

GUATEMALA 1986:

The odds on Cerezo. By Tim Draimin

■ **The election will not bring an automatic transfer of real power to the president. There will be a handover of formal power. What are my chances of consolidating that power? Fifty-fifty. – Vinicio Cerezo, October 1985.**

■ Marco Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo, the dynamic Christian Democrat presidential candidate, had just won Guatemala's elections. A few days later the tortured and brutally disfigured body of 26-year-old law student, Beatriz Eugenia Barrios Marroquín, was discovered 40 kilometres outside Guatemala City. Ms. Barrios had just been accepted by the Canadian Embassy in Guatemala to come to Canada as a political refugee.

In many countries a politically-motivated abduction and murder would be major news. In Guatemala it is only another numbing statistic – a daily occurrence – in the record of Latin America's most repressive military dictatorship. Today, as the international media focus on Vinicio Cerezo's new government, observers wonder whether Guatemala can overcome its horrific past.

Why, after holding the presidency for 27 of the last 31 years, is the Guatemalan military now turning the office over to a civilian? More importantly, what real possibility does President Cerezo have of democratizing Guatemala? The answer lies in a series of factors: the background of military dictatorship, the economic crisis, the military's response to the continuing insurgency, and the impact of the political model evolving in neighbouring El Salvador. An assessment of these

factors should inform the foreign policy toward Guatemala of Western allies like Canada.

Thirty Years of Dictatorship

In the early 1950s the democratically-elected government of Jacobo Arbenz began to tackle the country's fundamental problem, land tenure. The proposed expropriation of unused land belonging to the United Fruit Company triggered alarm bells in Washington. In 1954 Arbenz's reformist government was overthrown by a CIA-engineered rebellion. This intervention abruptly truncated Guatemala's political and social development, plunging the country into three decades of practically uninterrupted military rule.

Military dictatorship, mismanagement and unbridled corruption left a sorry legacy. Today 5 per cent of the population enjoys 34 per cent of national income, while 70 per cent survives on \$300 or less per year.

Guatemala's poor, including nearly all the 4 million Indians, suffer the hemisphere's second-worst index of malnutrition, affecting 82 per cent of children; half of rural children die before the age of five; literacy stands at only 47 per cent, dropping to 20 per cent in the countryside.

Economic Crisis

Guatemala is undergoing its

worst economic crisis since the Depression: declining terms of trade, an onerous government deficit, and 45 per cent unemployment. The foreign debt of nearly \$3 billion, composed mostly of short-term loans, consumes approximately half of the export-generated foreign income. The once-stable national currency, the Quetzal (Q), at par with the US dollar until 1984, now trades at three to one. Inflation topped 50 per cent in 1985.

Guatemala's disastrous human rights record left the country without foreign aid. In 1985 the US Congress approved \$90 million in economic and military aid conditional upon the inauguration of an elected civilian president and an improvement in human rights.

Counterinsurgency Warfare

Until 1981/82 military corruption and antiquated counterinsurgency tactics – mostly massive killings and crude terror – were no match for a rapidly growing guerrilla movement gaining widespread rural support. However, the 1982 coup of Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt, signalled the predominance of younger officers espousing a coherent counterinsurgency strategy.

The younger officers were as prepared as their predecessors to employ state terrorism, but the role of terror now had a definite purpose: the dislocation of the highland Indians supporting the guerrillas. Before long, tens of thousands of indigenous people were killed, over 500,000 were internally displaced and 150,000 had fled to Mexico. "We have no policy of scorched earth," Gen.

Ríos Montt boasted. "We have a policy of scorched Communists."

As this process advanced the military reorganized and expanded its national command structure, defined regional "development poles" (areas of concentration for civic action projects which corresponded to the major areas of guerrilla conflict) and set up "model villages" (strategic hamlets) in the development poles for the Indians who had been forcefully displaced. Security and development were merged into a single coherent strategy.

However, Guatemala's sophisticated counterinsurgency programme is very expensive. President Carter's suspension of US military aid to Guatemala in 1977 forced the military to become self-sufficient. Guatemala now produces some of its own weapons, ammunition and armoured personnel carriers. But despite being able to purchase some military supplies from countries like Israel, there is a crippling shortage of spare parts for US-made helicopters and other advanced technology. In anticipation of renewed US military aid, the Army has already produced an extensive shopping list.

Civilian President Next Door

In El Salvador the presidency of Christian Democrat Jose Napoleon Duarte has brought the country unprecedented levels of military and economic aid from the United States and other countries. President Duarte has neither implemented significant land reform, nor put the conduct of the war under civilian control. Members of the security forces