GUATEMALA
Why They Like Ríos Montt
BY DAVID STOLL

"Horrendous," was the reaction from Americas Watch. "Lure of the Iron Fist," reported the Miami Herald. "The 900-pound gorilla of Guatemalan politics is back," headlined the Village Voice. Efraín Ríos Montt, the evangelical general who seized power in 1982 and moralized over the airwaves while his army massacred peasants, was running for president. Solidarity activists in the United States were appalled, and so were most of Guatemala's professional politicians. As the November 11 vote drew near, it was clear that the dreaded ex-dictator had become the most popular candidate, as much as twelve points ahead of his nearest rival.

If the retired general had not been knocked off the ballot by a constitutional ban against past coup participants, he probably would have been elected president. The constitutional court upheld the ban a month before the voting, to the relief of the political establishment but to the disappointment of many Guatemalans. As Ríos fumed on the sidelines telling supporters to deface their ballots, they swung instead to a dark-horse candidate, born-again businessman Jorge Serrano Elías. Bstered by the general's downfall, Serrano ran a close second and stands a good chance of winning the January 6 runoff.

The Second Coming

Why the survivors of Ríos Montt's regime would want him back a second time is a mystery to North Americans schooled on human rights reports. "We had huge fights all summer," reports a visitor to Quetzaltenango—fights with Guatemalan friends who didn't want to hear of the human rights case against his candidate.

Contrary to early assessments, Ríos Montt's electoral support was not limited to evangelicals, the middle and upper classes, or to Guatemala City. From the start, the campaign was loaded with contradictions. At headquarters in Nebaj—one of the areas hit hardest by Ríos Montt's scorched earth tactics eight years ago—I was surprised to find that, despite the general's well-known feelings about alcohol, his supporters showed up slightly inebriated. These were Catholic Ixil Indians. Never mind that their candidate was a Protestant general who was accused of persecuting the Catholic Church, and whose army had destroyed every rural settlement in their part of El Quiché department. These Ixils had found something to admire in Ríos Montt which has so far eluded his critics.

The men recalled how, a few months before he took power in March 1982, another general—army chief-of-staff Benedicto Lucas García—showed up in a helicopter. He threatened to exterminate the town if it did not stop collaborating with the guerrillas, who at that point seemed on the verge of taking over the western highlands. Because of his fundamentalist rhetoric, Ríos Montt ended up with a worse international reputation than Benedicto or the latter's brother, military president Romeo Lucas García (1978-1982). But for many Guatemalans, the born-again general was an improvement.

"A campesino seen was a campesino dead," Nebajeños say of the Lucas García brothers—in contrast to Ríos Montt, who they credit with saving their lives. "Lies, lies!" a Nebaj teacher shouted when I insisted that his beloved general had covered up massacres. "If it hadn't been for Ríos Montt, we all would have disappeared! Before, there were killers waiting on the corner; you couldn't even go out, because they would kill you. But Ríos Montt took away all that."

While foreigners focus on how the general continued the previous regime's anti-guerrilla offensive, survivors are more interested in the differences—from the unpredictable, chaotic terror of a floundering dictatorship to Ríos Montt's more predictable textbook campaign. Another Catholic campesino in Nebaj remembers Ríos Montt for his "ley de amistad" ("law of friendship"), actually the "ley de amnistía," or the amnesty Ríos Montt gave to refugees. The most obvious reason Nebajeños like the former general is that he offered them the chance to surrender without being killed.

There are two ways of looking at Ríos Montt: as reformer and as human rights violator, but separating the two is a mistake. In 1974, he was generally thought to have won the presidential election as the reform candidate for the Christian Democrats, only to be defrauded by rivals in the army high command. It was to protest another electoral fraud, at the height of the violence between the army and the guerrillas in 1982, that junior officers installed him in the national palace.

Unknown to the coup plotters, Ríos had become a born-again Christian, and in office he proved to be an outspoken one. Every Sunday over the airwaves, he railed against corruption in Guatemalan life. He suspended kidnappings by security forces in the capital, and in the countryside he replaced a few abusive commanders. But as he wagged his finger at adulterers and bribe-takers, he also denied the army massacres which continued under his administration, crimes eventually admitted to by his own evangelical advisors.

Apologetic argue that Ríos Montt's orders to respect lives were stymied by the same generals who overthrew him after 16 months in office. However, for victims of the stepped-up rural massacres that occurred early in his administration, Ríos Montt's vows to transform Guatemala's moral landscape were a cruel propaganda hoax. The Catholic Church and the Left denounced him as a fanatical tyrant who was plunging the country into a holy war. Internationally, he became known as the born-again butcher.

Since then, the Catholic hierarchy—including the general's own brother, the bishop of Zacapa—has continued to decry evangelical growth as a U.S. political strategy. Everything about Ríos Montt's government dramatized the loss of Catholic authority. His closest advisors were elders from the congregation he had joined, the California-based Church of the Word. The evangelist Luis Palau came to celebrate the Protestant centenary in Guatemala and, with Ríos beside him, proclaimed that the country could become the first "reformed" nation in Latin America.

