Plus ça change...

GUATEMALA: POLITICS BY OTHER MEANS

by Richard O'Mara

Guatemala City, Guatemala

Columnist Alvaro Contreras Velez waved a blunt, black pistol. He held it with firm delicacy, his little finger extended elegantly. "I take this everywhere I go," he said. He slipped the piece back into his desk drawer then seated himself on the couch. He talked about Guatemala, the most beautiful of the Central American states, the most populous, yet a dark and dangerous place. He said he thought his people were tired of military rule. It has been interminable in their history. They would probably vote *against* General Anibal Guevara and *for* one of his three civilian opponents in the elections of March 7, three days away.

General Romeo Lucas García's time in office had run out and General Guevara was the government's hand-picked candidate. Urgent needs were pressing upon the regime: helicopters, possibly napalm, and weapons of a heavier order than they could get from Israel, their regular supplier.

Guatemalan guerrillas—four separate leftist groups that operate under an umbrella organization called the National Revolutionary Union of Guatemala (UNRG)—had been making considerable headway against the eighteen thousand-man Guatemalan army, especially in the northwest. They now virtually controlled the department of Huehuetenango and were strong in Quiche. A look at the map tells the story: Those regions encompass much of the country, and Huehuetenango itself backs up against Mexico, which the Guatemalans claim is a haven for the guerrillas.

The March 7 elections were called to legitimize the old order, to make Guatemala respectable in the eyes of the world. This is the country that, in the words of one frank American diplomat, the Lucas regime had turned into "a bucket of blood." There were no helicopters from Washington, no heavy weapons because the regime was so dirty that President Carter had been forced to cut off military assistance back in '78. The regime hoped that, following the election, the Reagan administration would be able to deflect criticism of Guatemala in the U.S. Congress and send the needed weapons to clear out those Communists in the hills. The new U.S. administration thought it a good idea and still does. They say as much at the embassy in Guatemala City and they say so in Washington.

Alvaro Contreras knew what the odds were for re-establishing democracy and civil order in his country. He had been commenting on events in Guatemala for over thirty years in his daily column, "Cacto," in *La Prensa Libre*. Journalism too was a dangerous trade in Guatemala. Between 1980 and 1982 over thirty journalists were murdered, some by right-wing terrorists, some by left-wing terrorists. Mr. Contreras himself was kidnapped the morning after our interview. On March 5 some men came to his house, killed his bodyguard, and took him away. He has not been heard from since. He was grabbed, they say, by leftists.

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Mario Sandoval Alarcon, the most extremist of the right-wingers in the four-man presidential race, offers an interview on the afternoon before the election. One of those involved in the CIA-contrived plot in 1954 that overthrew the reformist government of Jacobo Arbenz, he is a populist, a mystic Catholic, and more reactionary even than General Guevara. He is also thought to command a private army of several thousand men.

Sandoval's is a modest house next to a Volkswagen dealer; its most salient features are two gun towers rising above the front wall. We journalists are searched thoroughly, then admitted behind the wall to the front yard, where a dozen armed men are milling about. Inside, in the living room, there are other armed men and a funereal floral arrangement in the colors of the National Liberation Movement, Sandoval's party. Sandoval appears, admires the flowers, then invites us into another room, where there are more armed men. The candidate sits beneath a picture of his wife as a young woman, asserting his ownership like a Mafia don. When he speaks it is with an unnerving and tuneless crackle; he has lost his voice box to cancer.

Sandoval talks of taking back Belize, long claimed by Guatemala; of the corruption of the military; of destroying the guerrillas and of getting weapons for that purpose from the United States. He does not speak of peace or reconciliation of the Guatemalan family.

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Those are unacceptable words in the current vocabulary of Guatemalan politics. Parties that preach them have been blasted out of the game. There is no Christian Democratic candidate for the March 7 elections; too many of their people have been killed participating in previous pollings. No, extremists like Sandoval are the norm in Guatemalan politics. The elections were being conducted with the participation of ultra

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and extremist right-wing parties. The center has fallen by the wayside. The Left practices politics by other means. Guerrillas are active in Guatemala for much the same reason they thrive in El Salvador: One segment of the political class has denied participation to the other, making its members, in effect, outlaws.

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"Some months ago we all used to laugh at the guerrillas. Now everyone, foreigners who live here, they no longer say it is impossible. The guerrillas have gained credibility. We used to call them bandits."

He was a European ambassador, balding, sleek, confident. He had been in the country long enough to know what he was talking about. He felt secure, but only because he sat in an office shielded by the most elaborate security hardware in the Third World—a series of pneumatically sealed doors, like decompression chambers, sheets of green-tinted bullet-proof glass, hard-eyed policemen imported from his native country. "Here the guerrillas are very strong," he said. "They are more organized than in El Salvador."

Part of Guatemala's potential for violence lies in its racial configuration. The country's population of seven million is evenly divided between Ladinos (Spanish-speaking descendants of the Spanish settlers) and Indians (Quiche-Mayan, descendants of the ancient Mayans who flourished here centuries ago). A hatred and suspicion has always simmered between the two groups. Since the Conquest, the Indians of Guatemala, like those of the high Andes, have kept themselves apart from the Ladino society and economy. Most of them live in small villages in the countryside, living traditional village lives in strict remove. Some grow corn and peppers, some have worked the great banana plantations, but only a few have integrated to even the superficial degree they are permitted in Guatemala.

Efforts by left-wing opponents of the government to recruit the Indians have failed in the past, but these days the Indians are joining the guerrillas in increasing numbers. They have been given little choice. They are beseiged by the army, their villages are burned, and their crops are destroyed. General Lucas followed a simple strategy in his regime's combat with the estimated 4-6,000 guerrillas: If the guerrillas can swim among the people the way fish swim in water, the way to get at the fish is to drain the pond—that is, kill all the people. The strategy, the product of a mind both stupid and bloodthirsty, has had two effects. It has produced the approximately three thousand refugees a month who pour over the Mexican border; and it has swelled the ranks of the Guatemalan Peoples Army and the Organization of People in Arms, two of the four groups fighting under the UNRG.

Another group that has responded to local conditions is the Jesuit order. Like other Catholic religious working in Central America, many in its ranks obeyed the call of the 1968 Medellín Conference of Bishops and set themselves at the side of the poor against the rich and powerful. They were encouraged in that mission by Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI and will not heed Pope John Paul II's call to stay in their churches and out of the slums. In fact, more than a dozen priests and hundreds of lay workers have been murdered in Guatemala in the past two years. The silence from the Vatican, when governments are taking so many lives, makes them resentful.

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On May 7, as the columnist Contreras predicted, the Guatemalan people indicated they were indeed tired of the military. They voted against General Guevara. But the Lucas government rigged the results and tried to pass off the general as the winner. That had two immediate consequences: It brought thousands of protesting Guatemalans into the streets, where they were gassed, clubbed, and shot by the forces of order, and it produced a successful coup d'état on March 23. Today Guatemala has a new military man at its head. Although General Efrain Rios Montt's intentions are not clear, he hasn't even bothered to promise new, honest elections.

A lot happened in Guatemala this year, but not much has changed. |WV|