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DEMOCRACY IN CENTRAL AMERICA?

Mark B. Rosenberg

March 1985

Dialogues #44

## PREFACE

This paper was prepared for the Conference on Redemocratization in Latin America, held in conjunction with the twentieth anniversary of the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Latin American Studies, March 28-30, 1985 in Pittsburgh, Pa. Suggestions and comments will be appreciated prior to the paper's revision.

Mark B. Rosenberg  
Director

## DEMOCRACY IN CENTRAL AMERICA?

### Introduction

While much has been written about the return to democracy in South America, surprisingly little has been written on democracy in Central America. Despite important electoral developments in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, the literature on these countries tends to focus on other issues: revolution, agrarian reform, relations with the US and the role of the church. There has been precious little attention to political institutions and the form of government in the region. Thus, while we know that political institutions do not work well in the region, we have little information explaining why.

The lack of attention to the democratic tendencies of the region is probably well deserved. With the exception of long-democratic Costa Rica, no country in the Central America can boast of its democratic proclivities. Instability, dictatorship, authoritarianism and military rule, and often profound civil violence have marked the contemporary histories of each of the four countries. Political parties are weak, governing coalitions are usually ephemeral, personalism is dominant, the military is ever-present and the US Embassy often has the final word. There is no democratic tradition in Central America, only liberal and democratic mentalities and sensibilities which are starkly juxtaposed against very conservative, elitist authoritarian tendencies. Usually these latter tendencies have also had the political advantage, either through the use and abuse of state power or through the application of direct techniques of persuasion. Democracy may be generally desired in the region, but pluralism is

not, particularly if it reflects threatening popular or mass interests. While much research remains to be done on the region's political culture, inevitably it is the institutional framework, the political process, and the act of governance itself which is in need of serious analysis if we are to understand more about democracy in the region.

### Is Democracy Possible?

Central America is now one of the most studied areas of the world.<1> Countless new dissertations, monographs, articles, policy papers, op-ed articles and essays have been written. Little has been said about democracy. Much more has been written about the present crisis, how it emerged, and how Central America has responded. US policy has also been intensively studied; many important insights about the region and how it interacts with the US have been gleaned from this intensive study. Lessons learned from the last six years of US-Central American interaction will inevitably engender a re-writing of the region's history.

The lack of research on democracy in Central America may be justified given the region's history. There are few periods in any of the countries' histories when even fair elections have taken place. Only Costa Rica has managed free and fair elections and a semblance of democratic consistency since 1948, and then following a civil war over the forms that the succeeding government would take. As Table 1 illustrates, of the 46 changes of government in the other four countries of the region (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua) since 1948, 22

TABLE I  
CENTRAL AMERICA: ACCESS TO POWER (1948-1982)

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Government, Date	Access to Power	Chief Executive
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**GUATEMALA**

J. Arbenz (1950-1954)	Elections	Military
C. Castillo Armas (1954-1957)	Counterrevolution	Military
L. A. Gonzalez Lopez (1957)	Succeeds Castillo (assassinated)	Civ.
G. Flores Avendano (1957-1958)	Congressional designation	Military
M. Idigoras Fuentes (1958-1963)	Elections	Military
E. Peralta Azurdia (1963-1966)	Golpe de Estado	Military
J. Mendez Montenegro (1966-1970)	Elections	Civilian
C.M. Arana Osorio (1970-1974)	Elections	Military
K. Laugerud Garcia (1974-1978)	Elections (Fraud)	Military
R. Lucas Garcia (1978-1982)	Elections (Fraud)	Military
E. Rios Montt (1982-1983)	Golpe de Estado	Military
H. Mejia Victores (1983)	Golpe de Estado	Military

**EL SALVADOR**

Government Junta (1948-50)	Golpe de Estado	Civil-
O. Bolanos; H. Costa, R. Gallindo, O. Osorio)		Military
O. Osorio (1950-56)	Elections	Military
J.M. Lemus (1956-1960)	Elections	Military
Government Junta (R. Fortin, F. Castillo, Three Military)	Golpe de Estado	Civil-
Civil-Military Directory (61-62)	Golpe de Estado	Military
R.E. Cordon (1962)	Executive Decree	Civil-
J.A. Rivera (1963-1967)	Election (Single Candidate)	Military
F. Sanchez Hernandez (1967-1972)	Election (Fraude)	Military
A. Molina (1972-1977)	Election (Fraude)	Military
C.H. Romero (1977-1979)	Election (Fraude)	Military
Government Junta (1979-80)	Golpe de Estado	Civil-
(G.M. Ungo; A. Majano; J.A. Gutierrez, R. Mayorga)		Military
Government Junta (1980)	Resignation of civilian members	
J.N. Duarte, A. Morales Erlich J.A. Gutierrez; A. Majano Adolfo Majano y R. Avalos Hector Dada)		
J.N. Duarte (1980-1982)	Designation by previous junta	Civilian
A. Magana (1982)	Designation by Cons. Assem.	Civilian
J.N. Duarte (1984)	Election	Civilian

