

Polity IV Country Report 2007: Guatemala

Score:	2006	2007	Change			
Polity:	8	8	0			
Democ:	8	8	0			
Autoc:	0	0	0			
Durable:		11				
Tentative:		No				
SCODE	GUA	CCODE	090	Date of Report	1 November 2008	
Polity IV Component Variables						
XRREG	XRCOMP	XROPEN	XCONST	PARREG	PARCOMP	
3	3	4	6	2	4	
Date of Most Recent Polity Transition (3 or more point change)						
End Date			15 January 1996		Begin Date	
					15 January 1996	
Polity Fragmentation: No						
Constitution	1986					
Executive(s)	President Álvaro Colom (UNE); directly elected 9 September and 4 November 2007, 28.2% and 52.8%					
Legislature	Unicameral: Congress of the Republic (158 seats; partially in departmental constituencies and partially proportionally elected; most recent elections, 9 September 2007) National Unity of Hope (UNE): 48 Grand National Alliance (GANAN): 37 Patriotic Party (PP): 30 Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG): 15 Other parties: 28					
Judiciary	Supreme Court of Justice; Court of Constitutionality					

Narrative Description:¹

Executive Recruitment: Competitive Elections (8)

Military-backed oligarchic rule and factional political violence have long defined Guatemalan politics. After a brief experiment with economic and social reform in the late 1940s and early 1950s, for the next three decades executive recruitment in this poor Central American country became the sole domain of rival conservative factions within the armed forces. The consolidation of political power by the military during this period triggered a peasant-based insurrection that would ultimately claim over 200,000 lives. The vast

¹ The research described in this report was sponsored by the Political Instability Task Force (PITF). The PITF is funded by the Central Intelligence Agency. The views expressed herein are the authors' alone and do not represent the views of the US Government.

majority of these casualties were rural peasants who suffered brutal repression at the hands of the Guatemalan military and pro-government paramilitary units.

Amidst widespread public discontent in the aftermath of the fraudulent 1982 presidential elections, a military coup brought to power a new government led by General Rios Montt. The brutal, albeit short-lived, Montt dictatorship exacerbated the civil war in Guatemala and triggered the 1983 coup by reformist military leader General Oscar Humberto Mejia. Spurred on by the reformist military government, a new democratic constitution was promulgated in 1985 as restrictions on press and political party activities were lifted. In 1986 democratic elections were held and Mario Vinicio Cerezo became the country's first civilian president in over two decades. While the return to civilian rule was a positive development, nevertheless, the military continued to exert significant political powers and the civil war remained a constant threat to the political and economic stability of the country.

Jorge Serrano, winner of the 1991 presidential election, attempted to limit the autonomy of the military and bring a conclusion of the civil war but was unable to do either effectively. In May 1993, in an effort to consolidate presidential authority, President Serrano attempted to impose an authoritarian regime on the country. Serrano's *autogolpe*, or self-coup, ultimately failed as trade unions, civic groups and some military factions united their efforts and forced the President to resign. In June 1993 the National Assembly appointed Ramiro de Leon as head of a national unity government that would rule until new elections could be held in 1996. In the 1996 elections Alvaro Arzu defeated Alfonso Portillo, candidate of the hard-right Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG). To everyone's surprise, President Arzu quickly sought to reduce the power of the military in Guatemalan politics and, in December 1996, signed a peace accord with the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union (URGN) that effectively ended the 36-year civil war.

Another democratic transfer of power took place in Guatemala on 14 January 2000 when Alfonso Portillo Cabrera (representing the FRG) took office as president after winning the elections. The elections were deemed free and fair by international monitors, with the candidate from the incumbent president's party (PAN) defeated in the run-off round by a wide margin. Elections in November-December 2003, brought Oscar Berger, of the center-right Grand National Alliance (GANA) to power. These elections were marred by political violence, with more than 22 people killed in the run-up to the vote. Some of these deaths were linked to the violent protests that were sparked after the enactment of a law that banned General Rios Montt from standing for president. According to the 2003 law, nobody engaged in a coup could run for the office of president (Montt had led a coup in 1982). After judicial review of the law, Montt was later permitted to run in the 2003 election but lost to Berger. The leadership of GANA in January 2004 signed a "governability pact" with two opposition parties – the center-left National Union for Hope (UNE) and the center-right National Advancement Party (PAN).

Presidential elections were held on 9 September 2007. While international election monitors expressed concern over the high murder rate among political candidates and activists in the run up to the vote, they indicated that the conduct of the election was relatively free and fair. Top vote-getter Álvaro Colom of the National Union of Hope (UNE) ran against Otto Pérez Molina of the right-wing Patriot Party (PP) in a November 4 run-off election. Colom accused his rival of sending him death threats. The run-off vote secured the presidency for Colom with nearly fifty-three per cent of the vote. Colom is the sixth consecutive civilian president to be elected since 1986. While all previous incumbents were from the right-wing of the political spectrum, Colom's UNE represents the center-left of Guatemalan politics. While Colom does not belong to any of the 23 Mayan groups who make up more than 40% of the population, nonetheless, he is an ordained Mayan priest and draws most of his electoral support from the indigenous rural poor. While an advocate of free trade, he has stated his commitment to increasing social spending on job creation, health and education.

