profile primarily because the larger isthmian region of which it is part, the strategic, umbilical cord of Central America, now looms large in the new cold war currently being waged by the United States against the Soviet Union. Not since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 has East-West confrontation in the Americas had such intensive media coverage, nor such perilous implications.

Understandably then, the forthcoming elections in El Salvador have received much attention. The involvement and interest of numerous Canadian politicians, including Kingston and the Islands MP Flora MacDonald, has served the important function of placing the tragedy of contemporary Central America in a domestic context: Canada seems for once to be refreshingly aware of just how much is at stake. However, while the spotlight has played on the elections in El Salvador and the grim setting of bitter civil turmoil in which they will be held, little world attention has focused on the events in one of El Salvador's equally strife-torn neighbors, Guatemala, a country which will tomorrow "elect" a new president and "vote" into office representatives to serve the nation in a time of unprecedented political crisis.

As in most Latin American countries, the tradition of open, free and peaceful elections has never been kindled in Guatemala. Here the "democratic process" is currently manipulated by the national armed forces to bring about not universal suffrage but universal suffering, a senseless, wanton and brutal suffering, the calculated barbarity of which, by any historical standards, chills and staggers human comprehension.

Ever since a Central Intelligence Agency orchestrated coup toppled the moderately reformist and, incidentally, truly democratically-elected government of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954, Guatemala has been ruled by a series of authoritarian regimes dominated and staffed largely by members of the national armed forces. The justification for the heavy-handed intervention of the military in Guatemalan political life is the same today as it was in the mid 1950s: preventing, at all costs, a perceived communist cancer from spreading throughout the nation, a cancer for which high-ranking members of the armed forces consider genocide of the civilian population to be the only effective remedial surgery.

To perpetuate this vision and retain political power, the military, ideologically fortified by periodic publications from the U.S. State Department or the CIA, keep alive the myth of an international communist conspiracy in Guatemala, a myth in which Cuba, and now Nicaragua, both backed by the Soviet Union, figure prominently in the roles of active, outside agitators. By adhering resolutely to this fallacious and myopic mythology, the armed forces have justified their high profile in Guatemalan political life and have consistently and conspicuously made their presence felt in every election held in the country since the overthrow of Arbenz three decades ago. The leader of the conservative Guatemalan Christian Democrat party, Vinicio Cerezo Arevalo, who only last month survived yet another attempt on his life, but who still courageously continues to speak out, puts it bluntly this way: "My government would have you believe that communism is the enemy of democracy in Guatemala when in reality it [the government] itself is freedom's greatest foe."

Cerezo Arevalo, if his good fortune holds, will at least be alive to run for election tomorrow. One presidential candidate, a lawyer by the name of Guillermo Rodriguez Serrano, will not. Campaigning on a low-key Social Democrat platform, Rodriguez Serrano was gunned down on Feb. 21 in a commercial district of Guatemala City, shot to death by two persons who opened fire on him from a passing motorcycle before speeding off to the protective anonymity reserved by the government for the "unknown" killers directly within its employ.

The minority of Guatemalans, perhaps 20 to 30 per cent of a total population of 7.2 million, likely to cast a vote tomorrow have little to choose from in the way of candidates. In a country where the tenets of Christian Democracy, even of the ilk practised by José Napoleon Duarte in neighboring El Salvador, are regarded as communist subversion, its upholders will stand little chance of assuming power, even if the ballots cast are overwhelmingly in their favor.

The only civilian contender with real possibilities must be Mario Sandoval Alarcón, the candidate of the extreme right-wing *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional* (MLN), the Movement of National Liberation. Sandoval Alarcón served as vice-president from 1974-1978 in the government of General Kjell Laugurud and is the leading figure in the MLN, Guatemala's self-proclaimed party of "organized violence," which boasts command of a trained and equipped private militia numbering some 3,000 men. To Sandoval Alarcón, a devout "anti-communist" in a country where *anyone* questioning the strict government line is considered a communist, "organized violence" is simply the possession of the physical strength to back up his party's views. The elections have been sensibly boycotted by all those constituting the left, for fear of certain extermination.

As so often these past three decades, the man most likely to be the next president of Guatemala will not be of civilian but of military background, one General Angel Anibal Guevara, an ex-minister of defence who has the distinction of being the man chosen by the armed forces to represent them in tomorrow's elections. And since the armed forces not only control what goes on in polling stations but also monitor results coming in from across the country, and since they also ultimately count the ballots, then the candidate of their choice usually "wins" the election, even if, as happened in the openly fraudulent election of 1974, another candidate (then Rios Montt) actually secures a majority of the votes. It is in such overtly-rigged ways that the "democratic process" operates in Guatemala.

