

Latin America: Myth and Reality

Much of the world still tends to view Latin Americans in terms of stereotypes. The popular image of the mustachioed bandit sporting a large sombrero and draped with cartridge belts has been replaced by the figure of the modern-day guerrilla, but the same essential image, of lawlessness and violence, persists. Another common stereotype is that of the lazy Latin American who constantly puts things off until *mañana* ("tomorrow"). The implied message here is that Latin Americans lack industry and do not know how to make the best use of their time. A third widespread image is that of the Latin lover and the cult of *machismo* (manliness).

Many of those outside the culture find it difficult to conceive of Latin America as a mixture of peoples and cultures, each one distinct from the others. Indeed, it was not so long ago that then—U.S. president Ronald Reagan, after a tour of the region, remarked with some surprise that all of the countries were "different." Stereotypes spring from ignorance and bias; images are not necessarily a reflection of reality. In the words of Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset: "In politics and history, if one takes accepted statements at face value, one will be sadly misled."

THE LATIN AMERICAN REALITY

The reality of Latin America's multiplicity of cultures is, in a word, complexity. Europeans, Africans, and the indigenous peoples of Latin America have all contributed substantially to these cultures. If one sets aside non-Hispanic influences for a moment, is it possible to argue, as does historian Claudio Veliz, that "the Iberian [Spanish and Portuguese] inheritance is an essential part of our lives and customs; Brazil and Spanish America [i.e., Spanish-speaking] have derived their personality from Iberia"?

Many scholars would disagree. For example, political scientist Lawrence S. Graham argues that "what is clear is that generalizations about Latin American cultural unity are no longer tenable." And that "one of the effects of nationalism has been to ... lead growing numbers of individuals within the region to identify with their own nation-state before they think in terms of a more amorphous land mass called Latin America."

Granted, Argentines speak of their Argentinity and Mexicans of their *Mejicanidad*. It is true that there are profound differences that separate the nations of the region. But there exists a cultural bedrock that ties Latin America to Spain and Portugal, and beyond—to the Roman Empire and the great cultures of the Mediterranean world. African influence, too, is substantial in many parts of the region. Latin America's Indians, of course, trace their roots to indigenous sources.

To understand the nature of Latin American culture, one must remember that there exist many exceptions to the generalizations; the cultural mold is not rigid. Much of what has happened in Latin America, including the evolution of its cultures, is the result of a fortunate—and sometimes an unfortunate—combination of various factors.



(United Nations photo)

In Latin America, the family is an important element in the cultural context. These children live in a poor section of Santiago, Chile.

THE FAMILY

Let us first consider the Latin American family. The family unit has survived even Latin America's uneven economic development and the pressures of modernization. Family ties are strong and dominant. These bonds are not confined to the nuclear family of father, mother, and children. The same close ties are found in the extended family (a network of second cousins, godparents, and close friends of blood relatives). In times of difficulty, the family can be counted on to help. It is a fortress against the misery of the outside world; it is the repository of dignity, honor, and respect.

AN URBAN CIVILIZATION

In a region where the interaction of networks of families is the rule and where frequent human contact is sought out, it is not

surprising to find that Latin Americans are, above all, an urban people. There are more cities of over half a million people in Latin America than in the United States.

Latin America's high percentage of urban dwellers is unusual, for urbanization is usually associated with industrialization. In Latin America, urban culture was not created by industrial growth; it actually predated it. As soon as the opportunity presented itself, the Spanish conquerors of the New World, in Veliz's words, "founded cities in which to take refuge from the barbaric, harsh, uncivilized, and rural world outside. . . . For those men civilization was strictly and uniquely a function of well-ordered city life."

The city, from the Spanish conquest until the present, has dominated the social and cultural horizon of Latin America. Opportunity is found in the city, not in the countryside. This cultural fact of life, in addition to economic motives, accounts for the continuing flow of population from rural to urban areas in Latin America.

A WORLD OF APPEARANCES

Because in their urban environment Latin Americans are in close contact with many people, appearances are important to them. There is a constant quest for prestige, dignity, status, and honor. People are forever trying to impress one another with their public worth. Hence, it is not unusual to see a blue-collar worker traveling to work dressed in a suit, briefcase in hand. It is not uncommon to see jungles of television antennas over shantytowns, although many are not connected to anything.

It is a society that, in the opinion of writer Octavio Paz, hides behind masks. Latin Americans convey an impression of importance, no matter how menial their position. Glen Dealy, a political scientist, writes: "And those of the lower class who must wait on tables, wash cars, and do gardening for a living can help to gain back a measure of self-respect by having their shoes shined by someone else, buying a drink for a friend . . . , or concealing their occupation by wearing a tie to and from work."

MACHISMO

Closely related to appearances is *machismo*. The term is usually understood solely, and mistakenly, in terms of virility—the image of the Latin lover, for example. But *machismo* also connotes generosity, dignity, and honor. In many respects, macho behavior is indulged in because of social convention; it is expected of men. *Machismo* is also a cultural trait that cuts through class lines, for the macho is admired regardless of his social position.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

If the complex nature of *machismo* is misunderstood by those outside the culture, so too is the role of women. The commonly held stereotype is that Latin American women are submissive and that the culture is dominated by males. Again, appearances mask a far more complex reality, for Latin American cultures actually allow for strong female roles. Political scientist Evelyn Stevens, for example, has found that *marianismo*—the female



(United Nations photo/Bernard P. Wolff)

The role of the indigenous woman in Latin America has been defined by centuries of tradition. This woman is spinning wool, in Chimbaso, Ecuador, just as her ancestors did.

counterpart of *machismo*—permeates all strata of Latin American society. *Marianismo* is the cult of feminine spiritual superiority that "teaches that women are semi-divine, morally superior to and spiritually stronger than men."

When Mexico's war for independence broke out in 1810, a religious symbol—the Virgin of Guadalupe—was identified with the rebels and became a rallying point for the first stirrings of Mexican nationalism. It was not uncommon in Argentine textbooks to portray Eva Perón (1919–1952), President Juan Perón's wife, in the image of the Virgin Mary, complete with a blue veil and halo. In less religious terms, one of Latin America's most popular novels, *Doña Barbara*, by Rómulo Gallegos, is the story of a female *caudillo* ("man on horseback") on the plains of Venezuela.

The Latin American woman dominates the family because of a deep-seated respect for motherhood. Personal identity is less of a problem for her because she retains her family name upon marriage and passes it on to her children. Women who work outside the home are also supposed to retain respect for their motherhood, which is sacred. In any conflict between a woman's job and the needs of her family, the employer, by custom, must grant her a leave to tend to the family's needs. Recent historical scholarship has also revealed that Latin American women have long enjoyed rights denied to women in other, more "advanced" parts of the world. For example, Latin Amer-

ican women were allowed to own property and to sign for mortgages in their own names even in colonial days. In the 1920s, they won the right to vote in local elections in Yucatán, Mexico, and in San Juan, Argentina.

Here again, though, appearances can be deceiving. Many Latin American constitutions guarantee equality of treatment, but reality is burdensome for women in many parts of the region. They do not have the same kinds of access to jobs that men enjoy; they seldom receive equal pay for equal work; and family life, at times, can be brutalizing.

WORK AND LEISURE

Work, leisure, and concepts of time in Latin America correspond to an entirely different cultural mindset than exists in Northern Europe and North America. The essential difference was demonstrated in a North American television commercial for a wine, in which two starry-eyed people were portrayed giving the Spanish toast *Salud, amor, y pesetas* ("Health, love, and money"). For a North American audience, the message was appropriate. But the full Spanish toast includes the tag line *y el tiempo para gozarlos* ("and the time to enjoy them").

In Latin America, leisure is viewed as a perfectly rational goal. It has nothing to do with being lazy or indolent. Indeed, in *Ariel*, by writer José Enrique Rodó, leisure is described within the context of the culture: "To think, to dream, to admire—these are the ministrants that haunt my cell. The ancients ranked them under the word *otium*, well-employed leisure, which they deemed the highest use of being truly rational, liberty of thought emancipated of all ignoble chains. Such leisure meant that use of time which they opposed to mere economic activity

as the expression of a higher life. Their concept of dignity was linked closely to this lofty conception of leisure." Work, by contrast, is often perceived as a necessary evil.

CONCEPTS OF TIME

Latin American attitudes toward time also reveal the inner workings of the culture. Exasperated North American businesspeople have for years complained about the *mañana, mañana* attitude of Latin Americans. People often are late for appointments; sometimes little *appears* to get done.

For the North American who believes that time is money, such behavior appears senseless. However, Glen Dealy, in his perceptive book *The Public Man*, argues that such behavior is perfectly rational. A Latin American man who spends hours over lunch or over coffee in a café is not wasting time. For here, with his friends and relatives, he is with the source of his power. Indeed, networks of friends and families are the glue of Latin American society. "Without spending time in this fashion he would, in fact, soon have fewer friends. Additionally, he knows that to leave a café precipitously for an 'appointment' would signify to all that he must not keep someone else waiting—which further indicates his lack of importance. If he had power and position the other person would wait upon his arrival. It is the powerless who wait." Therefore, friends and power relationships are more important than rushing to keep an appointment. The North American who wants the business deal will wait. In a sense, then, the North American is the client and the Latin American is the *patrón* (the "patron," or wielder of power).



(United Nations photo/Jerry Frank)

Agriculture is the backbone of much of Latin America's cultures and economies. These workers are harvesting sugarcane on a plantation in the state of Pernambuco, Brazil.

Perceptions of time in Latin America also have a broader meaning. North American students who have been exposed to Latin American literature are almost always confused by the absence of a “logical,” chronological development of the story. Time, for Latin Americans, tends to be circular rather than linear. That is, the past and the present are perceived as equally relevant—both are points on a circle. The past is as important as the present.

MYTH AND REALITY MERGE

The past that is exposed in works of Latin American literature as well as scholarly writings reflects wholly different attitudes toward what people from other cultures identify as reality. For example, in Nobel Prize—winning writer Gabriel García Márquez’s classic novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*—a fictional history of the town of Macondo and its leading family—fantasy and tall tales abound. But García Márquez drew his inspiration from stories he heard at his grandmother’s knee about Aracataca, Colombia, the real town in which he grew up. The point here is that the fanciful story of the town’s origins constitutes that town’s memory of its past. The stories give the town a common heritage and memory.

From a North American or Northern European perspective, the historical memory is faulty. From the Latin American perspective, however, it is the perception of the past that is important, regardless of its factual accuracy. Myth and reality, appearances and substance, merge.

POLITICAL CULTURE

The generalizations drawn here about Latin American society apply also to its political culture, which is essentially authoritarian and oriented toward power and power relationships. Ideology—be it liberalism, conservatism, or communism—is little more than window dressing. It is the means by which contenders for power can be separated. As Claudio Veliz has noted, regardless of the aims of revolutionary leaders, the great upheavals in Latin America in the twentieth century, without exception, ended up by strengthening the political center, which is essentially authoritarian. This was true of the Mexican Revolution (1910), the Bolivian Revolution (1952), the Cuban Revolution (1958), and the Nicaraguan Revolution (1979).

Ideology has never been a decisive factor in the historical and social reality of Latin America. But charisma and the ability to lead are crucial ingredients. José Velasco Ibarra, five times the president of Ecuador in the twentieth century, once boasted: “Give me a balcony and I will be president!” He saw his personality, not his ideology, as the key to power.

In the realm of national and international relations, Latin America often appears to those outside the culture to be in a constant state of turmoil and chaos. It seems that every day there are reports that a prominent politician has fallen from power, border clashes have intensified, or guerrillas have taken over another section of a country. But the conclusion that chaos reigns in Latin America is most often based on the visible political and social violence, not on the general nature of a country. Political violence is often local in nature, and the social fabric of the country is bound together by the enduring social stability of the family. Again, there is the dualism of what *appears to be* and what *is*.

Much of this upheaval can be attributed to the division in Latin America between the people of Mediterranean background and the indigenous Indian populations. There may be several hundred minority groups within a single country. The problems that may arise from such intense internal differences, however, are not always necessarily detrimental, because they contribute to the texture and color of Latin American culture.

SEEING BEHIND THE MASK

In order to grasp the essence of Latin America, one must ignore the stereotypes, appreciate appearances for what they are, and attempt to see behind the mask. Latin America must be appreciated as a culture in its own right, as an essentially Mediterranean variant of Western civilization.

A Latin American world view tends to be dualistic. The family constitutes the basic unit; here one finds generosity, warmth, honor, and love. Beyond the walls of the home, in the world of business and politics, Latin Americans don their masks and enter “combat.” It is a world of power relationships, of macho bravado, and of appearances. This dualism is deep-seated; scholars such as Richard Morse and Glen Dealy have traced its roots to the Middle Ages. For Latin Americans, one’s activities are compartmentalized into those fit for the City of God, which corresponds to religion, the home, and one’s intimate circle of friends; and those appropriate for the City of Man, which is secular and often ruthless and corrupt. North Americans, who tend to measure both their public and private lives by the same yardstick, often interpret Latin American dualism as hypocrisy. Nothing could be further from the truth.

For the Latin American, life exists on several planes, has purpose, and is perfectly rational. Indeed, one is tempted to suggest that many Latin American institutions—particularly the supportive network of families and friends—are more in tune with a world that can alienate and isolate than are our own. As you will see in the following reports, the social structure and cultural diversity of Latin America add greatly to its character and, paradoxically, to its stability.