**HONDURAS**

J. Manuel Galvez (1949-1954)	Presidential election	Civilian
J. Lozano Diaz (1954-1956)	Congressional Designation	Civilian
Junta Militar de Gobierno (1956)	Golpe de Estado	Military
R. Villeda Morales (1957-1963)	Elections	Civilian
O. Lopez Arellano (1963-1965)	Golpe de Estado	Military

O. Lopez Arellano (1965-1971)	National Assembly Elections	Military
R. Cruz (1971-1972)	Elections	Civilian
O. Lopez Arellano (1972-1975)	Golpe de Estado	Military
J.A. Melgar Castro (1975-1978)	Golpe de Estado	Military
P. Paz (1978-1980)	Golpe de Estado	Military
P. Paz Garcia (1980-1981)	National Assembly Elections	Military
R. Suazo Cordoba (1982)	Elections	Civilian

#### NICARAGUA

V.M. Ramos y Reyes (1948-1950)		
A. Somoza Garcia (1951-1956)	Golpe de Estado	Military
L. Somoza Garcia (1956-1963)	Election	Military
R. Schick (1963-1967)	Election	Military
A. Somoza Debayle (1967-1972)	Election	Military
Triunvirate (1972-1974)	Election	Civilian
A. Somoza Debayle (1974-1979)	Election	Military
Government Junta of Nat. Reconstruction (1980)	Revolution	Civil- Military
D. Ortega (1984)	Election	Civil- Military

#### COSTA RICA

O. Ulate (1949-1953)	Election	Civilian
J. Figueres Ferrer (1953-1958)	Election	Civilian
M. Echandi (1958-1962)	Election	Civilian
F. Orlich (1962-1966)	Election	Civilian
J.J. Trejos (1966-1970)	Election	Civilian
J. Figueres Ferrer (1970-1974)	Election	Civilian
D. Oduber (1974-1978)	Election	Civilian
R. Carazo (1978-1982)	Election	Civilian
L.A. Monge (1982)	Eleccion	Civilian

Adapted from: Mario Solorzano, "Centroamerica: democracias de fachada," Polemica, No. 12 (Noviembre-Diciembre, 1983).

were realized through elections and 50 per cent of these were accompanied by some form of fraud. "Candidato unico" elections, "elecciones con fraude" and elections where a military leader was elected have dominated the region's political scene since 1948.

As will be discussed below, the lack of meaningful elections in a North American sense, should be understood more as an effect than as a cause of the lack of a strong democratic tradition in the region.

Despite the fact that little has been said directly about

democracy in the recent literature on Central America, much has been written indirectly. Ebel's "Governing the City-State: Notes on the Politics of the Small Latin American Countries" <2> and his subsequent up-date <3> are useful points of departure for an understanding of democracy in Central America. He essentially argues that "national politics" in many Latin American countries are really "city politics." The Latin American city-states are small economies with restricted markets; economic concentration reinforces the tendency to "corporative" socio-political organization and this inevitably translates into political power. Ebel sees politics in the city-state as a struggle between elites for a particular allocation of goods and values. He argues that government in the Central American city-state is over-centralized administratively, decentralized in decision-making and usually oblivious to if not consciously circumventing constitutional arrangements. In a semantic tour de force, Ebel suggests:

[w]hile the Presidente de la Republica looks impressive, and from his office and those of his subordinates flow streams of licencias, diligencias, permisos, avisos, prorogas and tramites, he is in reality something of a paper tiger. Much of the time he is performing a delicate balancing act in his attempt to coordinate the activities and harmonize the conflicting demands of such powerful interests as algonoderos, bananeros, eclesiasticos, militares, and Norteamericanos. <4>

A recent analysis more directly examines the prospects for democracy in Central America. The study argues that the "underlying factors which have left democracy an orphan in Central America are undergoing important changes" <5>. He focuses on economic and sociocultural variables, arguing that the "economic and sociocultural conditions that have been prerequisites for democratic growth ...have been emerging over the past ten to



fifteen years throughout Central America" <6>. Seligson notes however that as the conditions for democracy have recently emerged, so has unprecedented violence. He attributes this violence to growing income inequality and to public policies in the region which promote inequality. He argues that unless "existing policies are reversed, one can expect continuing unrest and political violence" <7>.

While the region is approximating the social requisites necessary to sustain democracy, the essential implication is that reformist public policies are needed to effect structural changes. Seligson's paper does not specify exactly what policies might help to alleviate the pressures derived from economic growth, although it is clear that he favors measures promoting greater expenditure on education, social security and welfare as well as policies supportive of income and land redistribution. His paper does not examine how these reforms might be effected, much less if they are any more likely to emerge under democratic or non-democratic forms of government. Further, the paper needs to address the impact of six years of prolonged civil strife on the region and the implications of this destruction for the economic and socio-cultural conditions which had, until 1979, been improving.

