

1-16-2003

Guatemala: Administration Under Fire

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Guatemala: Administration Under Fire." (2003). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9045>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Guatemala: Administration Under Fire

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Guatemala

Published: 2003-01-16

At the conclusion of its third year, the government of Guatemalan President Alfonso Portillo faces severe criticism of its record. Corruption and security are the main themes.

Opposition parties, the private sector, the press, and the human rights establishment are in agreement that this administration and its ruling party have been, according to one newspaper, "one of the most corrupt in the history of this Central American country." From the Camera de Comercio de Guatemala, president Jorge Briz said, "Now we have more insecurity, more unemployment, and more corruption."

Leader of the opposition Partido de Avanzada Nacional (PAN), Alfredo Cojti, singled out the impunity that now reigns in the country and the setback in social and economic development, while union leader Jose Pinzon said that during 2002 transparency in public spending had declined dramatically. Human rights activist Helen Mack said that the Portillo government had reneged on its promise to guarantee security to the population, since during the past year threats against defenders of human rights had increased.

Presidential spokesman Byron Barrera argued that it is difficult to fulfill promises in four years of government, and he charged that there are sectors, which he didn't identify, that are seeking to debilitate the state. Barrera pointed to some bright spots in the government financial and fiscal reforms, and macroeconomic stability and complained that these hostile sectors only see the negative, like corruption and insecurity. Responding directly to the criticism, he said that the government does not deny the corruption that even the US has criticized and the government would soon be announcing measures to counter the problem.

Barrera was on solid ground in his defense of macroeconomic stability, said Maria del Carmen Acena of the Centro de Investigaciones Economicas Nacionales (CIEN), but even that success is mitigated by the failure of the administration to field a foreign policy that increased exports. The level of insecurity is impressive.

Since 2001, for instance, 134 judges have been threatened with death, according to Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) president Carlos Larios. Larios revealed the statistic while informing the press of an attack on Judge Jackeline Espana. She had been shot at, but the attackers missed. Attackers did not miss, however, just two days after Larios's denunciation, when they gunned down magistrate Hector Mauricio Rodriguez Artueta. The murdered magistrate of the Sala Segunda de lo Contencioso Administrativo was not among those previously threatened, said a member of his family, nor did his court hear the kinds of cases usually associated with the intimidation of judges. For this reason, Larios interpreted the assassination as an assault on the judiciary as a whole.

Portillo's government has been, from the outset, unable or unwilling to deal with the mushrooming disorder. Mario Polanco of the human rights organization Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM) saw the problem coming from the very outset of the administration. He said the FRG came to power with neither plan nor policy for guaranteeing security, leaving the door open for organized crime to "control through state structures."

Helen Mack seconds this evaluation. She anticipates that the international community will increasingly turn its back on Guatemala because "the state itself has become a criminal, protected by government institutions." Some of those institutions have chalked up a remarkable record of instability. The Ministry of the Interior has passed through the hands of four ministers in the regime's three years. The baton passed from one to the next as a massive prison escape, a multimillion-dollar embezzlement, and the disappearance of tons of cocaine dissolved in ridicule the tenure of each but the last.

The present minister, Adolfo Reyes, with six months longevity, has already ridden out a prison riot that left 14 dead. There are calls in the Congress for his removal. The Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) has had eight directors during the same period (See NotiCen, 2002-09-26), as had the now-disbanded Departamento de Operaciones Antinarcocticos, (DOAN). The Direccion de Migracion has had six directors. Adolfo Reyes has gone before the Congress to declare that the ruling FRG lacks a security plan.

Former Vice Minister of the Interior Mario Merida has charged elsewhere that the FRG lacks qualified people to deal with the security of the population, and that the PNC, in failing to professionalize the force, has corrupted itself. A recent poll taken by Prensa Libre, the leading daily, indicates that all the foregoing has not gone unnoticed in the general population. Security and corruption, along with unemployment, are the leading concerns of the citizenry.

Ninety percent of those polled thought that there was corruption within the government and that the government is dishonest in managing the funds that it collects in taxes and receives from international donors. The paper cited a US\$10.4 million diversion of funds in the Ministry of the Interior, a US\$20 million fraud in the Ministry of Communications, and other millions lost in a banking scandal involving a close friend of President Portillo, Francisco Alvarado McDonald (See NotiCen, 2002-06-20). Respondents to the poll also showed sensitivity to drug issues. Reflecting recent complaints from the US embassy, 67% said that in their communities there were people who had grown rich in the drug trade and that these people were involved in the transport of drugs to the US.

On other fronts, 83% of those polled disapproved of a budget increase that Portillo gave the military. The poll appeared in the country's largest daily on Jan. 13, two days before Portillo's scheduled address to the nation. It had been completed on Jan. 5. In a departure from the usual format, the poll results were scheduled to run in three parts, including the day of the president's speech. The timing led some observers to conclude that the media are part of one of those unspecified sectors, the private sector, that Barrera accused of trying to debilitate the state. The government and the private sector have been at odds during much of the present administration, reaching the lowest ebb at the moment when Central America is negotiating a free trade agreement with the US.

During negotiations with the US, the private sector desperately needs to avoid ostracism that would be bad for business. But even with the press against him, Portillo has a poor record to defend. The poll, pushed though it may be, indicates a tide of disapproval that could translate into a defeat for Portillo's party in the elections scheduled for the end of this year. PAC to the rescue The support that Portillo couldn't earn with performance, he may be able to buy with cash.

Thousands of ex-members of the Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil (PAC) were bussed, trucked, and otherwise transported to the capital to show unstinting support for their president on the occasion of his third annual report to the Congress. The multitude was motivated by a promise from their leader, Rosenda Perez, that the government would give them a down payment of 5,000 quetzales (about US\$650) on its commitment to pay them 20,000 quetzales each (see NotiCen, 2002-08-22). "They told me," said one former patrullero, "that in the capital they will give us part of what we demanded, and the rest in the next few months." Perez denied making any such promise, or that she had planned any such demonstration outside the Congress.

But Romulo Caal, FRG deputy from the Peten, said that Perez intended to levy a fine of 300 quetzales on any patrullero who did not show up. Perez denied this as well, but she was reported to have had a meeting with Portillo on Dec. 27, at a military base in the Peten, where the payments were discussed. The demonstration was planned not only to support Portillo, the patrulleros' benefactor, but also to counter the initiative against the president mounted by the private sector. This was payback for the private sector's campaign against the placement of some US\$750 million in government bonds (see NotiCen, 2002-09-26) on the European market, and the subsequent boycott of the bonds by the business community when they went on sale within Guatemala. It was from the proceeds of this bond offering that the money to pay off the PAC was to come.

The FRG is also counting on the patrulleros to pull next year's presidential election out of the fire. The party's executive committee met on Jan. 13 to plan the candidacy of Efraim Rios Montt, party leader and current president of the Congress. This PAC constituency is key to the FRG's hopes for victory against a pro-business candidate of another party, as well as to its hope of legalizing Rios Montt's running for the office. Having previously assumed the presidency after a military coup, the former general has been found by the CSJ to be constitutionally ineligible to run in past elections. On the day of Portillo's speech, ex-PAC members did show up in their thousands.

But the FRG may have miscalculated. Rather than extol the party and its presumptive candidate Rios Montt, Rosenda Perez told the press, "Our working plan is to paralyze the elections, because we are noticing that the political parties do not support compliance with the peace accords." This is in apparent reference to the money.

-- End --