

1-20-1989

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## **Summary Of Cerezo Vs. The Extreme Right & The Military: Attempted Coups & Aftermath**

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*Category/Department: General*

*Published: Friday, January 20, 1989*

On the morning of May 11, 1988, two army officers tried to stage a coup against the government of President Vinicio Cerezo. Soldiers from military bases in Retalhuleu and Jutiapa were within 90 km. and 25 km. outside the capital, respectively, were stopped by loyal troops and persuaded to return to their barracks. The loyalist troops, led by Gens. Juan Leonel Bolanos and Otto Erick Ponce, were supported by tanks and artillery. At the time of the "march on Guatemala City," the number of troops involved in the march on the capital was unclear, ranging from 600 to 2,000. On May 12, the Defense Ministry reported that the insurrection was neutralized without a shot being fired, and the two officers who led it were in custody and under interrogation. The Cerezo government tried to downplay or minimize the significance of the events of May 11, while also denying that subsequent military rebellions have occurred. According to a source close to the coup co-conspirators cited in an Americas Watch report, Guatemala's 22 department military bases supported the coup in May, as did the Air Force and the honor guard in the capital. Next, various sources have reported that military uprisings took place after May 11 until mid-August. The number of these uprisings is unclear, ranging from two to four, depending on the source. Discontent on the far right and within the army had been on the upswing for several months preceding the attempted coup in May. Sectors of the civilian elite and the military were upset by the Cerezo administration's actions in the following areas: overtures to the rebels, result of an attempt to fulfill provisions of the Central American peace accord signed in August 1987; permitting four leftist civilians to return to Guatemala for a visit; and the opening of talks with labor unions, which are despised by many wealthy Guatemalans. [When exiled Indian leader Rigoberta Menchu returned to the country for a week on April 18, and was promptly arrested at the airport, thousands of students and others affiliated with organizations in the Labor and Popular Action Unity (UASP) coalition mobilized within hours. A mass street rally was held in front of the courthouse where Menchu was being held. International protests forced the government to release Menchu. Military officers were furious over her release and the activities of the "subversive UASP." Two weeks later, they attempted the coup.] Two major rallying points for the military's allies among rightwing businesspersons were a package of tax hikes passed in 1987 and government attempts to carry out a very modest land redistribution program. Discontent in the military also stemmed from perceived inadequate military funding, and power struggles within the army and between the police and army hierarchies. Conspirators & Arrests Defense Minister Gen. Hector Gramajo appeared to have been the major influence in defusing the uprising. On May 13, Gramajo announced that he had placed six officers under arrest for organizing an attempted coup, and suspended or ordered the early retirement of three others. Next, he said army investigators had discovered that eight civilians were also involved in instigating the mutiny, and that their names would be given to the government for possible prosecution. On May 17, formal charges were filed in a Guatemala City court against eight civilian co-conspirators, including pediatrician Mario Castejon, journalists Danilo Roca and Nicolas Buonafina, former presidential candidate Gustavo Anzueto, and cashiered military intelligence major Gustavo Diaz Lopez. Later on the same day, a Defense Ministry communique said five colonels and majors who

led the uprising had been punished with "temporary arrest"; four junior officers were suspended for up to a year, and one soldier was cashiered. President Cerezo told reporters that military officers involved in the conspiracy had received \$6 million from private businesspersons who were opposed to government initiatives in several areas, including taxation, agrarian reform, and labor rights, using time-worn anti-communist hysteria as justification. About 15 civilians were involved in the coup attempt, he said, and most had been arrested. Defense Minister Gramajo described the civilians as "radicals." Later in the month of May, the Guatemalan media reported that in addition to officers from the Retalhuleu and Jutiapa garrisons, officers from the Zacapa, Chiquimula and El Quiche military zones were involved in the conspiracy. Air Force chief Gen. Eduardo Wohlers had also been arrested. On May 19, the Guatemalan government closed down a television station (channel 3) on grounds that it had broadcast "material dangerous for state security." Mario David Garcia, news director for the station and presidential candidate of the rightwing Authentic National Center in the 1985 elections, was one of the civilians charged with promoting and financing the May 11 coup attempt. Two weeks before the attempted coup, Garcia read a statement on the air which said that the political process "has been betrayed by a corrupt clique of communists, military leaders and Christian Democrats." As of the third week in June, a total of 13 army officers had been indicted for participation in the May 11 rebellion. After pardoning two colonels and a major, a military court arranged to have them demoted. The military high command announced the discharge of three additional officers for crimes of "negligence" in events related to the attempted coup: Col. Arturo Geteyac, commander of the Jutiapa military zone; Col. Guillermo Vargas of the Zacapa military zone; and, Col. Edgardo Solis of the Armed Forces Tactical Group. Next, the High Command reported that 120 "shifts" promotions, demotions and transfers of army personnel were carried out in the wake of the uprising. Judge Ana Maria Orozco Olivet, who had been coordinating investigations of civilians and former military officers facing charges related to the coup attempt, refused to release former Major Gustavo Adolfo Diaz Lopez and Lt. Edgardo Estrada Portillo, both detained on May 27. In mid-May on the TV news program "Aqui el Mundo," Diaz Lopez denounced an alleged plan by the government and the military high command to lead the country "towards a socialist regime." (The news program was later banned by the government.) In statements before the Defense Commission of the national congress, in June, Gramajo and other members of the army high command declared that a faction of the country's rural landowners was the main instigator of the coup attempt. He said that wealthy landowners had distributed large sums of money to selected army officers toward inciting the rebellion. Indicative of the power struggle within the army was a demand for Gramajo's dismissal presented to Cerezo by a group of army officers. To the present, Cerezo has not acted on the demand. In a June issue of Mexican news magazine *Proceso*, one of Gramajo's major weaknesses in the eyes of the rightwing and certain military officers is his failure to obtain significant military victories in the fight against the guerrillas. "Gramajo's prestige," the magazine wrote, "declined because the year-end military offensive in which the Armed Forces committed 65% of its resources to eradicate guerrilla pockets in El Quiche...was a resounding failure." Former Col. Francisco Luis Gordillo Martinez has insisted that Gramajo resign, claiming that the general lacks the basic morals needed to fill his post evidenced by his "participation in past attempts to create disturbances and in palace intrigues, always covering his participation at the last minute." Gordillo said that the absence of clear military rules and regulations has permitted Gramajo to become the "army's master and feudal lord." Gordillo was discharged from the army in 1982, after serving in the military junta that overthrew Gen. Romeo Lucas. He is currently a member of an extreme rightwing group, the *Movimiento Emergente de Concordia (MEC)*, and serves as an alternate member representing political parties on the National Reconciliation Commission

