

Historical Background

This article is intended as a primer for readers unfamiliar with Guatemala. It provides a brief introduction to the history of the country prior to 1987, when the broad peace process is widely perceived to have started. The history of the process itself and of Guatemala since 1987 is not covered in this article, but is outlined at the back of the issue, in the chronology and key actors sections.

The Guatemalan civil war began after the failure of a nationalist uprising by military officers in 1960. It formally ended on 29 December 1996 with the signing in Guatemala City of The Agreement on a Firm and Lasting Peace. While there are no reliable figures on how many people died in this war, current estimates suggest around 180,000. In addition, 40,000 people 'disappeared' during the conflict, over 400 villages were completely destroyed, at least 100,000 became refugees in neighbouring Mexico, and a further million were forcibly displaced within the country. Guatemala's population is currently estimated at around 10 million.

The Roots of the Conflict

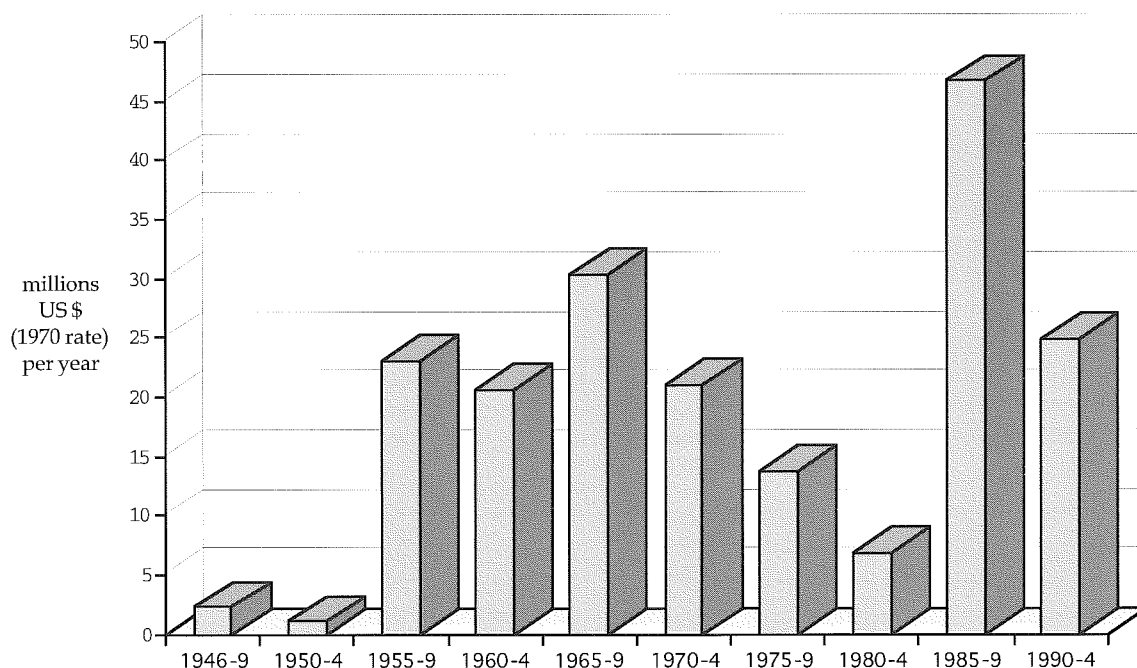
A Casualty of the Cold War

During the Cold War, world powers frequently employed ideological rhetoric to justify the forceful pursuit of perceived geopolitical and economic interests. Cold War interventions in the Third World were generally extremely partisan and often led to the intensification and militarisation of existing conflicts. The Guatemalan war ran roughly parallel to the Cold War and in some ways was paradigmatic of these trends.

In 1952, the elected Guatemalan government of President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán passed an agrarian reform law which sought to re-distribute to landless *campesinos* all unused land from holdings over 223 acres. At this time, the US-based United Fruit Company (UFC) was Guatemala's biggest landowner, but no more than 15% of its 550,000 acres were under cultivation. As a result, the government expropriated 400,000 acres, offering compensation based on the UFC's own figures which had under-valued the land for tax purposes.

US Economic and Military Aid to Guatemala 1946-1989

Source: Statistical Abstract on Latin America,
volumes 30 and 33, UCLA



To counter the expropriation, the UFC called on its allies in the US government, in particular Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother Allen, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). In June 1954, a CIA-sponsored mercenary army moved into Guatemala from neighbouring Honduras to help overthrow the government. Because the ruling coalition of President Arbenz included members of the Communist Guatemalan Workers Party (PGT), it was possible to justify the intervention as part of a broader strategy to contain the ubiquitous 'communist menace'.

