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Guatemalans: How They See Themselves And What To Do About It

by Mike Leffert

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Guatemalans have a dismal view of themselves (see NotiCen, 2005-09-22), their government, and the political system, says a recent poll by the largest national newspaper Prensa Libre and the firm Vox Latina. At the same time, there is a movement afoot to change those perceptions. The organization Guatemala the name a lexicological innovation concocted to mean Guatemala, love it has drawn together hundreds of leaders in various fields to change the negative self-image. The group has its work cut out for it.

The poll showed, for starters, that 87.4% of Guatemalans have heard nothing from their political leaders with which they agree or in which they believe. This opinion is uniform across the country and across age, educational, and income demographics, and across the urban-rural divide.

They want new leadership, by which they mean totally new, from people not yet known or identified nationally. About 66% believe that the electorate would vote for an indigenous candidate in presidential elections slated for 2007. The poll was taken between Dec. 29 and Jan. 9, among 1,260 respondents throughout the country, all over 18 years of age and registered to vote. Respondents were 46% urban and 54% rural, and included men and women, both indigenous and nonindigenous.

Guatemalans, about 75% of them, do not identify with any political party. A similar number also disapproves of the job President Oscar Berger, now in midterm, has done. Pollsters asked if respondents believed that the government has a plan or is just improvising, and two-thirds thought the latter. Just 27% thought there was a plan. More than eight in ten thought that the country was headed in the wrong direction and that the president did not care about people like them.

Berger's stock has slipped considerably. Soon after his election he had the highest presidential approval ratings in all of Latin America; his character and personality were his major strengths. Now two-thirds say he nearly always regrets his own decisions. On the question of security, more than half said they thought that crime rose during the presidency of Alfonso Portillo (2000-2004) and that crime is now the greatest problem facing the country, more than unemployment and cost of living.

More than 90% want a mano-dura policy by the government against gangs. But, while they want this kind of policy, they do not necessarily want the mano to be too dura. According to the poll, the best-known and most charismatic person in the country now is Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu. The best known and least liked is former strongman, de facto president (1982-1983), accused war criminal, and political leader Gen. Efraim Rios Montt.

Rios was more popular in the past, even among those whose communities he is alleged to have ravaged during the civil war that ended in 1996. His popularity was based largely on his

effectiveness in cleaning up street crime during his short presidency, almost entirely by means of assassination and extrajudicial police activity.

Menchu, increasingly a presidential prospect, could not be expected to carry out a *mano-dura* policy. Many in Guatemala expect her political capital to rise, bolstered not only by the poll but also by trends in South America, where Chile elected a woman president, Michelle Bachelet, who was abused during the regime of Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), and Bolivia elected an indigenous leader, Evo Morales. But Menchu is not the people's first choice for president at this time. She was picked second in a field of 16 hypothetical candidates, and third if "no preference" is counted. Almost 40% had no preference.

Alvaro Colom, a center-leftist who ran second to Berger in the last election, was the most chosen, with 22%, followed by Menchu with just 11.3%. The rest, led by former president (1996-2000) and current mayor of Guatemala City Alvaro Arzu, were in single digits. Significant here is that the great majority of these other politicians, despite their high standing with their own parties, are almost entirely unknown to the electorate.

Questioned about their institutions, Guatemalans in the poll rated the fire departments, both municipal and voluntary, best, followed by the churches, both Catholic and evangelical. Next came the press, the municipalities, and the Procuraduria de los Derechos Humanos (PDH). At the bottom were the Congress, the police in urban areas, the government, the courts, the Corte de Constitucionalidad, and the office of the attorney general.

The political parties are widely disliked. Indigenous people tended to despise the parties slightly more than did others. Interpreting the poll Prensa Libre interviewed Manfredo Marroquin, a political analyst and director of the civic organization Accion Ciudadana, to interpret the picture drawn by the polls. Marroquin saw the results as reflecting a profound crisis in the political system, a total divorce between the system and the population in an alienated and directionless society. It is a systemic crisis, not a governmental one, with little prospect for change in view of the lack of self-reflection on the part of the elites. Marroquin laid the precipitous decline of hope since the 1996 end of the war on weak political parties representing no one, looking to their own interests, and without the capacity to confront the country's problems. The system, he said, must be rebuilt from the ground up, on pillars of strong political organizations and stronger government.

This, however, is not likely to happen because of a lack of leadership that diminishes the self-esteem and hope of the people, who see no possibility of changing the status quo, defined by poverty, insecurity, unemployment, and corruption. The analyst predicted that, unless there is a swift and categorical response to the need for systemic change, the population will move in the direction taken in South America, where leaders emerge from movements, rendering the parties irrelevant.

