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President Jose Efraim Rios Montt and the Spiritual Rebirth of Guatemala

An Intelligence Assessment

APPROVED FOR RELEASE
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G/82-10276X
December 1982

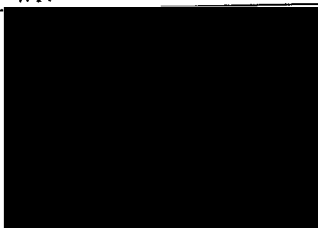
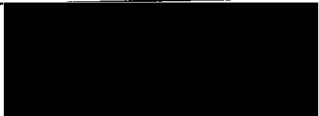
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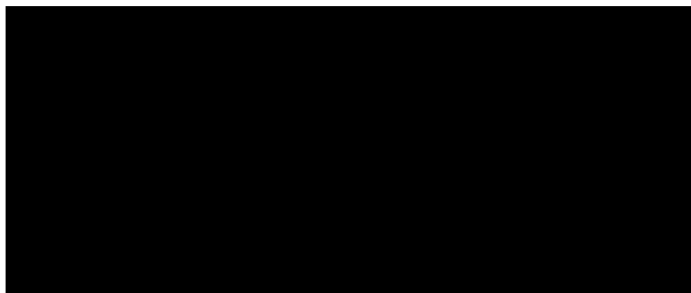


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President Jose Efraim Rios Montt and the Spiritual Rebirth of Guatemala [REDACTED]

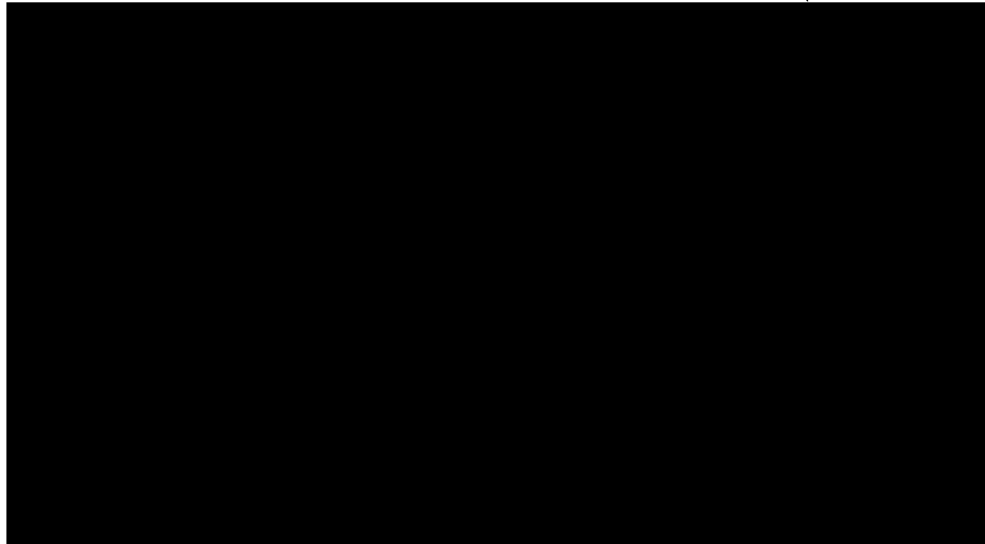
Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 26 November 1982
was used in this report.*