Circumstantial evidence which supports such allegations of electoral tampering may be derived by contrasting the position of the United States with respect to the Guatemalan elections vis-a-vis the position adopted by Washington over the elections in El Salvador. In the latter instance, the United States has thrown its full support behind the scheduled elections and has expended an enormous amount of energy attempting to convince world opinion that a just exercise in political democracy will take place in El Salvador on March 28. Because President Duarte is viewed by Washington as maintaining a centrist position in which he is besieged both from the right and the left by political extremists, his government has been propped up by a massive injection of U.S. aid, totalling $81 million in military assistance and $104.5 million in economic assistance. In sharp contrast, Guatemala has only been awarded $11.8 million in economic aid, a mere $8 million more than cold-shouldered Nicaragua.

The reasons behind the conspicuous absence of a huge infusion of American economic and military assistance to Guatemala are related chiefly to its deplorable record on human rights and to its blatant rejection of the United States' suggestion to stage anything remotely resembling fair elections. Whereas Duarte can at least be approached (and manipulated), the present Guatemalan government of General Romeo Lucas Garcia has refused to listen to American entreaties to ease off on its hard line and thus eventually justify the resumption of millions of dollars of military and economic assistance it so badly needs.

When President Carter suspended military aid to Guatemala in 1977 on the grounds of gross and unacceptable government participation in vio-

lations of human rights, it was widely thought by the armed forces that support would again be forthcoming from the Reagan administration once it assumed power. That this did not occur, because of the unabating excesses of the Guatemalan authorities, caused anger and confusion in the armed forces, which reacted testily when informed that military and economic assistance would resume only after a tangible reduction on their part in the intensity of government terror and repression. The *New York Times* reported an American official as describing the Guatemalan reaction as one in which "we've been told to shove it." Not even the personal intervention of retired General Vernon Walters, a former deputy director of the CIA and now an influential ambassador at large in Latin America, could temper the malevolent stance of Lucas Garcia's administration.

This inevitably forces us to ask, what then *is* the stance of the military government? What brought about this trenchant position in the first place? And what are some of the consequences of the government's heavy-handed actions for a land and a people upon which and whom so much suffering has already been unleashed?

Contrary to the argument of a Cuban, Nicaraguan and Soviet fuelled "communist conspiracy," the roots of the crisis in contemporary Guatemala may be more realistically attributed to a geography of social and economic inequality which has prevailed since colonial times, but which has worsened considerably over the past 20 years. Although the past two decades, chiefly through the operation of the Central American Common Market and revitalized foreign investment, witnessed substantial growth in industry, manufacturing and tourism in Guatemala, the agricultural sector, based on the production of coffee, cotton and sugar cane for export, remains the most vital component of the national economy. Just as the more recent economic ventures have been of benefit largely to a small group of local entrepreneurs connected to corporate enterprises outside the country, so the financial fruits of the agro-export sector have been enjoyed principally by large landholding families who have dominated, together with the armed forces, the political life of Guatemala for more than a century.

Control of both the agricultural and industrial sectors of the economy is in the hands of a ruling class in no way reluctant to employ the state apparatus to maintain its privileged position. At a time when the national economy has been surging ahead at an average rate of growth of six per cent per annum, an impressive figure for any Latin American country, the vast majority of Guatemalans have been excluded from the material benefits of this development process. Many, in fact, have become even more impoverished.

This glaring economic inequality is reinforced by the fact that it distinctly crosses social and ethnic lines as well. Just as Canada may be said to comprise "two solitudes," so also, but much more vividly, can the same be said of Guatemala. There the rural, land-oriented world of the Indians (some 60 per cent of the population) is set culturally apart from the world of the Ladinos, persons of mixed Spanish and Indian descent who opt for a more "western" as opposed to "traditional" lifestyle. While there are many poor Ladino families in Guatemala, nonetheless Ladinos are generally better off materially than their indigenous countrymen. They can certainly relate much more directly than the Indians to the often ostentatious culture of the small but powerful elite of pure-blooded or almost pure-blooded whites of primarily Spanish descent, a group which enjoys the greatest political and economic clout of all.

'Because of the marked cultural duality of Guatemala, many military actions against "subversives" bear the signs of a caste war'

SINCE THE OVERTHROW of the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle in July 1979, an event which triggered civil unrest throughout much of Central America, the "two solitudes" of Guatemala have been in almost constant collision, as popular forces in the country openly call for, and now fight for, a radical change in a system designed only to benefit an established elite and those who align themselves with it. In order to protect the interests of the privileged elite of which it is part, the leaders of the armed forces have sought to preserve the status quo by subjecting the civilian population of Guatemala to a fearful repression, the atrocities of which grow more heinous by the day.