Mexico (United Mexican States)



Mexico Statistics

GEOGRAPHY

Area in Square Miles (Kilometers):

764,000 (1,978,000) (about 3 times the size of Texas)

Capital (Population): Mexico City (8,500,000)

Environmental Concerns: Scarce freshwater resources; water pollution; deforestation; soil erosion; serious air pollution

Geographical Features: high, rugged mountains; low coastal plains; high plateaus; desert

Climate: varies from tropical to desert

PEOPLE

Population

Total: 104,959,594

Annual Growth Rate: 1.18%

Rural/Urban Population Ratio: 26/74

Major Languages: Spanish; various Maya, Nahuatl, and other regional indigenous languages

Ethnic Makeup: 60% Mestizo; 30% Amerindian; 9% white; 1% others

Religions: 89% Roman Catholic; 6% Protestant; 5% others

Health

Life Expectancy at Birth: 72 years (male); 77 years (female)

Infant Mortality Rate (Ratio): 21.69/1,000

Physicians Available (Ratio): 1/613

Education

Adult Literacy Rate: 92.2%

Compulsory (Ages): 6–12; free

COMMUNICATION

Telephones: 15,958,700 main lines

Daily Newspaper Circulation: 115 per 1,000 people

Televisions: 192 per 1,000

Internet Users: 10.033 million (2002)

TRANSPORTATION

Highways in Miles (Kilometers): 204,761 (329,532)

Railroads in Miles (Kilometers): 12,122 (19,510)

Usable Airfields: 1,827

Motor Vehicles in Use: 12,230,000

GOVERNMENT

Type: federal republic

Independence Date: September 16, 1810 (from Spain)

Head of State/Government: President Vicente Fox is both head of state and head of government

Political Parties: Institutional Revolutionary Party; National Action Party; Party of the Democratic Revolution; Mexican Green Ecologist Party; Workers Party

Suffrage: universal and compulsory at 18

MILITARY

Military Expenditures (% of GDP): 0.9%

Current Disputes: none

ECONOMY

Currency (\$ U.S. Equivalent): 10.79 pesos = \$1

Per Capita Income/GDP: \$9,000/\$942.2 billion

GDP Growth Rate: 1.2%

Inflation Rate: 4%

Unemployment Rate: 3.3% urban; plus considerable underemployment

Labor Force: 41.5 million

Natural Resources: petroleum; silver; copper; gold; lead; zinc; natural gas; timber

Agriculture: corn; wheat; soybeans; rice; beans; cotton; coffee; fruit; tomatoes; livestock products; wood products

Industry: food and beverages; tobacco; chemicals; iron and steel; petroleum; mining; textiles; clothing; motor

vehicles; consumer durables; tourism

Exports: \$164.8 billion (primary partners United States, Canada)

Imports: \$168.9 billion (primary partners United States, Japan, China)

SUGGESTED WEBSITES

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/mx.html#geo>

Mexico Country Report

There is a story that Hernán Cortéz, the conqueror of the Aztec Empire in the sixteenth century, when asked to describe the landscape of New Spain (Mexico), took a piece of paper in his hands and crumpled it. The analogy is apt. Mexico is a tortured land of mountains and valleys, of deserts in the north and rain forests in the south. Geography has helped to create an intense regionalism in Mexico, and the existence of hundreds of *patrias chicas* ("little countries") has hindered national integration.

Much of Mexico's territory is vulnerable to earthquakes and volcanic activity. In 1943, for example, a cornfield in one of Mexico's richest agricultural zones sprouted a volcano instead of maize. In 1982, a severe volcanic eruption in the south took several hundred lives, destroyed thousands of head of livestock, and buried crops under tons of ash. Thousands of people died when a series of earthquakes struck Mexico City in 1985.

Mexico is a nation of climatic extremes. Much-needed rains often fall so hard that most of the water runs off before it can be absorbed by the soil. When rains fail to materialize, crops die in the fields. The harsh face of the land, the unavailability of water, and erosion limit the agricultural potential of Mexico. Only 10 to 15 percent of Mexico's land can be planted with crops; but because of unpredictable weather or natural disasters, good harvests can be expected

from only 6 to 8 percent of the land in any given year.

MEXICO CITY

Mexico's central region has the best cropland. It was here that the Aztecs built their capital city, the foundations of which lie beneath the current Mexican capital, Mexico City. Given their agricultural potential as well as its focus as the commercial and administrative center of the nation, Mexico City and the surrounding region have always supported a large population. For decades, Mexico City has acted as a magnet for rural poor who have given up attempts to eke out a living from the soil. In the 1940s and 1950s, the city experienced a great population surge. In that era, however, it had the capacity to absorb the tens of thousands of migrants, and so a myth of plentiful money and employment was created. Even today, that myth exercises a strong influence in the countryside; it partially accounts for the tremendous growth of the city and its greater metropolitan area, now home to approximately 18 million people.

The size and location of Mexico City have spawned awesome problems. Because it lies in a valley surrounded by mountains, air pollution is trapped. Mexico City has the worst smog in the Western Hemisphere. Traffic congestion is among the worst in the

world. And essential services—including the provision of drinkable water, electricity, and sewers—have failed to keep pace with the city's growth in population.

Social and Cultural Changes

Dramatic social and cultural changes have accompanied Mexico's population growth. These are particularly evident in Mexico City, which daily becomes less Mexican and more cosmopolitan and international.

As Mexico City has become more worldly, English words have become more common in everyday vocabulary. "Okay," "coffee break," and "happy hour" are some examples of English idioms that have slipped into popular usage. In urban centers, quick lunches and coffee breaks have replaced the traditional large meal that was once served at noon. For most people, the afternoon siesta ("nap") is a fondly remembered custom of bygone days.

Mass communication has had an incalculable impact on culture. Television commercials primarily use models who are ethnically European in appearance—preferably white, blue-eyed, and blonde. As if in defiance of the overwhelmingly Mestizo (mixed Indian and white) character of the population, Mexican newspapers and magazines carry advertisements for products guaranteed to lighten one's skin. Success has become associated with light skin.

Another symbol of success is ownership of a television. Antennas cover rooftops even in the poorest urban slums. Acute observers might note, however, that many of the antennas are not connected to anything; the residents of many hovels merely want to convey the impression that they can afford one.

Television, however, has helped to educate the illiterate. Some Mexican soap operas, for instance, incorporate educational materials. On a given day, a show's characters may attend an adult-education class that stresses basic reading and writing skills. Both the television characters and the home-viewing audience sit in on the class. Literacy is portrayed as being essential to one's success and well-being. Mexican *telenovelas*, or "soaps," have a special focus on teenagers and problems common to adolescents. Solutions are advanced within a traditional cultural context and reaffirm the central role of the family.

Cultural Survival: *Compadrazgo*

Despite these obvious signs of change, distinct Mexican traditions and customs have not only survived Mexico's transformation but have also flourished because of it. The chaos of city life, the hundreds of thousands of migrants uprooted from rural settings, and the sense of isolation and alienation common to city dwellers the world over are in part eased by the Hispanic institution of *compadrazgo* ("cogodparenthood" or "sponsorship").

Compadrazgo is found at all levels of Mexican society and in both rural and urban areas. It is a device for building economic

and social alliances that are more enduring than simple friendship. Furthermore, it has a religious dimension as well as a secular, or everyday, application. In addition to basic religious occasions (such as baptism, confirmation, first communion, and marriage), Mexicans seek sponsors for minor religious occasions, such as the blessing of a business, and for events as common as a graduation or a boy's first haircut.

DEVELOPMENT



President Fox's plans to privatize the state-owned electrical and petrochemical industries have been stymied by Congress and union opposition who fear a loss of jobs. It is estimated that Mexico's energy industries require tens of billions of dollars of investment that must come from the private sector.

Anthropologist Robert V. Kemper observes that the institution of *compadrazgo* reaches across class lines and knits the various strands of Mexican society into a whole cloth. *Compadrazgo* performs many functions, including providing assistance from the more powerful to the less powerful and, reciprocally, providing homage from the less powerful to the more powerful. The most common choices for *compadres* are neighbors, relatives, fellow migrants, coworkers, and employers. A remarkably flexible institution, *compadrazgo* is perfectly compatible with the tensions and anxieties of urban life.

Yet even *compadrazgo*—a form of patron/client relationship—has its limita-

tions. As Mexico City has sprawled ever wider across the landscape, multitudes of new neighborhoods have been created. Many are the result of well-planned land seizures, orchestrated by groups of people attracted by the promise of the city. Technically, such land seizures are illegal; and a primary goal of the *colonos* (inhabitants of these low-income communities) is legitimization and consequent community participation.

Beginning in the 1970s, *colonos* forcefully pursued their demands for legitimization through protest movements and demonstrations, some of which revealed a surprising degree of radicalism. In response, the Mexican government adopted a two-track policy: It selectively repressed the best-organized and most radical groups of *colonos*, and it tried to co-opt the remainder through negotiation. In the early 1980s, the government created "Citizen Representation" bodies, official channels within Mexico City through which *colonos* could participate, within the system, in the articulation of their demands.

From the perspective of the *colonos*, the establishment of the citizen organizations afforded them an additional means to advance their demands for garbage collection, street paving, provision of potable water, sewage removal, and, most critically, the regularization of land tenure—that is, legitimization. In the government's view, representation for the *colonos* served to win supporters for the Mexican political structure, particularly the authority of the



(AP photo/Jose Luis Magana)

A man from the state of Puebla asks for money outside a jewelry store in Mexico City, hoping to raise enough funds to supply the peasants of his community with the water and electricity that the government has been unable to provide.

official ruling party, at a time of outspoken challenge from other political sectors.

Citizens are encouraged to work within the system; potential dissidents are transformed through the process of co-optation into collaborators. In today's Mexico City, then, patronage and clientage have two faces: the traditional one of *compadrazgo*, the other a form of state paternalism that promotes community participation.

THE BORDER

In the past few decades, driven by poverty, unemployment, and underemployment, many Mexicans have chosen not Mexico City but the United States as the place to improve their lives. Mexican workers in the United States are not a new phenomenon. During World War II, the presidents of both nations agreed to allow Mexican workers, called *braceros*, to enter the United States as agricultural workers. They were strictly regulated. In contrast, the new wave of migrants is largely unregulated. Each year, hundreds of thousands of undocumented Mexicans illegally cross the border in search of work. It has been estimated that at any given time, between 4 million and 6 million Mexicans pursue an existence as illegal aliens in the United States.

Thousands of Mexicans are able to support families with the fruits of their labors, but, as undocumented workers, they are not protected by the law. Many are callously exploited by those who smuggle them across the border as well as by employers in the United States. For the Mexican government, however, such mass emigration has been a blessing in disguise. It has served as a kind of sociopolitical safety valve, and it has resulted in an inflow of dollars sent home by the workers.

In recent years, U.S. companies and the governments of Mexican states along the border have profited from the creation of assembly plants known as *maquiladoras*. Low wages and a docile labor force are attractive to employers, while the Mexican government reaps the benefits of employment and tax dollars. Despite the appearance of prosperity along the border, it must be emphasized that chronic unemployment in other parts of Mexico ensures the misery of millions of people. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) hoped to alter these harsh realities, but after 10 years real wages are lower, the distribution of income has become more unequal, and Mexicans still cross the U.S. border in large numbers.

THE INDIAN "PROBLEM"

During the 1900s, urbanization and racial mixing changed the demographic face of Mexico. A government official once com-

mented: "A country predominately Mestizo, where Indian and white are now minorities. Mexico preserves the festivity and ceremonialism of the Indian civilizations and the religiosity and legalism of the Spanish Empire." The quotation is revealing, for it clearly identifies the Indian as a marginal member of society, as an object of curiosity.

FREEDOM



Drug-related corruption and violence hinder maintenance of a rule of law.

Election-reform laws contributed to the victory of the Alliance for Change (National Autonomous Party, Green Party) in 2000.

In Mexico, as is the case with indigenous peoples in most of Latin America, Indians in many quarters are viewed as obstacles to national integration and economic progress. There exist in Mexico more than 200 distinct Indian tribes or ethnic groups, who speak more than 50 languages or dialects. In the view of "progressive" Mexicans, the "sociocultural fragmentation" caused by the diversity of languages fosters political misunderstanding, insecurity, and regional incomprehension. Indians suffer from widespread discrimination. Language is not the only barrier to their economic progress. They have long endured the unequal practices of a ruling white and Mestizo elite. Indians may discover, for example, that they cannot expand a small industry, such as a furniture-making enterprise, because few financial institutions will lend a large amount of money to an Indian.

NATIONAL IDENTITY

Mexico's Mestizo face has had a profound impact on the attempts of intellectuals to understand the meaning of the term "Mexican." The question of national identity has always been an important theme in Mexican history; it became a particularly burning issue in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1910. Octavio Paz believes that most Mexicans have denied their origins: They do not want to be either Indian or Spaniard, but they also refuse to see themselves as a mixture of both. One result of this essential denial of one's ethnic roots is a collective inferiority complex. The Mexican, Paz writes, is insecure. To hide that insecurity, which stems from his sense of "inferiority," the Mexican wears a "mask." *Machismo* (the cult of manliness) is one example of such a mask. In Paz's estimation, aggressive behavior at a sporting event, while driving a car, or in relation-

ships with women reflects a deep-seated identity crisis.

Perhaps an analogy can be drawn from Mexican domestic architecture. Traditional Mexican homes are surrounded by high, solid walls, often topped with shards of glass and devoid of windows looking out onto the street. From the outside, these abodes appear cold and inhospitable. Once inside (once behind the mask), however, the Mexican home is warm and comfortable. Here, appearances are set aside and individuals can relax and be themselves. By contrast, many homes in the United States have vast expanses of glass that allow every passerby to see within. That whole style of open architecture, at least for homes, is jolting for many Mexicans (as well as other Latin Americans).

THE FAILURE OF THE 1910 REVOLUTION

In addition to the elusive search for Mexican identity, one of Mexican intellectuals' favorite themes is the Revolution of 1910 and what they perceive as its shortcomings. That momentous struggle (1910-1917) cost more than 1 million lives, but it offered Mexico the promise of a new society, free from the abuses of past centuries. It began with a search for truth and honesty in government; it ended with an assertion of the dignity and equality of all men and women.