The analytical implications following from the analyses by both Seligson and Ebel are suggestive about what exactly we need to focus upon if we are to understand better the nature of and prospects for democracy in Central America. First, because of the small size and limited economy of the city-state, politics ultimately carries with it inevitable personalistic features.

Family, clique and regional factors may be just as important as ideological and partisan explanations. Sex, business deals ("movidas," "chambas," "palanca," "telefonazos") and other idiosyncratic aspects may be the only valid explanations of why some things get done and why others don't.

Second, formal government institutions often have few manifest functions and many important latent functions. Political parties, government agencies and interest groups may only be incidental and not central to the real struggles over political allocations. Vertical patronage networks are usually critical to access in the region, whereas the formally constituted vehicles may serve, in the best of worlds, as mere artifices to supply political favors, co-opt the wayward challengers and to demobilize and deaden public interest where it might mistakenly direct itself in the absence of available patronage networks.<8> Broad notions of political legitimacy have no currency in this context. Government at best can only serve particularistic interests. There is no tradition of public interest which can be defined beyond the narrow interest of the group(s) in power. Such is the intensity and importance of meeting direct clientele needs and such is the nature of the expectations and demands of the respective clientele, that there are few overall pressures in Central America for high quality and responsive government. What matters is keeping the particular clientele interests dependent on your access and largesse. While this clientelistic model is similar to "machine" politics and political "bossism" in other countries, scarcity and political and economic instability place

particularistic imperatives on public office-holders which work against any larger notion of the public good. There simply are no incentives to perform in accordance with a generalized ideal of probity.

The role of the United States in each Central American country is critical. The US is the single largest economic enterprise; it has unparalleled political power and resources and it may be the only growth sector of the economy; it sets the country's social agenda. The particular US ambassador is one of the most studied figures in the country. The embassy itself, its staff, programs and aid activities are analysed, scrutinized and then hustled by locals who specialize in "working" the US institution. If knowing someone or having access on the local scene is important, part of any Central American bon-savant's important resources is access to high embassy officials and the ability, at decorous intervals, to be seen at the ambassador's receptions for traveling notables. Such is the importance of the US mission in Central America that Howard Wiarda has said this:

[the] United States is not only the most important external power operating throughout Central America, but the American embassy ...operating in its proconsular capacity is also a major domestic force if not the the [sic] major domestic force. <9>

The large US presence is magnified by the fact that so many other public and private institutions in Central America are weak. It is also made more complex by the fact that the embassy often serves as an important source of information and disinformation, which in small societies is particularly useful. Moreover, even if the respective embassy does not want to get involved in certain issues, it may become involved because it is

dragged in or implicated by another party. And the embassy is often part of a complex political game which pits it at certain discrete moments in a political equivalent of musical chairs with struggling local political factions. The manipulation of embassy interests, symbols and messages is as important in Central American politics as is their manipulation by other local and national groups. Politicians and military officials inevitably spend as much time cultivating embassy clientele as they do with their own nationals.

The important role played by the United States underlines another essential aspect of Central America which bears on democracy: the extreme dependency on and belief in the importance of US institutions. While this varies from country to country in Central America, there are few political actors who underestimate the US' power to do good and bad in the region. In part, this belief in the efficacy of US institutions derives from the preponderance of influence which American customs and culture have on the region. <10> Perhaps more importantly it derives from a strong desire among Central Americans to create in their countries the general living conditions which they so desperately lack. Finally, Central Americans tend to be woefully short on understanding how the US policy process really works, particularly in foreign policy toward their countries. While diplomatic relations with the US are the principal element of their respective country's foreign policy, US policy toward them is usually one of the least important diplomatic items on the US foreign policy agenda. Thus there is a disproportionate

relationship which inevitably makes the US more important to Central America than Central America is to the US.

A final political aspect relevant to an understanding of democracy in the region is that many of Central America's critical political questions are not being debated and resolved internally but rather internationally. The region's elites have a long tradition of elevating their problems to the international arena because of the disproportionate resources found there as well as the generally safer ambience. This tradition is explained in part by the lack of structures internally to promote and foster open discussions about political issues. Few of the region's countries have had "political centers" where debate was fostered. <ll> Moreover, the ability to manipulate international organizations, to utilize the prestige media, to travel to international gatherings and be photographed with important world leaders all have their local political value and impact. While this has been especially the case since 1978, it is nonetheless an important and recurring element in the political process which needs to be understood.

#### Definition and Analysis

Two schools of thought characterize approaches toward democracy in less developed countries. The first is predictably traditional, emphasizing process, procedure and form and assuming some general consensus on the rules of the game. Interest groups, political parties and simply the existence of pluralism are understood to be essential elements for the establishment and maintenance of a democratic system. The second school looks less at means than at ends, emphasizing the broader socio-

economic and participatory features engendered through enhanced well-being and greater equity. This school emphasizes ends rather than means and approaches issues with a "collectivist" bias.