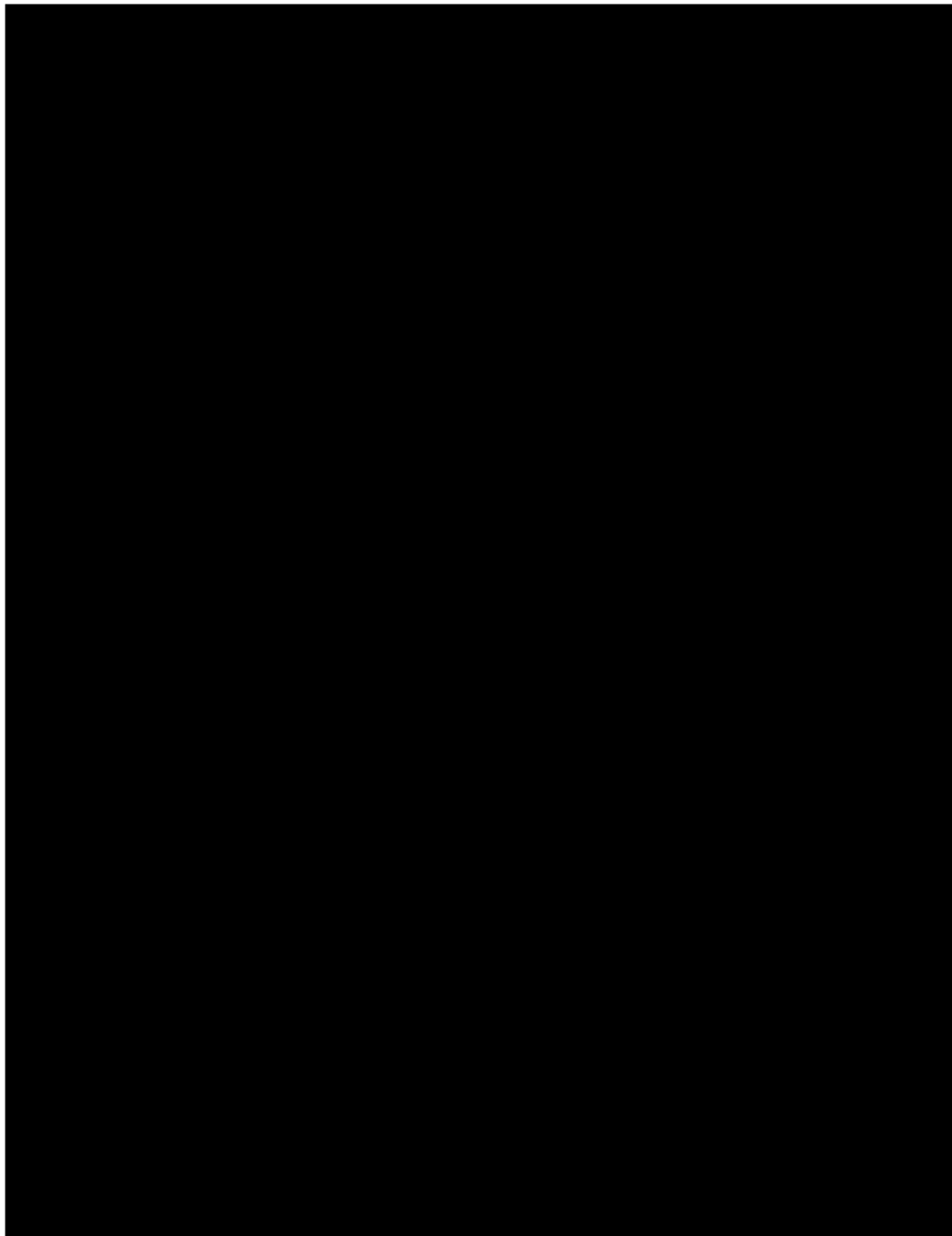
On becoming President of Guatemala on 9 June 1982, born-again Christian Gen. Jose Efraim Rios Montt proclaimed his determination to fight corruption and restore human rights. A minister of the Church of the Complete Word, Rios Montt believes that his life is guided by God and his mission for Guatemala has divine sanction. While his style has been compared with that of other Latin American dictators, Rios Montt's moral commitment and his appointment of church members to key government posts have added a unique dimension to his rule. [REDACTED]

In the face of pressures from Guatemala's failing economy, an escalating guerrilla war, and increasing opposition from the right, the strength of the President's religious convictions has given him the self-assurance, determination, and toughness to act decisively. In recent months, he has:

- Offered amnesty for repentant insurgents and declared all-out war—including public executions—on those who resist.
- Arrested or neutralized members of the rightwing opposition.
- Initiated civic programs to improve the economic conditions of the peasantry. [REDACTED]



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President Jose Efrain Rios Montt and the Spiritual Rebirth of Guatemala

Although supported by young military officers, the peasantry, and the moderate forces in his country, Guatemala's new President, Gen. Jose Efrain Rios Montt, faces grave economic problems and serious threats to his regime from potential rightist coups and from leftwing guerrilla forces.

