Post-War and Post-Electoral Guatemala:
The ‘Cohabitation’-Formula of Portillo and Rios Montt

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The government of President Alfonso Portillo that took office on January 14, 2000 is the first post-war government of Guatemala after the civil war of 36 years, which ended with the Peace Agreements in December 1996. It is only the fourth democratically elected government to follow the transfer of power to a civilian presidency after a long series of de facto governments between 1954 and 1986 of military triumvirates, dictatorships and co-governmental formulas. It is also the government of a new political class that is not formed by traditional partners: the military in active service or the aristocratic elite. The former government, that of Álvaro Arzú (1996-2000), was an archetypal example of the political aristocracy. Arzú, a member of one of the traditional patriarchal families, became the country’s president with a team of seventeen ministers, vice-ministers and senior advisers directly related to these families (Casas Arzú 1998: 106-112). The influence of the military decreased as well; from the very beginning of the current government, the military lost most of its vigilante functions over government and parliament that it had still been able to exercise over the civilian cabinets between 1986 and 2000.

The power to achieve this is based upon a singular formula of co-government between President Portillo, who is a political scientist that was exiled to Mexico from the 1970s to the early 1980s, and General (Ret.) Efraín Rios Montt, currently the president of Congress and secretary-general of the ruling party, the FRG (Frente Republicano Guatemalteco). The FRG is a party created in 1989 for the purpose of channelling the political aspirations of this political soldier. During the 1990s the FRG gradually acquired a solid share of the votes during successive presidential, parliamentary and municipal elections (Sichar Moreno 1999: 45-47). Rios Montt as the head of a de facto government cannot be elected president under the present constitution of 1985, which means he has to either delegate to or negotiate with the office of the presidency. The former general, considered in the 1970s to be the moderate officer amongst an assembly of military hardliners, had been asked to be the presidential candidate of the Christian Democrats in the mid-1970s. He won the presidential election of 1974 only to see it annulled by the ruling military factions. In 1982, that disastrous year of the civil war, a younger generation of ‘institutional officers’ staged a coup against the generals – and brothers – Romeo (who was then president of the country) and Benedicto (commander of the Armed Forces) Lucas García. Rios Montt, the leading member of the military triumvirate, was then appointed president in the same year. He was the first military dictator to look for prudent though secret negotiations with the
political leadership of the guerrilla forces. He is, however, also remembered as the president who, a couple of months later, initiated the utterly brutal and utterly successful counter-insurgency campaigns against the guerrilla forces and its alleged support by the Maya population. Most of the ‘institutional officers’ acted as the local counter-insurgency commanders. At the same time Rios Montt is remembered as the military president who restored law and order in the capital and the country, although with an extremely hard hand. Due to his far-reaching political ambitions the institutional wing of the officers corps staged another coup in 1983. Then they dismissed Rios Montt and appointed an a-political general, Oscar Mejía Victores, to accomplish the gradual transition towards civilian government. This took place, however, under a prolonged period of military guidance (called a long term ‘military project’ by Rosada-Granados, 1990, and Schirmer, 1998). Peace negotiations started at the end of the 1980s. In 1989, the URNG (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca – the united guerrilla forces) solicited the good services of the UN Secretary-General. In 1991, representatives of the government, the Armed Forces and the URNG initiated peace talks. In 1995, the government, the Armed Forces and the guerrilla forces signed a tripartite agreement on the timetable to be followed, the procedures to be respected and the agenda for a series of consecutive partial peace agreements to be considered. Representatives of the UN were invited to participate, first as ‘moderators’ and later in the form of a special peace organization called MINUGUA (United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala), which was in charge of monitoring and verifying the procedures of the various peace agreements (Franco, Esponda and Baranyi, 1996). After a long and painstaking negotiating process (Rosada-Granados, 1998; McCleary, 1999; Jonas, 2000; Kruijt and van Meurs, 2000), the final peace agreement was signed in December 1996, the first year of the presidency of Arzú.

Portillo’s inaugural address expresses the intention to make his government term a period of reconciliation, in comparison to Arzú’s ‘presidency of the peace agreements’. He announced that although the peace agreements had been negotiated by the government, the Armed Forces and the UNRG, the agreements were not the exclusive domain of Arzú’s PAN (Partido de Avanzada Nacional, created in 1985), the URNG (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca, in 1997 transformed into a political organisation by the former guerrillas) and the Armed Forces, but that the State as such should be its principal instrument. The consolidation of the peace process and national reconciliation can be described as incorporating the following: the composition of the cabinet, the demilitarization of the government, the modernization of the State, the implementation of the peace agreements, and the integration of the Maya ethnicities.

Portillo’s cabinet and advisory group reflect his efforts to form a ‘national government’. Some friends of the President of an undisputedly progressive, leftist, even ex-guerrilla background, now occupy posts of confidence such as Head of the Office of Strategic Affairs of the presidency, Secretary of Peace Affairs, head of the presidential advisory group (the institution succeeding the military-dominated Estado Mayor Presidencial; see below), and the delegados presidenciales in charge of Maya affairs and modernizing the State. Some ministers – in contrast to previous civilian governments – are of Maya descent.
Other cabinet members are FRG affiliates that have been rewarded by Rios Montt. A third group – such as the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Transport for example – is composed of the ‘new rich’, political friends of the president, who almost completely financed his electoral campaign. There are also cabinet members with ‘a dark past’. One example is the replacement of the Minister of Internal Affairs (Gobernación) – the sensitive cabinet post controlling the newly created national police – by Byron Barrientos, an FRG member of parliament whose army background is disputed. Barrientos was appointed in August 2000 to follow the unsuccessful six-month period of one of Portillo’s personal friends as minister. Barrientos, a retired army officer with an anti-subversive, security and paramilitary background, has been an ally of Rios Montt since the early 1980s. With a track record as ‘clean-up officer of criminal elements’, he used paramilitary justice during the presidency of Rios Montt and again in the indigenous Comités de Autodefensa Civil during the counter-insurgency campaigns of the 1980s and early ‘90s.