The actual experience with South American countries returning to democratic forms of government is noteworthy within this context. In each of the countries (Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay) which have recently "redemocratized," the emphasis has been on the formal and procedural aspects of political organization rather than on the distributional aspects of democracy as suggested in the second approach. Indeed, it may have been frustration and anger over the inability to make any progress at all in the second area of political economy that provided the rationale for returning to a less economically but politically more ambitious effort to order themselves.

Because Seligson has utilized the definition of democracy provided by Weiner in his recent comparative study of competitive elections in developing nations <12>, this essay will apply Weiner's definition of democracy to its Central American context. However, it should be pointed out that this definition is overly formalistic and election-party oriented. Nowhere does the definition reflect any "first principles" of democracy or get at any larger issues of equity. By contrast, a recent analysis of Central America's crisis by Gabriel Aguilera points directly at this issue by examining the two types of democracy currently possible in Central America <13>. While he analyzes the current efforts at democratization in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salva-

dor as a means by which to keep the extant political economy functioning without any major upheavals, he sees the revolution in Nicaragua in a more principled sense. Its objective is the creation of a democracy, where mass living conditions are improved as rapidly as possible and where racism and exploitation are eliminated. Aguilera further states that "while the first approach guarantees freedom of movement and expression to political interests of diverse classes, the second refers to the building of new societies with the participation of all the population" <14>. Seen in this way, "the democratic and participatory are not necessarily realized through elections and political parties and they are not measured simply by electoral results, but rather by indices of participation and by changes in living conditions for the majority of people" <15>.

Nonetheless Weiner's approach to democracy should be analyzed within the Central American context because it highlights many of the aspects characterizing the return to democracy in South America, particularly the emphasis on procedure and party-oriented politics, with less specified ends or goals of that process, except to put civilians back into formal governmental control. Weiner's study of democracy provides the general dimensions of a useful definition which can be applied to the region:

- (1) government leaders are chosen in competitive elections in which there are opposition political parties;
- (2) political parties, including opponents of the existing government, have the right to openly seek public support: they have access to the press, the right of assembly and freedom of speech and are protected against unwarranted arrest;

(3) governments defeated in an election step down; losers are not punished by the winners nor are defeated leaders punished unless in the act of governance they have broken the law and their punishment is based upon due process;

(4) elected governments are not figureheads; they exercise power and make policies and they are accountable to the electors, not to the military, the monarchy, the bureaucracy or some oligarchy.

Each of these dimensions of Weiner's definition deserves to be examined in greater detail as they apply to Central America.

### Competitive Elections

There have been few genuinely competitive elections in Central America in the post-World War II era. With the exception of Costa Rica, where a strong competitive tradition has been in existence since the mid-1940s, the number of competitive elections can be counted on almost one hand for the other four countries.

Reasons for the lack of competitive elections abound. In the first place, Central America's elites have a variety of alternative means to access power. As Robert Dahl has indicated, there must be some "underlying consensus" on policy in the society among a predominant portion of the politically active members.<16> Elections are just one of the many means to effect public policy. Eldon Kenworthy has written about this, suggesting that "actors" can not agree on one "currency" for measuring power. The dual currency game, alternating between coercion and popularity, can be translated into almost equal amounts of power <17>. And, elections often tend to promote rather than resolve conflict. Glen Dealy has recently asserted that:

"By accenting differences, elections exacerbate latent conflicts and disrupt the whole both in theory and in practice. Partisan speeches, stuffed ballot boxes, extravagant claims of alternate



teleogies and military coups are just a few of the factors that have come to characterize the so-called electoral process." <18>

Dahl himself admits that elections and political competition "vastly increase the size, number and variety of minorities whose preferences must be taken into account by leaders making policy choices." <19>

And even if there were faith in elections as an important mechanism for the transfer of power, Central America's electoral institutions have had much difficulty in establishing an electoral process which meets the needs of the diversity of interests who ultimately vote. Debates abound over the type of ballot, the financing of campaigns, the registration of voters, the nature of candidate selection and the issue of district representation. While this lack of consensus reflects the larger problems concerning the legitimacy of the process itself, it ultimately feeds back into it as part of a vicious circle.

To be competitive, elections must ultimately pit opposing parties against each other. In the region, there has been no shortage of opposing parties. As one analyst has pointed out for El Salvador, " ...in the 1960s and 1970s Salvadoran political life swarmed with broad-based political parties, grass-roots movements, coalitions, demonstrations...[and] popular organizations." <20> However, their ability to aggregate broad interests has been an issue. Indeed, Central America's dilemma is that the opposing parties increasingly represent smaller and smaller sectors of the population. Perhaps surprisingly this has occurred, because the region has always had distinct ideological differences which translated into "conservative" and "liberal"

party formations. These party distinctions were particularly acute before the 1930s in each country, but seemed to collapse as the pressure of the Depression forced dominant groups together to protect their mutual interests. Since the 1940s, traditional parties have not been able to aggregate diverse and new interests as they have emerged and the result has been predictable in terms of the formation of guerrilla movements, revolutionary groups and the formation of clandestine political organizations of both left and right ideological tendencies. The failure of the traditional parties to provide meaningful political alternatives is at the heart of Weiner's second component of democracy.

