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Insurgency and Instability in Guatemala

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INSTABILITY AND INSURGENCY IN GUATEMALA

THE PROBLEM

To assess the prospects over the next several years for the insurgency in Guatemala in the context of the country's continuing political, economic, and social problems.

CONCLUSIONS

A. The persistent insurgency by a small number of leftist extremists is a particularly troublesome manifestation of Guatemala's chronic political instability. Nonetheless, the insurgency, now in its ninth year, has survived rather than flourished. The insurgents, though able to carry out dramatic acts of urban terror, have had little success in gaining adherents in the countryside. Much of the energy of the insurgent movement has been squandered on internal dissidence and factionalism.

B. We believe it unlikely that the insurgency, now at a low ebb, will expand greatly, at least for several years to come. Over the next year or so, the insurgents will probably attempt to keep the pressure on the government through sporadic terrorism, including acts against US officials. Their apparent motive is to provoke the replacement of President Méndez by a repressive military regime in the hope that it would cause the people to rally to the insurgency.

C. There are some indications that{

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Such foreign assistance might increase the insurgency's capacity for violence and terror, and thus increase its disruptive effect.

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But it would probably not enhance the insurgents' overall prospect for seizing power.

D. Since early 1968, Méndez has increased his control over Guatemalan security forces and sharply reduced the bloody and often indiscriminate counter-terrorism through which they and right-wing vigilantes were combating the insurgents. The President's freedom of action, however, still is limited, and he is unlikely to undertake basic reforms or any other actions that would coalesce the military and the political right generally against him. Though the security forces have been able to keep the rural insurgency from getting out of hand, they suffer from a variety of disabilities, including weak leadership and poor and uncoordinated intelligence. The latter disability in particular puts them at a disadvantage in coping with urban terrorism.

E. The basic political and social problems of Guatemala are not caused by the insurgency, and they would persist even if it collapsed. Even if the insurgents were to achieve their interim objective of provoking the establishment of a harsh military dictatorship, they would in our view benefit little at least in the short run. Over the longer period, the actions of such a regime might increase the prospects for the emergence of a more vigorous revolutionary movement; but we cannot know at this point what role, if any, the current insurgents and their sometime allies among Guatemalan Communists would have in such a movement.

DISCUSSION

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Guatemala has endured a long history of political instability and social and economic backwardness. Governments and constitutions come and go with little lasting impact on the largely impoverished rural masses. The population of some 4,700,000 is now rising at a rate of about three percent per year despite one of the highest rates of infant mortality in the world. About half the people are *Indios*—Indians who follow traditional ways and have little or no contact with national political and economic life. The remainder (called *ladinos*) consist for the most part of Indians and mestizos who have moved into contemporary Guatemalan society at the bottom of the economic ladder. Only about one Guatemalan in four is literate, probably a smaller proportion than ten years ago; many

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do not speak Spanish. Primitive social services in terms of health, education, and welfare compare unfavorably even with most other Latin American countries.¹

2. Before the revolution of 1944 the country was ruled by more or less despotic military dictators who were buttressed by an elite of large landowners and merchants. The revolutionary governments of Jose Arévalo (1945-1951) and Colonel Jacobo Arbenz (1951-1954) passed some important social and economic legislation, and undertook some reforms aimed at bringing the *Indios* and poorer *ladinos* into national life. For the most part the impact was more apparent than real. Political power had for a time been wrested from the right, and the Guatemalan Communists played a key role in the Arbenz government, but the grip of the elite on the economy had hardly been shaken.

3. The limited extent of Arbenz's control over the country became quite evident in the course of his downfall in 1954. Then the improvised band of men under Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, with US backing, overthrew the government without difficulty. The poorer elements of the population that Arbenz had been trying to favor made no effort to come to his defense. Upon taking power, Castillo Armas rather effectively turned the clock back to prerevolutionary times; Communists and suspected Communists were purged and the country's nascent organizations of laborers and small landowners were dismantled. While for the past decade the elites have been in a position to exercise direct political control of the government, they in fact have failed to do so because of personal and factional rivalries and a dearth of rightist political leaders with any sort of popular appeal or effective program. Thus since 1954 it has become clear once more that the Guatemalan military is the single most important political force in the country.

