

## GUATEMALA: HOPE IS THE LAST TO DIE

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Although the new Guatemalan leadership under Álvaro Colom Caballeros has only been in office for a little more than two months, the euphoria that attended the change of government appears to have evaporated. Colom and his team keep veering and vacillating, and there is no hint of consistency in the policy of the new President whose slogan 'Your Hope Is My Mission' won him and his party, Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE), more than half of the Guatemalan vote in the elections. Yet Colom used to be seen as a pillar of hope: He who scored highest in the rural regions was once the talk of the country when he successfully managed the national reconstruction fund, FONAPAZ, acquiring a reputation of great expertise with the problems that prevail especially in the interior.

Dominated more by promises and less by meaningful debates about political solutions to the tax or land question, the results of the elections late in 2007 call for a thorough analysis. The political parties will have to change their organization. Moreover, there is no doubt that such a thing as the *voto indígena* does not exist, because the evidence – including the unsuccessful candidacy of the Nobel Prize winner, Rigoberta Menchú – shows that membership in an ethnic Maya group is not enough to guarantee electoral success. Moreover, the electoral law is about to be changed so as to strengthen the role of the electoral court. Furthermore, the party law as it now stands encourages a trend towards party fragmentation and increasingly short party life cycles, another cause for concern. On this occasion alone, three minor parties, including the Christian Democrats, simply disappeared. And no one wonders that Colom himself, after his election, should have given up his party membership, stating in his inaugural speech that from now on he intended to serve not his party but the country.

This has been the first orderly change of government in the history of Guatemala. The country owes this to the initiative of the international community but also to the election schedule, which provided no less than eight weeks between the election victory and the inauguration of the incoming government. So far, 'newcomers' in Guatemala were always confronted by the same situation when they came into office: There was no furniture in Government House, files had disappeared, and financial accounts did not exist. In the ministries, numerous employees had to leave their desks to be replaced by adherents of the new leadership. In view of all this, consolidating the orderly change of government seems more than overdue, yet the *transición* remained unused: On the one hand, the team around Colom was anything but united, while on the other, the President and his deputy, Rafael Espada, had trouble agreeing on a government team.

Meanwhile, the government has developed a 100-day programme, probably the yardstick by which it will be measured although it does not contain any apparent priorities. On the one hand, it lists a number of highly ambitious objectives, such as restoring order in the 'red areas'; on the other, it describes irrelevancies like extending the consulting hours for patients in state hospitals. Whether or not these measures are sustainable appears as questionable as their funding and that of the secondary investments which are bound to follow.

Guatemala's political agenda is foreseeable. Very soon, questions will be asked about Mr Colom's success in suppressing the country's rampant crime and a concrete formulation of his concept of an 'intelligent domestic-security policy'. Yet the government party UNE is having a hard time getting its bearings. At the moment, both the government and the UNE parliamentary party are good for surprises that rather tend to harm their reputation. More pressure comes from the teachers' union which, vehemently opposing any reforms in the field of education, has already threatened to go on strike.

Next to the President and his deputy, the most important person in the UNE leadership team is none other than Mr Colom's wife, Sandra Torres, who was invested by her husband with the presidency of the Council for Social Cohesion which has been allocated no less than 25 percent of the entire investment budget. Highly ambitious and assertive, Mrs Torres is supposed to establish coherence in social policy. However, the *primera dama* does not hold any concrete political office for which she might be called to account.

Among others, the cabinet includes reputable experts, party politicians, and UNE campaign donors. Its poster boy is Fuentes Knight, the Minister of Finance whose uncle, formerly the mayor of Guatemala City, now is one of the leading figures of the social Democrats. Remarkably enough, the incoming government is anything but close to the class of traditional entrepreneurs. However, this does not mean that the 'G8', i.e. the country's eight most influential families, will not endeavour to influence politics through junior entrepreneurs. Moreover, some of the seats at Álvaro Colom Caballeros' cabinet table are occupied by army officers, never mind the fact that, during the election campaign, the UNE vehemently attacked Pérez Molina, Mr Colom's opponent, for his military past. The indigenous population is rather underrepresented on the government team. The slogan 'Social democracy with a Mayan face and a fragrance of maize' which Mr Colom used in his campaign seems to have lost much of its potency now that he is in power.

Holding 51 of 158 seats, the government party forms the largest group in parliament and provides its President. Even so, the UNE depends on coalitions which are bound to be highly flexible in the Congress of Guatemala because all political parties lack an ideological foundation and accord priority to

persons rather than programmes. Because party programmes are so nebulous, MPs practically do not scruple to change from one party to another or to abandon a party whose power is declining and form their own spin-offs. Thus, they boost the reproduction of parties with a new name but with all the old birth defects. And because the position of the Congress President is so weak, there is no one to procure a political majority for the government. Given this overall constellation, there is no way of knowing whether and how the reforms that are pending in tax policy, in the electoral and party legislation, in public health, and in education can be launched in the first place.

What Guatemala's citizens most fervently wish for is more security and more comprehensive and better social services. The security situation in the country is alarming: Shortly after the change of government, numerous buses were held up and the drivers murdered systematically. This is a message sent by organized crime to the new government which makes the 100-day programme appear naïve and makes the problem stand out in all its daunting complexity. Social divisiveness is latent and governmental institutions are weak, while interests are increasingly intermingled and governmental structures undermined by organized crime. The inevitable conclusion is that the state appears almost incapable of solving the security problem.

It is true that the Colom government did not start off brilliantly, but this is not astonishing in view of the daunting number and gravity of its problems. It looks as if the new team wanted to tackle everything at once. And there are obvious discrepancies: Thus, eyebrows were raised when Vice President Espada announced his intention to double the number of soldiers so as to fight organized crime more efficiently – a message that runs counter to the peace treaties of 1996 which provide for a drastic reduction in military strength. A recession in the USA might turn into a stumbling block with an immediate impact on the Central American country. Aiming to place economic relations on a more secure footing, negotiations about an association agreement between the Central American region and the EU confront Guatemala with another special problem. The last issue to be mentioned here is social inequality within the country itself. To tackle all these, a comprehensive reform package will be needed which focuses on the poorest of the poor and provides for implementing a tax reform, improving and extending the social services of the state, and strengthening Guatemala's weak democratic institutions.

The tasks facing Guatemala's new government are immense, and the country's realities do not appear conducive to their successful solution. Yet the Guatemalans have not given up hoping for a society that enjoys greater justice, more security, and more democracy.

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