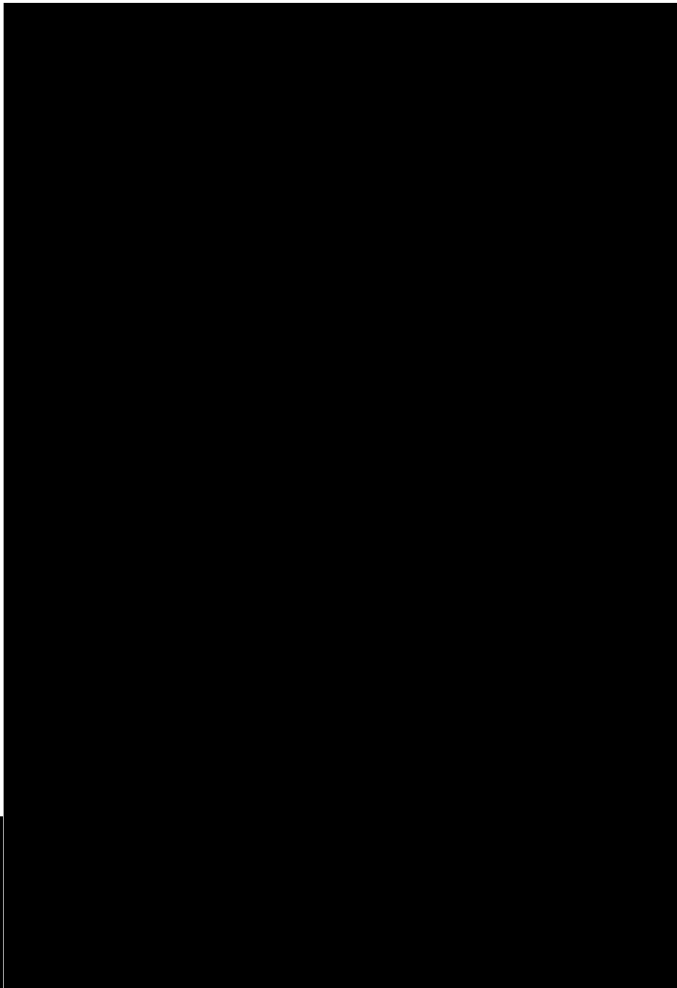
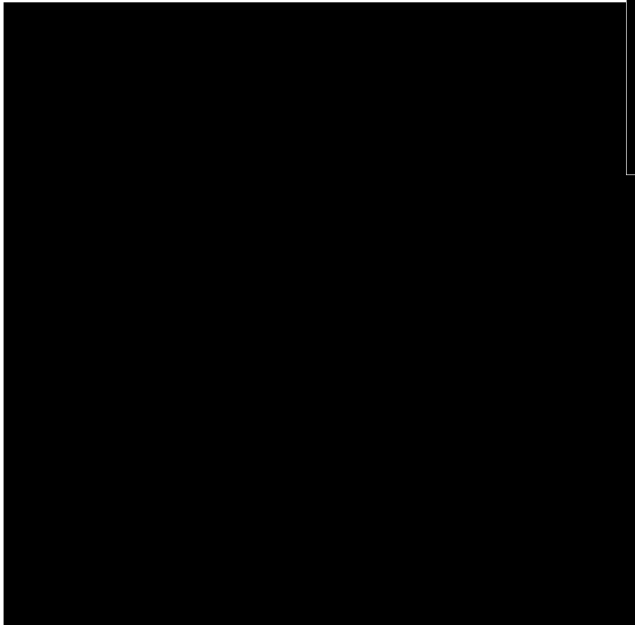
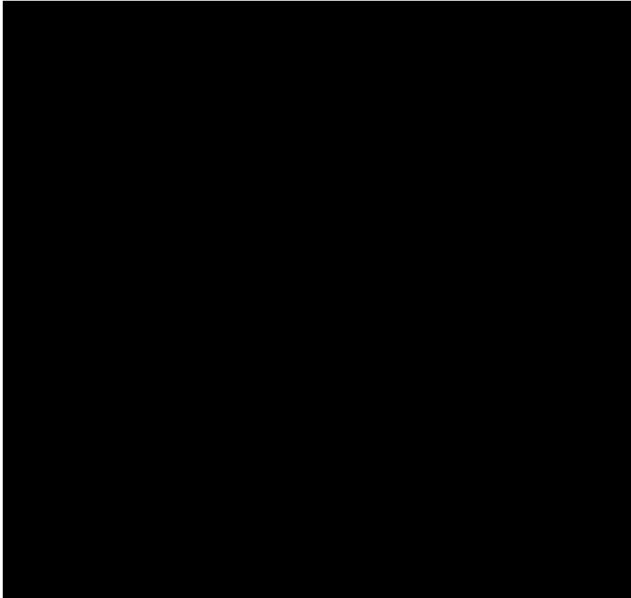
[REDACTED]