4. Memories of the Arévalo-Arbenz period have instilled in the military, and in the political right, deep suspicions of any movement even slightly to the left of center. The appellation "Communist" has been generally applied to the most elementary proposed reforms or steps toward modernization. The military has been particularly wary of any signs of a reversion to the revolutionary era; in 1963 it removed the corrupt but avowedly anti-Communist General Ydígoras Fuentes from the presidency for permitting the return of former President Arévalo during an election year. In short, the political right and the military have been extraordinarily successful in opposing change. For lack of constructive political leadership, the basic conditions of political instability—social backwardness, national disunity, and general poverty—have become institutionalized in Guatemala.

¹ Some basic demographic comparisons with neighboring countries for the years 1962-1965:

| | GUATEMALA | MEXICO | COSTA RICA | EL SALVADOR |
|---|-----------|--------|---------------|-------------|
| Crude birth rate (per 1,000 population) . . . | 46.7 | 44.3 | 43.7 | 47.7 |
| Crude death rate (per 1,000 population) . . | 16.6 | 9.6 | 8.7 | 10.8 |
| Infant mortality (per 1,000 live births) . . | 98.7 | 62.9 | 75 | 68.8 |

Source: Secretariat for Economic Integration for Central America, Fifth statistical compendium for Central America 1967

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5. The persistent insurgency by leftist extremists is a particularly troublesome aspect of the country's continuing political instability. After eight years of varying fortunes the insurgents maintain the ability to carry out sporadic acts of urban terror—acts which within the past year have included even the assassination of the US Ambassador and two members of the US Military Group. Nevertheless, the insurgency has survived rather than flourished. The movement reached its peak early in 1966, when it controlled large parts of the Sierra de Minas in the Departments of Zacapa and Izabal and terrorized the public through a campaign of kidnaping and robbery which netted the insurgents \$2 million or more. Its strength then declined as the result of vigorous military counter-terror action, and the leaders are currently no closer to their eventual goal of taking over the country than they were at the inception of their campaign in 1960.

6. Indeed the insurgents have probably always considered this a far-off goal. There is some evidence that a more immediate one has been the provocation of another right-wing coup in the hope that it would rally the populace to the cause of the insurgency. The insurgents were frustrated in this hope in 1966 when the military government of Colonel Enrique Peralta, in power since 1963, kept its promise to hold an honest election for the presidency. Then, Julio César Méndez Montenegro of the Revolutionary Party (PR), benefiting from a split of the votes of the political right between two candidates, won a plurality of the presidential vote and a majority of seats in Congress.

II. THE MÉNDEZ GOVERNMENT

7. Despite this electoral success, the Méndez government holds office only at the sufferance of the military and the economic elite. Its demonstrably anti-Communist stance and its favorable approach to private enterprise notwithstanding, the PR has few backers among the economic elite. Indeed, it is regarded with suspicion by those on the right who recall that many of its present leaders were active in the revolution of 1944.

8. Méndez realizes the limitations on his freedom of action as president. Although he is concerned with the need for national development and for social and economic reform, he apparently believes that these must be subordinated to the elementary goal of completing his term. By doing so he feels that the groundwork will have been laid for a legal and constitutional handling of political conflicts by his successor. This is no mean aspiration, as no elected Guatemalan president has completed a term since 1951, but it has dispirited those who had hoped for more than token progress on basic reforms. Pressure from the right has restrained the administration from imposing major new taxes, or efficiently collecting old ones, sufficient to finance more than a small start on such reforms. The government has moved slowly, too, on its pledge to redistribute land from the state-owned farms. Méndez has made scant use of \$70 million available in foreign aid funds; the largest single limiting factor is the lack of new taxes to meet the requirements for partial domestic financing of aid projects.

