

GUATEMALA: THE 1999 GENERAL ELECTIONS

A Discussion of Electoral Behaviour in Guatemala

By Stener Ekern

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Preface

Among the electoral processes held in Central American countries over the last two decades, those held in Guatemala since 1985 have perhaps been the most consistently heralded by international observers as procedurally "free and fair." One prominent criticism has been that, at least until the 1999 elections, the left could not and did not participate openly, and thus that the will of the people could not reasonably have been reflected in the popular vote. Following the December 1996 peace accords and the subsequent legal formation of a leftist party incorporating the former URNG insurgents, this criticism no longer holds. Yet something still seems amiss as electoral participation remains one of the lowest in Latin America and political corruption appears endemic to all political parties. Now more than ever, observers are called upon to deepen their understanding of the structural weaknesses of modern electoral systems that have been transposed onto inequitable societies like that of Guatemala.

This study of electoral behaviour in Guatemala written by Stener Ekern, who led a team of four Norwegian researchers to observe and study the 1999 elections, begins to fill such a need for an analysis of why a country like Guatemala has had such a rocky road in its transition to democracy. On the one hand, this study provides the reader with a concise overview of political conditions in Guatemala, as well as the history and current reality of electoral processes in that country — updated information that is not always so readily available given the dearth of social scientists (national or international) working on Central America in recent years.

However, this study also provides new insights and conclusions that are rarely taken into account by the average electoral observation team. Ekern and his colleagues note that these elections resulted in greater participation by the electorate (especially women) and thus it is "not unlikely" that they contributed to a democratic advance for Guatemala. However, Ekern also argues that one should not ignore the reality of the clientelist mode of politics that continues to be practiced throughout the country. The custom of political candidates "buying" votes through promises of responding to the immediate needs of voters, especially in rural areas, is both widespread and commonly known, yet seldom described by international observers who parachute into a country for only a few days. This study posits that any effort to expand democratic practices in Guatemala must start from acknowledging this "really existing relation" between politicians and rural citizens — citizens who are, in fact, rational actors when it comes to proffering their vote for particular candidates. The challenge remains that of building an inclusive civic culture as

well as public institutions that are accountable and which will thus inspire greater confidence in the average citizen.

Additionally, Ekern and his colleagues question the effectiveness of international assistance in promoting voter turnout, and point to the need for further research on this question. This issue is key, since international organizations have failed to fully visualize what might constitute long-term, sustainable support for citizen participation strategies. More common are efforts geared toward providing technical solutions or last-minute "get-out-the-vote" strategies similar to U.S. or Western European models. Inevitably, international organizations will attribute any "successes" in increased citizen participation to their own efforts, while assigning blame to local actors should the results be less promising.

Finally, this study represents an important model of research that seeks to bridge the often distant worlds of academia and policymakers. Social scientists and the international community alike would do well to think through possible future collaborations that result in critical contributions to the still incipient field of democracy building.

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