

Guatemala changes Presidents

cators, industrialists and government bureaucrats, creating a formidable civilian-military network of power. With this background it is understandable that the March 7 election was manipulated so that General Anibal Guevara would displace a coalition of right wing parties with the reformist Christian Democrats. But in the face of widespread knowledge of electoral fraud retired General Efraim Rios Montt was placed in charge of a three-man junta on March 23. His administration is as repressive as previous ones, although his selection by the army was intended to improve the poor international image of the Guatemalan military, for Rios Montt had been robbed by the military of his victory as the Christian Democratic presidential candidate in the 1974 elections. By the accession to power of a former Christian Democrat the junta hoped to inject a dimension of legitimacy to the regime similar to that provided by Duarte while he was president of El Salvador.

But under the new junta the campaign to tighten control over all undesirable political groups has escalated. Within one month of the bloodless coup, Congress was dissolved, the constitution was suspended and the activities of all political parties were prohibited by the new Fundamental Statute of Government. This law takes away the right of free assembly, the right to demonstrate and to organize strikes. Thus the battle lines are being drawn, promising to embroil everyone in a period of political violence.

Church as opposition

Curiously, the Roman Catholic Church is the only large Guatemalan group that has retained its autonomy and is in a position to resist the regime. It is not surprising that in many parts of the country the Church is being attacked. Some bishops have been threatened because of their involvement with the people. Catholic schools have been accused of supporting communist doctrine. School administrators have been frequently threatened. Disappearances and murders of the clergy were documented by US Congressman Robert Drinan, who headed a fact-finding mission to Guatemala in 1981. Repression of the Church has included the murder of a New Brunswick layworker Raul Leger, who was helping peasants to organize. The Church maintains that this anti-clerical program is directed by a single organism within the Government which they identify as the Army.

In all of the Central American republics the hierarchy of the Church is split along conservative/liberal lines, especially since Pope John Paul II's rejection of the "theology of liberation." So the Church quietly denounces the Guatemala regime for repression and for arresting and torturing priests and nuns accused of harboring political fugitives. But a middle-road strategy of quiet diplomacy will be hard to tread; the concern for the poor has radicalized the lower clergy as they have developed a strong stand for human rights and focused on the awesome poverty in the country. Since the terrible earthquake of 1976 the passion of the Guatemalan Church has been based on the plight of the country's poor. The bishops issued a pastoral letter which exposed the structural violence and injustice imposed on the people. This letter made visible the open resistance and defiance of the Church and rekindled the old anti-clericalism of the Guatemalan bourgeoisie and military. Relations between Church and the military junta

now mirror the relations between the people and government.

Repress the Press

The Guatemalan government also dislikes foreign journalists. Repression is so severe within Guatemala that journalists in the country learn about news through AP and UPI, the international news agencies. Guatemalan journalists often tell of repressive measures such as kidnappings, armed attacks and death threats. These are the common means used to suppress the press. Today the authorities keep a list at the international airport in Guatemala City of the correspondents considered undesirable. This includes virtually everyone who has filed stories critical of the government over the past decade.

Freedom of information doesn't really exist in Guatemala. All newspapers practice self-censorship in one form or another. The taboo topics are so well known by journalists that they never refer to them. Newspapers are targets of frequent attacks by the army or armed men employed by the army. *El Diario Grafico*, *El Nuevo Diario* and *El Independiente* have had their reporters and editors shot at and murdered for several years now. Common wisdom holds that any phone could be tapped, so no one talks politics over the line. Journalists pick their stories with the same caution as a veterinarian injecting a nervous porcupine. Everyone is a potential informer: the barber in one hotel turns out to be an oreja, a political spy; the university switchboard operator is busy jotting notes on calls to faculty.

But information trickles out and details the daily terror that Guatemalans must face. In February 1981, Amnesty International reported that a clearly-defined program of assassination, secret detention and summary execution was coordinated from a communications annex directly behind the National Palace.

Nervousness in Washington

To the Reagan administration Guatemala is the unthinkable revolution. The country has the largest domestic market and the most abundant resources in all of Central America. The US has substantial investments to protect in Guatemala, approaching \$500 million, its largest stake in the Central American region. Companies like Exxon, IT&T, Xerox, Gillette, Monsanto and IBM are but a few of the over 100 major US firms which have invested heavily in their subsidiaries and affiliates in Guatemala.

But the recent discovery of oil by Texaco in the northern corner of Guatemala — next to Mexico — has given a whole new meaning to the words "banana republic" in Washington. The reserves are impressive at 39,000,000 barrels and a daily production of 10,000 barrels. The Reagan administration cannot allow a hostile regime so close to the colossal oil fields of Chiapas, Mexico, for Guatemala and ultimately the whole region, including Venezuela, is considered part of the strategic preserve of the United States.

The policy of the Reagan administration towards the region as a whole is based on the fear of "domino communism." The Administration has concluded that growing insurgency in Guatemala is due to the subversive actions of Cuba, Nicaragua and El Salvador. As the revolutionary activities of these countries have increased, the United States has adopted a more protective attitude to