Political Parties and their Dilemma

Weiner's definition of democracy states that "political parties, including opponents of the existing government, have the right to openly seek public support: they have access to the press, the right of assembly and freedom of speech and are protected against unwarranted arrest." With few exceptions, these conditions have rarely obtained in the region. To explain this, we must first examine the types of political parties which exist and the nature of their mass support. Table 2, below, outlines the four types of parties which exist in the region.

TABLE 2

<u>Type of Party</u>	<u>Party Name</u>	<u>Ideology</u>
Traditional		
Modernizing		

## Extremist

### Dominant Mass

Traditional parties by and large are now passing from the Central American political scene except for in Honduras. While they once articulated a coherent political and ideological philosophy, they exist in practice for patronage and clientelistic purposes.

Modernizing parties, characterized by their European oriented ideological bases, are now in power in both Costa Rica and El Salvador. These parties have rarely captured over 50 per cent electoral support and normally have strong opposition to them because of their statist tendencies. While fostering a programmatic, mobilizational image, in practice they must content themselves with some mix of program and patronage. In many respects, their programmatic orientation provided a convenient, if not ideological and thus purer pretext for rewarding party faithfuls with jobs, status and security.

Extremist parties are characterized by militant dogmatism and a willingness to use violence to achieve their ends. The political pathology of extremist politics often leaves little room for differentiating between conservative (rightist) and radical (leftist) movements; the nature of the pathology is such that the means inevitably becomes confused with the ends, and a

viscious circle is created whereby violence seems to be the only response to violence. Both extremes seem have little faith in democratic procedures and even less confidence in "centrist" politicians. Both can undermine political compromise and force governments into extremist positions and both pull and tug at political forces on the margins of the spectrum which are not fully committed to any type of political governance, thereby making that governance even more tenuous. While these parties openly espouse their positions, extremist parties of the left have gone underground or are in exile.

Dominant mass parties are those which tend to dominate government and non-offical elements of public life. The explicit model which they follow is Mexico's PRI. The FSLN in Nicaragua is the most recent example, but the PCN of El Salvador aspired to this type of political hegemony for many years before it lost its momentum in the 1970s, and PLN ideologues openly spoke of establishing a PRI-type political dominance in Costa Rica during the mid-1970s.

Like political parties in other parts of the world, Central America's political parties tend to be rent by personalism and factionalism. Even the region's most successful political party, the National Liberation Party (PLN) of Costa Rica, has suffered a series of potentially debilitating splits based largely on personal ambition. The ruling Liberal Party in Honduras is now split into at least four factions and the Christian Democratic Party of El Salvador barely weathered a leadership struggle prior to the 1984 presidential elections between Jose Napoleon Duarte

and his heir apparent, Fidel Chavez Mena. The tendency toward party factionalism is not perhaps as extreme as in other Latin American countries like Bolivia, where a reported 323 political parties have competed for power since 1958.<21> But factionalism is nonetheless a major problem because it directs political competition inward rather than outward. One Honduran analyst has pointed out in this regard that there is greater intra-party competition in Honduras than inter-party competition. Moreover factionalism reinforces the tendency toward internal competition and conflict resolution, rather than on purpose and problem solving. In this context, pay-offs (political favors, jobs, differential access to limited resources such as foreign exchange) are related back to groups competing for power, not forward to their consequences for society. While Charles Tilly has noted that the formation of national states and widespread popular involvement in them in Europe emerged inadvertently as the result of "small groups of power hungry men" fighting off numerous rivals and great popular resistance in the pursuit of their own ends <22>, the model hardly seems to be reassuring for Central America.

But there is a larger issue and it relates to party capability to incorporate newly emerging sectors into the ongoing political fabric. While more research is needed on the subject, many of the region's Christian and Social Democratic leaders were originally members of more traditional parties. They believed that that party could not or would not expand beyond its own more narrow and traditional interests to accommodate the newly emerging middle class interests engendered by the

economic post-World War II economic expansion. As Mario Solorzano has indicated,

"Agricultural diversification, the industrialization process and the massive entry of foreign capital had an important impact with relation to the economy's modernization, generating the appearance of new business groups, expanding the size of the middle sectors and catalyzing the appearance of urban and rural proletariat." <23>

While some parties could not adapt, others were quickly forming to capture the political space left unprotected by the less responsive political parties. The efforts of these parties have had very high costs. In Guatemala, key leaders of these emergent parties have been assassinated, in El Salvador they were exiled and/or assassinated, in Honduras they have been marginalized, and in Nicaragua, both before and after Somoza, they have been harrassed and hassled. Where minority parties have emerged in Costa Rica, they have either successfully been able to articulate their interests through the unicameral national assembly or they have joined, in coalition, with one of the parties. With few exceptions, no party in Central America has been able to articulate a meaningful and lasting relationship with any of the region's major labor unions.

