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Turning Point

Guatemala Will Elect A Civilian, but Will He Control the Military?

Col. Lima, for One, Says No As He Runs His Province In a Huey Long Manner

Always Take a TV Film Crew

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SANTA CRUZ DEL QUICHE, Guatemala—On the wall is a painting of the Last Supper with the Apostles dressed as Indians. Beneath it, Col. Byron Disrael Lima and his staff are eating steaks and tortillas and discussing guerrilla warfare. A radio blares campaign jingles for the coming presidential election, which will end 15 years of military rule in Guatemala.

A liberal contender's spot commercial promises a better life for peasants. "He's a demagogue," Col. Lima snorts. "All politicians are liars."

Then a conservative candidate pledges to spur economic growth. The stocky colonel bursts out of his chair, strides across the officer's mess hall and turns down the radio. "There's a civilian wave in Latin America now," he exclaims, his mustache twitching, "but that doesn't mean military men will lose their ultimate power." He adds: "Latins take commands from men in uniform."

Up and down the table, his junior officers nod in agreement.

Throughout much of Latin America, people do take commands from men in uniform, even in countries where civilians supposedly rule. And one reason that's unlikely to change anytime soon is the influence of men like Col. Lima, the 44-year-old army commander for Quiche (pronounced key-CHAY) province and one of this country's key military officers.

"You know what the biggest concern of a civilian president will be his first day in



Byron Disrael Lima

office?" asks Claudio Riedel Telge, a top adviser to Jorge Carpio Nicolle, a center-right candidate in the elections. "A coup d'etat." The first-round election is this coming Sunday and a December runoff is probable, with the winner taking office in January, but Mr. Riedel Telge says it could take generations of civilian governments before the army retires to the barracks completely.

'I Respect Conquerors'

Col. Lima probably wouldn't dispute that view. The son of an ultraconservative colonel—whom guerrillas machine-gunned to death in Guatemala City in 1970—and the grandson of a peasant, he is devoted to the military. His father called him "mi cadelite" as a child, and one of his own sons now attends the military academy. The colonel's heroes in history are Napoleon and Hitler—"I respect conquerors," he says. He also greatly admires the Israelis as "warriors," and hopes his own countrymen will become more like them. He looks less kindly on civilian politicians.

"If a cabinet doesn't work," says Col. Lima, talking of government in general, "I prefer a coup."

Even if the new government does work, he and his fellow officers will play a political role. During one of his daily personal patrols of Santa Cruz del Quiche, Col. Lima spots a civilian congressional candidate retching and stumbling in a drunken stupor. He turns his van around, stops and snaps a photograph of the politician. "I'll have him by the tail," he says, openly amused.

In the Mainstream

Such attitudes put Col. Lima, and Guatemala, squarely in the mainstream of Latin American history. The military long has been one of the region's most powerful institutions, rivaled perhaps only by the church. Even in countries such as Argentina, where the military has been forced back to the barracks, it remains a force that few people would count out.

"The civilians don't work until we tell them to work," boasts Col. Lima, a simple man and a workaholic officer, who spends much of his rare free time washing his dogs or playing dominoes. "They need our protection, control and direction."

Like most top military men, though, Col. Lima is supporting Guatemala's return to civilian government—for the sake of appearance. He thinks an election will improve the country's international image sufficiently to attract badly needed capital from international lending agencies. He hopes a civilian leader can win the kind of U.S. aid that has transformed the armies of neighboring El Salvador and Honduras into modern fighting machines. And he is tired of the army taking all the political heat for the country's high inflation and rising unemployment.

Guatemala generally is considered the most strategically important country in Central America. Some people see it as the final buffer against the region's revolutionary fever's spreading into Mexico, which Guatemala borders. Guatemala also traditionally has been the economic heavyweight of Central America, with the most-developed industrial base and the largest population (8.3 million).

But Guatemala has been an international outcast since the late 1970s, because of the brutal tactics the army used in pressing its war against leftist guerrillas. Human-rights groups charge that the army murdered thousands of civilians during the war, which was at its height from 1979 to 1983. Such allegations resulted in a cutoff of U.S. military aid in 1977.

Since 1980, the Reagan administration has tried to resume military aid but has faced strong opposition from Congress. It has managed, however, to grant Guatemala \$300,000 for military training and authorize American companies to sell the country trucks, jeeps and helicopters. Congress last year rejected a Reagan administration request to allot Guatemala \$10 million in credits for military sales and has conditioned military aid in fiscal 1986 on a civilian president's taking power and on an improvement of Guatemala's human-rights record.

Province's History

Some of the strongest human-rights charges over the years have involved Quiche province, in the remote highlands, where Col. Lima served as commander for most of 1982 and has been commander again since early this year. "The army committed horrendous abuses in Quiche" between late 1981 and early 1983, says Aryeh Neier, vice chairman of America's Watch, an independent New York-based human rights organization. He notes there is "clearly much less killing today," but says that this only means the army was "very successful."

