

# Central America's Violent Legacy

FABRICE LEHOUCQ

Armed conflict liquidated Central America's dictatorships by the end of the twentieth century. Only Costa Rica was democratic when a wave of civil wars broke out in the 1970s; by the mid-1990s, every country on the isthmus had replaced dictators or military juntas with elected presidents and legislators. Every nation in the region now allows adults at least 18 years old (or 16, in Nicaragua) to cast ballots in regularly scheduled elections.

These changes have attracted scant attention worldwide. Indeed, the limited achievements and manifold problems of Central America seem to barely register with outsiders today, even though the region drew daily international headlines between the fall of Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza in 1979 and the signing of peace accords in El Salvador in 1992 and Guatemala in 1996. Only drug- and gang-related violence reminds us nowadays about Central America. Yet even as the world fixes its attention on turmoil in the Middle East, revisiting the Central American past and assessing its legacies offer important lessons—suggesting that ending tyranny is a long-term and costly struggle.

## DESPOTS AND OLIGARCHS

Autocracy was a fixture of the Central American political landscape until the 1990s. Generals ruled in association with the exporters of coffee and bananas in regimes that the political scientist Enrique Baloyra dubbed “reactionary despotisms.” They were despotic because they did not allow for competitive and non-fraudulent elections. They were reactionary because they were highly responsive to the interests of agro-exporters. Dictators or military juntas outlawed criticism of the low tax, low social-spending

policies favored by the large coffee and banana businesses. They prevented both the peaceful contestation of power and alternative ways to share the gains from international trade.

The social and economic results of these policies were predictable. By 1980, more than half the population lived in poverty in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. On the eve of the Somoza regime's downfall, most countries in the region had experienced GDP per capita growth rates below the global average since 1950. Only the Costa Rican, Nicaraguan, and Panamanian economies grew faster than the world average between 1950 and 1975. But it was only in Costa Rica that democracy encouraged politicians to take measures that halved the poverty rate, to 24 percent of the population, between 1950 and 1980.

Reactionary despotism was stubbornly resistant to change. Oligarchs easily mobilized to defend their privileges. Most military and security officers protected the old order to preserve their share of the spoils. The narrow set of interests ruling in most of Central America, in other words, did not face the collective-action challenges that elected officials and citizens do. Even if democratic leaders—as in Costa Rica—enacted policies that led to more growth and better social indicators, the diffuse nature of these benefits made it harder to mobilize support among the much larger constituency—the electorate—to which such leaders are accountable. Interest in maintaining the status quo bred a preference for dictatorship in most of the region. Its benefits appeared more desirable than the uncertain results of political change.

Rebellion was regrettably the only way possible to change the status quo. Centrist compromises might have modernized political systems more peacefully, but landed elites and their military allies typically deployed violence to clear the streets of protesters. On more than a few occasions, reformist officers came to power and allied themselves with civilians, labor unions,

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FABRICE LEHOUCQ is a professor of political science at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. His latest book is *The Politics of Modern Central America: Civil War, Democratization, and Underdevelopment* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

and students. But the reactionary coalition defeated these reformist experiments. When they survived, the United States turned against them, justifying its policies as necessary in the global struggle against communism. In 1954, the Central Intelligence Agency helped depose the government of President Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala. In 1980, US failure to pressure El Salvador's military to stop killing civilians led to the collapse of another reformist interlude, which had begun with an anti-oligarchic coup in October 1979.

## SHRUNKEN ECONOMIES

Refusal to democratize imposed enormous costs on these societies. Civil war raged throughout the 1970s and 1980s and even into the 1990s (and began in the early 1960s in Guatemala). Between the mid-1970s and the early 1990s, war led to the deaths of at least 300,000 people in Central America, the vast majority of whom were killed by the military and/or right-wing hit squads. The violence produced between 1.8 million and 2.8 million refugees. The passage to modernity was strewn with thousands of victims, most of them unwilling recruits in a war to protect the interests of the privileged few.

Economic devastation was one legacy of the armed conflict. In Nicaragua, the combination of economic mismanagement and another civil war—between the postrevolutionary government and the Contras (renegade members of former President Somoza's National Guard and their peasant supporters)—shrank per capita income by almost 40 percent during the 1980s. This destruction came on top of an almost 30 percent drop in GDP per capita during the bloody struggle to topple Somoza in the late 1970s. In El Salvador and Guatemala, per capita GDP declined by a fifth during the 1980s. It was not until the first decade of the twenty-first century that GDP per capita rates regained prewar levels in most of Central America. In Nicaragua, per capita GDP is still half of what it was in the mid-1970s. The country has fallen into a long-term economic slump, joining Honduras as one of the two poorest places on the isthmus.