These problems are related to another. With the exception of the Sandinistas, particularly during their first two years in power, few parties have had the skills, or the wherewithal to mobilize large groups of people. Central America has had no Perons, Haya de la Torres, Vargas, or Cardenas. This is made even more complicated by the fact that Central America's military establishments and the left and right wing death squads have made open political mobilizing quite dangerous. The right of assembly

and speech may exist in every constitution of the region, but in practice it is subject to the particular correlation of forces and sentiments at the time.

Indeed, a far more important tactic for the establishment and maintenance of power, if not for the establishment of democracy, may be for the dominant political forces, especially parties, to seek accommodation. The most common form of public accommodation in Latin America has come about through the writing of "pacts" between parties and other political groups. These pacts, essentially agreements on how the spoils of power will be divided and limitations on the extremes which political power will be used, have been essential elements in the evolution of social peace and democracy in Colombia and Venezuela.<24> They have had their equivalents in Central America: in Nicaragua and Honduras in the early 1970s and in El Salvador most recently. While they may be political devices which actually enshrine expediency and "ad-hocism," they may also be essential elements to achieve the currently fashionable concept of "democracy as the second best option," particularly where no one group is hegemonic and capable of imposing its political will on the rest.<25>

#### Sufragio efectivo, no reeleccion

Weiner's third characteristic of democracy points to the importance of elected government's leaving power if defeated in an election. As the Mexicans learned under Diaz, this was no simple matter and helped galvanize the revolutionary forces in their efforts to topple the dictator. In Central America, in fact, there has been very little continuismo. The Somoza dynasty

is an exception to the rule, but it should not becloud the larger reality of Central American political organization. With the exception of Costa Rica, the key to understanding political relations in the region can be found in the armed forces and their relation to civilian groups. Thus, while it is true that Guatemala has had periodic electoral changes as Table 1 shows, behind the scenes in every crucial decision was the armed forces of that country. In El Salvador, the military directly dominated each government beginning with the Hernandez-Martinez dictatorship (1931), while in Honduras the armed forces plays the decisive internal political role. Nicaragua's Sandinistas are increasingly relying on military power to maintain their control and it is this dependence which may be tipping the balance of control internally within the ruling Front.

The permanency of the military in power, either formally or informally, is what has prompted Solorzano to describe Central America as a region of "democracias de fachada." Thus, while there has been very little continuismo in strict terms, few presidential candidates have taken public office in Central America without the military's expressed support. Indeed, elections have recently been held in the region where the candidates with the most number of votes did not take power. Dealy explains this phenomenon by pointing to the fact that Latin Americans prefer "guided" elections because the alternative--transferring power based on "uninhibited voting"--suggests a community without collective goals and a theory of equality, both of which they deny.<26>

In practice however, the predominance of the armed forces



throughout Central America reflects concretely a number of problems. First, the military as a group has very little confidence in civilian political leadership. This lack of confidence derives from a larger sense among the military and their allies that civilians are not to be trusted. This distrust is compounded by what Wynia calls the military's "craving" for control over things that affect them, "a trait that may be wise in war but is counterproductive in constitutional politics." <27> Second, this situation is compounded by the fact that at least three of the region's militaries consider themselves to be fighting insurgencies of significant proportion. The Guatemalan rebellion has been a continuing dimension of civil-military relations since the early 1960s, virtually guaranteeing the armed forces of that country an extraordinary role in political life. In El Salvador, the insurgency is now in its fifth year and gives the Salvadoran military less motivation to bring their own wayward security forces into greater order. And in Nicaragua, the contra maneuvers on the north and south of the country give the Sandinistas a crucial resource to justify their own political and economic mismanagement. The growing military sophistication of the Honduran armed forces give the region a "garrison-state" complexion which only further erodes the weakened base of civilian politics.<28>

Armed forces predominance in the region reflects a third problem. In many instances, civilian politicians would rather deal with the military than with other civilians. While Nunn captured the essence of this relation several years ago with his

now classic essay, he underemphasized the extent to which this type of alliance formation inevitably eroded a range of civilian institutions beyond simply civilian rule as a norm.<29> In this regard, the region's legal systems have been hostage to the privilege and exclusiveness which the military and their non-uniformed coalition partners effected. The fact that few military officers have been brought to trial for human rights abuses in Guatemala and El Salvador is but the tip of the proverbial iceberg in terms of the extent to which the region's legal systems are negated by those with power and privilege. Thus their power and privilege has not only undermined the possibilities of a broad-based civilian political landscape, but as importantly the parallel systems vital to the creation of public legitimacy and efficacy.

Thus, while Wiener specifies that "governments defeated in an election step down" as an essential dimension of democracy, he fails to appreciate the fact that many governments in fact at best share power with other powerful institutions. This will be a problem in the four Central American countries for the foreseeable future. The military will play a decisive role. Ultimately for the military to be controlled, parallel organizations will need to change and penetrate it. Two options are available: in Mexico and Tanzania, the military is subordinate to non-communist ruling parties. On the other hand, in communist countries, the military is subordinate to the ideologically based party. In Central America, the Salvadoran model seems the most likely. In this situation, it is the United States which supports the party in power, giving that party

extraordinary power over the military. While this support is important at a symbolic level, it may be more apparent than real, given the current party's inability to effect basic structural reforms in the legal system.