Because of the marked cultural duality of Guatemala, and of the conflict of interests contained within it, many of the military actions being carried out against elements deemed subversive by the armed forces bear the ominous signs of a caste war, of the Indian being turned upon, yet again, by his white-Ladino adversaries. One such example was a massacre of Cukchiquel Indians last April in the department of Chimaltenango, which was reported in the Guatemalan daily newspaper *El Gráfico*:

One such example was a massacre of Cukchiquel Indians last April in the department of Chimaltenango, which was reported in the Guatemalan daily newspaper *El Gráfico*. "Unknown men," the paper reported, "murdered 24 people, including a nine-year-old girl.

"The victims were killed one by one with machetes. Before being killed inside a local school, many were tortured."

Two people, left for dead, survived.

Actions such as those undertaken by the "unknown men" mentioned above serve only to further politicize the Indian population and to facilitate their conversion to one of the four main left-wing guerilla groups currently active in the revolutionary armed struggle. The successful waging of guerrilla warfare is impossible without support at the local level in the form of food, shelter and moral if not physical encouragement. The ability of such groups as the *Ejercito Guerrillero de los Pobres*(EGP), the Guerrilla Army of the Poor and the *Organización del Pueblo Armado* (ORPA), the Organization of People in Arms, to engage and to defeat the Guatemalan armed forces in open conflict certainly suggests a broadening of the guerrillas' popular base.

The dramatic policiticization of the Indian population, long written off by most activists as hopelessly apathetic, is matched by an equally dramatic move on the part of certain members of the Catholic Church in Guatemala to identify with the revolutionary cause rather than side, as ecclesiastics have traditionally done, with the status quo. Such religious "converts" are inspired by, and quote, paragraph 17 of the Puebla Documents:

Illuminated by our faith, we see the growing gap between rich and poor as a scandal and a contradiction of being Christians. The luxury of a few reverts into an insult against the misery of the masses. This is contrary to the plan of the Creator and the honor which it deserves.

One priest in Guatemala who has chosen the activism of liberation theology is the Irishman Donal MacKenna. Thirty-year-old MacKenna served in the Quiché Indian town of Zacualpa prior to enlisting with the EGP. The magazine *Por Esto* carried this interview with him last July:

What is the situation inside the Guatemalan Church?

"The Church is passing through a crisis. And logically, because this is a nation at war, a war which the poor are waging to liberate themselves from oppression, then bishops, priests, nuns, sacristans and catechists have to assume responsibilities: at the side of the oppressed or against them."

What can you tell us about repression of the church?

"The church which dedicates itself to nothing more than giving the Sacraments and to a religion remote from the reality of the Guatemalan people is not repressed. But the Church which spreads the Good Word, which is Good because it wishes to change the life of man in all its dimensions, which promotes ties between faith and the life of the people, and which is socially committed, this church is persecuted by the government."

This profound shift in the thinking of certain members of the Catholic Church in Guatemala has been welcomed by the EGP as an act of true solidarity and commitment, and was celebrated by them in a poignant communique:

During the last month, the Lucas government and the army have intensified their campaign of assassinations and intimidations against Christians, both priests and nuns and lay preachers. The only reason these good people, from Guatemala and other countries, have been massacred and continue to be threatened, is that they have come in close contact with the poor of Guatemala and have understood through their own experience that the society of exploitation, repression and discrimination in which we live is incompatible with the principles and practice of true Christianity.

Although the government has created a climate of terror, falsely accusing the church of abandoning its role in order to get involved in politics, the truth is that every day there are more Christians, both on a base level and throughout the hierarchy, who, faced with the grave misery and merciless repression suffered by the majority of Guatemalans, have stopped supporting and giving a facade of legitimacy to the miserly interests of the rich and the government; and they have come to the conclusion that to put an end to this situation, profound and integral changes in our society are needed. And that therefore, those who maintain the injustice, crime and contempt towards the majority must be denounced and defeated.

Christians play a large role in raising the consciousness and organization of our people, and have turned their faith into a generous farce for the the liberation of Guatemala . . . In our country one cannot be a Christian and not be a revolutionary.

The challenge of such convictions are now slowly and painfully being met and will hopefully one day usher in a more human prospect for the Guatemalan people than anything tomorrow's victor will be able to offer. Between then and now, however, lies a horrendous bloodbath and several thousands of unrecorded, uncounted ballots cast by all those not electing a new government but voting with their lives, whether knowingly, for a new Guatemala. □

Donald McAlpine has travelled extensively throughout Latin America over the past seven years, and teaches and writes about his experiences there.