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Guatemalan President Portillo's Popularity Fades After Six Months in Office

by LADB Staff

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After six months in office, Guatemalan President Alfonso Portillo has seen his popular support plummet to record lows. The public blames him for inaction in the face of a public-security crisis and the country's massive poverty. Many suspect retired Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt is really in charge.

Reviewing his performance during the first six months, Portillo gave himself a modest grade of "average." He said public security had edged out the economy as the country's leading problem, and he blamed rising crime on the slow judicial process, inefficient investigations, and insufficient police. In short, "in public security, we have obviously not advanced," he said.

Some of Portillo's critics did not agree that his performance was average. Congressional Deputy Jorge Rosales of the opposition Partido de Avanzada Nacional (PAN) thought the administration had no idea where it was headed and was exaggerating its economic achievements.

During the first months of his administration, Portillo retained considerable popular support. He moved quickly on his campaign promise to see that suspects in the Bishop Juan Gerardi murder case were arrested (see NotiCen, 2000-02-03, 2000-04-13). He exerted increased civilian control over the military (see NotiCen, 2000-01-20, 2000-06-08). He cut government spending by 10%, pleasing the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the business community. He authorized a US\$26 increase in the annual salary of government and private-sector workers.

Besides the US\$26 raise for teachers, Portillo has promised 50,000 scholarships this year for primary students in the interior of the country and 150,000 for 2001. Portillo claimed the economic picture has improved in the past six months. He said his administration had stabilized the currency, lowered interest rates, and opposed an increase in the value-added tax (impuesto al valor agregado, IVA) from 10% to 12%.

Supporting Portillo's claims, Banco de Guatemala (central bank) president Lizardo Sosa said that in the first semester, inflation was kept at an annualized rate of 5% and that investment was up. A World Bank analysis confirmed that, with an expected growth rate for the year of 3.6%, the economy was on the road to "moderate growth with stability." However, claims about economic stability were not well received among labor leaders, since 80% of Guatemalans live in poverty and 64% live in extreme poverty.

Jose Pinon, head of the Central General de Trabajadores de Guatemala (CGTG), said, "The economic situation of workers, campesinos, and most of the population in general continues at deplorable levels and without possibility of improvement."

President burdened with negatives

Portillo's troubles started during his first week in office when he moved into a luxury house. His office first said he was paying the rent out of his salary, but Portillo said later the US\$5,000 monthly rent came out of state discretionary funds.

Still later, when Portillo produced his lease, critics who smelled influence peddling asked why banker Francisco Alvarado had signed the lease as guarantor if the state was paying the rent. Because of his frequent trips abroad, Portillo has had to defend himself against accusations of frivolous use of public funds. "What president in the world does not travel?" he asked. "Don't I have the right to travel to Mexico to see my daughter?" While claiming to be socialist, Portillo offended the poor by favoring his Cabinet with handsome raises.

At the same time, the US\$26 wage hike has largely gone unpaid and unenforced. In June, Portillo stirred up anxiety in the business community by questioning the legality of the US\$700 million sale of majority shares in Telecomunicaciones de Guatemala (TELGUA), which by financial legerdemain ended up in the hands of Telefonos de Mexico (TELMEX).

Alleging fraud on the part of the previous administration for approving the sale (see NotiCen, 2000-04-13), Portillo declared it damaging to the nation and brought suit to overturn it. His tariff reductions on sugar imports cost him points with business without significantly reducing the price of basic consumer goods. He stumbled into a public-relations nightmare in June by sending members of his family to Canada to protect them from rampant crime (see NotiCen, 2000-07-06).

Meanwhile, his anti-crime program offered little more than backing up police patrols with soldiers. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the Portillo administration is its power base, which lies in the rightist Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG) headed by former de facto president Rios Montt (1982-1983). Rios Montt, currently under investigation by the Spanish National Court for genocide, torture, and other human rights violations, is president of Congress. Guatemalans are unsure who actually governs Rios Montt or Portillo, who says he is a social democrat and an admirer of Argentine revolutionary icon Ernesto "Che" Guevarra.

Portillo says powerful forces oppose him

As his first six months in office ended in June, Portillo lashed out at what he said were "destabilizing" forces that began a conspiracy against him on the second day of his administration.