[REDACTED]

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the past two decades. Social conflicts aggravated by racism and long neglect of a poor Indian majority by a Ladino ruling class have resulted in religious movements whose goals are evangelizing and enlightening this population. Rios Montt has been one among many socially progressive Ladinos who have found inspiration for improving the social condition of Guatemala through conversion to charismatic Protestantism. American religious groups claim that 22 percent of the population have already joined various evangelical faiths after converting from Roman Catholicism, which they associated with perpetuating the status quo. 

Christian Ideology in Practice

Rios Montt's conversion from Catholicism to charismatic Protestantism is a reflection of broader social developments that have occurred in Guatemala over

Rios Montt is strongly influenced by the principles of his church in both his personal and political life. He has appointed two elders of his church to key government posts: Secretary of Public Relations, Francisco Bianchi, and Executive Secretary, Alvaro Contreras. Rios Montt refers to them as his "conscience" since their role is to ensure that his decisions are communicated and implemented with the proper Christian spirit. These men are regarded as the most powerful civilian members of the presidential entourage. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Rios Montt has proclaimed publicly that Guatemala can combat the evils of both Communism and capitalism by developing a spiritual direction based on Christian aspirations and values. He has attempted to steal the left's thunder by preaching against the corruption of the bourgeoisie and by promoting the welfare of the poor. However, he has stated in public broadcasts that he is opposed to the prospect of any influence by Marxist states such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and the Soviet Union. At the same time, although Rios Montt receives US church support and is friendly toward the US Government, he is wary of American influences. In these broadcasts he blames the

***The Church of the Complete Word:
A Political and Social Movement***

The Church of the Complete Word is an evangelical Protestant denomination whose members practice and believe in divine inspiration through the gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the New Testament, such as laying on of hands, speaking in tongues, and divine revelation. The California-based church became involved in relief efforts to Guatemala following devastating earthquakes in 1976.

The Church of the Complete Word has joined with many other Christian fundamentalist churches in establishing missions in rural Guatemala for the purpose of winning converts. Their success has been largely due to helping Guatemala's peasantry improve their social conditions by teaching them Spanish and marketable skills, effectively drawing them out of rural isolation toward a national identity.

[REDACTED]