Col. Lima denies charges of abuses. He blames many of the killings on guerrillas who, he claims, dressed as soldiers and murdered their own supporters to discredit the army. Like other officers, he is proud the army beat back the rebels without the large-scale outside help that El Salvador's army has needed.

With the election nearing, top officers already have told the candidates that their power will be limited. Among other things, no officer is to be tried for human-rights violations. The civilians aren't likely to buck such edicts. As Gen. Oscar Humberto Mejia Victores, chief of state since a 1983 coup ousted another military government, says, army support for the next president will be "crucial and vital."

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A Candidate's View

The civilians are putting the best face on things. "My goal is to build a civilian government," says Vinicio Cerezo, the Christian Democratic candidate and a leading presidential contender. "If I fail, it will be because of a coup or because they kill me in the Presidential Palace." He opens his denim jacket to reveal a Browning revolver. "And I'll keep packing the pistol, even as president," he says.

Since a Central Intelligence Agency-sponsored coup toppled a civilian government in 1954, the army has been the only Guatemalan institution capable of governing this polarized society. Political parties have either been discredited by corruption or decimated by death squads. Repeated guerrilla uprisings have made national security a preeminent issue, one that only the army can deal with.

Col. Lima graduated first in his class (of '62) at the national military academy and has spent nearly his entire career fighting guerrillas in the rural highlands, where he has become convinced that poverty breeds insurgents. "We've seen the needs of the people," he says.

A Huey Long Image

These days he labors to cultivate an image as a sort of Huey Long in fatigues for Quiche province, a backward region of 380,000 people, many of them Mayan Indian descendants who don't speak Spanish. The colonel opens roads and schools, awards trophies to marimba bands and poets and crowns Senorita Quiche. After a speech in Chuguxa, he stands gamely as village elders take turns dancing in circles before him, carrying a 40-pound statue of Santiago, a mythological hybrid of Christian saint and Mavan god.

"Gen. MacArthur understood," he says of such public-relations efforts. "He always traveled with a film crew."

The colonel recently was furious when, after an earthquake shook a town in his province, the nightly news didn't show soldiers working at the disaster site. Told by one of his captains that army doctors on the scene weren't wearing uniforms—and that there weren't any casualties, anyway—he thundered back: "I don't care if there weren't casualties. I want the people to see our doctors."

But he also is a man of action. Last summer, with the nation's inflation rate soaring past 60% a year, Col. Lima ordered farmers to stop shipping their beans out of Quiche—and he had his soldiers and police enforce the edict. The result: a rise in local supplies which brought bean prices in the province down by 33%.

At about the same time, he summarily slapped price controls on meat. Butchers in Santa Cruz del Quiche screamed. So Col. Lima cut their city taxes—without consulting the mayor.

Role of Committees

He could do that because, like all provincial commanders, he is president of the provincial "inter-institutional coordinator" committee, a way for the army to decentralize government and mesh the functions of various public agencies and ministries. After the election, civilians are to preside over the committees, but Col. Lima notes, "We'll still supply the expertise, the machinery and the manpower."

At one recent committee meeting, a forestry official complains that a local judge won't force eight men, who illegally cut down 749 trees, to plant new shrubs. "We won't leave it to the judges," Col. Lima says. "Justice will be done."

The civilian governor hands the colonel a list of schools that need desks; Col. Lima promises his troops will build the desks and transport them to the schools. When the colonel promises to do a favor for an agricultural official, the man offers him one of his best fighting cocks, an offer that is politely refused.

Since early 1982, the army has supervised an extensive social program in Quiche, part of an effort to win the hearts and minds of peasants traumatized by massacres. Ten model villages, with potable water and government-financed cottage industries, were built for 19,000 former guerrilla sympathizers and refugees. More than 50,000 civilians were organized into civilian patrols to back up the army and work on public projects. Hospitals and clinics, schools and roads also were built.

Controversial Program

However, the program is controversial. In the model villages, residents' travel and other aspects of life are closely monitored by the army, and critics say the purpose of the program is political control. Piero Gleijeses, a Johns Hopkins University foreign-affairs professor, sees the new setup as simply an extension of the military's earlier activities.

"You have this pendulum of terror, depending on the challenge from below," he says. "The hatred the army has sown among the Indians necessitates a military occupation. Otherwise, when the shock of terror fades, what remains is hatred."

Col. Lima doesn't see things that way. On one recent afternoon, he has his pilot

tly him over the Ixil Triangle, once the toughest war zone and now an area where the army's social programs are much in evidence. With his nose nearly touching the window, he stares out of the helicopter through the valleys and over the mountains.

"Those houses, those roads—the army built them," he says, pointing down and squinting as the glare of sunlight reflects off the metal roofs of army-built housing. Moments later, he pounds his chest with a fist and adds: "I get satisfaction seeing how we won the people over."