What is clear is that the military will continue to be the major force for political accountability in the region's political systems; and this notion runs counter to Wiener's fourth characteristic of democracy, to be discussed below.

Obedzco pero no cumplo

"Elected governments are not figureheads; they exercise power and make policies and they are accountable to the electors, not to the military, the monarchy, the bureaucracy or some oligarchy." Here Wiener gets to the essential element of democracy confronting Central America, the issue of accountability. Like many of the components of democracy, accountability has a number of dimensions which deserve analysis.

Traditionally there has been little public accountability for those who wielded power in Central America. Rather, accounts were rendered privately to either the military, the oligarchy, the private external financial interests with investments in the country, or some combination. Only in Costa Rica has some tradition of accountability been established, taking place largely through the electoral and then to a lesser extent, through the legal system.

In rare instances, governments have been forced to be accountable to a wider audience. Public manifestations brought down governments in Guatemala and El Salvador in 1944, and almost

in Costa Rica in 1947. The Sandinista rebellion of 1979 could not have been successful without a poly-class movement to oust the dictatorship. The growing militancy of the Catholic Church has provoked a greater consciousness about the importance of government responsiveness and this contributed to the mobilization of public demand making in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. But Church militancy has sparked a counter-response, particularly from conservative evangelicals who eschew the disorder inherent in Liberation Theology teachings.

The thrust of Ebel's analysis is to question the real power which any Central American government has. To be accountable, a government has to have resources with which to be accountable. If, as Ebel suggests, the Central American city-state is penetrated by a series of vertical, corporatively organized interest associations, then accountability should take on a new dimension in Central America. Yet perhaps it is just this particularized accountability which may explain why governemtn appears to do so little in the region. The minorities to which Dahl referred have captured and cannibalized the state to such an extent that it really is incapable of being accountable to any large audience. The presence of the military virtually insures that such a situation will not be altered.

Another dimension to the accountability issue is the actual availability of both human and material resources. The limited economic productivity of the region coupled to its shortage of skilled and semi-skilled labor contribute to further undermine any responsiveness that a government may desire. Thus even when there is a genuine effort to respond to some public

need, the capability simply may not be there. A recent study of the National Agrarian Institute (INA), charged with land management in Honduras, revealed the following:

"The current INA management inherited a motor vehicle pool which theoretically contained about 400 vehicles...Virtually all of these vehicles are deadlined; in fact, most of them are junk...in all of INA, including the seven regional offices, there are twenty-four vehicles running."

"However, there are problems in every area of administrative support. There is no personnel system other than a small office which handles the paperwork; all office psace is poorly assigned, poorly furnished, overcrowded and clearly demoralizing. Supplies and equipment are in short supply." <30>

Thus, while the old adage "Obedezco pero no cumplo" ("I obey but I do not comply") has been interpreted to mean that the colonial administrator chose not to comply with orders received from Spain, in the modern version, meaning can be expanded to suggest that the administrator can not comply simply because the human and material resource technology is unavailable.

#### Is this Central America's Democratic 'Moment'?

One recent analysis on redemocratization in the Andean countries (Malloy and Abugattas, "Redemocratization in Latin America: The Andean Pattern," Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh, n.d.) asserts that Latin America is entering a new "democratic cycle" whereby it is imperative to shift attention to an analysis of the emergence of "democratic moments within the historical process of Latin America." <31> As has been shown in this paper, if Central America's "moment" has arrived, as suggested by Seligson in his examination of the broad socio-cultural and economic conditions of the region, then it is still not reflected in the structural arrangements which characterize

the political organization of most Central American countries. As Dahl has suggested, "what we ordinarily describe as democratic 'politics' is merely the chaff...Prior to politics...is the underlying consensus on policy that usually exists in the society among a predominant portion of the politically active members." <32>

There are at least four preconditions necessary for consensus to emerge in Central America. 1) The region's economy will have to reverse its downward spiral and return to the secular growth patterns characteristic of the 1960s and 1970s. However, as Booth <33> and others have shown, the cost of this growth can not be unilaterally imposed on the Central American working classes as it was in the previous growth era. Even in Brazil, as Kaufman (1984) points out, the 'lesson' from the Brazilian experience with authoritarianism is that "both the economic and political 'successes' [were] achieved ...because of (rather than in spite of) the willingness of authorities to tolerate debates and to play the political game in ways that sometimes diverged sharply from their own anti-democratic mentalities." <34>. If economic growth is to occur, it will have to respond in some fashion to the basic needs to Central America's burgeoning population, which by the year 2000 will have almost doubled to just about 42 million people. In this context, it is clear that growth can not just occur in the area of non-traditional exports, but as well in the production of basic grains so that the population can feed itself. At present the prospects for significant economic growth in the remainder of this decade and for the next are not good, particularly given the continued destruction of the region's infrastructure as well as the lack of investable surplus in the

region.

