



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

Researcher: Ryan Oster
Study Acceptance Date: March 2024
Study Sequence No. 36

Guatemalan Civil War 1960–96

Executive Summary

In 1954, the fairly elected Guatemalan president, Jacobo Arbenz, was ousted by Guatemalan rebels with assistance from the CIA. Arbenz intended to nationalize the United Fruit Company, and the United States feared he would try to implement other socialist policies that could promote Soviet influence and jeopardize economic interests in the region.¹ The Eisenhower administration and the CIA's Operation PBSuccess succeeded in subverting the Arbenz government by means of psychological and paramilitary operations.² CIA-led teams of Guatemalan militants countered government forces successfully, and demonstrations of airpower by CIA-provided planes eventually led to the president's resignation.³ A US-approved general, Carlos Castillo Armas, assumed power as the new president. Castillo Armas helped execute the last component of PBSuccess, which called for state kidnappings and executions of many Guatemalan citizens suspected of opposing the new regime.

The conflict was mainly fought between the Guatemalan military (and some quasi-civilian) government regimes and left-wing guerrilla groups. In July 1957, Armas was assassinated by a member of the presidential guard in the presidential palace in Guatemala City, and Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes came to power. The civil war began in 1960 when a group of left-wing military academy students and anti-Ydígoras members of the military launched a failed revolt against the current regime. With support from the Guatemalan Party of Labour (also known as the PGT), leftist revolutionary groups like Revolutionary Movement 13th November (also called MR-13) and the Rebel Armed Forces (known as FAR), among others, joined forces to coordinate guerrilla operations. The scope of the attacks ranged from bombings and kidnappings to attacks on government property.⁴ In 1982, the rebel groups formed a coalition, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (or URNG). The URNG continued to clash with the successive military governments and their affiliated right-wing death squads (which aided in the counterinsurgency throughout the war in the Guatemalan countryside).

Guatemala's return from the abyss was long and difficult. Through successive governments during the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, the restoration of true civilian authority, fair elections, and government reforms made slow progress toward legitimacy and transparency. Under increasing international pressure, the Guatemalan Peace Process (1994–96) eventually restored a representative government through negotiations between the URNG and the Guatemalan government of Álvaro Arzú. Arzú and the leader of URNG, Rolando Morán, shared the UNESCO Félix Houphouët-Boigny Peace Prize for their efforts. The United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 1094 in January 1997 and deployed military observers to Guatemala to monitor the implementation of the peace agreements, ending the civil war.⁵ Between 140,000–200,000 Guatemalans died during the war,

the vast majority of them victims of government killings and massacres, according to the UN Historical Clarification Commission.⁶

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

No. The SOIC project defines a nation as a country in which at least 85 percent of the population places personal identity at the level of the state. Guatemala at the beginning of the civil war likely had between 45–60 percent. In 1950, the indigenous population comprised 53.6 percent of the overall population, and the Ladino (non-indigenous) population 46.4 percent. By 1964, however, the percentage of the population that was indigenous had dropped to 42.2 percent, while the Ladino population had grown to 57.8 percent.⁷ The two groups were largely geographically and culturally separate. Mayans, a commonly used blanket term for the indigenous groups of Guatemala, mostly inhabited the highlands and rural areas of Guatemala. The Mayans often did not speak the national language, Spanish, or only spoke it secondarily to their indigenous language. Most Mayans followed traditional cultural patterns and often still observed the Mayan calendar.⁸ At the time of the war, Mayans were not assimilated into Guatemalan life. They were not seen as equals by many in the Ladino population and were often seen as outsiders or as uncivilized peoples.⁹ In addition, Mayans were often blocked from participation in state politics and did not enjoy the same social status as non-indigenous Guatemalans.¹⁰ Mayans were the most common victims of the internal conflict, as they were commonly targeted by the military governments and right-wing death squads, due to a perceived association between Mayan groups and leftist rebel groups. Government forces were known to employ sexual violence and torture against the civilian population as well. In the bloodiest three-year period of the civil war, 1981–83, scholars have calculated 100,000 deaths within the Mayan population alone.¹¹ Based on further investigation into many factors—culture, geography, language, economic discrimination, and targeting by the military—it can be said that Guatemala did not have 85 percent national identity at the time of the conflict.