The goals of the 1910 Revolution were set forth in the Constitution of 1917, a remarkable document—not only in its own era, but also today. *Article 123*, for example, which concerns labor, includes the following provisions: an eight-hour workday, a general minimum wage, and a six-week leave with pay for pregnant women before the approximate birth date plus a six-week leave with pay following the birth. During the nursing period, the mother must be given extra rest periods each day for nursing the baby. Equal wages must be paid for equal work, regardless of sex or nationality. Workers are entitled to a participation in the profits of an enterprise (i.e., profit sharing). Overtime work must carry double pay. Employers are responsible for and must pay appropriate compensation for injuries received by workers in the performance of their duties or for occupational diseases. In 1917, such provisions were viewed as astounding and revolutionary.

Unfulfilled Promises

Unfortunately, many of the goals of 1917 have yet to be achieved. A number of writers, frustrated by the slow pace of change, concluded long ago that the Mexican Revolution was dead. Leading thinkers and



(United Nations photo)

In many ways, the Mexican people have two separate identities: one public and one private. This carved door by artist Diego Rivera, located in Chapingo, depicts the dual identity that is so much a part of Mexican culture.

writers, such as Carlos Fuentes, have bitterly criticized the failure of the Revolution to shape a more equitable society. Corruption, abuse of power, and self-serving opportunism characterize Mexico today.

One of the failed goals of the Revolution, in the eyes of critics, was an agrarian-reform program that fell short of achieving a wholesale change of land ownership or even of raising the standard of living in rural areas. Over the years, however, small-scale agriculture has sown the seeds of its own destruction. Plots of land that are barely adequate for subsistence farming have been further divided by peasant farmers anxious to satisfy the inheritance rights of their sons. More recently, government price controls on grain and corn have driven many marginal producers out of the market and off their lands.

Land Reform: One Story

Juan Rulfo, a major figure in the history of postrevolutionary literature, captured the frustration of peasants who have “benefited” from agrarian reform. “But sir,” the peasant complained to the government official overseeing the land reform, “the earth is all washed away and hard. We don’t think the plow will cut into the earth ... that’s like a rock quarry. You’d have to make with a pick-axe to plant the seed, and even then you can’t be sure that anything will come up...” The official, cold and indifferent, responded: “You can state that in writing. And now you can go. You should be attacking the large-estate owners and not the government that is giving you the land.”

More frequently, landowners have attacked peasants. During the past several years in Mexico, insistent peasant demands for a new allocation of lands have been the occasion of a number of human-rights abuses—some of a very serious character. Some impatient peasants who have occupied lands in defiance of the law have been killed or have “disappeared.” In one notorious case in 1982, 26 peasants were murdered in a dispute over land in the state of Puebla. The peasants, who claimed legal title to the land, were killed by mounted gunmen, reportedly hired by local ranchers. Political parties reacted to the massacre in characteristic fashion—all attempted to manipulate the event to their own advantage rather than to address the problem of land reform. Yet years later, paramilitary bands and local police controlled by political bosses or landowners still routinely threatened and/or killed peasant activists. Indeed, access to the land was a major factor in the Maya uprising in the southern state of Chiapas that began in 1994 and, in 2004, remains unresolved.

The Promise of the Revolution

While critics of the 1910 Revolution are correct in identifying its failures, the Constitution of 1917 represents more than dashed hopes. The radical nature of the document allows governments (should they desire) to pursue aggressive egalitarian policies and still be within the law. For example, when addressing citizens, Mexican public officials often invoke the Constitution—issues tend to become less controversial if they are placed within the broad context of 1917. When President Adolfo López Mateos declared in 1960 that his government would be “extremely leftist,” he quickly added that his position would be “within the Constitution.” But some authorities argue that constitutional strictures can inhibit needed change. For example, the notoriously inefficient state petroleum monopoly (PEMEX) has been



(United Nations photo/Heidi Larson)

Mexican women won the right to vote in 1955. These women, at a political rally in Oaxaca, demonstrate their political consciousness.

critically short of investment capital for years. To allow private companies to invest in the oil industry would require a constitutional change that many Mexicans equate to a form of *vendepatria* (selling out the country). Indeed, in 2003–2004 Congress routinely rejected discussions of even limited private participation in a national industry.

Women’s Rights

Although the Constitution made reference to the equality of women in Mexican society, it was not until World War II that the women’s-rights movement gathered strength. Women won the right to vote in Mexico in 1955; by the 1970s, they had challenged laws and social customs that were prejudicial to women. Some women have served on presidential cabinets, and one became governor of the state of Colima. The most important victory for women occurred in 1974, however, when the Mexican Congress passed legislation that, in effect, asked men to grant women full equality in society—including jobs, salaries, and legal standing.

But attitudes are difficult to change with legislation, and much social behavior in Mexico still is sexist. The editor of the Mexican newspaper *Noroeste* has asserted that the most important challenge confronting president Vicente Fox is to “break the paternalistic culture.” But commentator Lourdes Galaz has noted that the absence

of professional women in positions of responsibility on Fox's government teams is an indication that "he lacks any commitment to the female vote."

Many Mexican men feel that there are male and female roles in society, regardless of law. Government, public corporations, private businesses, the Roman Catholic Church, and the armed forces represent important areas of male activity. The home, private religious rituals, and secondary service roles represent areas of female activity. One is clearly dominant, the other subordinate.

The Role of the Church

Under the Constitution of 1917, no religious organization is allowed to administer or teach in Mexico's primary, secondary, or normal (higher education) schools; nor may clergy participate in the education of workers or peasants. Yet between 1940 and 1979, private schools expanded to the point where they enrolled 1.5 million of the country's 17 million pupils. Significantly, more than half of the private-school population attended Roman Catholic schools. Because they exist despite the fact that they are prohibited by law, the Catholic schools demonstrate the kinds of accommodation and flexibility that are possible in Mexico. It is in the best interests of the ruling party to satisfy as many interest groups as is possible.

From the perspective of politicians, the Roman Catholic Church has increasingly tilted the balance in the direction of social justice in recent years. Some Mexican bishops have been particularly outspoken on the issue; but when liberal or radical elements in the Church embrace social change, they may cross into the jurisdiction of the state. Under the Constitution, the state is responsible for improving the welfare of its people. Some committed clergy, however, believe that religion must play an active role in the transformation of society; it must not only have compassion for the poor but must also act to relieve poverty and eliminate injustice.

In 1991, Mexican bishops openly expressed their concern about the torture and mistreatment of prisoners, political persecution, corruption, discrimination against indigenous peoples, mistreatment of Central American refugees, and electoral fraud. In previous years, the government would have reacted sharply against such charges emanating from the Church. But, in this case, there had been a significant rapprochement between the Catholic Church and the state in Mexico. The new relationship culminated with the exchange of diplomatic representatives and Pope John Paul II's successful and popular visit to Mexico in 1990. Despite better relations

at the highest level, in 1999 the bishop of Chiapas vigorously criticized the government for backing away from a 1996 accord between the state and leaders of a guerrilla insurgency and returning to a policy of violent repression.

MEXICO'S STABILITY

The stability of the Mexican state, as has been suggested, depends on the ability of the ruling elite to maintain a state of relative equilibrium among the multiplicity of interests and demands in the nation. The whole political process is characterized by bargaining among elites with various views on politics, social injustice, economic policy, and the conduct of foreign relations.

It was the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which held the presidency from 1929 until 2000, that set policy and decided what was possible or desirable. All change was generated from above, from the president and his advisers. Although the Constitution provides for a federal system, power was effectively centralized. In the words of one authority, Mexico, with its one-party rule, was not a democracy but, rather, "qualified authoritarianism." In the PRI era, Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa referred to Mexico as a "perfect dictatorship." Indeed, the main role of the PRI in the political system was political domination, not power sharing. Paternalistic and all-powerful, the state controlled the bureaucracies that directed the labor unions, peasant organizations, student groups, and virtually every other dimension of organized society. Even though the PRI lost the presidency in 2000, it remains the most powerful political party and retains a strong influence in Mexico's power centers.

HEALTH/WELFARE



Violence against women in Mexico first became an issue of public policy when legislation was introduced in 1990 to amend the penal code with respect to sexual crimes. Among the provisions were specialized medical and social assistance for rape victims and penalties for sexual harassment.

Historically, politicians have tended to be more interested in building their careers than in responding to the demands of their constituents. According to political scientist Peter Smith, Mexican politicians are forever bargaining with one another, seeking favors from their superiors, and communicating in a language of "exaggerated deference." They have learned how to maximize power and success within the existing political structure. By following the

"rules of the game," they move ahead. The net result is a consensus at the upper echelons of power.

In the past few decades, that consensus has been undermined. One of the great successes of the Revolution of 1910 was the rise to middle-class status of millions of people. But recent economic crises alienated that upwardly mobile sector from the PRI. People registered their dissatisfaction at the polls; in 1988, in fact, the official party finished second in Mexico City and other urban centers. In 1989, the PRI's unbroken winning streak of 60 years, facilitated by widespread electoral corruption, was broken in the state of Baja California del Norte, where the right-wing National Action Party (PAN) won the governorship. A decade of worrisome political losses prompted the PRI to consider long overdue reforms. That concern did not prevent the PRI from flagrant electoral fraud in 1988 that handed the presidency to Carlos Salinas Gortari. When it seemed apparent that the PRI would lose, the vote count was interrupted because of "computer failures". In the words of the recent autobiography of former president Miguel de la Madrid, who presided over the fraud, he was told by the PRI president: "You must proclaim the triumph of the PRI. It is a tradition that we cannot break without alarming the citizens." That "tradition" was about to end. Clearly, the PRI had lost touch with critical constituencies who were interested in fundamental change rather than party slogans and were fed up with the rampant corruption of PRI functionaries. Opposition parties continued to win elections.

In the summer of 1997, the left-of-center Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) scored stunning victories in legislative, gubernatorial, and municipal elections. For the first time, the PRI lost its stranglehold on the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Congress. Significantly, Cuauhtemoc Cardenas of the PRD was swept into power as mayor of Mexico City in the first direct vote for that position since 1928. In gubernatorial contests, the PAN won two elections and controlled an impressive seven of Mexico's 31 governorships.

Within the PRI, a new generation of leaders now perceived the need for political and economic change. President Ernesto Zedillo, worried about his party's prospects in the general elections of 2000, over the objections of old-line conservatives pushed a series of reforms in the PRI. For the first time, the party used state primaries and a national convention to choose the PRI's presidential candidate. This democratization of the party had its reflection in Zedillo's stated commitment to transform Mexican politics by giving the oppo-

sition a fair playing field. Voting was now more resistant to tampering and, as a consequence, the three major parties had to campaign for the support of the voters.

In July 2000, Vicente Fox headed a coalition of parties that adopted the name Alliance for Change and promised Mexico's electorate a "Revolution of Hope." It was a formula for success, as the PRI was swept from power. Although Fox was labeled a conservative, his platform indicated that he was above all a pragmatic politician who realized that his appeal and policies had to resonate with a wide range of sectors. Mexican voters saw in Fox someone who identified with human rights, social activism, indigenous rights, women, and the poor. He promised to be a "citizen president." Pundits described his election as a shift from an "imperial presidency" to an "entrepreneurial presidency." Indeed, Fox's economic policies, if implemented, would promote an annual growth rate of 7 percent, lower inflation, balance the budget, raise tax revenues, and improve the standard of living for Mexico's poor (who number 40 million). The private sector would drive the economy; and strategic sectors of the economy, notably electricity generation and petrochemicals, would be opened to private capital. Labor reforms would be initiated that would link salaries to productivity.

President Fox also promised a renewed dialogue with rebels in the southern state of Chiapas. There, beginning in 1994, Maya insurgents had rebelled against a government that habitually supported landowners against indigenous peoples, essentially marginalizing the latter. Led by Subcomandante Marcos, a shrewd and articulate activist who quickly became a hero not only in Chiapas but also in much of the rest of Mexico, the rebels symbolized widespread dissatisfaction with the promises of the PRI. A series of negotiations with the government from time to time interrupted the climate of violence and culminated in 1996 with the Agreements of San Andres. The government assured the Maya of their independence over issues of local governance. But lack of implementation of the agreements, in combination with attacks by the military on the Maya, doomed the accord from the outset.

ORGANIZED LABOR

Organized labor provides an excellent example of the ways in which power is wielded in Mexico and how social change occurs. Mexican trade unions have the right to organize, negotiate, and strike. Most unions historically have not been independent of the government. The major

portion of the labor movement is still affiliated with the PRI through an umbrella organization known as the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM). The Confederation, with a membership of 3.5 million, is one of the PRI's most ardent supporters. Union bosses truck in large crowds for campaign rallies, help PRI candidates at election time, and secure from union members approval of government policies. Union bosses have been well rewarded by the system they have helped to support. Most have become moderately wealthy and acquired status and prestige. Fully one third of Mexico's senators and congressional representatives, as well as an occasional governor, come from the ranks of union leadership.

ACHIEVEMENTS



Mexican writers and artists have won world acclaim. The works of novelists such as Carlos Fuentes, Mariano Azuela, and Juan Rulfo have been translated into many languages. The graphic-art styles of Posada and the mural art of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Siqueiros are distinctively Mexican.

Such a relationship must be reciprocal if it is to function properly. The CTM has used an impressive array of left-wing slogans for years to win gains for its members. It has projected an aura of radicalism when, in fact, it is not. The image is important to union members, however, for it gives them the feeling of independence from the government, and it gives a role to the true radicals in the movement. In the 1980s, cracks began to appear in the foundation of union support for the government. The economic crisis of that decade resulted in sharp cutbacks in government spending. Benefits and wage increases fell far behind the pace of inflation; layoffs and unemployment led many union members to question the value of their special relationship with the PRI. Indeed, during the 1988 elections, the Mexican newspaper *El Norte* reported that Joaquín Hernández Galicia, the powerful leader of the Oil Workers' Union, was so upset with trends within the PRI that he directed his membership to vote for opposition candidates. Not surprisingly, then, President Salinas responded by naming a new leader to the Oil Workers' Union.