2) As indicated earlier, leadership is a key question for Central America. This leadership must at be able to negotiate its way through the veritable "living museum" and to accommodate the vast and complex political spectrum while nurturing and protecting the evolution of a civil politics which, while acceptable to few, can indeed emerge as the "second best" option because there are no winnable first options for any group. Moreover, the leadership must be able to resist the temptations of power, which often makes it the first to abuse the democratic systems which they presumably want to create and maintain. In Honduras, the current president has egregiously weakened the nascent democracy there by forgetting that he was president of all the country, not just his party. In El Salvador, the Christian Democratic leadership has over-zealously disregarded the laws passed by its own conservative congress, thereby violating directly the constitution. Even democrats have to practice being good democrats. Strong and decisive leadership in the region must be capable of articulating a larger democratic political project and of organizing and mediating the debates on issues which give all the illusion of participation while leaving space for incremental changes (see Kaufman on this last point).

3) If democracy is to evolve in Central America, it can not do so under conditions of armed insurgency and civil war. In the Southern Cone, Kaufman suggests that "the maximalism of the extreme left merely fed the fears that contributed to the brutal authoritarian lurches to the right" <34>. In Central

America, there is good evidence that this relationship has worked in the other direction: the maximalism of the extreme right led to the brutal (if not more episodic) response of the extreme left. As Gabriel Zaid has more than once persuasively argued for El Salvador, "[t]hat dirty trick of tampering so arrogantly with an election [of 1972] merely goaded on the rebels, the coup makers, the death squads." <36>. The result for Central America has been what Zaid calls "armed pluralism."

The situation of "armed pluralism" has three important dimensions. First, with the exception of Costa Rica, the region's armed forces are paramount political actors in each Central American country. This is not likely to change particularly given the new environment of "low-intensity conflict." <37>. Some formula must be sought to minimize the political influence of the military. Such a formula is unlikely under conditions of insurgency. Kaufman asserts for the Southern Cone that "...one of the striking uniformities of otherwise very different liberalization experiences in contemporary Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay has so far been the absence of such insurgencies." <38> He further argues that "guerrilla activities have been counter-productive" as a means by which to accelerate the disintegration of bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes. What he is less clear about however is how to keep the military at a meaningful distance from the political arena.

In Central America, this dilemma is even more complicated by the fact that civilians, as elsewhere, are often more comfortable with the military than with other civilians. This attitude is not simply at the elite level however. The 1984 Salvadoran



elections gave dramatic evidence to the drawing power of conservative, non-reformist political formula. There, as elsewhere in the region (Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica) the contradictions occasioned by the desire and capacity for modernization and the strength of conservatism as expressed through religious values, as well as extant patterns of political and organizational life, suggest that we need to learn a lot more about the region's mass political values and their modes of political expression.<40>

It is unrealistic to believe that the military will "return to the barracks" in the foreseeable future in Central America. Indeed, for those searching for some formula to de-politicize the military, the search will most likely be fruitless. Incrementalist solutions will probably depend more on changes in non-military facets of political life and the emergence in the military of strong leadership which chooses to be more democratic.

The other two dimensions of "armed pluralism" are as intractable as the first. As stated earlier, the presence of "extremist" parties is but a reflection of a larger problem in Central America. Fed by patterns of mistreatment characteristic of the colonial period a culture of violence dominates the area. <41> Official violence, whether emanating from the darkest recesses of Guatemala's secret police or from the "turbas divinas" in Sandinista Nicaragua, are now quasi-institutionalized forms of political control. Distinctions between the two types of violence suggested here can be made. "Rightist" violence attempts to maintain the existing political system by eliminating those

who would challenge it. "Leftist" inspired violence is oriented at creating a new system by eliminating those opposed to change. Of course tactics within each group vary as does ideology. The results seem to be the same. The region's "blood tax" gets higher and higher. <42> Within this context, the procedural norms and the consensus critical to democracy have little opportunity to prove themselves.

Finally, it is clear that a critical element in Central America's democratic moment will continue to be the United States. Strong US support is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for democracy in the region. Without US support the region's democrats are simply not strong enough to maintain their struggle. They are virtually defenseless against both right and left extremists and the military as well. US support for democracy however needs to be able to develop confidence in democratic forces and in the almost ineluctable necessity for these forces to develop, over time, broad based popular support. The development of this support will require human, material and symbolic resources which have all been in short supply in the region's past. Given the current scarcities and the unprecedented internationalization of the conflict in Central America, the US may be facing an almost insurmountable task if it pushes the democracy theme too hard and too fast. This will be particularly the case if American policy-makers maintain too rigid a view of what constitutes democracy and if they allow themselves to disregard this country's previous legacy in the region.

## ENDNOTES

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