As things now stand, and as these parties continue to put forth mediocrities for public office, particularly in the Congress, electoral politics amounts to little more than "a competition among dwarves, with a high degree of uncertainty." He said that, as the poll reflects, the population lacks any real options. "The population has matured more than the political class, and must demand

an elevated electoral process, demanding recommendations, serious and realistic government programs, as well as suitable people to occupy electoral office."

Marroquin's organization, Accion Ciudadana, promotes participatory democracy in Guatemala. A movement against despair Another organization of recent origin, Guateamala, has addressed the general despair in another way. Characterized as a movement for lack of a better descriptive, Guateamala started with about a dozen people concerned with the negative self-image in the country, and it has now grown to include some 300 leaders in diverse fields and social sectors. They plan to infuse a "culture of life" into the country with a series of public events. Among the founders are artists like Efrain Recinos and Alvaro Aguilar, academics like Universidad del Valle rector Roberto Moreno and ex-minister of culture Otilia Lux, activists like Helen Mack and Pedro Ixchop (Asociacion de Sacerdotes Mayas), Minister of Education Maria del Carmen Acena, journalists including Harris Whitbeck (CNN), and business people like Emilio Mendez.

The organization grew out of conversations dating back to 2003 about the country's deep pessimism and eventually evolved into a movement that seeks to stimulate a more positive outlook by demonstrating that success, be it personal or political, is possible. Guateamala participants have had successes in a variety of fields, and the organization has documented 220 projects that exemplify this proposition.

One example is Hugo Moran Botzoc, who in 1996 became concerned with deforestation in Coban, Alta Verapaz. He worked to promote the economic development of the bosques and has so far planted 12 million trees throughout the country with state support and 1,200 coworkers.

Another is a teacher in San Pedro Sacatepequez, San Marcos, who invented a method to teach literacy in 32 days, "forty if the teacher is not very good," said the teacher, Oscar Orozco. Orozco developed the method because a deaf student of his, Elfego Bautista, had failed the same grade five times. The method involves each student becoming a letter in the alphabet and teaching themselves and each other through exercises. Orozco wrote a book about it, Coquin, and claims that a quarter of a million people have become literate with the method.

Guateamala's idea is to identify successes like these and make them known. Their declaration of principles says that they will "seek multiple ways to awaken the spirit of Guatemalans: they will put people in contact, show examples, tell stories, present positive cases, and identify heroes to extol them." Organizers deny that Guateamala is a naive attempt to change what cannot be changed.

Tomas Rodriquez, vice president of the Fundacion para la Vida, the legal and fiscal entity through which Guateamala functions, said the organization does not try to deny the reality of the country. But they have noticed that countries with situations similar to or worse than Guatemala's have not dug themselves into such a depressive hole. "The Colombian, the Costa Rican, the Mexican, the Salvadoran, they don't think this way about their countries," he said. "We have contacted foreign experts and people who have achieved attitude changes in their cities, like the former mayor of Bogota, Antanas Mockus [who turned around the deep pessimism in the Colombian capital]." Rodriguez said the Guateamalistas are inclusive and nationwide, a requisite in this country so fractured along race, gender, class, and regional lines.

He said they plan an event in the Plaza Espana in the capital, to run from Jan. 25 to Feb. 5. "To do this there is in itself madness. The nine cultures [into which the country is divided] will be there, and we will present the 220 projects, to feel proud of what is already happening in the country," said Rodriguez. The event will include dialogues and forums along with concerts and other celebratory activities. The whole of the intent is contained in a declaration of propositions reading:

We come from a beautiful country with a legendary history, where the hills belch fire, the land is fertile, the skies are painted in colors, and the souls are filled with energy; good and noble people of deep roots. We are determined to change the course of the whole country. The dark times we have endured today are filled with light, with dreams, with opportunities. The culture of life will allow Guatemalans to achieve their dreams and ambitions. Our differences will be indispensable for the enrichment of our life. In the short-term we will carry out concrete projects that will be measurable and palpable to motivate more people and generate confidence. We will invite the best in the world to orient, instruct, and inspire us. Excellence, tenacity, discipline, innovation, and solidarity will be our tools to ensure success. We will work with what we have. No more complaints about our lacks and our weaknesses. We will start a movement that will spark the creativity of every Guatemalan, that will make them vibrate, that gives meaning to their lives, that allows them to develop their talents, that make them dream and that provides the energy to follow and achieve their dream. To the extent that more Guatemalans live it, make it come true, and love our country, we will have a more advanced society and a world that needs more Guatemala.

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