Independent unions outside the Confederation of Mexican Workers capitalized on the crisis and increased their memberships. For the first time, these independent unions possessed sufficient power to challenge PRI policies. To negate the challenge from the independents, the CTM invited them to join the larger organization. Incorporation

of the dissidents into the system is seen as the only way in which the system's credibility can be maintained. It illustrates the state's power to neutralize opposing forces by absorbing them into its system. The demands of labor today are strong, which presents both a challenge and an opportunity to the new government. If he is to implement successfully his economic policies, President Fox must count on the support of organized labor. While most of the leadership still identifies with its traditional patron, the PRI, if labor is to win benefits from the new government, it must cooperate. Fox is perfectly capable of using government patronage to undermine PRI influence with the workers and forge a new base of support for his Alliance for Change.

ECONOMIC CRISIS

As has been suggested, a primary threat to the consensus politics of the PRI came from the economic crisis that began to build in Mexico and other Latin American countries (notably Brazil, Venezuela, and Argentina) in the early 1980s. In the 1970s, Mexico undertook economic policies designed to foster rapid and sustained industrial growth. Credit was readily available from international lending agencies and banks at low rates of interest. Initially, the development plan seemed to work, and Mexico achieved impressive economic growth rates, in the range of 8 percent per year. The government, confident in its ability to pay back its debts from revenues generated by the vast deposits of petroleum beneath Mexico, recklessly expanded its economic infrastructure.

A glut on the petroleum market in late 1981 and 1982 led to falling prices for Mexican oil. Suddenly, there was not enough money available to pay the interest on loans that were coming due, and the government had to borrow more money—at very high interest rates—to cover the unexpected shortfall. By the end of 1982, between 35 and 45 percent of Mexico's export earnings were devoured in interest payments on a debt of \$80 billion. Before additional loans could be secured, foreign banks and lending organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund, demanded that the Mexican government drastically reduce state spending. This demand translated into layoffs, inadequate funding for social-welfare programs, and a general austerity that devastated the poor and undermined the high standard of living of the middle class.

Although political reform was important to then-president Salinas, he clearly recognized that economic reform was of

more compelling concern. Under Salinas, the foreign debt was renegotiated and substantially reduced.

It was hoped that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) among Mexico, the United States, and Canada would shore up the Mexican economy and generate jobs. After a decade there is a wide range of disagreement over NAFTA's success. The Carnegie Endowment of International Peace concluded in November 2003 that the agreement failed to generate significant job growth and actually hurt hundreds of thousands of subsistence farmers who could not compete with "highly efficient and heavily subsidized American farmers." A World Bank report argued that NAFTA had "brought significant economic and social benefits to the Mexican economy," and that Mexico would have been worse off without the pact. Part of the problem lies with the globalization of the economy. Mexico has lost thousands of jobs to China as well as El Salvador, where labor is 20 percent cheaper and less strictly regulated. Five hundred of Mexico's 3,700 *maquiladoras* have closed their doors since 2001. Opposition politicians, nationalists, and those concerned with the more negative aspects of capitalism have generally fought all free-trade agreements, which they see as detrimental to Mexico's sovereignty and independence of action. Perhaps the most interesting development is not economic, but political. Analysts have noted that NAFTA has contributed to a trend toward more representative government in Mexico and that globalization of the economy undercut the state-centered regime of the PRI. Despite advances in some areas, there are still far too many Mexicans whose standard of living is below the poverty level. Of the 40 million poor, 18 million are characterized as living in "extreme poverty." Income distribution is skewed, with the richest 20 percent of the population in control of 58 percent of the nation's wealth, while the poorest 20 percent control only 4 percent.

Many of those employed workers, now estimated at 150,000 per year, will continue to make their way to the U.S. border, which remains accessible despite the passage of immigration-reform legislation and more rigorous patrolling of the border. Others will be absorbed by the so-called informal sector, or underground economy. When walking in the streets of Mexico City, one quickly becomes aware that there exists an economy that is not recognized, licensed, regulated, or "protected" by the government. Yet in the 1980s, this informal sector of the economy produced 25 to 35 percent of Mexico's gross domestic

product and served as a shield for millions of Mexicans who might otherwise have been reduced to destitution. According to George Grayson, "Extended families, which often have several members working and others hawking lottery tickets or shining shoes, establish a safety net for upward of one third of the workforce in a country where social security coverage is limited and unemployment compensation is nonexistent."

FOREIGN POLICY

The problems created by Mexico's economic policy have been balanced by a visibly successful foreign policy. Historically, Mexican foreign policy, which is noted for following an independent course of action, has been used by the government for domestic purposes. In the 1980s, President Miguel de la Madrid identified revolutionary nationalism as the historical synthesis, or melding, of the Mexican people. History, he argued, taught Mexicans to be nationalist in order to resist external aggression, and history made Mexico revolutionary in order to enable it to transform unequal social and economic structures. These beliefs, when tied to the formulation of foreign policy, have fashioned policies with a definite leftist bias. The country has often been sympathetic

to social change and has identified, at least in principle, with revolutionary causes all over the globe. The Mexican government opposed the economic and political isolation of Cuba that was so heartily endorsed by the United States. It supported the Marxist regime of Salvador Allende in Chile at a time when the United States was attempting to destabilize his government. Mexico was one of the first nations to break relations with President Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua and to recognize the legitimacy of the struggle of the Sandinista guerrillas. In 1981, Mexico joined with France in recognizing the opposition front and guerrilla coalition in El Salvador. In the 1990s Mexico, together with several other Latin American countries, urged a negotiated solution to the armed conflict in Central America. It is also likely that Jorge Castañeda, the new foreign minister, will become very much involved in regional issues such as the internal conflict in Colombia, probably to the displeasure of the United States.

Mexico's leftist foreign policy balances conservative domestic policies. A foreign policy identified with change and social justice has the effect of softening the impact of leftist demands in Mexico for land reform or political change. Mexicans, if displeased with government domestic pol-

icies, were soothed by a vigorous foreign policy that placed Mexico in a leadership role, often in opposition to the United States. With Fox as president, there has been a more centrist position in Mexico's foreign policy, especially with regard to economic-policy formulation and the negotiation of free-trade agreements.

HARD TIMES

Mexico's future is fraught with uncertainty. In December 1994, the economy collapsed after the government could no longer sustain an overvalued peso. In just a few months, the peso fell in value by half,

Timeline: PAST

- 1519**
Hernán Cortés lands at Vera Cruz
- 1521**
Destruction of the Aztec Empire
- 1810**
Mexico proclaims its independence from Spain
- 1846–1848**
War with the United States; Mexico loses four fifths of its territory
- 1862–1867**
The French take over the Mexican throne and install Emperor Maximilian
- 1876–1910**
Era of dictator Porfirio Díaz; modernization
- 1910–1917**
The Mexican Revolution
- 1934–1940**
Land distribution under President Cárdenas
- 1938**
Nationalization of foreign petroleum companies
- 1955**
Women win the right to vote
- 1968**
The Olympic Games are held in Mexico City; riots and violence
- 1980s**
Severe economic crisis; the peso is devalued; inflation soars; the foreign-debt crisis escalates; Maya insurgency in the state of Chiapas
- 1990s**
NAFTA is passed; the PRI loses ground in legislative, gubernatorial, and municipal elections

PRESENT

- 2000s**
The PRI is ousted from power
Vicente Fox is elected president
Presidential elections scheduled for 2006

while the stock market, in terms of the peso, suffered a 38 percent drop. The crash was particularly acute because the Salinas government had not invested foreign aid in factories and job creation, but had instead put most of the money into Mexico's volatile stock market. It then proceeded to spend Mexico's reserves to prop up the peso when the decline gathered momentum. Salinas's successor, President Ernesto Zedillo, had to cut public spending, sell some state-owned industries, and place strict limits on wage and price increases.

To further confound the economic crisis, the Maya insurgency in Chiapas succeeded in generating much antigovernment support in the rest of Mexico. President Zedillo claimed that the rebels, who call themselves the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN, named for Emiliano Zapata, one of the peasant leaders of the Mexican Revolution), were "neither popular, nor indigenous, nor from Chiapas." Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz condemned the uprising as an "interruption of Mexico's ongoing political and economic liberalization." The interests of the EZLN leadership, he said, were those of intellectuals rather than those of the peasantry. In other words, what happened in Chiapas was an old story of peasant Indians being used by urban intellectuals—in this instance, to challenge the PRI. Indeed, the real identity of "Subcomandante Marcos" was revealed as Rafael Sebastian Guillen Vicente, a former professor from a rich provincial family who had worked with Tzotzil and Tzeltal Maya Indians since 1984.

George Collier, however, argues that the rebellion is a response to changing governmental policies, agricultural modernization, and cultural and economic isolation. While the peasants of central Chiapas profited from PRI policies, those in the eastern part of the state were ignored. Thus, the rebellion, in essence, was a demand to be included in the largesse of the state. The demands of the EZLN were instructive: democratic reform by the state, limited autonomy for indigenous communities, an antidiscrimination law, teachers, clinics, doctors, electricity, better housing, child-care centers, and a radio station for indigenous peoples. Only vague statements were made about subdivision of large ranches.

During the presidential campaign of 2000, Fox promised to address the complaints raised by the EZLN. Legislation introduced in Congress in the spring of 2001 was designed to safeguard and promote the rights of indigenous peoples. To call attention to the debate, the Zapatistas, with government protection, embarked on a two-week-long march to Mexico City. Significantly, the marchers carried not only the flag of the EZLN but also that of Mexico. But Congress felt that the legislation could damage the nation's unity and harm the interests of local landlords in the south. When a watered-down version of the legislation was passed, Subcomandante Marcos vowed to continue the rebellion. President Fox urged that the talks continue and publicly complained about the congressional action. This was an astute move, because

the EZLN could lose an important ally if it adopted an intransigent position.

In summary, the insurgency can be seen to have several roots and to serve many purposes. It is far more complex than a "simple" uprising of an oppressed people.

THE FUTURE

Journalist Igor Fuser, writing in the Brazilian newsweekly *Veja*, observed: "For pessimists, the implosion of the PRI is the final ingredient needed to set off an apocalyptic bomb composed of economic recession, guerrilla war, and the desperation of millions of Mexicans facing poverty. For optimists, the unrest is a necessary evil needed to unmask the most carefully camouflaged dictatorship on the planet."

The elections of 2000 tore away that mask, but persistent problems remain. Corruption, endemic drug-related violence, poverty, unemployment and underemployment, high debt, and inflation are daunting. President Fox admitted in his state of the nation address in September 2003 that he had failed to implement the "historic transformations our times demand." Congress has blocked many of his initiatives, the conflict with the Zapatista of Chiapas continued to simmer, jobs are being lost to the globalization of the economy, and the PRI is intent on mounting a comeback in the presidential elections scheduled for 2006. Change is critical but the policies of transformation render it problematic.

Central America



Much of Central America shares important historical milestones. In 1821, the states of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua declared themselves independent of Spain. In 1822, they joined the Empire of Mexico; in 1823, they formed the United Provinces of Central America. this union lasted until 1838, when each member state severed its relations with the federation and went its own way. Since 1838, there have been more than 25 attempts to restore the union—but to no avail.

Central America: Lands in Turmoil

LIFE IN THE MOUTH OF THE VOLCANO

Sons of the Shaking Earth, a well-known study of Middle America by anthropologist Eric Wolf, captures in its title the critical interplay between people and the land in Central America. It asserts that the land is violent and that the inhabitants of the region live in an environment that is often shaken by natural disaster.

The dominant geographical feature of Central America is the impressive and forbidding range of volcanic mountains that runs from Mexico to Panama. These mountains have always been obstacles to communication, to the cultivation of the land, and to the national integration of the countries in which they lie. The volcanoes rest atop major fault lines; some are dormant, others are active, and new ones have appeared periodically. Over the centuries, eruptions and earthquakes have destroyed thousands of villages. Some have recovered, but others remain buried beneath lava and ash. Nearly every Central American city has been destroyed at one time or another; and some, such as Managua, Nicaragua, have suffered repeated devastation.

An ancient Indian philosophy speaks of five great periods of time, each doomed to end in disaster. The fifth period, which is the time in which we now live, is said to terminate with a world-destroying earthquake. "Thus," writes Wolf, "the people of Middle [Central] America live in the mouth of the volcano. Middle America ... is one of the proving grounds of humanity."

Earthquakes and eruptions are not the only natural disasters that plague the region. Rains fall heavily between May and October each year, and devastating floods are common. On the Caribbean coast, hurricanes often strike in the late summer and early autumn, threatening coastal cities and leveling crops.

The constant threat of natural disaster has had a deep impact on Central Americans' views of life and development. Death and tragedy have conditioned their attitudes toward the present and the future.

GEOGRAPHY

The region is not only violent but also diverse. In political terms, Central America consists of seven independent nations: Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. With the exception of Costa Rica and Panama, where national borders coincide with geographical and human frontiers, political boundaries are artificial and were marked out in defiance of both the lay of the land and the cultural groupings of the region's peoples.

Geographically, Central America can be divided into four broad zones: Petén-Belize; the Caribbean coasts of Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua; the Pacific volcanic region; and Costa Rica-Panama.

The northern Guatemalan territory of Petén and all of Belize are an extension of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula. The region is heavily forested with stands of mahogany, cedar, and pine, whose products are a major source of revenue for Belize.



(United Nations photo/Sygma/J. P. Laffont)

The treat of earthquakes and other natural disasters affects all Central Americans. Above, residents of Guatemala City, Guatemala, begin the long clean-up process after an earthquake.