Once Arbenz had been forced from office, his land reforms were immediately reversed. Thereafter, a loose alliance of conservative military and private sector interests began to consolidate its grip on power, controlling or removing successive elected governments. Reformist dissent was gradually eliminated both within the army and in civil society, most of which was proscribed or destroyed through targeted repression. With extensive military and economic assistance from the United States, Guatemala became the national security state *par excellence*, designed to limit any popular protest which might threaten the status quo.

Gradually, political space became so restricted that many deemed armed resistance the only viable means of expressing opposition to the authorities. In 1962, the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR) was established, a coalition of rebel movements comprising army dissidents, radical students and left-wing political activists, all of whom were middle-class *ladinos*. The FAR espoused the *foco* theory of Che Guevara and others which held that the justice of the revolutionary cause would be immediately evident to *campesinos*, workers and the poor, thus sparking spontaneous insurrection. While relying for their support on rural communities, typically in non-indigenous areas such as the Eastern highlands, they communicated with their nascent support base through the ideologies of Marxism and liberation theology. As such, they tended to approach ethnic and cultural oppression within the framework of class struggle.

Although breaking from the Guatemalan Communist Party in 1968, the FAR drew moral and logistic support from the revolutionary regime in Cuba, reinforcing the view that Guatemala's war was a zero-sum conflict between the forces of capitalism

and communism. After a few early successes, the FAR was largely wiped out by a counter-insurgency campaign in which US special forces played a prominent role.

Dispossession, Exclusion and the Maya

The Cold War and the 1954 coup re-moulded and invigorated a number of structures within Guatemalan society which had long provoked and propagated the widespread use of violence. Tensions, then as now, stemmed from a highly unequal distribution of resources whereby less than 3% of the population own 70% of arable land and a staggering 80% live in poverty. This situation has itself retained a strong ethnic dimension.

In the centuries following the Spanish conquest of the 1520s, the Mayan majority in Guatemala successfully avoided the fate of assimilation or destruction which met many indigenous peoples in Latin America and elsewhere. This is partly because the *conquistadors* showed relatively little interest in their mountainous homelands, and partly due to the development of a pervasive Mayan culture of preservation, syncretism and resistance. Nevertheless, the Maya lost large areas of their communal lands to the invaders and were regularly subjected to forced labour on the colonial plantations.

Colonial economic structures survived in Guatemala beyond Central American independence in 1821, well into the mid 1800s. In the latter years of the nineteenth century, however, a qualitative change occurred in economic policy, linked to the expansion of coffee growing. One of the principles enunciated by the ideologues and politicians of the time was that private ownership of the land guaranteed greater productivity. With this pretext, powerful agribusiness interests allied to the state forced many communities to divide up their communal land, while direct expropriations were accelerated. A convenient consequence of these reforms was the increased availability of *campesinos* for work on the coffee plantations.

Strengthened by successive governments in the early years of this century, coffee production and the US-owned 'banana

enclaves' remained central to Guatemala's economic 'modernisation' and its increasing integration into international markets. While liberal rhetoric glossed over economic exploitation and social marginalisation, landless Maya continued to be subjected to regimes of forced labour and indentured servitude which were only legally abolished in 1944.

The ill-fated land reforms of President Arbenz were inaugurated with the intention of speeding economic growth, the redistribution of resources and industrialisation. Taken with other structural reforms, it was also hoped they might lessen the dependence of the Guatemalan economy on foreign capital. These reforms were the first and only serious attempt to rectify the imbalances in Guatemalan land usage and their reversal meant that, at the time of the last land census (1979), around 90 per cent of Guatemala's farms were too small to support the average family.

While economically exploited, the Maya have also been subject to a political culture of racism and exclusion, underpinned by a state which promotes the culture, values, customs and interests of the minority *ladino* population. As a consequence, constitutional guarantees of political participation, the rule of law and social equality have never been realised for the Maya.

Total War

A New Wave of Resistance

Responding to the many historical injustices suffered by indigenous people, and inspired by Church-backed development projects and the influence of liberation theology, Mayan communities became increasingly politicised in the 1960s.

Simultaneously, in the wake of sustained military setbacks in the latter half of that decade, it became clear to the Guatemalan guerrillas that they could only hope to grow strong if they incorporated an ethnic analysis of Guatemalan society into their discourse, rooting their struggle in the deep historical grievances of the Maya.

Gathering
firewood in
Caba, Quiché

Paul Smith/Panos Pictures



The Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) and the Revolutionary Organisation of the People in Arms (ORPA) officially emerged in 1972 and 1979 respectively, led by dissidents from the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR). Although ultimately controlled by *ladinos*, both groups based themselves in indigenous highland areas and recruited the Maya in large numbers. Before long, the EGP was established as the largest insurgent force, developing its strongholds along the North-western border in Quiché and Huehuetenango, where virgin lands, colonised by landless Mayan *campesinos*, were being encroached upon by military landowners. ORPA, for its part, maintained more of an organisational distance from rural communities, yet established the first significant guerrilla presence along the South Coast and in the west of the country, around San Marcos and Lake Atitlán. Meanwhile, the depleted FAR had also regrouped and had begun to develop new bases in the eastern highlands and remote northern jungles of the Petén.

