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Guatemala: Barely Measurable Democratic Development

by LADB Staff

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Guatemala has earned the lowest marks for democratic development of any of the 18 nations in the hemisphere included in the study. A report, the Informe de Desarrollo Democratico by the Argentine nongovernmental organization (NGO) Polilat, sponsored by the Fundacion Konrad Adenauer, found that, on a scale of one to 10, Guatemala scored 1.6. This compares with Chile, which got a perfect 10 plus.

The scoring to arrive at a democratic-development index is based on evaluation of 31 indicators, among which are spending on education, gender equity, capacity to solve political crises, civil liberties, and the economic situation. Guatemala took sole possession of last place thanks to a particularly poor showing on these indicators and its high indebtedness, low level of investment, poor participation of political parties in the Congress, and the worst possible accounting procedures. Other contributing factors were the discovery of the network of corruption on the part of the previous governing party, the Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG). The governing Gran Alianza Nacional (GAN) contributed by fracturing soon after bringing President Oscar Berger to office, leaving its ability to govern in doubt.

Political analyst Manfredo Marroquin, director of Accion Ciudadana, noted that this is not the first time his country has earned a distinction of this kind. He pointed out that this latest report confirms others and that it all adds up to "a very troubling tendency toward deterioration." "But more troubling," Marroquin said, "is the indifference of the national leadership toward the tendency we have. If these indices are not quickly taken seriously, Guatemala will be a country with serious problems of governability, entering into the category of failed states." Marroquin identified a culture of individualism, where leaders in political, social, and business contexts use their positions for personal or sectoral gain and where no sector is motivated to sacrifice for anything like the good of the whole. "Everyone thinks that benefit is achieved through someone else's loss; we keep functioning with this logic. On this road, we will end up a self-isolated country that will not get foreign investment. Already there is no lack of sanctions, decertifications, and condemnations with which the country has been punished in the past."

Raquel Zelaya, director of the Asociacion de Investigacion y Estudios Sociales (ASIES), seemed to underplay the findings. "You have to look as well at the advances the country has had. Before, we had a Relator de Derechos Humanos, and now we don't. We weren't even on the map of foreign investment. Some indicators in the Informe de Desarrollo Democratico could be confusing. It speaks of a lack of civil liberties in a country where everyone abuses them to the point of putting governability at risk."

The report did appear to have looked at Guatemala's advances but found them wanting. In 2002, the country scored 3.99, in 2003, 2.93, and in 2004, 3.88. In other words, the country fared better by Polilat's criteria during the now scorned years of FRG rule than under the GANA. These numbers

give some weight to the contentions of Aristides Crespo, FRG party leader in the Congress, who blamed the media for widespread misconceptions. "Nobody tells the truth, which is that there is a tremendous regression in unemployment, poverty, hunger, misery, insecurity, and low salaries," said Crespo. "There was more participation during the previous government. People discussed, went out and demonstrated. Now, when a deputy wants to look into corruption, he receives threats and even attacks."

While Crespo's analysis ignores the FRG's sins and omissions, the record during the period of the Berger regime would bear him out on his major contentions. From the Union Nacional de Esperanza (UNE), whose representation in the legislature is second only to the ruling GANA (they are tied with FRG at 27 members each), came commentary at odds with the report's findings. UNE deputy secretary-general Eduardo Meyer said, "I'm not familiar with the Informe de Desarrollo Democratico, but I am acquainted with human development and can say that the problems are at the Latin American level, where the democratic process has declined enormously. I believe that, if we insist on the negative, the people will believe it."

Generally higher scores for the region, Central America below average Polilat said that, in general, performance in the region had improved in the number of countries whose scores had improved and that the tendency was positive despite numerous political and institutional crises during 2004.

The finding was that the countries with the best performance were in South America but included some in Central America. Those that have improved were Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela, and El Salvador. Those getting worse were Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, and Peru. It is also true that these assertions focus on the differences between the 2004 and 2005 figures. Some countries that improved over that period had lower scores than they had in 2002. Thus, El Salvador, for instance, scored 5.05, an improvement over the 4.45 it earned for 2004 but worse than the 5.54 and 6.27 it got in 2002 and 2003, respectively. The regional average was 4.84, up slightly from last year.

Countries in Central America (including the Dominican Republic) below average, regardless of whether they improved or not, were Guatemala, Honduras with 4.33, Nicaragua with 4.03, and the Dominican Republic with 3.82. Central America had two countries in the group designated "highly developed" democratically. Those were Costa Rica at 8.51, a decline from last year, and Panama at 6.92, which slightly bettered last year's score but had a fairly sharp decline from the 8.31 and 8.03 it got in 2002 and 2003.

No national identity for many Guatemalans

These scores give some perspective as to how one country may be doing with respect to others but do little to give an idea of what Guatemala's incredibly low 1.6 might mean. Other studies have revealed the country as one where half its communities have no access roads, where a third of children do not go to school, and where 63% of people in rural areas do not speak the national language, Spanish, at home and many do not speak it at all. Researchers have discovered that, for many, there is no such thing as a national identity and that people do not know what department

they are from or even that they are from Guatemala. They observed that 20 years ago, refugees of the civil war learned the name of their country only after being settled in the refugee camps of Mexico.

Today in Guatemala, in the department of San Marcos, adult residents of the village of Las Pilas do not know they are in Guatemala. Despite the many years of militarization of the country with all its patriotic symbolism, many in these areas have never seen a flag, heard the national anthem, or experienced a sense of national belonging in any way. They have had no contact with the state or any of its institutions. In areas close to the Mexican border, Guatemalan communities identify as Mexicans, are exposed only to Mexican media, and even speak with Mexican accents. These Guatemalans have community identities other than national that serve them well, however. Some identify with their ethnic roots and with communities along borders that have formed with similarly alienated citizens of neighboring countries.

Silvia Irene Palma Calderon, a researcher with Incedes, explained that Honduran Chortis identify more with Chortis in Guatemala than with Hondurans. Garifunas who have been marginalized similarly experience greater kindredness with people across borders than with co-nationals, and many within these communities don't know whether they are Mexicans, Guatemalans, or Hondurans. Said Palma Calderon, "It's not that they don't know geography, it's that they share another dimension of identity. They are Q'anhob'ales, Jakaltecos, they are relegated to a cultural and community identity different from that established by the government of Guatemala."

These communities, when they are aware of it, resent Guatemalan government campaigns that use their images to foster the notion of Guatemalan identity, exploiting their traditional dress, their typical color schemes and designs, and so on. "We don't believe that the [national] independence is a real independence, and to use these symbols is as if to say, 'You are present in this nationalism,' but it's not so, we do not consider ourselves part of that," said Magdalena Perez of the Academia de Lenguas Mayas. In essence, that is some of what a score of 1.6 in democratic development means, a country that has nothing to offer to many, if not most, of its citizens but is willing to take from them what little they have.

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