

CONTEMPORARY GUATEMALAN POLITICS

I. Basic Political Institutions

II. From Optimism to Frustration (1996-present)

III. Should indigenous Guatemalans back indigenously framed political parties?

I. Basic Political Institutions

EXECUTIVE

- 4-year term w/ no possibility of immediate re-election
- ballottage election
 - 1st round: need a majority to win
 - 2nd round: runoff between top 2 vote-getters
- powers
 - strong veto (2/3 majority to override)
 - but president can call a referendum to overturn most types of legislation
 - can name & remove all ministers w/o approval
 - Congress can remove w/ a 2/3 vote
 - exclusive introduction of annual budget bill

LEGISLATURE

- unicameral Congress
 - 4-year terms concurrent w/ PRES
 - 158 seats w/ election via closed-list proportional representation
 - 29 in a nationwide constituency
 - 129 in smaller multimember districts
- the party system remains in flux
 - 1985 & 1990: the DCG dominated & has since faded from the scene
 - 1995 & 1999: the PAN & the FRG were dominant
 - 2003 & 2007: GANA & UNE collectively won 42% & then 53% in '07
 - the PAN & the FRG won only 38% of the seats in 2003
 - they won just 12% in the Sept. 2007 legislative elections

JUDICIARY

- Supreme Court of Justice works in separate chambers in accord with area of law at issue
 - 13 justices appointed by a complicated process to 5-year terms if approved by 2/3 of a panel of university officials, lawyers, & judges
 - majority vote in LEG needed for confirmation
- Court of Constitutionality
 - 5-member court exercises judicial review
 - members serve 5-year terms
 - each member is named by a different body
 - presidency, Congress, the Supreme Court, the bar association, and the board of the Univ. of San Carlos

II. From Optimism to Frustration (1996-present)

● A. Álvaro Arzú (1996-2000)

- inherited socioeconomic commitments of the Peace Accords (including raising taxes to 12% of GDP)
- privatized the national airline, postal service, railroads, telephones, & old-age pensions
- backtracked on initial property tax reforms
 - raised taxes from 8% of GDP to just under 10%
- moved slowly on civilian control of security forces & reacted coldly to the CEH report
 - the Mack & Gerardi murder cases stalled out

● B. Alfonso Portillo (2000-2004)

- elected as the surrogate candidate for Ríos Montt (who served as the leader of Congress during the Portillo government)
- raised the VAT rate from 10% to 12%
 - this got tax revenues above 11% of GDP for the first time, but didn't get it to the target of 12%
 - Portillo (like Arzú) shifted the deadline forward
- in downsizing the military, transferred many to the national police force
- the last year of this presidency ended under a cloud of controversy & corruption allegations
 - he fled the country shortly after leaving office & faces a series of charges & investigations

● C. Oscar Berger (2004-2008)

- mayor of Guatemala (1991-99) left the PAN to form his own party (GANA)
- this wealthy businessman came through on his promised defense of free enterprise
 - negotiated CAFTA accord w/ the U.S.
 - helped lobby for its ratification in the U.S.
- also promised (albeit less vigorously than in his 1999 campaign) to improve conditions for the poor
 - created 4 roundtables in 2006 to create a National Accord for poverty reduction
- in Jan. 2004 he appointed Rigoberta Menchú as his special representative for indigenous issues
 - 2 of his 29 cabinet-level appointments were indigenous (the Min. of Peace and Min. of Culture & Sports)
- tax revenues stagnated during most of Berger's term, but inched up to 12.3% in 2007
- Berger's approval rating fell to 25% in July 2006 amid rising violent crime & socioeconomic turmoil

II. (cont.)

● D. Álvaro Colom (2008-2012)

- textile magnate made name for himself as head of the rural development program FONAPAZ during the Peace Accord negotiation process (1991-1997)
- he ran unsuccessful presidential campaigns (in 1999 & 2003) as the centrist figure in center-left coalitions
- in 2007 he won a hard-fought runoff election (52.5% v. 47.5%) against law-and-order candidate retired general Otto Pérez Molina
- similar to Lula in Brazil, Colom launched the My Family Progresses (*Mi Familia Progresá*) program providing food & income stipends (of 20 to 40 dollars per month) to 36,000 poor families that keep their children in school (similar to Bolsa Familia in Brazil)
 - by late 2011, it had expanded to over 870,000 families (roughly 4/5 of all poor Guatemalans)
 - opponents criticized Sandra Torres' (Colom's wife) leadership of the program & attacked the program in the courts
 - Colom has called for tax reform to fund the program to provide funds for implementation & oversight

● E. Otto Pérez Molina (2012-present)

- brigadier general held leadership posts in intelligence & led coups against excesses of Ríos Montt & Serrano; retired from military in 2000
- formed Patriotic Party in 2001 and backed Berger's GANA coalition in 2003 presidential race
- in 2007 he lost a hard-fought runoff election (52.5% v. 47.5%) against Álvaro Colom
- in 2011, he won a runoff against young (41-year-old) surge candidate Manuel Baldizón
 - both candidates made bold claims about ability to reduce crime
 - Colom's movement named no presidential candidate once Sandra Torres' candidacy was ruled illegal (even after they divorced each other to try to enable her to run)
- In his first full day in office, Pérez Molina ordered the military to join the drug war (similar to Calderón in Mexico)
 - In mid-Feb. 2012 he proposed that Central America consider decriminalizing drug-trafficking

III. Indigenous Political Parties

● A. BACKGROUND

- Prior to 1944, indigenous peoples were excluded politically & economically
- The Decade of Spring granted political & economic rights, but glorified the figure of the national, “modern” peasant
 - (similar to the stance of the PRI in Mexico & the MNR in Bolivia)
- The Castillo Armas government reversed land reform
- Half a century later, indigenous peoples remain:
 - roughly 50% of the national population
 - economically disadvantaged
 - average life expectancy trails *ladinos*’ by 11 years
 - politically underrepresented
 - socially discriminated against

III.B. Indigenous Political Movements

- Except for the “Decade of Spring,” indigenous peoples were largely excluded from elections prior to 1985
- Rigoberto Quemé elected as mayor of Quetzaltenango in 1995 & 1999
 - in 1999, domestic & int’l protests blocked an effort to annul his electoral victory
- In early 2003, Quemé declared his presidential candidacy but he withdrew in late summer
 - he faced acts of intimidation, formal corruption allegations, & a lack of funds
- In early 2007, Rigoberta Menchú declared her presidential candidacy
 - she ran in a new coalition based on the union of the Encuentro por Guatemala & the Winaq parties
 - like Quemé, she also faced a lack of funds & acts of intimidation
 - she finished 7th w/ 3% of the vote
 - the EG got 3% of the LEG seats w/ 6% of the national vote
- In the 2011 elections,
 - Menchú ran in a new Broad Front (FA) coalition with the Winaq, UNRG, & the Alternative for New Nation parties
 - she finished 6th w/ 3% of the vote
 - the FA got 2% of the LEG seats w/ 3% of the national vote

III.C. The Big Question

- **To realize indigenous peoples’ goals,**
 - **Should they support indigenous parties?**
 - **Should they work w/ major cross-ethnic parties?**