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# Guatemala:

## Maya Movement At The Political Crossroads



Maya "Communities of Populations in Resistance" (CPR's) left hidden communities in the Ixcán jungle in February of this year to establish an open political presence.

By Estuardo Zapeta.

In June of 1993, following the failed self-coup d'état by former President Jorge Serrano Elias, the Permanent Maya Assembly submitted a list with three names for the Vice-presidency. This act in itself shook the Guatemalan political establishment, demonstrating the new assertiveness of the country's Indigenous movement. This previously little known political current is now one of the strongest in Guatemalan society. Paradoxically the "Serranazo," as Serrano Elias' attempted coup was nicknamed, helped the Maya movement emerge onto the national stage. Nonetheless, and perhaps due to a lack of political experience, Maya organizations have fallen far short of their political potential in recent years. This year, two political events reflect on the situation faced by the movement. On Jan. 30, a majority of voters approved

newly-appointed President Ramiro de Leon Carpio's proposed constitutional revision amidst massive abstentionism. Then, on Aug. 14, parliamentary elections were held in which former military dictator Rios Mont, whose administration from 1981-82 was responsible for the bloodiest repression of the Maya population in recent history, won a seat in congress.

### The Political Movement: Internal and External Factors

Maya Indians are the majority in Guatemala with over 60% of the population. They are also victims of the Western Hemisphere's longest and most bloody modern civil wars. Understanding the emerging Maya political participation requires a look at both internal and external factors affecting the movement in recent years.

There are three major internal influences on Maya political activism. First, strong opposition to celebration of the Quincentenary of Columbus' so-called

discovery of the Americas in 1992 unified organizations in a common cultural and political cause. Second, numerous Mayan organizations have formed in the countryside. These range from agricultural cooperatives to a national system of Mayan schools, and they have begun to consolidate local power as the basis of an effective political participation. Third, ethnic issues have become a matter of national debate since the agenda for peace talks between the government and the guerrilla movement was modified to include a point on "Identity and Rights of the Indigenous People."

Advances made by the movement have unfortunately been undermined by power struggles within the Indian leadership. Fueled by the lack of clear political objectives, this in-fighting slowly gnaws away at achievements made over the last three years. Additionally, one effect of the diminished influence of Marxist discourse has been the new recognition of previously ignored cultural differences among the

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Maya peoples. These differences have in turn, accelerated the internal competition for power.

Externally, Maya political participation faces challenges generated by last year's failed coup d'état, the nation's general democratic crisis and the Aug. 14 congressional elections. International pressure on the Guatemalan government has also contributed to the opening of political spaces for the Maya.

### Of Elections And The Elected

The Indigenous movement discovered its first "political thermometer" in President Carpio's referendum for the proposed constitutional revision. The revision was aimed at purging the corrupt Serrano congress and represented a fundamental clash between the executive and legislative powers. The Indigenous movement could have exploited this division, but political inexperience limited any gains. The principal Mayan organizations threw their support behind the president's constitutional changes. In exchange, the president approved a National Indigenous Fund. The Maya people could have gained much more.

President Carpio's constitutional revision was approved with a majority "yes" vote on Jan. 30, but turnout was a shockingly low 16% of the electorate. Poor communication between the Indigenous national and grassroots organizations prevented any significant political participation. Yet Maya organizations have learned that politicians now place importance on the Indigenous vote.

National congressional elections were held on August 14, 1994. Surprisingly, former military dictator Efraim Rios Montt and his Republican Front party emerged with a significant victory. Rios Montt's tenure as dictator in 1981-1982 was one of the bloodiest ever endured by the Mayan people. At that time, his "bullets and beans" counter-insurgency program razed hundreds of Maya villages to the ground. His victory however is not as surprising as it appears.

This is true, first of all, because only 20% of the electorate voted. Secondly, Rios Montt exploited law and order rhetoric in a country where criminal activity is second only to poverty as a social problem. The ex-dictator is also a born-again Protestant, and could therefore count on nearly unanimous support from the evangelical Protestant population. In 1990, 36% of the population was estimated to be Protestant, the highest proportion of any country in predominantly Catholic Latin America. Evangelical advances are not surprising in rural, Mayan communities. This success results from a well-planned and well-funded wave of evangelical missionizing from the United States.

