

Guatemala's Conversion

By GEORGE BLACK

THE COUP THAT BROUGHT GENERAL RIOS MONTT TO power on March 23, 1982, came in response to fraudulent elections earlier that month, in which the government of General Lucas García tried to prolong its rule. The coup was backed by most of the army and by centrist and far-right parties that saw it paving the way for clean elections.

Ríos Montt was the army's chosen figure for three basic purposes: to regain international prestige, to broaden the social base of the regime and erode support for the guerrillas, and to unite a badly divided army and improve its combat morale. We found little evidence that he has managed to achieve any of these goals.

Certainly, Guatemala City is now quiet and Lucas García's paramilitary thugs are no longer visible on the streets. The urban middle class desperately wants to believe that Ríos Montt can perform miracles, and many have turned to his brand of evangelism. But the political parties that originally backed the coup are profoundly disillusioned; instead of the elections they expected within 60 days of the coup, Ríos Montt has banned all political party activity until 1985.

Just as we arrived, eight members of the far-right MLN party were arrested for plotting a coup against the government, and MLN vice presidential candidate Leonel Sisniega—a key figure in organizing the March 23 coup—was in hiding.

Our interview with the leader of Guatemala's Christian Democratic Party, Vinicio Cerezo, took place with Cerezo surrounded by three heavily armed bodyguards. Once favorable to the coup, Cerezo now says that any hopes of democratization are absurd as long as Ríos Montt stays in power.

Only the army remains impressed with the new head of state. Ríos Montt's concept of counterinsurgency—combined with a moralizing program of civic action—is more sophisticated than his predecessor's and more

popular with field commanders. (When questioned about any contradiction between his religious convictions and his command of an army notorious for its human rights abuses, Ríos Montt replied: "There is no contradiction. Both are part of a single unity presided over by God.")

In rural areas, the army's new tactics have put the revolutionary movement on the defensive since the coup. Areas that the army previously avoided are now the object of surgically executed counterattacks, followed by the classic trappings of civic action—army bulldozers cutting new roads, construction teams building markets and health centers. But the massacres continue—3,000 to 8,000 dead in the highlands since the March coup.

We visited three villages in El Quiché, each of which illustrates a different facet of the war. The first, Salquil Grande, had just been bombed flat by the army and was crawling with troops busy "relocating" the population. The second, San Sebastián Lemoa, had been abandoned by its 900 inhabitants in May, after repeated threats from paramilitary bands. It was eerily desolate. And the third, Chontala, had been retaken from guerrilla forces only three weeks earlier; guerrillas still controlled the next hamlet, four kilometers away across the cornfields.

Chontala was the scene of an army massacre last December; now it's a hearts-and-minds showcase which the army is keen to display to foreign visitors. The civic-action strategy here centers on redistributing the corn and beans that villagers had contributed to guerrilla food caches in the area, and creating Civil Defense Patrols—under military supervision—to "protect" the hamlet. Since everything in Chontala was expertly stage-managed for our benefit, one can only question the "voluntary" character of these patrols.

The regime's attitude toward international opinion is deeply ambiguous. All the early rhetoric about changing the army's corrupt and violent practices has been abandoned, and no officers from the previous regime have been purged. All criticism is ascribed to a sophisticated "international communist conspiracy"—with Amnesty International high on Ríos Montt's list of communist stooges. The military commander of El Quiché told us that the army's counterinsurgency op-

This article was originally published in the Update section of the September/October 1982 NACLA Report on the Americas. George Black was NACLA editor in the 1980s. Reprinted with permission.



Guatemalan soldiers, early 1980s.
JEREMY BIGWOOD / NACLA PHOTO ARCHIVE

erations make “no distinction between the communist subversives and the Catholic Church. They are one and the same thing.”

The evidence of that is one of the

The problem for the regime comes in reconciling this cavalier attitude toward world opinion with its pressing need for foreign aid. Ríos Montt, flying in the face of all the facts of

of the Reagan administration’s failure to live up to its campaign promises. “Perhaps the Reagan people will take our needs seriously,” said the Quiché commander, “when 80 million Mexicans have died under the boot of Soviet terror.”

The Reagan administration has not failed for lack of trying. Congressional opposition thus far has blocked any direct military transfers to Guatemala, but the State Department is now pushing several ostensibly humanitarian grants through multilateral lending institutions. One such grant is an \$18 million Inter-American Development Bank loan for a rural telephone system—aid which will directly support the army’s intelligence operations in the northwestern highlands. ■

Areas that the army previously avoided are now the object of surgically executed counterattacks. Massacres continue—3,000 to 8,000 dead in the highlands since the March coup.

most enduring images of El Quiché: dozens of boarded-up churches. Only one priest remains in the whole department, placed there recently by the conservative cardinal of Guatemala City.

economic collapse, insists that they can manage without aid: “Everyone can eat beans and maize. If they don’t like it, they can leave the country.”

But the rest of the military is more realistic, and they are bitterly resentful