Portillo has become the President of Guatemala thanks to the electoral victory of the FRG, a party that is headed and dominated by Rios Montt and not by Portillo. Rios Montt is an ‘old fox’ with strong personal and political ambitions. His political ambitions interweave with family ties. Rios Montt presented his wife as the party’s presidential candidate during the elections of 1995. She promised ‘first to obey God and then my husband’. Currently, Rios Montt’s daughter is a member of parliament for the FRG. His grandson is the leader of the party’s youth movement.

Portillo joined the ranks of the FRG affiliates in 1995, after a five-year membership of the Christian Democrats. The political stepfather-stepson relation between the two implies a kind of ‘political cohabitation’. Rios Montt had a clear voice in the post-electoral political appointments. The two political leaders convened the cabinet members and Portillo’s advisors in June 2000 ‘to harmonize criteria and priorities’. Other meetings were also scheduled during which both Portillo and Rios Montt mutually presided. In an interview (Prensa Libre, 25 January 2001), Rios Montt admitted a government pact ‘between two gentlemen’. The FRG has a majority in Congress. It should to be noted that Arzú’s PAN, the second party in Congress after elections, has split into two factions. The smaller faction under Arzú’s former vice-president Luis Flores Asturias is acting as an independent party with a certain preference for the left. The left in parliament is loosely grouped around the URNG, a smaller ex-Christian Democrat centre-left party and an umbrella organization of newly organised civil society groups. Álvaro Colom, who was the presidential candidate for the left during the elections of 1999, is a rising star in Guatemalan politics. The FRG, the PAN and the smaller left wing parties – contrary to the situation in the 1970s and 1980s when most non-government intellectuals or technocrats were murdered, forced into exile or simply disappeared – can recruit their politico-technical advisers and bureaucrats among the new generation of academics, managerial and administrative cadres formed in the government and municipal advisory circuit during the 1990s.

The demilitarization of the government has always been one of the weak points in the successive civilian cabinets since 1985. Although it was the subject of one of the specific peace agreements, the military presence and power behind presidential and cabinet decisions remained basically intact during the
1990s. The obligatory ‘advisor’ from the presidential guard and the general with strong security and intelligence ties was visible even during the Arzú government. At the beginning of his presidency, Portillo, strongly advised to do so by Rios Montt, dismissed twenty generals and other high-ranking officers and appointed a colonel as Minister of Defence, thereby renewing the entire high command. From January to August 2000, twenty-nine high-ranking army officers were forced into early retirement, compared to four during the entire Arzú government. Although the appointment of a civilian Minister of Defence during Portillo’s presidential term had already been announced, in January 2001 a younger army officer was appointed as the new Minister of Defence. The presidential guard, since 1870 a bastion of military privilege, is now being replaced by a civilian one. In the near future, the (military) presidential advisory board will be replaced by a civilian intelligence committee, now being formed and trained. Much of this demilitarization can be attributed to the explicit support of Rios Montt in this process. In general, Portillo’s government is putting into practice the redefinition of the Armed Forces’ basic task by withdrawing them from involvement with the public and public security matters and redefining the national security agenda (Arévalo de León, 1998, 2000).

The modernization and decentralisation of the State by the government is partially implied by the peace agreements. Portillo’s government is apparently strongly committed to this issue, given the fact that the FRG traditionally acquired its core support from rural departments and less from the capital. The general idea of the reforms is to support local initiatives and local municipal and civil society committees. Initiatives for local development, reinforcement of municipal institutions of local government and plans for poverty alleviation are expected. The president has repeatedly announced on TV that he considers the decentralisation of government to be the backbone of his political programme.

In spite of these advancements, progress in the implementation of changes implied by the peace agreements has been slow during Portillo’s first year in office. A pact on taxation and tax reform is underway. However, the presidential Secretary of Peace (the counterpart institution of MINUGUA) was very unsuccessful and was replaced by Gabriel Aguilera, a more experienced politician and Guatemala’s most respected researcher on matters of military and security. MINUGUA’s Chief of Mission, former peace negotiator Jean Arnaud, was transferred to Africa, and the interim management of the mission has not made much advancement since then. In August 2000, the time schedule of the last phase of activities up to the end of 2003 was established.

The weak side of the implementation of the peace agreements of Portillo’s government is the emancipation and integration of the indigenous peoples. Although some progress has been made in this long-term process (Maya alcaldes represent thirty percent of the national total), the problem of second-class citizenship and the sharp divisions in linguistic, cultural and economic terms remain enormous. The question of indigenous rights and justice, of land titles and economic progress in general remain basically unresolved. In spite of good intentions, the State is largely absent in the Maya regions. Until the peace agreements the Maya departments were under the jurisdiction of the Armed Forces and the theatre of counter-insurgency politics. Now, however, ‘governmental void’ has been filled up by the donor community: the multilateral
banks, World Bank and IADB; the UN organization UNDP; the specialized agencies; the bilateral donors USAID, the Spanish government and others; all function as the State’s alternative in development matters. So do the Catholic and the Evangelical churches, the humanitarian organizations, the private aid agencies and various NGO’s. Of course, this is not the most preferable alternative in terms of autonomous development. And, ultimately, the systematic improvement of the livelihoods of the ‘ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples’ will determine the possibilities of long-term peace and development in Guatemala.

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