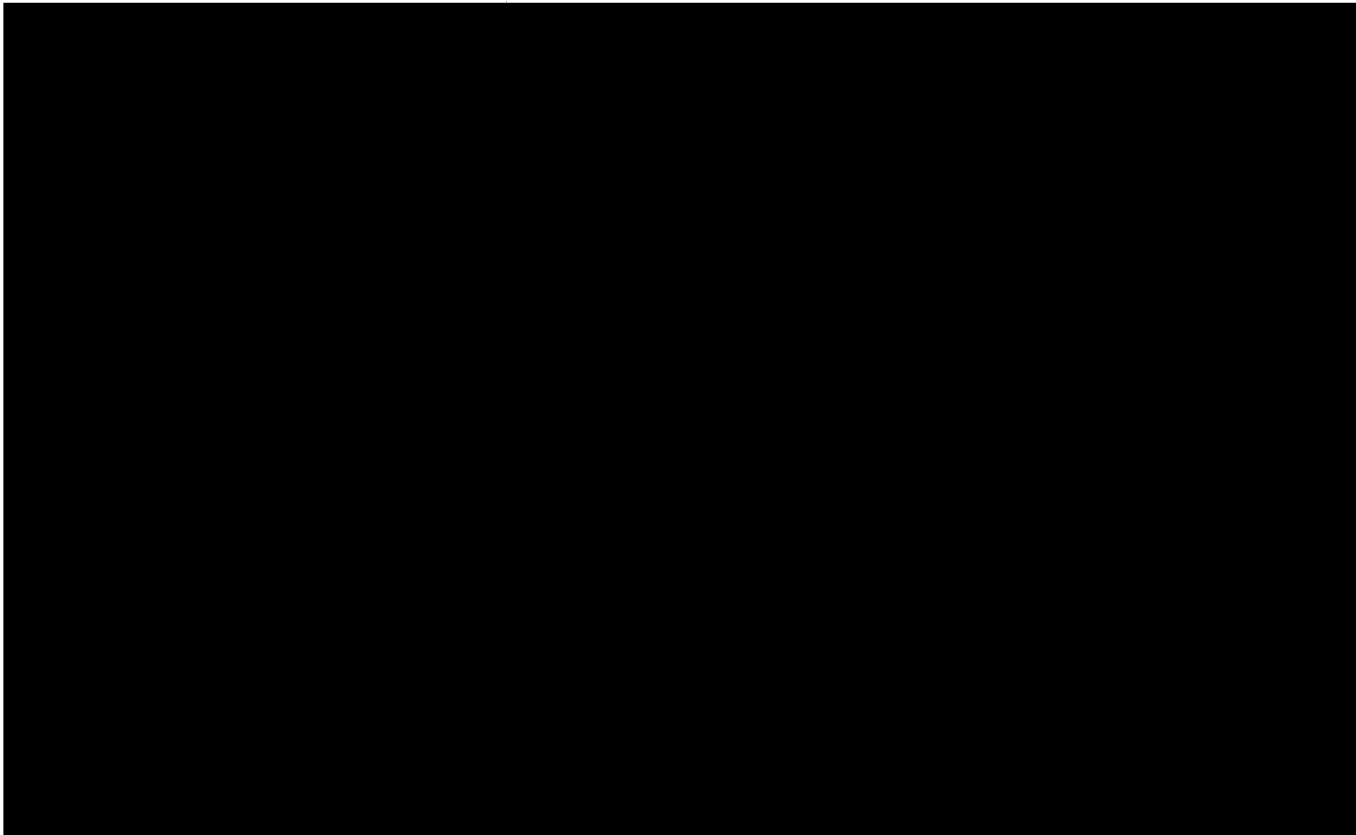
United States for using economic and interventionist tactics in the past that have retarded the development of Guatemala's peasantry. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

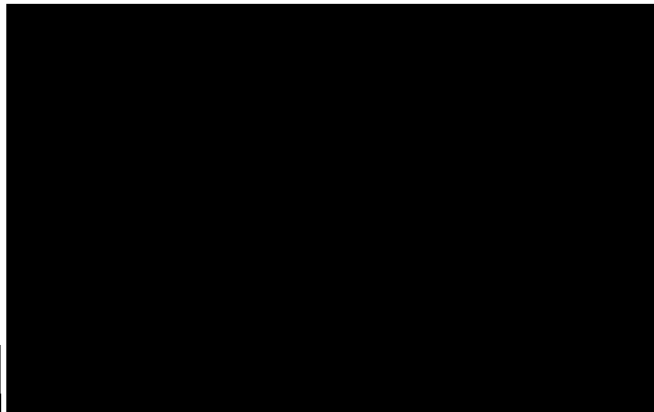
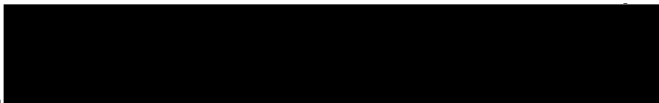
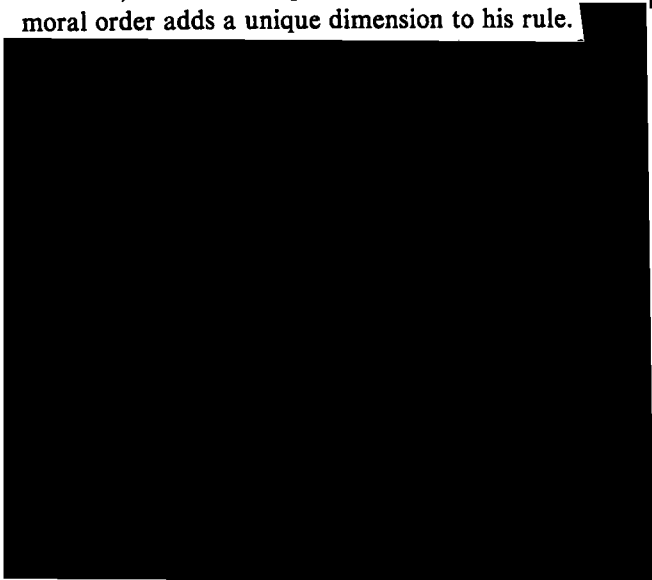
Leadership Style