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

No. Predating the official start of the conflict, Castillo Armas came to power through a coup d'état supported by the United States. Fuentes, in the absence of major fraud, received a plurality from the Guatemalan public and was elected by the congress in 1958—however, he was deposed in a coup in 1963.¹² Guatemalans saw a return to civilian leadership in 1985, but it was widely considered a front for continued military rule. The 1995 elections, as a result of the peace negotiations, were seen as the first sign of a legitimate democracy in the country since the conflict began.¹³

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

No. Estimates suggest 250,000–500,000 indigenous supporters of the insurgency played a role in the efforts against the government. Progress by the guerillas was evident; in 1981 they had large presences in 18 of 22 provinces while exercising virtual control over nine of those.¹⁴

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

Yes. The guerrillas received training, support, and sanctuary in Cuba, Mexico, and Nicaragua.¹⁵

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. Guatemala had a professional army at the start of the civil war, in addition to regular police forces. Professional army training began in Guatemala in 1873 at the Escuela Politécnica.¹⁶

GUATEMALAN CIVIL WAR 1960–96	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	NO
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	NO
POPULATION SECURITY	NO
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	YES
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Outcome

Because the civil war in Guatemala continued for 36 years and the country went through so many changes in governments during that time, it is difficult to assess the outcome within the standard SOIC rubric. Broadly speaking, the civil war began when the Guatemalan military overthrew the legitimately elected left-leaning civilian government with the assistance of the CIA. Over the decades, a succession of military governments and civilian regimes widely seen as fronts for the military ruled the country, rigged elections, and attempted to suppress the rebel movements with increasing brutality. The rebellion gradually expanded, however, and came to control large areas of the countryside. Their political wing, the URNG, carried out the peace negotiations from 1994–96 that ended the conflict in what is now referred to as the Guatemalan Peace Process. The result was an end to the fighting, a UN-observed return to a legitimate democratic process, genuine popular representation, and UN-led investigations into the mass human rights abuses by the various governments during the war. In this sense, it would have to be said that the insurgents ultimately succeeded in forcing power from the military and the right-wing cabals that ruled the country for decades and succeeded in allowing for a return to true democracy. This case supports the Five Factors Theory.

Endnotes

1. National Security Council, *Report Prepared by the National Security Council Planning Board* (Washington, DC: June 1, 1953), document no. 45 in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, The American Republics*, vol. 4, ed. N. Stephen Kane and William F. Sanford Jr. (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office [GPO]) 192–94, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v04/d45>.
2. Kate Doyle and Peter Kornbluh, eds., *CIA and Assassinations: The Guatemala 1954 Documents*, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book, no. 4 (National Security Archive, n.d.), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB4>.
3. CIA, “Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency,” May 12, 1975, document no. 287 in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Guatemala*, ed. Susan Holly (Washington, DC: GPO, 2003), 449–50, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54Guat/d287>.
4. CIA, “Memorandum.”
5. “Terrorist Organization Profile: Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG),” National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (website), University of Maryland, accessed December 18, 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20131221123027/http://start.umd.edu/start/data_collections/tops/terrorist_organization_profile.asp?id=3709.
6. “Truth Commission: Guatemala,” United States Institute of Peace, n.d., accessed March 4, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/1997/02/truth-commission-guatemala>.
7. John D. Early, “Revision of Ladino and Maya Census Populations of Guatemala, 1950 and 1964,” *Demography* 11, no. 1 (February 1974): 110–17, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2060702>.
8. Jens Söchtig et al., “Genomic Insights on the Ethno-History of the Maya and the ‘Ladinos’ from Guatemala,” *BMC Genomics* 16, article no. 131 (February 2015): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12864-015-1339-1>.
9. Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil, “The Politics of Maya Revindication,” *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*, ed. Edward F. Fischer and R. McKenna Brown (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 19–50.
10. Manuel Vogt, “The Disarticulated Movement: Barriers to Maya Mobilization in Post-Conflict Guatemala,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 57, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 29–50, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24765954>.
11. World Peace Organization, “Guatemala,” Mass Atrocity Endings (website), Tufts, August 7, 2015, <https://sites.tufts.edu/atrocityendings/2015/08/07/guatemala/#Fatalities>.
12. Dov H. Levin, “Throwing Their Hat into the Ring: When Electoral Interventions Occur,” in *Meddling in the Ballot Box: The Causes and Effects of Partisan Electoral Interventions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197519882.003.0003>.
13. Stefanie Ricarda Roos, “Democracy and Elections in Guatemala,” *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 21, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 1997): 97–132, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45288982>.
14. Benjamin A. Valentino, “Counterinsurgent Mass Killings: Guatemala and Afghanistan,” in *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the 20th Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 209, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt24hg9z.10>.

15. “Military Intelligence Summary, Volume VIII – Latin America (U),” National Security Archive, September 1981, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB100/Doc9.pdf>.
16. Franklin Patterson, “The Guatemalan Military and the Escuela Politécnica,” *Armed Forces & Society* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1988): 359–90, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45305002>.



<https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/Research-Commentary/Study-of-Internal-Conflict/SOIC-Conflict-Studies/>

More information about the programs of the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) and US Army War College (USAWC) Press may be found on the Institute’s web page at <http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/>.

Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI and USAWC Press publications should contact the Editor for Production via e-mail at usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.ssi-editor-for-production@army.mil. All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: “Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute and US Army War College Press, US Army War College.”

