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Guatemala Suffering Effects Of US-led Coup

by LADB Staff

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Forty-nine years after the fact, Guatemala is still suffering the effects of the overthrow of its government in a coup engineered by the US. This is the view of Piero Gleijeses, historian and author of an important book on the period, *Shattered Hope*.

Speaking on the occasion of the release, on May 16, of some 12,285 previously classified documents on the overthrow, Gleijeses said, "The United States intervened in Guatemala without any emotion, with neither the intention of saving nor damaging the Guatemalans. It was to guarantee their interests, just as the Soviet Union did two years later in Hungary. The only difference is that today Hungary is free and Guatemala is [still] suffering the consequences." Gleijeses was a featured participant at a US State Department conference on the subject, attended by a number of scholars, government officials, and witnesses to the coup. His views and comments generally reflected those of the other participants.

One of the most tangible consequences of the US action, according to historian Oscar Pelaez, is the lack of institutionalization of Guatemala's political parties. Pelaez, a professor at the Universidad de San Carlos (USAC) in Guatemala, describes the country as an "unstable democracy." He traced the history of these baseless parties from the Movimiento de Liberacion Nacional (MLN) that was formed around coup leader Carlos Castillo Armas, through the Movimiento Accion Solidaridad (MAS), formed around exiled President Jorge Serrano, famed for his failed Fujimori-style auto-coup (see *NotiCen*, 1997-08-28), to the Union Centrista Nacional (UCN), crystallized around Jorge Carpio, who died in a bullet storm after losing a presidential election in 1991 (see *NotiSur*, 1994-11-18). "The parties in Guatemala have no social base, ideology, nor institutionalization," said Pelaez. "They are used as a platform. In the Grupo Consultivo, instead of seeing strong, representative parties, we hear from civil organizations and employers associations presenting their national vision." This is a deficiency in the system that has vested real power in the business sector and the army, and, to some extent, even the university, rather than in defined political space, according to Pelaez's analysis.

Coup also had economic consequences

The consequences of the destruction of the presidency of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 were not solely political, but were economic as well. Said Guatemalan economist Isaac Cohen, "Arbenz wanted to turn the feudal Guatemalan society into a capitalist one. Even the communists agreed with this, since it was a part of the dialectic. To do this, he proposed the elimination of monopolies, promotion of labor and campesino organizations, and an agrarian reform." By "part of the dialectic," Pelaez was referring to the fact that orthodox Marxism sees the historical movement to communism as an evolutionary process that requires a period of capitalism.

Once having gotten rid of Arbenz, the US government and the puppet Carlos Castillo Armas it spawned in Guatemala went through those same motions, recalled Cohen, but they failed on all counts. When the United Fruit Company was declared a monopoly in a Boston court and an anti-monopoly law was used against it in Guatemala, the company abandoned the country.

Next, the US sent advisors to organize worker unions, but failed. Lastly, the Castillo Armas government tried its hand at an alternative to agrarian reform by creating the Instituto Nacional de Transformacion Agraria, which was to distribute idle land, but that agency only gave land to corrupt military officers. The post-coup government did little more than politicize the military. David Jickling, a retired official of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), said, "Politics was militarized. Guatemala took the Cold War very seriously, and was polarized. Moderate leaders, reformers who wanted a peaceful alternative for a modern state, were assassinated." The effect of the loss of those leaders, and the whole generation of leaders who were to be killed in succeeding years, is incalculable, and the militarized political sphere and the failure to resolve land issues continue to plague the country.

Congress ordered accurate history

The documents chronicling that early US experiment with regime change came, belatedly, in response to criticisms leveled at the 1983 US government publication of a first tome on US foreign policy in Latin America that made no mention of the overthrow of the Arbenz government. Responding to criticisms, Congress passed a bill in 1991 ordering the publication of this complementary volume, and it has taken all these years to bring it to light. Until now, the coup was not an official part of US history. In 1990, the CIA officially recognized 11 secret operations undertaken during the Cold War, including this one. Included in "Guatemala 1952-1954" are extensive archives covering Pbfortune, a 1951 contingency plan to overthrow Arbenz; Pbsuccess, the plan that was finally implemented; and Pbhstory, the plan to procure and analyze records of the Arbenz government, said a State Department communication to the press.

The presentation of the new volume coincided with a two- day (May 15-16) conference at the State Department entitled New Perspectives of The United States, Guatemala, and Latin America in the Coup of 1954. One of the ironies of this coup and the long-playing disaster for Guatemala that followed it, and continues to follow it, is that, although it was inspired in large part by US terror of the communist menace, Jacobo Arbenz was, according to historians including Gleijeses, probably not a communist. Nor was he, in the popular phrase of the time, a "dupe of the Communist Party." He favored the Guatemalan Communist Party largely because it was the only trustworthy political organization available to him. The party was well known for its scrupulous honesty.

Further, the Guatemalan Communist Party was only nominally communist. Despite its many attempts to affiliate with the Soviet Union, the Stalinists were supremely disinterested in it, and there never was any relationship formed, a fact established by documentation both in Guatemala and the Soviet Union. This might account for Pelaez's observation that the Guatemalan communists approved of Arbenz's capitalist leanings. Russia had never had a capitalist period and is only now laboring through one.

With the installation of Castillo Armas, the US ushered into Guatemala a period of military rule that was to endure for 30 years. That in itself was not so egregious. Arbenz was a military man, and the first government of the revolution of 1944, the Juan Jose Arevalo government, was staffed by several such military reformers. What is more salient is that the US handed over the country to the most right-wing faction of the army, one that was to crush hundreds of thousands of its own citizens beneath its heel in the years to come. But it did not stop there.

Document 131 of the newly declassified material provides evidence that the US ambassador at the time, John Peurifoy, participated in marking specific leftist leaders for assassination. Frank La Rue, human rights activist and leader of the Centro de Accion Legal en Derechos Humanos (CALDH), sees the governments of the revolution of 1944 as a "nationalist, reformist, pause" that ended with the 1954 coup. "There," he said, "the army regressed to the role for which it was created in 1871: defend economic interests in this case, of the United States." By the 1970s, "The conservative military was established, and, in the seventies, the military reached its maximum expression, succeeding in having a state that marched totally to its drumbeat," said Pelaez.

In the 1980s, during the worst of the armed conflict, the military directed its action against the civilian population rather than against the military enemy, an enemy composed of military men from among the reformers who had risen against them in the sixties, touching off a war that was to smolder for 36 years. It wasn't until 1985 that Guatemala returned to civilian rule, but it was civilian in name only. The military allowed the change at the insistence of the US, agreed the historians at the State Department convocation. "The Guatemalan government became a controlled democracy. And this did not change with the [1996] peace accords, because the military considered itself the winner at arms and loser at the negotiation," said La Rue.

Participants apologize for US actions

After two days of presentations of data and evidence at the State Department conference, one newspaper reported an atmosphere of "wishing they could change history." Gleijeses lamented that the coup wasn't even debated in the US. The evidence showed that much of the initiative for it came from Peurifoy. "It was never questioned if in truth there was a danger for North American national security; it never was considered if the USSR really had contacts; an alternative was never sought," said Gleijeses. There never was a threat. The moment, there in the State Department, was palpably sad, paradoxical.

Some participants were in tears at the end of the reading and retelling of this episode in the history of regime change. Breaking with protocol, Andrew Schlewitz, political scientist from Wabash College, said in Spanish, "To Guatemalans, I confess that these conferences have renewed my sadness for the actions of my government in your country. I'm very sorry. But I have the hope that, some day, there will be a great change in our relationship with the countries of the South."

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