The Caribbean lowlands, steamy and disease-ridden, are sparsely settled. The inhabitants of the Caribbean coast in Nicaragua include Miskito Indians and the descendants of English-speaking blacks who first settled the area in the seventeenth century. The Hispanic population there was small until recently. Coastal Honduras, however, presents a different picture. Because of heavy investments by foreign companies in the region's banana industry, it is a pocket of relative prosperity in the midst of a very poor country whose economy is based on agricultural production and textiles.

The Pacific volcanic highlands are the cultural heartland of Central America. Here, in highland valleys noted for their springlike climate, live more than 80 percent of the population of Central America; here are the largest cities. In cultural terms, the highlands are home to the whites, mixed bloods, Hispanized Indians known as Ladinos, and pure-blooded Indians who are descended from the Maya. These highland groups form a striking ethnic contrast to the Indians (such as the Miskito), mulattos, and blacks of the coastlands. The entire country of El Salvador falls within this geographical zone. Unlike its neighbors, there is a uniformity to the land and people of El Salvador.



(United Nations photo/Jerry Frank)

Central American Indians are firmly tied to their traditional beliefs and have strongly resisted the influence of European culture, as evidenced by this Cuna woman of Panama's Tubala Island.

The fourth region, divided between the nations of Costa Rica and Panama, constitutes a single geographical unit. Mountains form the spine of the isthmus. In Costa Rica, the Central Mesa has attracted 70 percent of the nation's population, because of its agreeable climate.

CLIMATE AND CULTURE

The geographic and biological diversity of Central America—with its cool highlands and steaming lowlands, its incredible variety of microclimates and environments, its seemingly infinite types of flora and fauna, and its mineral wealth—has been a major factor in setting the course of the cultural history of Central America. Before the Spanish conquest, the environmental diversity favored the cultural cohesion of peoples. The products of one environmental niche could easily be exchanged for the products of another. In a sense, valley people and those living higher up in the mountains depended on one another. Here was one of the bases for the establishment of the advanced culture of the Maya.

The cultural history of Central America has focused on the densely populated highlands and Pacific plains—those areas most favorable for human occupation. Spaniards settled in the same regions, and centers of national life are located there today. But if geography has been a factor in bringing peoples to-

gether on a local level, it has also contributed to the formation of regional differences, loyalties, interests, and jealousies. Neither Maya rulers nor Spanish bureaucrats could triumph over the natural obstacles presented by the region's harsh geography. The mountains and rain forests have mocked numerous attempts to create a single Central American state.

CULTURES IN CONFLICT

Although physical geography has interacted with culture, the contact between Indians and Spaniards since the sixteenth century has profoundly shaped the cultural face of today's Central America. According to historian Ralph Woodward, the religious traditions of the indigenous peoples, with Christianity imperfectly superimposed over them, "together with the violence of the Conquest and the centuries of slavery or serfdom which followed, left clear impressions on the personality and mentality of the Central American Indian."

To outsiders, the Indians often appear docile and obedient to authority, but beneath this mask may lie intense emotions, including distrust and bitterness. The Indians' vision is usually local and oriented toward the village and family; they do not identify themselves as Guatemalan or Nicaraguan. When challenged, Indians have fought to defend their rights, and a long succession of rebellions from colonial days until the present attests to their sense of what is just and what is not. The Indians, firmly tied to their traditional beliefs and values, have tried to resist modernization, despite government programs and policies designed to counter what urbanized whites perceive as backwardness and superstition.

Population growth, rather than government programs and policies, has had a great impact on the region's Indian peoples and has already resulted in the recasting of cultural traditions. Peasant villages in much of Central America have traditionally organized their ritual life around the principle of *mayordomía*, or sponsorship. Waldemar Smith, an anthropologist who has explored the relationship between the *fiesta* (ceremony) system and economic change, has shown the impact of changing circumstances on traditional systems. In any Central American community in any given year, certain families are appointed *mayordomos*, or stewards, of the village saints; they are responsible for organizing and paying for the celebrations in their names. This responsibility ordinarily lasts for a year. One of the outstanding features of the *fiesta* system is the phenomenal costs that the designated family must bear. An individual might have to expend the equivalent of a year's earnings or more to act as a sponsor in a community *fiesta*. Psychological and social burdens must also be borne by the *mayordomos*, for they represent their community before its saints. *Mayordomos*, who in essence are priests for a year, are commonly expected to refrain from sexual activity for long periods as well as to devote much time to ritual forms.

The office, while highly prestigious, can also be dangerous. Maya Indians, for example, believe that the saints use the weather as a weapon to punish transgressions, and extreme weather is often traced to ritual error or sins on the part of the *mayordomo*, who might on such occasions actually be jailed.

Since the late 1960s, the socioeconomic structure of much of the area heavily populated by Indians has changed, forcing

changes in traditional cultural forms, including the fiesta system. Expansion of markets and educational opportunity, the absorption of much of the workforce in seasonal plantation labor, more efficient transportation systems, and population growth have precipitated change. Traditional festivals in honor of a community's saints have significantly diminished in importance in a number of towns. Costs have been reduced or several families have been made responsible for fiesta sponsorship. This reflects not only modernization but also crisis. Some communities have become too poor to support themselves—and the expensive fiestas have, naturally, suffered.

This increasing poverty is driven in part by population growth, which has exerted tremendous pressure on people's access to land. Families that cannot be sustained on traditional lands must now seek seasonal wage labor on sugarcane, coffee, or cotton plantations. Others emigrate. The net result is a culture under siege. Thus, while the fiestas may not vanish, they are surely in the process of change.

The Ladino World

The word *Ladino* can be traced back to the Roman occupation of Spain. It referred to someone who had been "Latinized" and was therefore wise in the ways of the world. The word has several meanings in Central America. In Guatemala, it refers to a person of mixed blood, or *Mestizo*. In most of the rest of Central America, however, it refers to an Indian who has adopted white culture.

The Ladinos are caught between two cultures, both of which initially rejected them. The Ladinos attempted to compensate for their lack of cultural roots and cultural identity by aggressively carving out a place in Central American society. Often acutely status-conscious, Ladinos typically contrast sharply with the Indians they physically resemble. Ladinos congregate in the larger towns and cities, speak Spanish, and seek a livelihood as shopkeepers or landowners. They compose the local elite in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador (the latter country was almost entirely Ladinoized by the end of the nineteenth century), and they usually control regional politics. They are often the most aggressive members of the community, driven by the desire for self-advancement. Their vision is frequently much broader than that of the Indian; they have a perspective that includes the capital city and the nation. The vast majority of the population speak Spanish; few villages retain the use of their original, native tongues.

The Elite

For the elite, who are culturally "white," the city dominates their social and cultural horizons. For them, the world of the Indian is unimportant—save for the difficult questions of social integration and modernization. Businesspeople and bureaucrats, absentee landlords, and the professional class of doctors, lawyers, and engineers constitute an urban elite who are cosmopolitan and sophisticated. Wealth, status, and "good blood" are the keys to elite membership.

The Disadvantaged

The cities have also attracted disadvantaged people who have migrated from poverty-stricken rural regions in search of eco-



(United Nations photo)

Many Central Americans migrate from rural areas to the urban centers, but it is frequently beyond the capacity of urban areas to support them. The child pictured above has to get the family's water from a single, unsanitary community tap.

nomie opportunity. Many are self-employed as peddlers, small-scale traders, or independent craftspeople. Others seek low-paying, unskilled positions in industry, construction work, and transportation. Most live on the edge of poverty and are the first



(World Bank photo/Jaime Martin-Escobal)

The migration of poor rural people to Central American urban centers has caused large numbers of squatters to take up residence in slums. The crowded conditions in urban El Salvador, as shown in this photograph, are typical results of this phenomenon.

to suffer in times of economic recession. But there exist Hispanic institutions in this harsh world that help people of all classes to adjust. In each of the capital cities of Central America, lower-sector people seek help and sustenance from the more advantaged elements in society. They form economic and social alliances that are mutually beneficial. For example, a tradesman might approach a well-to-do merchant and seek advice or a small loan. In return, he can offer guaranteed service, a steady supply of crafts for the wholesaler, and a price that is right. It is a world built on mutual exchanges.

These networks, when they function, bind societies together and ease the alienation and isolation of the less advantaged inhabitants. Of course, networks that cut through class lines can effectively limit class action in pursuit of reforms; and, in many instances, the networks do not exist or are exploitive.

POPULATION MOVEMENT

For many years, Central Americans have been peoples in motion. Migrants who have moved from rural areas into the cities have often been driven from lands they once owned, either because of the expansion of landed estates at the expense of the smaller landholdings, population pressure, or division of the land into plots so small that subsistence farming is no longer possible. Others have moved to the cities in search of a better life.

Population pressure on the land is most intense in El Salvador. No other Latin American state utilizes the whole of its

territory to the extent that El Salvador does. Most of the land is still privately owned and is devoted to cattle farming or to raising cotton and coffee for the export market. There is not enough land to provide crops for a population that has grown at one of the most rapid rates in the Western Hemisphere. There are no unpopulated lands left to occupy. Agrarian reform, even if successful, will still leave hundreds of thousands of peasants without land.

Many Salvadorans have moved to the capital city of San Salvador in search of employment. Others have crossed into neighboring countries. In the 1960s, thousands moved to Honduras, where they settled on the land or were attracted to commerce and industry. By the end of that decade, more than 75 percent of all foreigners living in Honduras had crossed the border from El Salvador. Hondurans, increasingly concerned by the growing presence of Salvadorans, acted to stem the flow and passed restrictive and discriminatory legislation against the immigrants. The tension, an ill-defined border, and festering animosity ultimately brought about a brief war between Honduras and El Salvador in 1969.

Honduras, with a low population density (about 139 persons per square mile, as compared to El Salvador's 721), has attracted population not only from neighboring countries but also from the Caribbean. Black migrants from the "West Indian" Caribbean islands known as the Antilles have been particularly attracted to Honduras's north coast, where they have been able to find employment on banana plantations or in the light industry that has increasingly been established in the

area. The presence of these Caribbean peoples in moderate numbers has more sharply focused regional differences in Honduras. The coast, in many respects, is Caribbean in its peoples' identity and outlook; while peoples of the highlands of the interior identify with the capital city of Tegucigalpa, which is Hispanic in culture.

THE REFUGEE PROBLEM

Recent turmoil in Central America created yet another group of people on the move—refugees from the fighting in their own countries or from the persecution by extremists of the political left and right. For example, thousands of Salvadorans crowded into Honduras's western province. In the south, Miskito Indians, fleeing from Nicaragua's Sandinista government, crossed the Río Coco in large numbers. Additional thousands of armed Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries camped along the border. Only in 1990–1991 did significant numbers of Salvadorans move back to their homeland. With the declared truce between Sandinistas and Contras and the election victory of Violeta Chamorro, Nicaraguan refugees were gradually repatriated. Guatemalan Indians sought refuge in southern Mexico, and Central Americans of all nationalities resettled in Costa Rica and Belize.

El Salvadorans, who began to emigrate to the United States in the 1960s, did so in much greater numbers with the onset of the El Salvadoran Civil War, which killed approximately 70,000 people and displaced about 25 percent of the nation's population. The Urban Institute, a Washington, D.C.–based research group, estimated in 1986 that there were then about ¾ million El Salvadorans—of a total population of just over 5 million—living in the United States. Those emigrants became a major source of dollars for El Salvador; it is estimated that they now send home about \$500 million a year.

While that money has undoubtedly helped to keep the nation's economy above water, it has also generated, paradoxically, a good deal of anti-U.S. sentiment in El Salvador. Lindsey Gruson, a reporter for *The New York Times*, studied the impact of expatriate dollars in Intipuca, a town 100 miles southwest of the capital, and concluded that they had a profound impact on Intipucueño culture. The influx of money was an incentive not to work, and townspeople said that the "free" dollars "perverted cherished values" and were "breaking up many families."

THE ROOTS OF VIOLENCE

Central America still feels the effects of civil war and violence. Armies, guerrillas, and terrorists of the political left and right have exacted a high toll on human lives and property. The civil wars and guerrilla movements that spread violence to the region sprang from each of the societies in question.

A critical societal factor was (and remains) the emergence of a middle class in Central America. In some respects, people of the middle class resemble the Mestizos or Ladinos, in that their wealth and position have placed them above the masses. But, like the Mestizos and Ladinos, they have been denied access to the upper reaches of power, which is the special preserve of the elite. Since World War II, it has been members of the middle



(UN Photo 135/228/Syoma/J. P. Laffont)

Guatemala, City, Guatemala, has attracted numerous people from poverty-stricken rural regions in search of economic opportunities. Many are self-employed as peddlers, small-scale traders, or independent craftspeople. These Guatemalan Indians are buying household supplies in a makeshift outdoor market.

class who have called for reform and a more equitable distribution of the national wealth. They have also attempted to forge alliances of opportunity with workers and peasants.

Nationalistic, assertive, restless, ambitious, and, to an extent, ruthless, people of the middle class (professionals, intellectuals, junior officers in the armed forces, office workers, businesspeople, teachers, students, and skilled workers) demand a greater voice in the political world. They want governments that are responsive to their interests and needs; and, when governments have proven unresponsive or hostile, elements of the middle class have chosen confrontation.

In the civil war that removed the Somoza family from power in Nicaragua in 1979, for example, the middle class played a critical leadership role. Guerrilla leaders in El Salvador were middle class in terms of their social origins, and there was significant middle-class participation in the unrest in Guatemala.

Indeed, Central America's middle class is among the most revolutionary groups in the region. Although middle-class people are well represented in antigovernment forces, they also resist changes that would tend to elevate those below them on the social scale. They are also significantly represented among right-wing groups, whose reputation for conservative views is accompanied by systematic terror.