During the limited democratic opening provided by the government of General Kjell Laugerud García (1974-1978), a new gener-

ation of student leaders, trade unions and *campesino* organisations also sprang up. Officially independent of the armed struggle, largely Mayan groups such as the Committee for Campesino Unity (CUC) shared many of the rebels' objectives, but employed non-violent, legal methods to pursue them. As their demands for freedom of organisation, land rights and democracy gathered momentum, however, a new wave of repression broke out involving massacres in the countryside, systematic death threats and the selective assassination of civic leaders and political activists.

Increasing numbers of younger Mayans and the civic opposition duly joined the ranks of the armed rebels, reflecting their growing sense of insecurity. Inspired by the successes of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in Nicaragua, the guerrilla movement reached its peak in 1978-9, with 6-8,000 fighters and up to half a million active supporters operating in most departments of the country. At this point, even US government advisers acknowledged that the guerrillas were forging a genuinely national movement, receiving only limited support from outside sources.

‘Scorched Earth’ Repression

The army’s response was unprecedented in its brutality. Supported by the US, covertly from 1977, but more openly from 1982, the governments of General Romeo Lucas García (1978-1982) and General Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-83), unleashed a vicious war which aimed literally to depopulate Mayan areas where the guerrillas were operating. During this offensive, entire sectors of the population became military targets, leaving around 100,000 civilians killed or ‘disappeared’ between 1981-83 alone. In addition to the massacres, most of the war’s refugees and internally displaced emerged in these years, while a systematic campaign of highland deforestation was also waged to remove physical cover for the guerrillas. In 1982, the guerrilla groups and the PGT came together to form the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG), a unified command with a platform for a revolutionary government. By this time, however, the poorly-armed guerrillas were unable to defend their supporters in the rural highlands against the full brunt of military violence. The possibilities for successful insurrection had all but vanished.

By 1984, the large scale massacres were generally over, the army had set up new bases throughout the Mayan heartlands and had accrued unprecedented economic power through the seizure of vast tracts of productive land and a number of key state institutions. It had also consolidated various means to strengthen its control over the rural population. So-called ‘development poles’ had been established, comprising newly constructed population centres, known as ‘model villages’, and reception centres for refugees and displaced people returning from the mountains. Development and infrastructure projects were centralised and administered by Inter-Institutional Co-ordinating Councils (IICCs) under the direct control of the army.

At the same time, rural villages were undergoing a process of intense militarisation through the establishment of Civil Defence Patrols (PACs). Although billed

as voluntary organisations, all males over sixteen were required to serve in the PACs and failure to do so meant being branded a guerrilla sympathiser. Typically, patrol duty consisted of guarding the village, checking the identification of everyone entering, and reporting anything suspicious to the PAC commander who in turn reported to the nearest military base. Patrols were also involved in periodic sweeps of the local countryside to search for guerrilla units and, together with the military commissioners, civilians responsible for army recruitment in each village, they became the eyes and ears of the army. The PACs aggravated divisions and suspicions within indigenous communities. At their height, in the mid-eighties, it is estimated that they had around 900,000 members.

In many areas, the army further consolidated its power by prohibiting the cultivation of large tracts of land. In others, farmers were forbidden to return to their home villages but were permitted to work their fields by day, sometimes accompanied by civil patrollers. Extensive campaigns to resettle abandoned lands were also undertaken with some 2,000 land titles awarded to *campesinos* in the most conflict-ridden areas by late 1985. While these campaigns helped improve the army’s image, they also removed physical evidence of large-scale violence and enabled the army to prevent ‘troublemakers’ from owning and working the land.

In short, the counterinsurgency campaigns of the early eighties exacerbated all the original causes of the conflict. On one hand, displacement and resettlement deepened an already desperate land problem. On the other, democratic space was at its most limited with the army and military commissioners the only state representatives in the highlands, and city authorities obliged to demand prior application for gatherings of more than two people. The rule of law was also grievously undermined through the period with an increasing centralisation of power and a total absence of democratic accountability. Almost inevitably, the indigenous rural majority bore the brunt of these mounting injustices.



A funeral procession in Chichicastenango, Quiché province. The coffins contain the remains of 27 victims of an army massacre originally buried in a clandestine cemetery.