Social conditions have improved slightly. A smaller share of the region's population lives in poverty, even if inequality rates have not budged.

By 2012, an average of 45 percent of Central Americans remained destitute, according to the most recent data. The top quintile receives 57 percent of income, a share that has not changed since 1970.

## DEMOCRATIC DOLDRUMS

A second legacy has been limited democratization. The political systems of Costa Rica and El Salvador became democratic and have remained so since the end of hostilities. I mention Costa Rica because it, too, had experienced civil war several decades earlier. The opposition coalition that won the 1948 civil war negotiated to redesign the political system with provisions that included abolishing the standing army. In subsequent decades, democracy consolidated as the losers of the civil war were allowed to return from exile. The 1992 peace accords in El Salvador

dissolved the internal security forces and shrank the size of the army. They permitted the guerrillas of the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (FMLN) to found a political party. Starting in 1994, dozens of its candidates won legislative

elections. In 2009, Salvadorans elected FMLN candidate Mauricio Funes to the presidency.

The fall of reactionary despotism has led to significantly less change in Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Formal democratic rule collapsed in Honduras in 2009 when the armed forces put President José Manuel Zelaya on a plane to Costa

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From the archives  
of *Current History*...

“Although Pinochet is one of the last of Latin America's contemporary strongmen to join the trend toward democratization, his defeat signifies the reemergence of a deep-rooted civic culture that made Chile stand apart in a continent famous for coups and revolutions.”

Arturo Valenzuela and Pamela Constable  
“The Chilean Plebiscite:  
Defeat of a Dictator”  
March 1989

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Rica. It suffered a near-breakdown in Guatemala in 1993, when President Jorge Serrano failed to elicit military support to close Congress. There was further political turbulence in 2003 when the former Guatemalan dictator, General Efraín Ríos Montt (who ruled in 1982–83), obtained a legal reform to allow him to run for the presidency, despite a constitutional ban on de facto heads of state ever becoming presidential candidates again.

Clashes between the executive and legislative branches of government led to collusion in Nicaragua, when Daniel Ortega's faction of the Sandinistas collaborated with President Arnoldo Alemán (1996–2001) to revise the constitution so as to restrict access to elected offices. Democratic structures have deteriorated in quality in each of these countries. Nicaragua gradually morphed into a mild version of an electoral autocracy by 2012, after Ortega succeeded in pressuring the Supreme Court to permit him to run for reelection to a second consecutive term.

## CYCLES OF VIOLENCE

A final—and unexpected—legacy of civil war is criminal violence. In retrospect, we should have predicted this would happen. Internal security suffers in the aftermath of civil war. In 2010, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala

each had a homicide rate in excess of 35 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants; the rates in El Salvador and Honduras exceeded 50 per 100,000 inhabitants. Costa Rica and Nicaragua's homicide rates are an average of 8 and 12 per 100,000 inhabitants, respectively, no more than double or triple the US rate (which ranks as the most violent of the developed countries). The real surprise is that Nicaragua's rate is relatively low. In the wake of the Contra War, the Sandinistas agreed to disband domestic intelligence and to depoliticize the army. International pressure (and funding) helped to create an uncorrupt police force, which retains the support and hence the cooperation of civilians.

Armed conflict may very well have been necessary to rid the isthmus of archaic dictatorship. Politically, Central America is now a different place, even if democratization remains incomplete in most countries and has suffered reversals in Honduras and Nicaragua. Governments no longer exterminate their opponents, though drug- and gang-related violence in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras has caused thousands of deaths. Even so, the immense cost in human life and the other legacies of war are testimony to the unwillingness of the vanquished oligarchs and officers to share power and permit a more humane future for their societies. ■

From *Current History's* archives...

"Few find it credible...that arming 15,000 Nicaraguan exiles, intent on gaining control of an underdeveloped country of 3 million, could be the most efficacious way to halt a world power intent on tipping the geopolitical balance in its direction by subverting all of Central America. Yet Americans 'bought' a policy that offered this view as its rationale."

Eldon Kenworthy "United States Policy toward Central America," December 1987