Other societal factors also figure prominently in the violence in Central America. The rapid growth of population since the 1960s has severely strained each nation's resources. Many rural areas have become overpopulated, poor agricultural practices have caused extensive soil erosion, the amount of land available to subsistence farmers is inadequate, and poverty and misery are pervasive. These problems have combined to compel rural peoples to migrate to the cities or to whatever frontier lands are still available. In Guatemala, government policy drove Indians from ancestral villages in the highlands to "resettlement" villages in the low-lying, forested Petén to the north. Indians displaced in this manner often—not surprisingly—joined guerrilla movements. They were not attracted to insurgency by the allure of socialist or communist ideology; they simply responded to violence and the loss of their lands with violence against the governments that pursued such policies.

The conflict in this region does not always pit landless, impoverished peasants against an unyielding elite. Some members of the elite see the need for change. Most peasants have not taken up arms, and the vast majority wish to be left in peace. Others who desire change may be found in the ranks of the military or within the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. Reformers are drawn from all sectors of society. It is thus more appropriate to view the conflict in Central America as a civil war rather than a class struggle, as civil wars cut through the entire fabric of a nation.

Much of today's criminal violence in urban areas of Central America, and particularly in El Salvador and Honduras, is a direct consequence of the years of civil war. Young children of refugees, who relocated to large United States cities as adolescents, often imitated the gang culture to which they were exposed. When they returned to Central America and encountered a society that they did not recognize, they could not find jobs and the gang culture was replicated.

ECONOMIC PROBLEMS

Central American economies, always fragile, have in recent years been plagued by a combination of vexing problems. Foreign debt, inflation, currency devaluations, recession, and, in some instances, outside interference have had deleterious effects on the standard of living in all the countries. Civil war, insurgency, corruption and mismanagement, and population growth have added fuel to the crisis—not only in the region's economies but also in their societies. Nature, too has played an important contributory role in the region's economic and social malaise. Hurricane Mitch, which struck Central America in 1998, killed thousands, destroyed crops and property, and disrupted the infrastructure of roads and bridges in Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

Civil war in El Salvador brought unprecedented death and destruction and was largely responsible for economic deterioration and a decline of well over one third of per capita income from 1980 to 1992. Today, fully two thirds of the working-age population are either unemployed or underemployed. The struggle of the Sandinista government of Nicaragua against U.S.-sponsored rebels routinely consumed 60 percent of government spending; even with peace, much of the budget was earmarked for economic recovery. In Guatemala, a savage civil war lasted more than a generation; took more than 140,000 lives; strained the economy; depressed wages; and left unaddressed pressing social problems in education, housing, and welfare. Although the violence has subsided, the lingering fears conditioned by that violence have not. U.S. efforts to force the ouster of Panamanian strongman Manuel Antonio Noriega through the application of economic sanctions probably harmed middle-class businesspeople in Panama more than Noriega.

Against this backdrop of economic malaise there have been some creative attempts to solve, or at least to confront, pressing problems. In 1987, the Costa Rican government proposed a series of debt-for-nature swaps to international conservation groups, such as the Nature Conservancy. The first of the transactions took place in 1988, when several organizations purchased more than \$3 million of Costa Rica's foreign debt at 17 percent of face value. The plan called for the government to exchange with the organizations part of Costa Rica's external debt for government bonds; the conservation groups would then invest the earnings of the bonds in the management and protection of Costa Rican national parks. According to the National Wildlife Federation, while debt-for-nature swaps are not a cure-all for the Latin American debt crisis, at least the swaps can go some distance toward protecting natural resources and encouraging ecologically sound, long-term economic development.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL DIMENSIONS OF CONFLICT

The continuing violence in much of Central America suggests that internal dynamics are perhaps more important than the overweening roles formerly ascribed to Havana, Moscow, and Washington. The removal of foreign "actors" from the stage lays bare the real reasons for violence in the region: injustice, power, greed, revenge, and racial and ethnic discrimination. Havana, Moscow, and Washington, among others, merely used

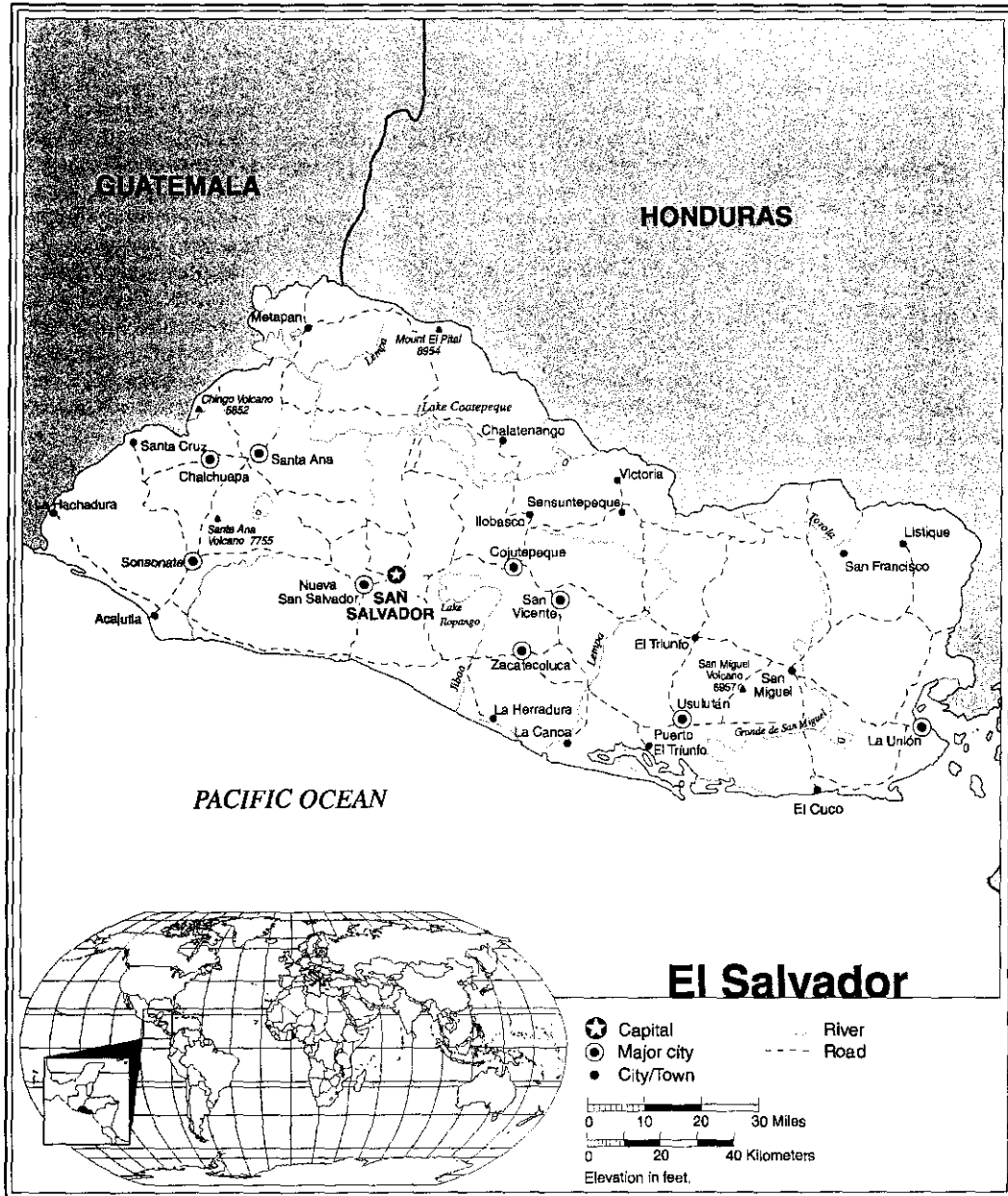
Central American violence in pursuit of larger policy goals. And Central American governments and guerrilla groups were equally adept at using foreign powers to advance their own interests, be they revolutionary or reactionary.

Panama offers an interesting scenario in this regard. It, like the rest of Central America, is a poor nation comprised of subsistence farmers, rural laborers, urban workers, and unemployed and underemployed people dwelling in the shantytowns ringing the larger cities. For years, the pressures for reform in Panama were skillfully rechanneled by the ruling elite toward

the issue of the Panama Canal. Frustration and anger were deflected from the government, and an outdated social structure was attributed to the presence of a foreign power—the United States—in what Panamanians regarded as their territory.

Central America, in summary, is a region of diverse geography and is home to peoples of many cultures. It is a region of strong local loyalties; its problems are profound and perplexing. The violence of the land is matched by the violence of its peoples as they fight for something as noble as justice or human rights, or as ignoble as political power or self-promotion.

El Salvador (Republic of El Salvador)



El Salvador Statistics

GEOGRAPHY

Area in Square Miles (Kilometers): 8,292 (21,476) (about the size of Massachusetts)

Capital (Population): San Salvador (1,214,000)

Environmental Concerns: deforestation; soil erosion; water pollution; soil contamination

Geographical Features: a hot coastal plain in south rises to a cooler plateau and valley region; mountainous in north, including many volcanoes

Climate: tropical; distinct wet and dry seasons

PEOPLE

Population

Total: 6,587,541

Annual Growth Rate: 1.78%
Rural/Urban Population Ratio: 55/45
Ethnic Makeup: 94% Mestizo;
 Amerindian 1% white; 9%
Major Language: Spanish
Religions: 75% Roman Catholic; 25%
 Protestant groups

Health

Life Expectancy at Birth: 67 years (male);
 74 years (female)
Infant Mortality Rate (Ratio): 25.93/1,000
Physicians Available (Ratio): 1/1,219

Education

Adult Literacy Rate: 80.2%
Compulsory (Ages): 7–16; free

COMMUNICATION

Telephones: 483,000 main lines
Daily Newspaper Circulation: 53 per
 1,000 people
Televisions: 91 per 1,000
Internet Users: 4 (2000)

TRANSPORTATION

Highways in Miles (Kilometers): 6,196
 (9,977)
Railroads in Miles (Kilometers): 374 (602)
Usable Airfields: 85
Motor Vehicles in Use: 80,000

GOVERNMENT

Type: republic
Independence Date: September 15, 1821
 (from Spain)
Head of State/Government: President
 Francisco Flores is both head of state and
 head of government
Political Parties: Farabundo Martí
 National Liberation Front; National
 Republican Alliance; National
 Conciliation Party; Christian Democratic
 Party; Democratic Convergence; others
Suffrage: universal at 18

MILITARY

Military Expenditures (% of GDP): 1.1%
Current Disputes: border disputes

ECONOMY

Currency (\$ U.S. Equivalent): U.S. Dollar
Per Capita Income/GDP: \$4,800/\$30.99
 billion
GDP Growth Rate: 1.4%
Inflation Rate: 2.1%
Unemployment Rate: 6.5%
Labor Force: 2,350,000
Natural Resources: hydropower;
 geothermal power; petroleum; arable land
Agriculture: coffee; sugarcane; corn; rice;
 beans; oilseed; cotton; sorghum; beef;
 dairy products; shrimp
Industry: food processing; beverages;
 petroleum; chemicals; fertilizer; textiles;
 furniture; light metals
Exports: \$3.2 billion (primary partners
 United States, Guatemala, Germany)
Imports: \$5.5 billion (primary partners
 United States, Guatemala, Mexico)

SUGGESTED WEBSITE

<http://cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>

El Salvador Country Report

EL SALVADOR: A TROUBLED LAND

El Salvador, a small country, was engaged until 1992 in a civil war that cut through class lines, divided the military and the Roman Catholic Church, and severely damaged the social and economic fabric of the nation. It was the latest in a long series of violent sociopolitical eruptions that have plagued the country since its independence in 1821.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, large plantation owners—spurred by the sharp increase in the world demand for coffee and other products of tropical agriculture—expanded their lands and estates. Most of the new land was purchased or taken from Indians and Mestizos (those of mixed white and Indian blood), who, on five occasions between 1872 and 1898, took up arms in futile attempts to preserve their land. The once-independent Indians and Mestizos were reduced to becoming tenant farmers, sharecroppers, day laborers, or peons on the large estates. Indians, when deprived of their lands, also lost much of their cultural and ethnic distinctiveness. Today, El Salvador is an overwhelmingly Mestizo society.

The uprooted peasantry was controlled in a variety of ways. Some landowners played the role of *patrón* and assured workers the basic necessities of life in return for their la-

bor. Laws against “vagabonds” (those who, when stopped by rural police, did not have a certain amount of money in their pockets) assured plantation owners a workforce and discouraged peasant mobility.

To enforce order further, a series of security organizations—the National Guard, the National Police, and the Treasury Police—were created by the central government. Many of these security personnel actually lived on the plantations and estates and followed the orders of the owner. Although protection of the economic system was their primary function, over time elements of these organizations became private armies.

DEVELOPMENT



Since 1991, the government has been able to attract substantial investment in a new industry of low-wage, duty-free assembly plants patterned after the maquiladora industries along Mexico's border with the United States. Advantageous tax laws and a free-market climate favorable to business are central to the government's development policy.

This phenomenon lay at the heart of much of the “unofficial” violence in El Salvador in recent years. In Salvadoran society, personal loyalties to relatives or local

strongmen competed with and often superseded loyalty to government officials. Because of this, the government was unable to control some elements within its security forces.

In an analysis of the Salvadoran Civil War, it is tempting to place the rich, right-wing landowners and their military allies on one side; and the poor, the peasantry, and the guerrillas on the other. Such a division is artificial, however, and fails to reflect the complexities of the conflict. Granted, the military and landowners had enjoyed a mutually beneficial partnership since 1945. But there were liberal and conservative factions within the armed forces, and, since the 1940s, there had been some movement toward needed social and economic reforms. It was a military regime in 1949 that put into effect the country's first social-security legislation. In 1950, a Constitution was established that provided for public-health programs, women's suffrage, and extended social-security coverage. The reformist impulse continued in the 1960s, when it became legal to organize opposition political parties.

A TIME FOR CHANGE

Food production increased in the 1970s by 44 percent, a growth that was second in Latin America only to Brazil's. Although

much of the food grown was exported to world markets, some of the revenue generated was used for social programs in El Salvador. Life expectancy increased, the death rate fell, illiteracy declined, and the percentage of government expenditures on public health, housing, and education was among the highest in Latin America.