The Maya people and the former dictator will face their real challenges in the Nov. 1995 presidential elections. Unless Rios Montt can engineer a constitutional revision, he will be barred—as a former dictator—from seeking the presidency. At the same time, moderate right-wing parties, who are best placed to win the presidency, have shown little concern for Rios Montt and are turning their attention to the Indigenous vote. For instance, the National Advancement Party (PAN), has been in "secret" talks with the Autonomous Movement of Masses, an organization working for political education and organization in poor Indigenous and *mestizo* communities.

### Military Ethno-hysteria

Within the political process, the Indigenous movement cannot underestimate the army's presence and power. This institution, which has systematically opposed any Maya political participation, is undergoing one of its worst times. It's important to remember that the army has free and permanent access to most Maya communities through paramilitary squads known as Civil Defense Patrols: it has established throughout the countryside. The current number of active members in the Civil Defense Patrols is estimated at over

500,000: 95% of these are Maya.

A serious internal division, "loss" of the communist enemy, a re-definition of its role after initial peace talks, and a problem of "image" both at the national and international level, are just few of the problems faced by the Guatemalan army.

The appointment of General Julio Otzoy Colaj, Maya-caqchiquel from the town of Comalapa, as Vice-Minister of Defense is widely perceived as an attempt to turn back Maya political advances. Otzoy never identifies himself as Maya and leads the army's ultra-conservative sector. Otzoy explained in a recent interview that "due to the serious ethnic problem" facing Guatemala, there is great risk for the emergence of an "ethnically-based guerrilla movement" in the next ten years. The recent "Maya Nation hypothesis" and the new ideas on Maya autonomy have increased Otzoy's fears. Although these ideas are mere speculations, the conservative military increasingly accuses Maya organizations of subversion and separatism.

The ultra-right is also haunted by the possibility that the Guatemalan govern-



Ex-dictator Rios Montt's campaign slogan proclaiming "With us, your vote counts."

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ment might ratify Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries. This would increase the international legal validity of rights claimed by Maya organizations.

at the end of the 1980s. The Indigenous National Front (FIN) was founded for this purpose. This political organization faded out, basically, because it had neither the people nor the money to be heard at the national level. Work at the local level has

Indigenous leaders who participated in Christian Democratic President Vinicio Cerezo Arevalo's administration. Many outstanding accusations of corruption and financial mismanagement remain against them. Though Minister Tay Coyoy is the first Indian to reach such a high position in Guatemalan government, the fact that his activities continue to be opaque has not helped the consolidation of the political party.

The Maya dilemma has always been whether to participate in the electoral system's existing parties in order to gain new spaces, and eventually rise to shape party platforms themselves or to create their own political associations, capable of participating at the national level. The Indigenous movement is also limited by a lack of economic power. Maya organizations are facing financial crises at the national, regional, and local levels.

This has only been overcome at the local level, where the Maya obviously have more opportunities.

### The Challenge Ahead

Though many have argued that the congress elected on Aug. 14 represents a challenge to Mayan political participation, the opposite is in fact true. It is the Maya who represent a challenge to the congress. The congress's short duration (one year) and its ideological composition which leans heavily toward the right wing (which ignores Indigenous demands), indicates that the Indigenous movement should take the time to re-evaluate its position and design strategies that reflect Guatemala's socio-political reality.



The army maintains a political presence in most Maya communities through the Civil Defense Patrols.

Recent publication of *Rujunamil Ri Mayab' Amaq* (Rights of the Maya People) has also fueled the army's fears. In sum, these military sectors see any Indigenous political progress as a national security threat. However, the "young officers" sector and the army's so-called "progressive wing" are to some extent forcing the ultra-conservative groups to be more tolerant toward political indigenous participation. It will be up to the political abilities of the Maya organizations to take advantage of these divisions within the army.

### Dilemmas and Limitations of Political Participation

The first Maya attempts at direct national political participation took place

been visibly more effective than at the national or regional level. For example, the Cante Civic Committee, an Indigenous grassroots organization, has kept control of the Mayor's office for the last ten years, even while competing with the established national parties.

