

Guatemala on the brink

by Jim Guy

Guatemala is often described by visitors as the most beautiful country in the world. About twice the size of Nova Scotia, its tropical climate has spawned a Garden of Eden, dotted with lush mountains, still lakes, rain forests and olympic skies. By the untutored tourist, nothing of violence is seen or heard. For the Guatemalan government, maintaining this silence earned close to \$120 million in 1981, making tourism the number three foreign exchange earner — behind coffee and cotton. Selling beaches and charm pays off in the midst of an eerie kind of normalcy. Club Med singles trot up a nearby mountain to grab a lecture on local mating habits. American bus tours speed towards scenic Chichicastenango, a major Indian market place. But the breath-taking scenery is at once distracting and deceptive. One of the most violent and coercive political systems in all of Central America has developed there since the country became independent in 1838. In fact a real sense of heaven-on-earth may have only been briefly experienced by the ancient Mayan civilization which once thrived in what is now Guatemala.

When the Spanish conquistadors came to convert the "heathens" and get rich quick they first fell on their knees to thank God; then they proceeded to fall on the Indians, enslave and oppress them. Things haven't changed much since. Today oppression comes from a military government that deals brutally with anyone who dares to criticize it or who calls for land reforms, employment or better nutrition.

At the present time close to 400 people in all age groups are murdered or disappear each month. This number is expected to climb dramatically as political repression heightens, making politics the major preventable cause of death in the country. Regime brutality against suspected leftists has taken grim proportions, promising to act out the Latin American prophecy that white terror kills more people in defending order than does red terror in overthrowing it.

Every Guatemalan who isn't in some way linked to the Government apparatus or to the armed forces, faces a Kafkaesque fate ("now you see them now you don't"). This process of government terrorism is directed against all Guatemalans who show the least bit of non-conformity

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with the political values of the regime in power. A vocal dissenter inadvertently accumulates points against himself. After some predetermined amount has been reached the government orders his execution. There is no due process, no warning, no second chance.

The previous government of President Romeo Lucas Garcia boasted that Guatemala is one of the few countries of the world where there are no political prisoners. Small wonder; the record shows that all opinionated opposition leaders in Guatemala who are known to the government have been eliminated or are in constant danger. There is very little likelihood that the new president General Efraim Rios Montt will change the old established ways. According to Amnesty International Guatemala has the worst record on human rights in Latin America. Since 1963 more than 42,000 people have been murdered for political reasons. And this may be only a prelude to what could become the goriest purge in the Western Hemisphere. In the words of Frank Ortis, former US Ambassador to Guatemala (1979-1980), "Guatemala is a bloodbath waiting to happen."

Causes of political turmoil

The question to be asked is why is Guatemala so politically turbulent? The answer is not that complex, but it must be considered from a number of different perspectives. In Guatemala, successive military regimes have presumed that material progress brings political contentment. Historical evidence seems to suggest otherwise. In the past the fruits of economic growth have been distributed unequally. The wealthiest fifth of Guatemalans receive over two-thirds of the income. At the bottom of the heap an estimated two-fifths of Guatemalans do not participate in the economy, having no income at all. Critics hold that what growth does take place in the economy is controlled by US multinationals and Guatemalan technocrats. But as modernization has crept into the country the masses have awakened, becoming organized, aware and angry. The problem with Guatemala is that the existing political institutions have not been able to handle these mass demands. In other societies well-organized political parties can channel, moderate and often calm demands in a constructive way. But Guatemalan political parties are weak, often little more than personal vehicles designed to get a caudillo into power.

The inequitable economic conditions that beset El Salvador, Honduras, Panama and Nicaragua (under