The programs and reforms, in classic Hispanic form, were generated by the upper classes. The elite believed that state-sponsored changes could be controlled in such a way that traditional balances in society would remain intact and elite domination of the government would be assured.

The origin of El Salvador's Civil War may be traced to 1972, when the Christian Democratic candidate for president, José Napoleón Duarte, is believed to have won the popular vote but was deprived of his victory when the army declared the results false and handed the victory to its own candidate. Impatient and frustrated, middle-class politicians and student leaders from the opposition began to consider more forceful ways to oust the ruling class.

By 1979, guerrilla groups had become well established in rural El Salvador, and some younger army officers grew concerned that a successful left-wing popular revolt was a distinct possibility. Rather than wait for revolution from below, which

might result in the destruction of the military as an institution, the officers chose to seize power in a coup and manipulate change from above. Once in power, this *junta*, or ruling body, moved quickly to transform the structure of Salvadoran society. A land-reform program, originally developed by civilian reformers and Roman Catholic clergy, was adopted by the military. It would give the campesinos ("peasants") not only land but also status, dignity, and respect.

FREEDOM



The end of the Civil War brought an overall improvement in human rights in El Salvador. News from across the political spectrum, often critical of the government, is reported in El Salvador, although foreign journalists seem to be the target of an unusually high level of muggings, robberies, and burglaries. Violence against women is widespread. Judges often dismiss rape cases on the pretext that the victim provoked the crime.

In its first year, 1980, the land-reform program had a tremendous impact on the landowning elite—37 percent of the lands producing cotton and 34 percent of the coffee-growing lands were confiscated by

the government and redistributed. The junta also nationalized the banks and assumed control of the sale of coffee and sugar. Within months, however, several peasant members of the new cooperatives and the government agricultural advisers sent to help them were gunned down. The violence spread. Some of the killings were attributed to government security men in the pay of dispossessed landowners, but most of the killings may have been committed by the army.

In the opinion of a land-reform program official, the army was corrupt and had returned to the cooperatives that it had helped to establish in order to demand money for protection and bribes. When the peasants refused, elements within the army initiated a reign of terror against them.

In 1989, further deterioration of the land-reform program was brought about by Supreme Court decisions and by policies adopted by the newly elected rightwing government of President Alfredo Cristiani. Former landowners who had had property taken for redistribution to peasants successfully argued that seizures under the land reform were illegal. Subsequently, five successive land-reform cases were decided by the Supreme Court in favor of former property owners.



(Y. Nagata/PAS United Nations photo)

Civil strife disrupted much of El Salvador's agrarian production, and a lack of fishery planning necessitated importing from other parts of the world. With a new and efficient program to take advantage of fish in domestic waters, El Salvador has been able to develop an effective food industry from the sea.

Cristiani, whose right-wing National Republican Alliance Party (ARENA) fought hard against land reform, would not directly attack the land-reform program—only because such a move would further alienate rural peasants and drive them into the arms of left-wing guerrillas. Instead, Cristiani favored the reconstitution of collective farms as private plots. Such a move, according to the government, would improve productivity and put an end to what authorities perceived as a form of U.S.-imposed “socialism.” Critics of the government’s policy charged that the privatization plan would ultimately result in the demise of land reform altogether.

Yet another problem was that many of the collectives established under the reform were (and remain) badly in debt. A 1986 study by the U.S. Agency for International Development reported that 95 percent of the cooperatives could not pay interest on the debt they were forced to acquire to compensate the landlords. *New York Times* reporter Lindsey Gruson noted that the world surplus of agricultural products as well as mismanagement by peasants who suddenly found themselves in the unfamiliar role of owners were a large part of the reason for the failures. But the government did not help. Technical assistance was not provided, and the tremendous debt gave the cooperatives a poor credit rating, which made it difficult for them to secure needed fertilizer and pesticides.

Declining yields and, for many families, lives of increasing desperation have been the result. Some peasants must leave the land and sell their plots to the highest bidder. This will ultimately bring about a re-concentration of land in the hands of former landlords.

HEALTH/WELFARE



Many Salvadorans suffer from parasites and malnutrition. El Salvador has one of the highest infant mortality rates in the Western Hemisphere, largely because of polluted water. Potable water is readily available to only 10% of the population.

Other prime farmland lay untended because of the Civil War. Violence drove many peasants from the land to the slums of the larger cities. And free-fire zones established by the military (in an effort to destroy the guerrillas’ popular base) and guerrilla attacks against cooperatives (in an effort to sabotage the economy and further destabilize the country) had a common victim: the peasantry.

Some cooperatives and individual families failed to bring the land to flower be-

cause of the poor quality of the soil they inherited. Reporter Gruson told the story of one family, which was, unfortunately, all too common:

José ... received 1.7 acres on a rock-pocked slope an hour’s walk from his small shack. José ... used to sell some of his beans and rice to raise a little cash. But year after year his yields have declined. Since he cannot afford fertilizers or insecticides, the corn that survives the torrential rainy season produces pest-infested ears the size of a baby’s foot. Now, he has trouble feeding his wife and seven children.

“The land is no good,” he said. “I’ve been working it for 12 years and my life has gotten worse every year. I don’t have anywhere to go, but I’ll have to leave soon.”

After the coup, several governments came and went. The original reformers retired, went into exile, or went over to the guerrillas. The Civil War continued into 1992, when a United Nations-mediated cease-fire took effect. The extreme right and left regularly utilized assassination to eliminate or terrorize both each other and the voices of moderation who still dared to speak out. The death squads and guerrillas claimed their victims from all social classes. Some leaders, such as former president Duarte, described a culture of violence in El Salvador that had become part of the national character.

HUMAN-RIGHTS ISSUES

Through 1992, human-rights abuses still occurred on a wide scale in El Salvador. Public order was constantly disrupted by military operations, guerrilla raids, factional hatreds, acts of revenge, personal grudges, pervasive fear, and a sense of uncertainty about the future. State-of-siege decrees suspended all constitutional rights to freedom of speech and press. However, self-censorship, both in the media and by individuals, out of fear of violent reprisals, was the leading constraint on free expression in El Salvador.

Release of the report in 1993 by the UN’s “Truth Commission,” a special body entrusted with the investigation of human-rights violations in El Salvador, prompted the right wing-dominated Congress to approve an amnesty for those named. But progress has been made in other areas. The National Police have been separated from the Defense Ministry; and the National Guard, Civil Defense forces, and the notorious Treasury Police have been abolished. A new National Civilian Police, comprised

of 20 percent of National Police, 20 percent former Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) guerrillas, and 60 percent with no involvement on either side in the Civil War, was instituted in 1994.

In El Salvador, as elsewhere in Latin America, the Roman Catholic Church was divided. The majority of Church officials backed government policy and supported the United States’ contention that the violence in El Salvador was due to Cuban-backed subversion. Other clergy strongly disagreed and argued convincingly that the violence was deeply rooted in historical social injustice.

ACHIEVEMENTS



Despite the violence of war, political power has been transferred via elections at both the municipal and national levels.

Elections have helped to establish the legitimacy of civilian leaders in a region usually dominated by military regimes.

Another endemic problem that confronts postwar El Salvador is widespread corruption. It is a human-rights issue because corruption and its attendant misuse of scarce resources contribute to persistent or increased poverty and undermine the credibility and stability of government at all levels. According to the nonprofit watchdog group *Probidad*, “El Salvador has a long history of corruption.... Before the first of many devastating earthquakes on January 13, 2001, El Salvador was the third poorest country in Latin America.... Influence peddling between construction companies and their friends and families in government and other corrupt practices resulted in many unnecessary deaths, infrastructure damage, and irregularities in humanitarian assistance distribution.”

GOVERNANCE

The election to the presidency of José Napoleón Duarte in 1984 was an important first step in establishing the legitimacy of government in El Salvador, as were municipal elections in 1985. The United States supported Duarte as a representative of the “democratic” middle ground between the guerrillas of the FMLN and the right-wing ARENA party. Ironically, U.S. policy in fact undermined Duarte’s claims to legitimacy and created a widespread impression that he was little more than a tool for U.S. interests.

Yet while the transfer of power to President Cristiani via the electoral process in 1989 reflected the will of those who voted, it did not augur well for the lessening of human-rights abuses. With respect

to the guerrillas of the FMLN, Cristiani made it clear that the government would set the terms for any talks about ending the Civil War. For its part, the FMLN warned that it would make the country "ungovernable." In effect, then, the 1989 election results polarized the country's political life even more.

After several unsuccessful efforts to bring the government and the guerrillas to the negotiating table, the two sides reached a tentative agreement on constitutional reforms in April 1991 at a UN-sponsored meeting in Mexico City. The military, judicial system, and electoral process were all singled out for sweeping changes. By October, the FMLN had promised to lay down its arms; and near midnight on December 31, the final points of a peace accord were agreed upon. Final refinements of the agreement were drawn up in New York, and a formal signing ceremony was staged in Mexico City on January 16, 1992. The official cease-fire took effect February 1, ending the 12-year Civil War that had claimed more than 70,000 lives and given El Salvador the reputation of a bloody and abusive country.

Implementation of the agreement reached between the government and the FMLN has proven contentious. "But," according to *Boston Globe* correspondent Pamela Constable, "a combination of war-weariness and growing pragmatism among leaders of all persuasions suggests that once-bitter adversaries have begun to develop a *modus vivendi*."

President Cristiani reduced the strength of the army from 63,000 to 31,500 by February 1993, earlier than provided for by the agreement; and the class of officers known as the *tondona*, who had long dominated the military and were likely responsible for human-rights abuses, were forcibly retired by the president on June 30, 1993. Land,

judicial, and electoral reforms followed. Despite perhaps inevitable setbacks because of the legacy of violence and bitterness, editor Juan Comas wrote that "most analysts are inclined to believe that El Salvador's hour of madness has passed and the country is now on the road to hope."

In 1998, President Armando Calderón Sol surprised both supporters and opponents when he launched a bold program of reforms. The first three years of his administration had been characterized by indecision. Political scientist Tommie Sue Montgomery noted that his "reputation for espousing as policy the last viewpoint he has heard has produced in civil society both heartburn and black humor." But a combination of factors created new opportunities for Calderón. The former guerrillas of the FMLN were divided and failed to take advantage of ARENA's apparent weak leadership; a UN-sponsored program of reconstruction and reconciliation was short of funds and, by 1995, had lost momentum; and presidential elections were looming in 1999. A dozen years of war had left the economic infrastructure in disarray. The economy had, at best, remained static, and while the war raged, there had been no attempt to modernize. During his final year in office, Calderón developed reform policies of modernization, privatization, and free-market competition. Interestingly, his reforms generated opposition from former guerrillas, who are now represented in the Legislature by the FMLN, as well as from some members of the traditional conservative economic elite.

Perhaps one result of Calderón's reforms was the decisive victory of ARENA at the polls in 1999, and again in 2004. The FMLN, on the other hand, won municipal and legislative elections in 2003, which gave them the largest voting bloc in congress.

Serious problems remain. Half of the population live in poverty and the devastating earthquake of 2001 left a million homeless. A BBC report notes: "Poverty, civil war, natural disaster, and consequent dislocations have left their mark on ... society, which is among the most violent and crime ridden in the Americas."

Timeline: PAST

- 1524**
Present-day El Salvador is occupied by Spanish settlers from Mexico
- 1821**
Independence from Spain is declared
- 1822**
El Salvador is part of the United Provinces of Central America
- 1838**
El Salvador becomes independent as a separate state
- 1969**
A brief war between El Salvador and Honduras
- 1970**
Guerrilla warfare in El Salvador
- 1979**
Army officers seize power in a coup: Civil War
- 1990s**
A cease-fire takes effect on February 1, 1992, officially ending the Civil War

PRESENT

- 2000s**
Earthquakes devastate towns and cities, with a heavy loss of life and extensive infrastructure damage
Anthony Saca wins 2004 presidential election

Guatemala (Republic of Guatemala)



Guatemala Statistics

GEOGRAPHY

Area in Square Miles (Kilometers): 42,000 (108,780) (about the size of Tennessee)

Capital (Population): Guatemala City (2,205,000)

Environmental Concerns: deforestation; soil erosion; water pollution

Geographical Features: mostly mountains, with narrow coastal plains and a rolling limestone plateau (Petén)

Climate: temperate in highlands; tropical on coasts

PEOPLE

Population

Total: 14,280,596

Annual Growth Rate: 2.63%

Rural/Urban Population Ratio: 61/39

Ethnic Makeup: 56% Ladino (Mestizo)

and Westernized Indian); 44% Amerindian
Major Languages: Spanish; Maya languages
Religions: predominantly Roman Catholic; Protestant and Maya

Health

Life Expectancy at Birth: 64 years (male); 66 years (female); 44 years (Indian population)
Infant Mortality Rate (Ratio): 36.91/1,000
Physicians Available (Ratio): 1/2,356

Education

Adult Literacy Rate: 70.6%
Compulsory (Ages): 7–14; free

COMMUNICATION

Telephones: 846,000 main lines
Daily Newspaper Circulation: 29 per 1,000 people
Televisions: 45 per 1,000
Internet Users: 400,000

TRANSPORTATION

Highways in Miles (Kilometers): 8,135 (13,100)

Railroads in Miles (Kilometers): 552 (884)

Usable Airfields: 477

Motor Vehicles in Use: 199,000

GOVERNMENT

Type: Constitutional democratic republic

Independence Date: September 15, 1821 (from Spain)

Head of State/Government: President Oscar Jose Rafael Berger (January 2004) is both head of state and head of government

Political Parties: National Centrist Union; Christian Democratic Party; National Advancement Party; National Liberation Movement; Social Democratic Party; Revolutionary Party; Guatemalan Republican Front; Democratic Union; New Guatemalan Democratic Front

Suffrage: universal at 18

MILITARY

Military Expenditures (% of GDP): 0.8%

Current Disputes: border dispute with Belize

ECONOMY

Currency (\$ U.S. Equivalent): 7.94 quetzals = \$1

Per Capita Income/GDP: \$4,100/\$56.53 billion

GDP Growth Rate: 2.2%

Inflation Rate: 5.6%

Unemployment Rate: 7.5%

Labor Force: 4.2 million

Natural Resources: petroleum; nickel; rare woods; fish; chicle; hydropower

Agriculture: sugarcane; corn; bananas; coffee; beans; cardamom; livestock

Industry: sugar; textiles and clothing; furniture; chemicals; petroleum; metals; rubber; tourism

Exports: \$2.7 billion (primary partners United States, El Salvador, Honduras)

Imports: \$5.7 billion (primary partners United States, Mexico, South Korea, El Salvador)

SUGGESTED WEBSITE

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>

Guatemala Country Report

GUATEMALA: PEOPLES IN CONFLICT

Ethnic relations between the descendants of Maya Indians, who comprise 44 percent of Guatemala's population, and whites and Ladinos (Hispanicized Indians) have always been unfriendly and have contributed significantly to the nation's turbulent history. During the colonial period and since independence, Spaniards, Creoles (in Guatemala, whites born in the New World—as opposed to in Nicaragua, where Creoles are defined as native-born blacks), and Ladinos have repeatedly sought to dominate the Guatemalan Indian population, largely contained in the highlands, by controlling the Indians' land and their labor.