created under the auspices of the regional accord signed in August 1987. Cerezo's Concessions to the Right Despite government assurances that the military coup(s) had been definitively quashed, political leaders, foreign diplomats and other observers concur that it was "a military failure and a political success." Local press sources reported that Cerezo had agreed to act on a list of 25 requests presented to him by the military high command. All requests consisted of concessions to rightwing business and military sectors, including more stringent limitations on press freedoms and unionization, the harnessing of police authority, a free hand to senior officers in defining security policies, an amnesty decree as insurance against future prosecution for political crimes. Partial evidence of these and other "concessions" (which have created an environment in which the right and death squads act with greater impunity than previously) are summarized below. \* Direct and indirect peace talks with the guerrillas were suspended. \* After a bomb exploded outside the local office of Soviet news agency Tass, and Cuban news agency Prensa Latina's correspondent received death threats, the government said it could not guarantee the security of reporters from either agency. Both closed their offices. \* In a bombing that some diplomats attributed to security forces, the offices of a socialist-oriented Guatemalan weekly, La Epoca, were destroyed. Attacks on journalists and threats by death squads on the lives of journalists have increased since May 1988. \* The office of Nicaragua's airline, AeroNica, was closed after a bombing and death threats received by office personnel. \* Tentative plans to open a Yugoslav embassy, which would have been the first embassy of a socialist nation in Guatemala, were abandoned. \* The scheduled visit of a symphony orchestra from the Soviet Union was canceled. \* On June 29, an organizer of the Democratic Socialist Party, Salomon Eduardo Figuerroa Tobar, was gunned down in his hometown of Coatepeque. Figuerroa, who was an advocate of agrarian reform, had recently returned to Guatemala after years of exile. \* Since mid-May, the government has effectively acted to consolidate the subordination of police forces to the military high command. On June 25, for instance, President Cerezo announced the resignation of Interior Minister Juan Rodil, effective July 15. Rodil, said Cerezo, resigned to pursue "personal activities." Rodil became a frequent target of criticism from certain sectors of the military. A clandestine group known as "Officers of the Mountains" accused him of having designed a plan that would strengthen police forces at the expense of the army. \* On July 8, Guatemala's latest amnesty decree-law went into effect. Decree-law 32-88 promulgated shortly after the May 11 coup attempt provides amnesty for political crimes and "common" crimes related to the same committed against the government up until June 23, 1988. The cutoff date covers the coup co-conspirators until after charges against them were dropped. This amnesty is indefinitely retroactive. The new amnesty legislation was presented as an extension of the 180-day amnesty promulgated following the signing of the Central American peace plan in 1987. But it was created to pardon the coup co-conspirators. The decree-law theoretically would also encompass crimes committed by guerrilla groups prior to June 23, 1988. Given the failure of the Guatemalan authorities to apply past amnesty laws to their opponents, however, it is doubtful that anyone other than the coup co-conspirators will put the new amnesty law to the test. \* Opposition parties of the extreme right opposed one of the cornerstones of the governing Christian Democratic Party's (DC) political program: legislation creating Development Councils (Consejos de Desarrollo). Passed in September 1987, the legislation established a National Development Board presiding over regional and departmental councils. When debated in the national congress, Christian Democrat representatives succeeded in creating local-level councils in order to facilitate local participation in needs assessment and the formulation of solutions to concrete problems. The development council legislation was distasteful to the extreme right because it provided the governing party with a formidable political and electoral tool. During a TV news program "Aqui el Mundo," former Maj. Gustavo Adolfo Diaz Lopez said that by

utilizing social promoters and local development boards, the government was trying to rebuild the social base of the guerrillas "which had already been destroyed by the army." The right's complaints were formalized in a judicial appeal challenging the constitutionality of the development boards. The appeal was sponsored by leaders of Common Action (MAS) and the National Renovation Party (PNR). In a ruling handed down in late May, the court declared the local councils to be illegal but confirmed the constitutionality of councils at other levels created under the law. (Basic data from back issues of Central America Update)

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