During a news conference June 22, Portillo said these unnamed forces opposed him in defense of their privileges because of reforms he was trying to make. He said his administration was particularly vulnerable because he did not represent special interests. What they want, he said, is a weak government. His diatribe only invited ridicule. PAN Deputy Anabella de Leon said Portillo did not need destabilizing forces since he is destabilizing the government all by himself. He has no plan to resolve the nation's problems, de Leon said.

An editorial in the daily Siglo Veintiuno asked, "What privileges has the Portillo administration eliminated?" The editorial reminded Portillo that there is a difference between being a candidate

who sells himself as the solution to all problems and a president who had to solve them. An opinion poll showed deep public dissatisfaction with Portillo and a widespread suspicion that Rios Montt runs the government.

The poll, taken between June 27 and July 8 by the opinion research firm Vox Latina, showed that 65% of respondents disapproved of Portillo's performance and 48% said the current administration is worse than the previous administration of Alvaro Arzu (1996-2000). Fifty-two percent thought the current FRG-controlled Congress was worse than the previous one, which was controlled by the PAN. Thirty-two percent said Rios Montt really governed the country, while only 26% thought the president did.

When asked who had the most influence over government policies, 73% said Rios Montt. The poll also showed that 80% of Guatemalans believe that political parties seek power mainly for enrichment, and nearly the same number believe the parties do not represent the interests of the people. The poll seemed to surprise the administration as officials gave uncoordinated and even irrelevant responses. Vice President Juan Francisco Reyes thought the poll indicated that democracy was growing in Guatemala and said he was sure the Portillo government was going to be better than the previous one.

Leonel Soto Arango, first vice president of Congress, suggested the negative poll results were the work of "powerful sectors" who resent the administration's reforms. Furthermore, he said, the poll was invalid because it did not include people in the interior of the country where "the people are with Portillo." Portillo was more frank. In a news conference, he said the poll results worried him. He said a previous poll which also gave him a low approval rating did not bother him, "but this one bothers me a lot." The poll showed that Guatemalans "don't believe in anything not in democracy, not in affairs of government, not in the authorities," he said.

Portillo concluded that the current political system was "worn out," and suggested the country should move toward a "semi-parliamentary" system to reduce the centralization of power and permit more participation in government by the major sectors of society. Portillo makes Cabinet changes Keeping a promise to revamp the Cabinet, Portillo announced July 30 the removal of two ministers and several lesser Cabinet officials.

Interior Minister Guillermo Ruiz Wong was replaced by retired Army officer and current congressional Deputy Byron Barrientos. Ruiz was considered a likely candidate for removal because of his lackluster performance as head of public security. But the Barrientos appointment was immediately criticized because of his military background and his close association with Rios Montt.

The appointment was clearly part of Portillo's anti-crime effort, but it will give more ammunition to those who oppose militarizing the police and to those who think Rios Montt is running the government. Barrientos immediately fired Mario Cifuentes, director of the National Civilian Police (Policia Nacional Civil, PNC), and Angel Conte Cojul, director of prisons (Sistema Penitenciario). Also replaced were two Interior vice ministers, Jose Antonio Monzon and Manuel de Jesus Flores.

Named in their places were Jose Adolfo Reyes Calderon and Luis Alberto Davila Garcia. Portillo also replaced Agriculture Minister Roger Valenzuela with Leopoldo Sandoval, another Rios Montt associate, who served in the general's de facto government in the 1980s. Valenzuela will name two vice ministers, one to replace Baudilio Hichos. Hichos resigned two days earlier under accusations of corruption for selling timber-cutting rights in protected areas. Other changes include replacing the director of the Secretaria General de Planificacion Economica (SEGEPLAN), Rene Escribano de Leon with Arturo Montenegro. Ruben Calderon was named to replace Gabriel Aguilera as director of the Secretaria de la Paz (SEPAZ). [Sources: Associated Press, 07/19/00; Notimex, 05/15/00, 07/24/00, 07/25/00, 07/30/00; Spanish News Service EFE, 07/30/00; Prensa Libre (Guatemala), 01/23/00, 07/12/00, 07/18/00, 07/26/00, 07/31/00; Siglo Veintiuno (Guatemala), 01/30/00, 06/23/00, 07/13/00, 07/31/00]

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