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In short, his accomplishments so far in the social and economic field have been modest considering the myriad profound problems of the country.

9. For the first two years of his term, Méndez was especially vulnerable to charges that he was a captive of the military. When an offer of amnesty to the insurgents was rejected, soon after his inauguration, he granted full authority to the military to combat the guerrillas, and appeared to acquiesce in the excesses which resulted. Local military commanders, such as Colonel Arana of the Zacapa Department, armed and fielded civilian vigilante groups and set in motion a counter-terror campaign, partly civilian and partly military, which killed at least many hundreds and possibly several thousands of Guatemalans. The victims were a diverse lot; some were insurgents and collaborators, but many were personal or political enemies of the vigilante leaders, including leftists generally and a number of PR members. This campaign was successful in that it all but denied the Zacapa area to the insurgents and threw them badly off base elsewhere. Yet as one side strove to revenge the terror of the other, the discovery of mutilated bodies became commonplace and the level of violence unusual even by Guatemalan standards.

10. This violence has been on the wane since March 1968, when Méndez achieved his principal success in dealing with the military. In a sudden and unexpected move he sent the three leading organizers of the counter-terror campaign, Colonel Arana, Minister of Defense Arriaga, and the chief of the national police, into posts abroad. This was followed by reassignments of personnel throughout the officer corps. Méndez, a former law professor, probably acted from the conviction that he could no longer turn his back to the widespread lawlessness and violence.² But how he came about the political courage to act upon this feeling is still unclear. It is possible that Méndez calculated that the right-wing vigilante groups had forfeited support even from their political allies by such acts as the kidnaping of the Archbishop of Guatemala. It may also have become clear to him that Colonel Arriaga had lost standing among his peers, and that there were chinks in what had appeared to be a solidly united military. Emboldened by his success in establishing this measure of control over the military, he then ordered the disbanding of the clandestine police and military units that had engaged in counter-terrorism around Guatemala City. In October the President took another step in curbing rural violence by requiring the civilian vigilante bands to turn in the weapons which had been issued to them by the Army. The move retrieved most of these weapons, but many others from other sources remain in civilian hands.

11. Méndez's position has been strengthened by the appointment of less forceful officers to key command positions in the military. Maintenance of good relations with the military is substantially aided by the efforts of the President's brother, Colonel Méndez, who seems to have no personal ambitions and is gen-

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erally respected by his fellow officers. Some right-wing civilians and inactive officers, however, have continued their efforts to prod the army into deposing Méndez. In particular, representatives of the right-wing National Liberation Movement are active in this endeavor. At the same time the civilians realize that the recent changes in the security forces have made the time less than propitious for a coup and are also looking to the election of 1970.

III. THE INSURGENCY

12. The Guatemalan insurgents were able to celebrate the movement's eighth anniversary on 13 November, but their achievement in longevity has not been matched by gains in strength. The history of the movement shows that much of the energy of the insurgents has been used up simply in trying to survive, and in the formation, splintering, and reconciliations of factions within the movement itself. Almost from its inception in 1960, the group of young Army officers who founded the 13 November group (MR-13) was confronted by attempts of the Guatemalan Communist Party (PGT) to take it over. Under the leadership of Marco Antonio Yon Sosa the insurgents were able to maintain financial independence from the PGT; they received some support from Cuba, but the bulk of their sustenance came from successful raids on military supply depots and plantations. A short-lived united front was achieved in 1963 when PGT militants and Yon Sosa's group combined to form the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR). This evaporated the following year when Yon blasted the pro-Soviet PGT for its advocacy of a "bourgeois national revolution," took the MR-13 out of the FAR, and enthusiastically praised China and Mao.