The process of domination was accelerated between 1870 and 1920, as Guatemala's entry into world markets hungry for tropical produce such as coffee resulted in the purchase or extensive seizures of land from Indians. Denied sufficient lands of their own, Indians were forced onto the expanding plantations as debt peons. Others were forced to labor as seasonal workers on coastal plantations; many died there because of the sharp climatic differences.

THE INDIAN AND INTEGRATION

Assaulted by the Ladino world, highland Indians withdrew into their own culture and built social barriers between themselves and the changing world outside their villages. Those barriers have persisted until the present.

DEVELOPMENT



Unchecked spending by the government in 2000–2001 led to rapid swelling of the national debt as revenues failed to keep pace. Without economic reform, the IMF will refuse further loans to Guatemala, and the country's peace process will be further endangered.

For the Guatemalan governments that have thought in terms of economic progress and national unity, the Indians have always presented a problem. A 2003 presidential candidate stated: "Indigenous groups do not speak of a 'political system'; they speak of community consensus, and their conception of community is very local.... How do you have a functioning na-

tion state, one where indigenous groups participate actively in protecting their political interests, and yet still respect the cultural practices of other indigenous groups for whom participation in Western political institutions is deemed undesirable?"

According to anthropologist Leslie Dow, Jr., Guatemalan governments too easily explain the Indian's lack of material prosperity in terms of the "deficiencies" of Indian culture. Indian "backwardness" is better explained by elite policies calculated to keep Indians subordinate. Social, political, and economic deprivations have consistently and consciously been utilized by governments anxious to maintain the Indian in an inferior status.

Between 1945 and 1954, however, there was a period of remarkable social reform in Guatemala. Before the reforms were cut short by the resistance of landowners, factions within the military, and a U.S. Central Intelligence Agency-sponsored invasion, Guatemalan governments made a concerted effort to integrate the Indian into national life. Some Indians who lived in close proximity to large urban centers such as the capital, Guatemala



(United Nations photo/152/271/Antoinette Jongen)

This elderly Indian woman of San Mateo looks back on a life experience of economic and social prejudice. In recent years, Indians in Guatemala have pursued their rights by exercising their voting power. On occasion, they have resorted to violence, which has been repressed swiftly and mercilessly by the government. But the power of the ballot box has finally begun to reap gains.

City, learned that their vote had the power to effect changes to their benefit. They also realized that they were unequal not because of their illiteracy, "backwardness," poverty, or inability to converse in Spanish, but because of governments that refused to reform their political, social, and economic structures.

In theory, indigenous peoples in Guatemala enjoy equal legal rights under the Constitution. In fact, however, they remain largely outside the national culture, do not speak Spanish, and are not integrated into

the national economy. Indian males are far more likely to be impressed into the army or guerrilla units. Indigenous peoples in Guatemala have suffered most of the combat-related casualties and repeated abuses of their basic human rights. There remains a pervasive discrimination against Indians in white society. Indians have on occasion challenged state policies that they have considered inequitable and repressive. But if they become too insistent on change, threaten violence or societal upheaval, or support and/or join guerrilla groups, gov-

ernment repression is usually swift and merciless.

GUERRILLA WARFARE

A civil war, which was to last for 36 years, developed in 1960. Guatemala was plagued by violence, attributed both to left-wing insurgencies in rural areas and to armed forces' counterinsurgency operations. Led by youthful middle-class rebels, guerrillas gained strength because of several factors: the radical beliefs of some RO-

man Catholic priests in rural areas; the ability of the guerrillas to mobilize Indians for the first time; and the "demonstration effect" of events elsewhere in Central America. Some of the success is explained by the guerrilla leaders' ability to converse in Indian languages. Radical clergy increased the recruitment of Indians into the guerrilla forces by suggesting that revolution was an acceptable path to social justice. The excesses of the armed forces in their search for subversives drove other Indians into the arms of the guerrillas. In some parts of the highlands, the loss of ancestral lands to speculators or army officers was sufficient to inspire the Indians to join the radical cause.

According to the *Latin American Regional Report* for Mexico and Central America, government massacres of guerrillas and their actual or suspected supporters were frequent and "characterized by clinical savagery." At times, the killing was selective, with community leaders and their families singled out. In other instances, entire villages were destroyed and all the inhabitants slaughtered. "Everything depends on the army's perception of the local level of support for the guerrillas," according to the report.

FREEDOM



Former president Ramiro de León Carpio warned those who would violate human rights, saying that the law would punish those guilty of abuses, "whether or not they are civilians or members of the armed forces." The moment has come, he continued, "to change things and improve the image of the army and of Guatemala."

To counterbalance the violence, once guerrillas were cleared from an area, the government implemented an "Aid Program to Areas in Conflict." Credit was offered to small farmers to boost food production in order to meet local demand, and displaced and jobless people were enrolled in food-for-work units to build roads or other public projects.

By the mid-1980s, most of the guerrillas' military organizations had been destroyed. This was the result not only of successful counterinsurgency tactics by the Guatemalan military but also of serious errors of judgment by guerrilla leaders. Impatient and anxious for change, the guerrillas had overestimated the willingness of the Guatemalan people to rebel. They also had underestimated the power of the military establishment. Surviving guerrilla units maintained an essentially defensive posture for the remainder of the decade. In 1989, however, the guerrillas regrouped. The subsequent in-

tensification of human-rights abuses and the climate of violence were indicative of the military's response.

There was some hope for improvement in 1993, in the wake of the ouster of President Jorge Serrano, whose attempt to emulate the "self-coup" of Peru's Alberto Fujimori failed. Guatemala's next president, Ramiro de León Carpio, was a human-rights activist who was sharply critical of security forces in their war against the guerrillas of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). Peace talks between the government and guerrillas had been pursued with the Roman Catholic Church as intermediary for several years, with sparks of promise but no real change. In July 1993, de León announced a new set of proposals to bring to an end the decades of bloodshed that had resulted in 140,000 deaths. Those proposals were the basis for the realization of a peace agreement worked out under the auspices of the United Nations in December 1996.

But the underlying causes of the violence still must be addressed. Colin Woodard, writing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, reported that the peace accords promised to "reshape Guatemala as a democratic, multicultural society." But an estimated 70 percent of the Maya Indians still live in poverty, and more than 80 percent are illiterate. Estuardo Zapeta, Guatemala's first Maya newspaper columnist, writes: "This is a multicultural, multilingual society.... As long as we leave the Maya illiterate, we're condemning them to being peasants. And if that happens, their need to acquire farmland will lead us to another civil war." This, however, is only one facet of a multifaceted set of issues. The very complexity of Guatemalan society, according to political scientist Rachel McCleary, "make[s] it extremely difficult to attain a consensus at the national level on the nature of the problems confronting society." But the new ability of leaders from many sectors of society to work together to shape a meaningful peace is a hopeful sign.

Although the fighting has ended, fear persists. Journalist Woodard wrote in July 1997: "In many neighborhoods [in Guatemala City] private property is protected by razor wire and patrolled by guards with pump-action shotguns." One professor at the University of San Carlos observed, "It is good that the war is over, but I am pessimistic about the peace.... There is intellectual freedom now, but we are very unsure of the permanence of that freedom. It makes us very cautious."

URBAN VIOLENCE

Although most of the violence occurred in rural areas, urban Guatemala did not es-

cape the horrors of the Civil War. The following characterization of Guatemalan politics, written by an English traveler in 1839, is still relevant today: "There is but one side to the politics in Guatemala. Both parties have a beautiful way of producing unanimity of opinion, by driving out of the country all who do not agree with them."

During the Civil War, right-wing killers murdered dozens of leaders of the moderate political left to prevent them from organizing viable political parties that might challenge the ruling elite. These killers also assassinated labor leaders if their unions were considered leftist or antigovernment. Leaders among university students and professors "disappeared" because the national university had a reputation as a center of leftist subversion. Media people were gunned down if they were critical of the government or the right wing. Left-wing extremists also assassinated political leaders associated with "repressive" policies, civil servants (whose only "crime" was government employment), military personnel and police, foreign diplomats, peasant informers, and businesspeople and industrialists associated with the government.

Common crime rose to epidemic proportions in Guatemala City (as well as in the capitals of other Central American republics). Many of the weapons that once armed the Nicaraguan militias and El Salvador's civil-defense patrols found their way onto the black market, where, according to the Managua newspaper *Pensamiento Propio*, they were purchased by the Guatemalan Army, the guerrillas of the URNG, and criminals.

HEALTH/WELFARE



While constitutional bars on child labor in the industrial sector are not difficult to enforce, in the informal and agricultural sectors such labor is common. It is estimated that 5,000 Guatemalan children live on the streets and survive as best they can. They are often targeted for elimination by police and death squads.

The fear of official or unofficial violence has always inhibited freedom of the press in Guatemala. Early in the 1980s, the Conference on Hemispheric Affairs noted that restrictions on the print media and the indiscriminate brutality of the death squads "turned Guatemala into a virtual no-man's land for journalists." Lingering fears and memories of past violence tend to limit the exercise of press freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution. The U.S. State Department's Country Reports notes that "the media continues to exercise a degree of self-censorship on certain topics.... The lack of

aggressive investigative reporting dealing with the military and human rights violations apparently is due to self-censorship.”

HEALTH CARE AND NUTRITION

In rural Guatemala, half the people have a diet that is well below the minimum daily caloric intake established by the Food and Agricultural Organization. Growth in the staple food crops (corn, rice, beans, wheat) has failed to keep pace with population growth. Marginal malnutrition is endemic.

Health services vary, depending on location, but are uniformly poor in rural Guatemala. The government has begun pilot programs in three departments to provide basic primary health care on a wide scale. But some of these well-intentioned policies have failed because of a lack of sensitivity to cultural differences. Anthropologist Linda Greenberg has observed that the Ministry of Health, as part of its campaign to bring basic health-care services to the hinterlands, introduced midwives who were ignorant of Indian traditions. For Guatemalan Indians, pregnancy is considered an illness that demands specific care, calling for certain foods, herbs, body positions, and interpersonal relations between expectant mother and Indian midwife. In Maya culture, traditional medicine has spiritual, psychological, physical, social, and symbolic dimensions. Ministry of Health workers too often dismiss traditional practices as superstitious and unscientific. Their insensitivity and ignorance create ineffectual health-care programs.

THE FUTURE

In February 1999, a UN-sponsored Commission for Historical Clarification, in a harsh nine-volume report, blamed the Gua-

temalan government for acts of genocide against the Maya during the long Civil War. The purpose of the report was not to set the stage for criminal prosecutions but to examine the root causes of the Civil War and explain how the conflict developed over time. It was hoped that the report signaled the first steps toward national reconciliation and the addressing of human-rights issues, long ignored by those in power.

ACHIEVEMENTS



Guatemalan novelist Miguel Ángel Asturias gained an international reputation for his works about political oppression. In 1967, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Rigoberta Menchú Tum won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 for her passionate support of the Maya peoples of Guatemala.

But the high command of the military and its civilian allies, accused of planning and executing a broad range of atrocities against the Maya, may perceive the report as a threat to their position and their future. In fact, the government has done little to implement the recommendations called for in the 1996 peace accords that ended the Civil War. Former President Efraín Ríos Montt, who engineered the assault against the Maya during the civil war, lost his congressional seat—and his immunity to prosecution—in 2004. Although he now faces charges of genocide for his scorched earth policy, Guatemala’s current president, Oscar Berger, a wealthy farmer backed by the nation’s traditional power brokers, has remained non-committal on Ríos Montt’s fate.

Not surprisingly, the poor and disadvantaged are increasingly frustrated. Illiteracy,

infant mortality and malnutrition are among the highest in Central America while life expectancy is among the lowest. Two-thirds of Guatemala’s children live in poverty. Violence remains endemic.

Timeline: PAST

- 1523**
Guatemala is conquered by Spanish forces from Mexico
- 1821**
Independence
- 1822–1838**
Guatemala is part of the United Provinces of Central America
- 1838**
Guatemala becomes independent as a separate state
- 1944**
Revolution; many reforms
- 1954**
A CIA-sponsored coup deposes the reformist government
- 1976**
An earthquake leaves 22,000 dead
- 1977**
Human-rights abuses lead to the termination of U.S. aid
- 1990s**
Talks between the government and guerrillas end 36 years of violence

PRESENT

- 2000s**
Economic problems multiply
Oscar Berger elected president in November 2003