Ríos cannot be credited with the evangelical boom, but his brief rule drew attention to evangelicals and defined them in new ways. What had seemed an acquiescent mass of the poor and the middle class, apolitical and otherwise, now appeared to have a hegemonic vision for Guatemala's future. Moreover, partially due to the repression against clergy and lay activists, Catholics increasingly began to describe themselves in pietistic terms borrowed from the Protestant movement.

These inroads made Guatemala the most evangelical country in Latin America. But as pietism conquers the population, Guatemala's public institutions continue to suffer a discrepancy between word and deed worthy of Stalinist Eastern Europe. Nothing works the way it is supposed to; nothing is what it seems. And the all-powerful Praetorian army continues to define the permissible for the civilian government elected in 1985.

Seen as Outsider

Many Guatemalans are less worried about the army than their dwindling ability to buy food and medicine, and a frightening rise in street violence. Their burdens have not been eased by the spectacle of the Christian Democrats. Outgoing President Vinicio Cerezo and his wing of the party leadership have not defended Guatemala's "democratic opening" from the assaults of the army and the extreme Right, nor have they protected the poor from the cost of economic stabilization policies. Instead, they are widely seen as having enriched themselves at the public's expense, confirming traditional Guatemalan wisdom that politicians seek office only to steal, and make campaign pledges only to break them. Cerezo's hand-

Textbook counterinsurgency: In Nebaj, survivors of army massacres remember Ríos for the amnesty he offered refugees
picked successor, Alfonso Cabrera, is rumored to have links to drug traffickers and won only 17% of the vote.

In short, many thank the Christian Democrats for making Ríos more popular than he was in 1982-1983. Partly due to army repression, political parties in Guatemala tend to function only as patronage rackets, unable to articulate popular demands. Here the former head of state has impeccable credentials. When he closed Congress in 1982, ruling by decree through a Council of State, he earned the undying enmity of Guatemala’s political establishment. That is why they see him as a wild card threatening to rupture the fragile agreements which returned the country to civilian rule. But for ordinary Guatemalans, Ríos Montt’s hostility to the parties makes him look like an outsider, an alternative to the politics of opportunism.

Flocking to his campaign were political novices and two small, discredited right-wing parties, but not the larger conservative parties or the country’s influential business lobbies, who regard him as unpredictable and dangerous. The campaign had a populist effervescence, organized around a charismatic figure with a simple message about law and authority: “Guatemala is not the police, the captain, the mayor, or the congressman,” he told a crowd in Nebaj. “Guatemala is you! The mayor may think he is the authority. The captain may think he is the authority. The policeman may think he is the authority. But authority is he who obeys the law! Even if he has a pistol or a machine gun, this is not authority!”

Human rights activists find it hard to believe that the army uniform which Ríos Montt wore in campaign pictures is, for many Guatemalans, an icon of credible authority. The hopes invested in the born-again general are older than the country’s Protestant churches; the figure he cut was instantly recogniz-
people disgusted with the day-to-day
toll of chronic corruption, he was the
moral crusader who promised to fire
teachers who don't show up for school,
prosecute civil servants who demand
bribes, and stop tortured bodies from
being dumped in the streets.

Evangelical religion is providing a
new language for talking about the
problem of authority in Guatemala. An
earlier book on the subject, "Evangelical
Religion in Guatemala," written by a
social scientist who has studied the
religion in the country, provides an insight
into the relationships between the Catholic
Church and the state. The book argues
that the Catholic Church has used its
influence to maintain the status quo, while
the evangelical movement has emerged as
a challenge to that authority.

In the 1980s, the evangelical movement
began to gain momentum, with the
establishment of a number of new
churches and the growth of existing ones.
These churches provided a new source of
power for the people, who were
becoming increasingly dissatisfied with
the traditional political system. The
movement was led by a number of
prominent leaders, including Jorge
Serrano, who became known as the "Pope of
the Poor.

Serrano's rise to power was
accompanied by a campaign of
defamation and false accusations.
Many of his opponents were
prosecuted for their political
declamations, and some were
sentenced to long prison terms.

In 1985, Serrano was
arrested and charged with
embezzlement. The trial was
characterized by a series of
legal disputes and the
removal of several judges.
Serrano was eventually
acquitted, but the case
remained controversial and
sparked widespread
protests.

Serrano's influence continued to grow,
and he became a key figure in the
evangelical movement. He
was succeeded by his
brother, Roque Serrano,
who continued to lead the
movement. The Serrano
family has remained a
powerful force in
Guatemala, with a number of
family members holding
important positions in
politics and government.

However, the movement has faced
controversy and criticism over the
years, with some accusing it of
being a工具 of the
right-wing factions, while others
have praised it for its
social and political impact.

The current political
climate in Guatemala
remains uncertain, with a
number of issues and
challenges facing the
country. However, the
vibrancy of the
evangelical movement
continues to provide
hope for a brighter future.

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A dual identity as sinner and saint...