13. This was the beginning of a string of defections, splits, and unification attempts among the insurgent groups. In accord with the resolution of the Havana Conference of 1964 to support the orthodox Communist parties in Latin America, Cuban aid was diverted from the MR-13 to the PGT. At about the same time one of Yon's lieutenants, Luís Turcios Lima, broke with the MR-13 and placed his following under the command of the PGT, thus reviving the FAR. Early in 1966, at the Tri-Continental Conference in Havana, Fidel Castro lionized Turcios and read the uninvited Yon Sosa out of the continental revolutionary movement as a "Trotskyite."

14. The period after the election of 1966 proved to be dismal for the insurgents in general and for the FAR in particular. Turcios died in an automobile crash, and operations of his band were impaired by a crisis of leadership. The government's counter-terror tactics forced the guerrillas onto the defensive. Adversity proved to be not unifying but divisive. Acrimony grew between the guerrillas of the FAR and the party bureaucrats of the PGT.³

³ The FAR guerrillas accused the PGT leaders of being more interested in securing legal status for the party than in getting on with the insurgency. Since then, some have even sneered that the PGT's major concern is not revolution but trying to persuade Méndez to sell coffee to Communist governments.

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15. By January 1968, the FAR, now under a man who calls himself César Montes, had divorced itself from the PGT and once more joined forces with the MR-13. It also recognized Yon Sosa as the leader of the insurgency, with César Montes in second place. The FAR, now at a low ebb in strength and capability, is going through a rather prolonged period of recuperation and reorganization.⁴ The movement is still in a state of flux; leaders have been captured and killed by the government forces, and there are

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Efforts are underway to build a single command over the small bands scattered around the country. The FAR occasionally receives funds from Cuba and arms purchased in Mexico; some of the guerrillas have been trained in Cuba, including Yon Sosa himself, who as an Army officer had also received US training in counter-guerrilla tactics.

16. There is some evidence that the main thrust of the FAR's current effort is to develop support organizations so that the insurgents can operate in several geographic areas. Insurgent leaders hope that if operations can be mounted in several places at the same time, government forces will be overextended. Meanwhile, in view of the faltering of insurgency movements which Castro has supported elsewhere in Latin America, the insurgency in Guatemala remains perhaps his most important target for support.

17. The FAR's capability for urban terror is its principal current asset. It has carried out its most spectacular operations in Guatemala City; kidnappings and bank robberies there have kept the movement in funds, and the assassinations of US and Guatemalan officials have intensified the political turmoil. In planning acts of urban terror, the insurgents generally have two important advantages over the security forces: better use of intelligence information, and the ability to pick and choose their targets. The urban terrorists also benefit from support among students. By contrast, the guerrillas in the countryside have not in eight years won and kept any significant support from the peasants.

IV. THE COUNTER-INSURGENCY

18. Since the suppression of the vigilante groups, the counter-insurgency operations of the military have continued, though at a lower rate because the guerrillas themselves have been less active. Recent military operations have been undertaken with more discretion, and mutilated corpses are no longer left on the side of the road to warn potential revolutionaries. Meanwhile the Army's civic action program is being carried out with special energy in the Zacapa Department. The Army units dig wells, work on roads, run medical clinics, and conduct reading classes. These activities are probably not sufficient, however, to win over the active support of the peasants, who are politically apathetic by nature and still no doubt suspicious of the Army's motives.

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19. The armed forces are capable of containing rural insurgency concentrated in one area, but probably would not be able to do so if forced to conduct simultaneous operations in several widespread localities. In the countryside, the Army's operations have owed at least part of their success to the fact that both sides have had to operate near major highways, where logistical support for the Army has been fairly easy. The logistical system would probably break down if the Army was forced to fight the guerrillas in isolated areas. (At the same time, the insurgents' freedom of movement in such areas is of limited value to them under present circumstances.) Intelligence, plans, and operations staffs and procedures are weak in all services and ineffectively coordinated at the general staff level. The 9,700-man Army is weak in tactical leadership, training, communications, and transportation. The Navy, with a personnel strength of 200 and seven small patrol craft, is unable to perform adequately the coastal surveillance mission. The 300-man Air Force is hampered by diverse types of aircraft, maintenance problems, and a weak logistic support system. Police forces include 5,500 National Police, of which 3,600 are in Guatemala City, as well as 500 Judicial Police and 1,200 Treasury Police. The weaknesses of the National Police cover a broad range of deficiencies in management and operations.