The most recent national efforts for Maya political participation was through the Sociedad Ixim, a committee that promoted formation of a political party. This committee is covertly directed by the current minister of education, Alfredo Tay Coyoy, Maya-K'iche' from Quetzaltenango. Christian Democratic parties both within Guatemala and Europe are also supporting this effort in near secrecy. Among the ranks of this group are



The following points require evaluation:

**a) Substantial changes in the political discourse.**

The radical nature of the Mayan political discourse—based on stagnant leftist ideas from the 1960s—has become obsolete in 1994. This discourse does not help Indian political participation; to the contrary, it reaffirms the fear and ethno-hysteria of the army and the economically powerful sectors. In short, this discourse is characterized by inconsistent populism, the insistence that the Maya's only problem is unjust land distribution, and by a radical environmentalism that defends the adoption of exotic lifestyles. This is not the Mayan people's discourse, but rather results from an influx of ideas from Marxist, environmental and other radical groups from Europe and the United States.

**b) The creation of a solid base of leadership.**

The lack of Maya leaders is another challenge the movement will have to overcome in order to achieve effective political participation. This lack of leadership was patently obvious during the recent congressional elections. Although a good number of Indian candidates ran for office, only five—out of a congress with eighty members—were elected. Abstentionism added to the fact that Mayan candidates were virtually unknown, guaranteed this result. Remarkably, the five winning candidates ran with right-wing parties. An urgent imperative for Maya organizations is to "train" new leaders who can act as catalysts for the thoughts and feelings of the Mayan people.

**c) Clarification and unification of realistic goals and objectives.**

The current debate over the Mayan

autonom, is a perfect example of confusion within the Indigenous movement of its own political objectives. When Indigenous rights, Mayan education, the Guatemalan Indigenous Fund, and compulsory military service—to mention just a few national issues—are added to subject of autonomy, the confusion becomes even more apparent. The Mayan organizations, independent of the means they decide to adopt, must together clarify their objectives and set goals for the short and long-run. The current political confusion naturally supports the State's argument that: "the Mayas don't know what they want or where they want to go." We must recognize in advance that this process of clarification and unification of goals does not necessarily imply a political homogenization. Unity within diversity has sustained the movement up to now. This claim is supported by way in which the different Indigenous fronts united in opposition to the 500 years celebration .

**d) Political education at the community level.**

In Guatemala, the Maya will have to redirect their efforts toward an effective political participation within the communities. In a country where power is highly centralized, traditional politics have completely neglected the rural areas. The consolidation of Maya organizations throughout the country is the best indication that efforts for political education at the community level are feasible. In this sense, the army also has recognized the political potential of the rural areas through the Civil Self-Defense patrols.

**e) A relationship with the moderate right.**

The serious consideration of possible relations with a Congress dominated by right-wing parties has become necessary. The strong initial opposition

that some right-wing parties demonstrated toward Rios Mont must be seen by the Indigenous movement as representing a range of possibilities for participation. The Indigenous movement must take advantage of the liberal mindsets of the center-right parties' younger generations.

**f) De-minorization of the majority.**

In a country where the Mayan majority has always been perceived and treated like a minority, it is necessary to intelligently demonstrate the numerical possibilities. In principle, politics is a numbers game. The Indigenous movement must take advantage of its majority status to win the necessary social and economic changes.

**g) Continuing diplomatic work at the international level.**

The Mayan people must continue to carry out diplomacy at a global level. This has been an extremely effective political tool that would be unwise to neglect.

In the final analysis, the new generations of Guatemalan Mayas, the so-called "children of repression," have the greatest challenges and responsibilities toward their people. The challenges they confront are many, and changes at the national, regional and global level are rapid. Achieving change at the national level will depend on a realistic vision of goals and political means congruent with global political changes. Post-war Guatemala represents another challenge at the macro-social level for contemporary Mayans. Having been born and raised in war-time, the new Maya generations, as well as the new *mestizo* generations, will have to look for ways of peaceful and respectful coexistence in a multicultural and multilingual country like Guatemala. All Guatemalans will have to insist on the possibility of unity within diversity. ♡