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## Guatemala's President Appears To Have Weathered Political Crisis, But Still No Progress On Rosenberg Murder

by LADB Staff

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"If I were a weak president, I'd have fallen," said Guatemala's President Alvaro Colom. Probably so. Since attorney Rodrigo Rosenberg was murdered shortly after producing a video accusing Colom of his impending assassination, the president has taken a hammering from opponents (see NotiCen, 2009-05-28). At the same time, he has seen impressive support from constituents and also from an international community interested in preserving governmental continuity. But, in the absence of any real progress in the investigation, the case has become the forum for any and all to vie for political advantage by whatever means. Rosenberg was murdered May 10. A month later, despite local efforts and the weighty assistance of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the UN's Comision Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala (CICIG), officials had little to show, but Colom was less concerned with his own image than with that of the country. He told reporters that his image had actually improved in his rural strongholds and declined only slightly in the capital. "The major image problem is overseas, as a country. The truth is that a lot of work has to be done, but first we have to wait for a result from the Ministerio Publico and CICIG," he said. No progress, no patience But patience is in short supply in Guatemala. Vitalino Similox, once a running mate of Colom's in a previous attempt at the presidency and now leader of the Consejo Ecumenico Cristiano de Guatemala, went to the media to deliver the message. "A month after the fact, we urge the authorities in charge to guarantee an exhaustive and independent investigation, concrete results that bring about clarification," he said. "We can't wait indefinitely." Aside from being aligned as a social democrat with Colom, Similox is a Presbyterian minister and travels in mainstream religious company. Along with him at this media event were representatives of the Conferencia de Religiosos de Guatemala (Cofregua) and of the Episcopal, Lutheran, and Evangelical churches. Close on the heels of Colom's plea for patience, CICIG issued one of its own, asking "society in general and the media not to generate disinformation or confusion in portraying the declarations of supposed witnesses." The week before, someone had apparently notified the press that Ovidio Batz Tax from Salcaja Quetzaltenango was about to testify before the Procuradoria de Derechos Humanos (PDH) about a plot to murder opposition leader Otto Perez Molina and the secretary-general of the right-wing Partido Patriotico (PP) he founded, Roxana Baldetti. Some days later, the allegation of the plot to kill the PP leaders was repeated when witness Juan Perez Leon testified before the attorney general about the plot. But it turned out that Perez Leon and Ovidio Batz Tax were one and the same person. If this were all, it would be enough to have inspired the CICIG admonition against proliferating disinformation, but more was in the offing. Perez Leon, now identified as a protected witness, went on Quetzaltenango radio and said that Rosenberg's murder had been the brainchild of Otto Perez Molina. Perez Leon said Perez Molina was directly involved in contracting the noted gang and hit squad, Los Pitagoras, for the deed. Also implicated in the plot was PP Deputy Armando Paniagua. The story as it is currently concocted has the enthusiastic support of Colom's Unidad Nacional de Esperanza (UNE) party and is vigorously denied by the PP, which has accused the witness of being a criminal and extortionist. CICIG took the press to task for its willingness to be manipulated and its failure to corroborate what it hastened to publish. Said the CICIG statement,

"On June 5, while the investigation was taking place, during which an alleged witness was supposed to provide evidence, the investigators were surprised by the presence of journalists, who were clearly called by someone with clear interests in the issue, to turn a technical activity into a media show." With a nod to press freedom and tepid assurance that this was meant as criticism of "those who want to manipulate the commission's work," CICIG pointed an accusing finger at the media and warning, "The media should be aware that it cannot allow itself to be manipulated by political interests, which do not reflect the overall views of Guatemalan society." The case is far from having assembled credible evidence on which to make a guess as to who did what. Rather, it is at a point where the bulk of the conjecture is beginning to favor Colom, taking enough pressure off him to enable a shift from defense to offense. He has changed the rhetoric slightly. Rosenberg's killers, he continues to say, are "golpistas," who are soon to be caught. "The golpistas produced the video and we are going to determine who they are. Already their traitors have begun to talk, begun to toss blame at each other." Open season for opportunists But now, another element is added, the opportunistic opposition. Colom described them, saying, "Here are people who took advantage of the Musas (the businessman and his daughter, who was also the girlfriend of Rosenberg), and of Rosenberg, who was innocent, to get rid of a president who obstructed them in their dirty businesses. This is called sedition, and the traitors are going to pay." Not only Otto Perez Molina, said Colom, but also others who saw a chance to pile on when the president was down would pay. Now, however, "The law must be implacable against those who orchestrated it. Not against the innocents who reacted to the tragedy of a murder, but rather those who after a tragedy took advantage of it and tried to effect a coup." And so it must. So much so that for the moment eyes are drawn away from the question that remains unanswered, why did Rosenberg make the video accusing the president of Guatemala, first lady Sandra Torres, and close presidential confidantes of plotting to kill him three days before he was shot to death? For some observers, the political crisis is defused and Colom is credited with fomenting the international response that averted governmental collapse. In testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Anita Isaacs, political scientist at Haverford College, made that point, but in doing that, cautioned, "International pressures cannot erase the significant political dangers highlighted by the tense interplay between violence, injustice, and political mobilization on display over the past few weeks on the streets of Guatemala City, as it has for years off camera, in rural communities." Isaacs has been analyzing governance in Guatemala for a dozen years and noted that the collective choices made in the wake of the Rosenberg murder reveal much about the current political moment. While civil society ought to have come together around the institutional and developmental deficits that contribute to the fragility of democracy, they did not. "Instead, Guatemalan society divided into two antagonistic camps," she said. "And rather than intervening to defuse the situation or to channel it through existing institutions, the political leadership encouraged mass demonstrations, calculating the political advantages to be gained by either weakening or propping up a regime through street mobilization and appeals for extra-systematic action." It also did not escape Isaac's scrutiny that, as the antagonists poured onto the streets to militate for their side, the differences between them were visible, the same differences that have divided Guatemalans for centuries, since the conquest, "mostly white, urban Guatemalans of economic means squaring off against a government seemingly aligned with a massive, rural, poor, and indigenous base at once grateful and dependent on its social programs." The rural indigenous, in addition to being grateful and dependent, also, says the scholar, "strive to maintain their own autonomy and gain political access." The purpose of Isaac's appearance before the committee was to "contextualize the current political situation in Guatemala and suggest how Congress might craft future US policy toward Central America." A list

of recommended reinsertion points concludes her testimony, mostly aimed at the usual suspects, impunity, poverty, racism, and the like. Her testimony entirely ignored the US's historical part in Guatemala's current state of affairs, however, or how the US might address its own history to the benefit of both nations. Isaacs says that, in the Rosenberg case, "Guatemala faces its most serious political crisis since the December 1996 signing of the peace accords," and goes on to tell members that, had she come before the committee a couple of months ago, before the murder, she would have spoken about how Guatemala has become "a casualty of US anti-narcotic efforts in Mexico" by pushing the Mexican traffickers into Guatemala. No connection was made between the drug-policy initiatives the endemic institutional weaknesses that underlie the situation and cause the US to seek a point of entry for further intervention.

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