V. PROSPECTS

20. There is a better than even chance that Méndez can continue his balancing act at least until the approach of the presidential election of March 1970. He has seen that the military is not as monolithic as it appeared when he first took office, and will probably continue to exploit its divisions to protect his own position. We doubt that his success in first making key personnel changes in the security forces and then disarming the vigilantes will embolden him to make other drastic moves, such as a stronger stand on basic economic and social reforms. The political realities of Guatemala have not changed, and Méndez is likely to avoid any action that might bring a powerful right-wing reaction against him.

21. Elements of the right will surely continue plotting against the Méndez government. The partial disarming of the civilian counter-terror groups has naturally disgruntled them. Their effectiveness in persuading the military to remove Méndez will depend on the course of the insurgency and how the military regards Méndez's handling of it. If the insurgents should prove capable of mounting vigorous guerrilla campaigns in more than one area at a time, or of significantly increasing their urban terror, the military and the right would press for a return to widespread counter-terror operations. Under these conditions, refusal by Méndez to comply with such a demand would mean his removal. As the election of 1970 draws closer, the Army will be under a variety of conflicting pressures, not only from Méndez but from rightists who may see in a military takeover their best chance to win the election, and from diverse views within its own ranks. Military reaction to these pressures is likely to depend on how key military figures view their own personal interests.

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Such an effort, of a size that Castro would probably be willing to support, would be of questionable overall value. It could place further strains on the unity of the insurgency movement. Some insurgents have resented the irregularity of Castro's financial support, and would not be enthusiastic about his attempt to take over the movement. There also remains the question of the working relationship between Fidel Castro and Yon Sosa. In short, foreign assistance,

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might increase the insurgency's capacity for violence and terrorism, and hence increase its disruptive effect, but it would probably not enhance its overall prospect for seizing power.

23. It is unlikely, at least for several years to come, that the insurgency will expand greatly. Despite the unrelieved poverty of the countryside, the basic inertia and conservatism of the Guatemalan peasant will prove to be the best ally of the counter-insurgency. Development of effective support among either the peasantry or the urban poor would require a much more capable and attractive leader than Yon Sosa has proved to be. The FAR is apparently short of materiel, and will probably go on being plagued with organizational problems. Despite its repeated emphasis on a single command, there is still dissidence within the leadership and incomplete cooperation on the part of small unit leaders. Over the short run, the FAR will probably attempt to keep the pressure on the government by various spectacular acts of terror, including acts against US officials, in the hope of securing the replacement of President Méndez by an unpopular military regime.

24. With or without increased help from Castro, over the next year or so the insurgents will probably achieve at best only limited and sporadic successes, mostly in Guatemala City. In our view, if Méndez can survive his full four years in office, a façade of constitutionality will have been achieved—at least for a while. But future leaders will also find themselves captives, not just of the military and the economic elite, but also of the country's social backwardness and oppressive poverty.

25. Indefinite continuation of the insurgency would of course be an important factor in preventing Méndez and his successors from coming to grips with the country's basic problems. But these problems are not caused by the insurgency and would persist even if it collapsed. What if the insurgents were to achieve their purported interim objective—a military dictatorship that proved both oppressive and regressive? Such a regime would probably hold its own against the insurgents at least over the short term. Its tactics might speed a polarization of forces on the extremes of right and left, and increase the prospects for a successful revolutionary movement at some time in the future. We cannot know, at this point, what role, if any, the current insurgents and their sometime allies in the PGT would have in such a movement. Nor can they.

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