Inklings of Change

A Return to Civilian Rule

By 1983, the scale of the terror had made the Guatemalan government an international pariah, threatening its international aid. With the URNG severely weakened, a significant sector of the army, encouraged by US advisers, saw a strategic advantage in returning the country to civilian rule.

Because of his opposition to these developments, General Ríos Montt was ousted and a process of institutional 'normalisation' was initiated, guided by General Oscar Mejía Victores. Under this new administration, political parties prepared to work with the army were legalised and, in 1984-85, legislative and presidential elections were held through which the National Centrist Union (UCN) and the Guatemalan Christian Democratic Party (PDCG) promoted a new rhetoric of rights and reconciliation. This rhetoric wrong-footed hard-liners in the powerful Movement of National Liberation (MLN) and other rightist parties, transporting the PDCG's Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo to the presidency. A

new constitution was then promulgated, a Constitutional Court and a Supreme Electoral Council were established and a new post of Human Rights Ombudsman was created.

Hopes for social progress were raised significantly by the return to civilian rule. During the election campaign, new social movements had been formed and older ones reappeared representing indigenous people, women, the displaced, trade unionists and relatives of the 'disappeared'. On coming to power, the Christian Democrats, who had themselves once been proscribed, promised to tackle a range of key issues including land reform, demilitarisation and the negotiated return of refugees. Meanwhile, the military confrontation between the state authorities and the URNG became increasingly politicised. The rebels re-oriented their propaganda operations to the international arena, while the state countered with a rhetoric of guided 'developmentalism'.

The strategic reformulations of the late-eighties broadly benefited the URNG as government rhetoric could not mask the fact that

military hard-liners were indeed obstructing substantial progressive change. The first indication of this obstructiveness was that all the new institutions of the counter-insurgency years were legalised in the 1985 Constitution. The IICCs were formally replaced by Councils of Development under civilian governors, but the army's National Reconstruction Committee maintained ultimate control of their activities. The PACs were also renamed rather than disbanded and by 1988, 'Voluntary Civil Defence Committees' (CVDCs) still marshalled around 700,000 civilians. President Cerezo himself confirmed his approval of the new institutions by inaugurating the Chisec development pole in Alta Verapaz in 1986.

Despite the various state institutions set up for the purpose, the Cerezo government also failed to investigate army human rights abuses seriously. This was partly due to a general amnesty set in place before Cerezo's inauguration, covering all crimes committed by the security forces after 1982. However, the president had also assiduously avoided making promises on military impunity, stating that if investigations took place, 'we would have to put the whole army in jail'.

Military structures remained intact and untouchable therefore, despite the return of civilian rule. Furthermore, during Cerezo's five year term, human rights violations actually increased, taking a number of forms from death threats against church leaders proposing land reform, to the murder and 'disappearance' of human rights activists, students, trade unionists, independent media workers and political leaders. The killings were highly selective in that high-profile leaders were generally left alone, while key local activists were assassinated to create public fear and preclude effective grass-roots organisation.

Regional Pressures For Peace

While political liberalisation was moving ahead fitfully, similarly fragile moves were also under way to kick-start a regional process to resolve the conflicts in

El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala. These moves were spearheaded by the Latin American 'Contadora Group', comprising Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia and Panama, all of whom feared the destabilising regional implications of the escalating violence. Launched in January 1983, the Contadora initiative drew increased international attention to Central America's conflicts and pressured for a softening of the militarist stance of the US in the region.

On 3rd September 1983, mediated by the Contadora group, the foreign ministers of the Central American countries adopted a Document of Objectives in Panama City. This document declared a shared intention to promote democratisation and an end to armed conflict in the region, to act in compliance with international law, to revitalise and restore economic development and co-operation in Central America, and to negotiate better access to international markets.

A year later, on 29th September 1984, the Contadora Act on Peace and Co-operation in Central America was also presented. This document included a range of detailed commitments to peace, democratisation, regional security and economic co-operation. It also provided for regional committees to evaluate and verify compliance with these commitments. The agreement was tentatively approved by the Central American presidents, but did not gain the crucial backing of the US due to its *de facto* recognition of the revolutionary government in Nicaragua. A revised version of the accord failed to assuage these objections and was finally laid to rest on its formal rejection by Costa Rica, El Salvador and Honduras in June 1986.

While the Contadora group ultimately failed to forge a credible peace formula with the backing of all regional governments, it did lay the foundations for such a plan to emerge in subsequent years. Inspired by the Costa Rican president Oscar Arias, the so-called 'Esquipulas process' emerged from the ashes of Contadora in 1986-87. With substantive backing from President Cerezo and the Guatemalan government, this new

process led to a fundamental remoulding of Central American politics. Within five years, it had inspired a return to liberal democracy in Nicaragua, the signing of a general peace agreement in El Salvador, and the first tentative steps toward a negotiated settlement in Guatemala.

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