Executive Constraints: Near Parity (6)

As outlined in the 1985 Constitution, Guatemala's president holds significant powers as chief of state, head of government and the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. The Guatemalan president, however, faces considerable constraints from both the military apparatus and the legislative branch of government. While the success of President Arzu in reducing the size of the military and bringing its commanders under civilian control cannot be underestimated, the armed forces remain a constant check on presidential authority within Guatemalan politics. Moreover, the legislature, while weakened by party fragmentation and a culture of institutional subordination, can and does act independently from the executive branch.

Under the Portillo administration, the president often found himself constrained by legislators from his own party. President Portillo's party, the FRG, is dominated by former dictator, and current

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National Assembly member, Rios Montt. Since the mid-1990s the FRG has made significant gains in legislative balloting and came to hold a majority of seats in the Congress. While many analysts viewed Portillo, a former leftist, as simply a populist front man for Montt and his conservative policy agenda, the relationship between Montt and Portillo is a complicated one. On the one hand, President Portillo had demonstrated independence from Montt and the conservative wing of the FRG by pledging to fully implement the 1996 peace accords and by trying to balance the appointment of right-wing cabinet ministers with left-wing human rights advocates. However, Montt loyalists in the Congress had effectively stymied efforts by the executive branch to follow through on many of the issues outlined in the 1996 peace accord (e.g., land reform) and effectively sought to protect former military leaders from prosecution for both past crimes and current illegal activities.

The 2003 elections gave President Berger a plurality of seats in the National Assembly, with his GANA party securing 47 seats. With the formation of a governing alliance with the UNE and the PAN in the wake of the election, the President was ensured of a majority of votes for his political agenda within the legislature. However, support for the President has been weakened in recent years as his GANA party has begun to fracture. Defections from the party in 2005 left it with only 38 seats in the National Assembly. Many of these defectors were upset after President Berger reneged on a campaign promise not to negotiate with the FRG on any political matters being debated within the legislature. In the September 2007 legislative polls, the UNE secured 48 seats, followed by GANA with 37 mandates, and the PP with 30 seats.

Political Participation: Political Liberalization: Limited and/or Decreasing Overt Coercion (9)

Deep class and ethnic divisions have long destabilized Guatemalan society. The population has historically been divided into two segments: the poor, indigenous Indians and the relatively prosperous *ladino* population. In Guatemala, the term *ladino* refers to all non-Indians, including Europeans, black Africans and *mestizos*. The *ladinos* have been the dominant political and economic group in Guatemala since the arrival of the Spanish in 1524 and have established one of the most unequal societies in the world. Under *ladino* hegemony the descendants of the highland Mayas have historically been subjected to severe economic discrimination and political repression. The fundamental class and ethnic inequalities found within Guatemala provide the backdrop to the political instability that has come to ravage this country for much of the past 50 years. While political parties actively operate within Guatemala, institutional opportunities to access the political process remain limited for those who live in poverty (estimated to comprise up to 75% of the population). Workers' efforts to form unions and participate in union activities continue to be hindered by oligarchic interests and an ineffective legal system. In early 2007, however, the indigenous activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Rigoberta Menchu, announced that she would run for president in the upcoming election. Running under the banner of the indigenous Winaq party, which she founded, and the left-wing Encounter for Guatemala, she could garner little more than 3% of the vote in first round balloting. Menchú—who finished seventh in the first round balloting—denounced the electoral process, saying, “The election cannot be legitimate, because there are not just doubts, but proof (of fraud). ...It is incredible, but there are places in which the number of names in the electoral roll is larger than the total population.” Electoral violence and fraud remain constant features of Guatemalan politics.

A relative degree of stability was achieved in Guatemala with the signing of the 1996 peace accord with the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union (URNG). Under the terms of the peace accord, the URNG agreed to demobilize their military forces in exchange for significant political and social reforms of Guatemalan society. One of the key reforms entailed a significant reduction in the size of the armed forces and a restructuring of its command structure. In particular, top military officers were to be prosecuted or forced to retire as a stipulation for peace. Not surprisingly, this stipulation, which was largely carried out during the Arzu administration (1996-99), created deep divisions within the military and has subsequently come to destabilize Guatemalan society. As hardliners within the military were forced to retire they have successfully held onto their power and influence in Guatemalan society by forming powerful criminal cartels. These organized crime syndicates, which are heavily involved in the illegal drug trade, have brought Guatemala back to the brink of chaos in recent years. Using political violence and intimidation to secure their illegal profits, these crime syndicates have targeted judges, politicians, human rights workers, church officials, journalists and moderate elements within the armed forces. In 2006 there were over 6,000 murders in Guatemala – up 60% since 2003 and surpassing the average number killed in political violence during the civil war that ended in 1996. Also contributing to the rising level of anarchy in Guatemala has been the emergence of violent youth gangs, known as “maras.”

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Guatemala has a weak and volatile party system. Political parties come and go at an alarming rate, with more than 30 parties disappearing from the political scene since 1986. Three of the most vibrant parties of the 1980s and '90s, the Christian Democrats, the MAS (Solidarity Action Movement) and the UCN (National Union of the Center), have virtually vanished from the political order. Moreover, party loyalty among members of Congress tends to be highly fluid and short-lived in nature. While the military had played a large role in right-wing party politics since the return to democracy in the mid-1980s, by 2003 the traditional business elite factions had largely displaced them in this role. The political left, for its part, remains highly fractionalized, deeply divided and not very popular. Only the URNG, the leftist guerrillas that ad re-formed as a political party following the peace accords, continues to function as a viable leftist party.