

NEW YORK TIMES  
22 February, 1985

# Novelty of Elections Nears in Guatemala

By JAMES LeMOYNE

Special to The New York Times

GUATEMALA, Feb. 20 — It appears increasingly likely that Guatemalans will get the chance to freely select their own government before the end of the year, Guatemalan political leaders and Western diplomats here say.

Such an election would be a novel development in a nation that has been ruled by military dictatorships since the Central Intelligence Agency helped overthrow a democratically-elected left-leaning Government in 1954. A new Constitution has yet to be written and the presidential palace is still occupied by an army general.

But the political authorities and diplomats say that a bankrupt economy and a shift to elected governments in neighboring countries have helped convince the chief of state, Gen. Oscar Humberto Mejía Victores, to hand over the presidential palace to a civilian.

General Mejía Victores supported free elections last July to select a new Constituent Assembly and has announced his intention to hold presidential elections this year.

## Strong Role for Army Seen

But the officials say the army is expected to retain a decisive influence on Government policies, making significant political change unlikely. In the countryside, where the army is waging a counterinsurgency campaign, the military is likely to act as a parallel government that is nearly independent, they added.

"The army wields tremendous independent authority," one Western official said. "It will take at least a couple of civilian governments to wean the army from power."

The 88-member Constituent Assembly elected in July is still arguing over what to include in Guatemala's fifth Constitution in the last 40 years. The debate is expected to delay presidential elections until at least October, but that has not kept the campaign from taking off in high gear.

The front-runner at this point appears to be Jorge Carpio Nicolle, a millionaire newspaper publisher who formed his own National Union of the Center party to seek the presidency.

## A U.S.-Style Campaigner

Mr. Carpio has begun an American-style campaign, based more on personality than on a political program, and has formed an alliance with two smaller parties that, together with his, are thought to be capable of drawing enough votes to worry other presiden-

tial contenders. He has portrayed himself as a centrist capable of talking to all sides and not creating too many waves, and is therefore considered attractive to the army.

The other two leading presidential candidates are pursuing the office with strongly ideological backgrounds. To the left of center is Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo, a worry to the army as the longtime leader of the reformist Christian Democratic Party. More than 300 of the party's members were killed by Government-supported death squads early in the 1980's.

## Pragmatism and a Pistol

Mr. Cerezo appears to be following a pragmatic policy of not calling for too many policy changes too early. Meanwhile, he counts on an established following from his party and carries a pistol strapped to his chest 24 hours a day.

"The democratic process doesn't end with elections," Mr. Cerezo said in a recent interview. He noted that civilian officials would have to work to gain more than formal control of the Government. "We need to recuperate areas of power," he said.

On the right is Mario Sandoval Alarcón, leader of the ultraconservative National Liberation Movement, a strongly nationalist, anti-Communist party descended directly from the first Government organized with C.I.A. help after the 1954 coup. Mr. Sandoval's chances have suffered from defections by leaders of smaller rightist parties.

## Runoff May Be Needed

The race could be close. The Christian Democrats won 17.2 percent of the vote in the Constituent Assembly elections last July. Mr. Carpio's National Union of the Center won 14.5 percent and the National Liberation Movement won 13.2 percent. The narrowness of the spread makes a runoff for the presidency appear likely.

Some political authorities say it is still an open question whether General Mejía Victores can keep headstrong officers in line as the push and pull of democratic politics strain the patience of soldiers who are used to commanding and being obeyed. The officer corps is believed to comprise several factions, some of which reportedly have little time for civilian politicians.

The army, which is widely feared

and is accused of continuing human rights violations, is also considered certain to refuse to allow any civilian investigation into the conduct of the security forces.

Despite such problems, civilian political leaders are not calling for rapid social change.

A 1982 study by the United States Agency for International Development found "striking inequalities in the distribution of land" in Guatemala that were considered among the worst in Latin America, worse even than El Salvador. Yet no presidential candidate has made land redistribution an issue.

Mr. Carpio said in a recent interview that land redistribution would never work in Guatemala because it would split the country by antagonizing private landholders. He said he would seek to develop unused land in the distant northern Petén region of the country instead.