GUATEMALA

Why They Like Ríos Montt

BY DAVID STOLL

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Former dictator Ríos Montt campaigns: Even after he was thrown off the ballot, the vote swung on his candidacy

"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. Bolstered by the general's downfall, Serrano ran a close second and stands a good chance of winning the January 6 runoff.

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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 their 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.

Apologists argue that Ríos Montt's orders to respect lives were stymied by the same colonels 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.

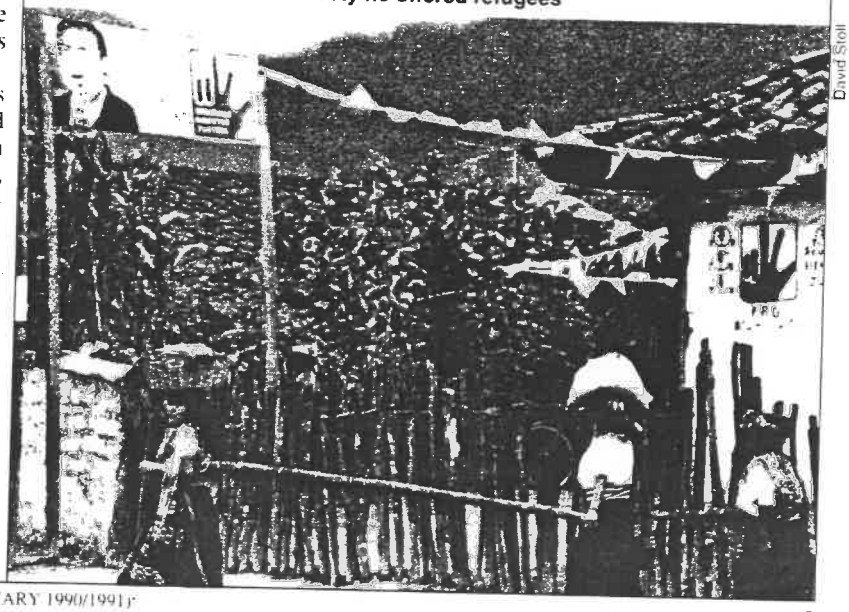
Ríos cannot be credited with the evangelical boom, but his brief rule drew attention to evangelicals and defined them in new ways. What had seemed an acquiescent mass of the poor and the middle class, apolitical and otherworldly, now appeared to have a hegemonic vision for Guatemala's future. Moreover, 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



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In a corrupt political system unable to articulate popular demands, many view Ríos Montt as a charismatic reformer

picked successor, Alfonso Cabrera, is rumored to have links to drug traffickers and won ony 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 recognizable as the old-fashioned caudillo, the man on horseback who saves the nation. In fact, the authoritarianism which foreigners hold against Ríos Montt appeals to many Guatemalans who, shaking their heads at the latest outrage, are willing to say: "We need a strongman to control us." Here is *un militar recto*, they say—a just military man—even as they fear and despise the army for all the killing it has done.

This is not exactly the lure of the iron fist. If it were, another retired general running for president—Benedicto Lucas García—would have attracted votes instead of ridicule. Ríos preached that Guatemalans can save themselves and their country through moral exertion. "You know why I like him?" a frustrated development organizer explained. "Because he used to get on television, point his finger at every Guatemalan, and say: 'The problem is you!' That's the only way this country is ever going to change." For

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. A social scientist tells the story of a preacher who, in his testimony to juvenile offenders, describes the murders and rapes he committed before becoming a Christian—for which, no small surprise, he has never been brought to justice. In this double identity as sinner and saint, common in evangelical testimony, there is an echo of the double identity of the Guatemalan state. De facto, the army is the country's most destructive institution, responsible for the murder of tens of thousands of citizens. De jure, it maintains peace and stability. And Ríos Montt, a general responsible for carnage, paradoxically became a symbol of national redemption. The uniform in his campaign picture held out the hope, however illusory, that he could overpower the most flagrant abusers of authority.

What was most interesting about the general's campaign was his attempt to translate the military values so abhorred by foreigners—obedience, discipline, devotion to authority—into a new culture of civic responsibility. In an interview with the *Village Voice*, not all of which is this reassuring, he said: "I don't propose an economic program, but rather an ethical and moral one. Our problem is disorder. We have to put order into our lives. We need law, order, and discipline. Not Fascism or Nazism, just order and discipline. Restoring order is not a question of administrative measures. It's a matter of setting a moral example. What's important is that the people understand that we know what the law is and that we will apply it. Democracy isn't letting people do whatever they want. Democracy means fulfilling your duties."

Ironically, this law-and-order candidate had to violate the constitution in order to run. While remaining unrepentant about his own human rights record, he complained that the courts ruling against him were violating his human rights, and threatened to appeal to the World Court at the Hague. When the courts enforced the constitutional ban against his candidacy, some supporters threatened to take the battle into the streets. But that would have alienated many evangelicals and other law-abiding supporters, and it did not materialize during what proved to be an orderly election.

There was also fear of the same kind of military "reform coup" which put the general in office the first time. But there has been no sign of such a move from the army's all-important base commanders. Despite some sympathy for Ríos, especially in the junior ranks, he has usually been at odds with the army's command structure since being sidelined by military president Gen. Carlos Arana Osorio in 1974.

Some of the people most uneasy about Ríos Montt's presidential bid were evangelical leaders. His preemptory ways offended them in 1982-1983; the military chain of command he envisioned from God through himself to the nation did not sit well with the mutual deference which characterizes independent church leaders.

Disenchanted Electorate

Instead of following Ríos Montt's advice to deface ballots, many of his supporters shifted to another candidate preaching moral reform—a civilian with a cleaner record. Enter Jorge Serrano Elías, an evangelical businessman who placed a distant third in the 1985 elections and has since stayed in the public eye through his role in semi-official meetings with guerrilla leaders. Although Serrano served as president of Ríos Montt's advisory council in 1982-1983, he is no surrogate for the general; the two have become bitter rivals. Serrano ran low in opinion polls until Ríos was thrown off the ballot, then he surged ahead of several other candidates to close the gap with frontrunning newspaper publisher Jorge Carpio, whose most obvious qualification is that he spent a fortune advertising himself. Each received about 25% of the vote.

The bloc of voters which turned from Ríos to Serrano has revived perennial talk of religious strife. Some Catholics continue to fear that evangelicals will join the army in another wave of persecution against them, as occurred in certain cases in the early 1980s. But many of the voters who switched from the born-again general to the born-again businessman are Catholics themselves. (Five years ago, many evangelicals voted for the Christian Democrats.) And Serrano himself is a conciliatory personality, a contrast to Ríos Montt's aura of fanaticism.

Neither Serrano nor Carpio are likely to have much to offer most Guatemalans. Both candidates for the January runoff claim to represent the "stabilizing Center" or "modernizing Right" (although Carpio's running mate hails from the far-right National Liberation Movement). Both talk about restoring faith in government, and they each offer the free market as the solution to poverty. Neither is likely to challenge the army, although as conservatives they would probably face fewer coup attempts than the Christian Democrats. Neither has a solid social base, nor much of a mandate; abstention was the most popular option during the November voting.

Solidarity activists and Guatemalan politicians are all breathing easier with the general out of the picture. But in the countryside, stories still circulate about Ríos Montt traveling around the country in disguise, meting out justice to corrupt officials, like a king in a medieval folk tale. §

A dual identity as sinner and saint

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