In the Western world, the consumer society, a man is greater when he can squander more, and is much more a man when he has more lovers and mistresses. Our Indian is more of a man when he works more, when he can accomplish his task well, when he can accomplish two tasks well. In this manner we should learn to be men, Guatemalan men, not "Gringos" or Russians. The United States, Cuba, Russia, private enterprise, the Church, and the Communists ruined Nicaragua and will do the same with Guatemala. [REDACTED]

Rios Montt
Excerpt from "Sunday Sermonette"
of 18 July 1982



Ministering to His Country. While his tough style has been compared with that of other Latin American dictators, Rios Montt's personal need for Christian moral order adds a unique dimension to his rule.



Rios Montt has used his highly sanctioned moral guidelines to justify extreme measures. He has tightened his control of government by declaring a "state

of siege" and clamping down on political activity. His illegal detention of the controversial academic, Dr. Hurtado, brought charges of kidnaping from the left. (Rios Montt eventually ordered Hurtado released for lack of evidence.) Undaunted by accusations of human rights violations, Rios Montt also declared that former corrupt politicians would stand trial, a decision that brought charges of oppression from the right. [REDACTED]

The President continues to arrest real or alleged coup plotters from the right and has executed convicted terrorists from the left. Over the long term, however, Rios Montt apparently hopes that the moral nature of his rule will win the support of the rural population, deprive the guerrillas of support, and keep the rightists at bay. [REDACTED]

Implications for Political Behavior

Armed with the certainty of his faith, Rios Montt will not tolerate interference with his mission for his country. Encouraged by the young military officers who brought him to power and who consider the guerrilla war the greatest threat to their government and strengthened in his resolve by his religious conviction, we believe Rios Montt is capable of escalating his armed response as the situation warrants. [REDACTED]

In addition to the threat from the insurgency, Rios Montt has to contend with significant danger from his political right. [REDACTED] former junta partner, Colonel Gordillo, and other senior military officers are dismayed by the power acquired by the younger officers since the coup. The US press has reported that some senior officers have joined leaders from the National Liberation Movement and other rightist parties in plans to oust Rios Montt. We believe he will act as decisively and harshly against this threat as to the insurgency. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]



La AMNISTIA finaliza el 30 de Junio de 1982

Amnesty Notice: "Only Three Days Left"

The Christian dictator [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Despite the pressure and the criticism, Rios Montt is also receiving considerable public support. For a population that has been buffeted by political and economic chaos and brutalized by police and guerrillas, Rios Montt represents a vast improvement over the oppressive regimes that have preceded him and that would, in all likelihood, succeed him. [REDACTED]

Appendix

Chronology of Events

- 16 June 1926 Rios Montt is born in Huehuetenango Province, Guatemala.
- 1943 Enlists in the Army.
- 1950 Graduates from Guatemala Polytechnical School and serves as instructor.
- 1952 Marries Maria Teresa Sosa.
- 1954 Maria Teresa Sosa Rios is arrested and briefly imprisoned.
- 1954-73 Serves on faculty of Polytechnical School.
- 1973 Runs for President as Christian Democratic Party (DCG) candidate. Despite apparent victory at polls, is blocked from assuming office.
- 1974 Serves in forced exile as military attache in Madrid.
- 1978 Returns to Guatemala and converts to the Church of the Complete Word.
- 23 March 1982 Rios Montt is named head of the ruling three-man junta after coup ousts President Romero Lucas Garcia.
- 9 June 1982 Rios Montt dissolves junta and assumes presidency.



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