

## **Public Lecture at NYU, Department of Politics, April 7, 1998**

I'd like to start my comments today by revisiting the premises of an article I wrote a year ago for Current History, in which I sought to analyze the origins and meaning of the Guatemalan peace process, shortly after the signing of the peace accords in late 1996. In that piece, I concluded that there were two possible outcomes in Guatemala. I wrote that "the obstacles to consolidating the peace in Guatemala are substantial and success is not guaranteed. At best, the peace process has given Guatemala its last viable chance to create a national agenda for development and democratization. At worst, the diverse—and often antagonistic—interests at play in Guatemala's political and economic development will fail to unite around a newly defined set of rules and relations that would move the country forward."

As I showed that piece to various friends and acquaintances, the reactions I received usually fell into one of two categories. On the one hand, were reactions from people I knew were working in the Guatemalan countryside and thus removed from the political debates which, in Guatemala as in other Central American countries, is centered around political elites in the capital. These persons generally interpreted my argument to be rather optimistic—optimistic about newly elected President Alvaro Arzu and his demonstrated political will for change, and optimistic in general about the possibility that Guatemalans would come together and forge a common agenda for development and democratization. After reading my analysis, they were left with the sensation: what does any of this have to do with the majority of the population, who in most cases were indigenous peasants in the highlands.

On the other hand, were the reactions of other acquaintances who found the article soberingly realistic. One Norwegian labor leader, and former government functionary, told me that he'd sent my article over to the Foreign Ministry as he felt my article was something of an antidote to the euphoria about the process that prevailed in the international community.

True, the article I wrote started off by naming a number of obstacles to the peace process. I mentioned the latent threat of military coups that had threatened, directly or indirectly, most of the elected civilian governments since the 1985; I mentioned the extreme poverty that divided the country (the latest Human Development Index developed by UNDP notes that in the poorest parts of the country, namely the indigenous highlands, the level of human development is equal only to that of Haiti and some parts of Asia and Africa); I mentioned the historic discrimination of the indigenous population, and the fundamental racism which pervades that society; I mentioned the low level of civic participation, as exemplified by one of the lowest levels of electoral participation in the region; and, finally, and perhaps most significantly, I mentioned that, just as the "war" has not been the defining element of everyday life for the majority of Guatemalans, neither were there any such expectations with respect to the process.

Perhaps one of the reasons for the disparate readings of that article was the fact that, in the rest of the article, I left those premises behind in order to examine the evolution of elite politics in Guatemala, a task which inevitably involved talking about political parties, the left, the business community, the military and the United Nations. While I would still defend the relevance of that analysis, only by reexamining some fundamental premises of the peace process will be able to understand what is going on today in Guatemala. Had I focused a year ago on what the implications might be for the process, given the defining characteristics of civic apathy, social exclusion, poverty and racism, the overall tone of my article would certainly have been more skeptical than hopeful. In fact, of the two possible scenarios I laid out at the beginning of this talk, we are currently witnessing the more pessimistic one, in which the tradition of political fragmentation (which in Guatemala is a more salient feature than political polarization) and a generalized, societal-wide atomization and dysfunctionality is winning out over the full realization of the participatory, inclusive and consensus-building mechanisms set up by the accords.

Before I outline what I see as some of the fundamental weaknesses of the Guatemalan process, it's worth noting that for many analysts and political actors external to Guatemala, there seems to be a stubborn unwillingness to recognize that the peace process is faltering. If you listen to people in the United Nations, you might hear that the Guatemalan process is notable for two novel elements: on the one hand, the accords themselves were broader than, say, were the accords in El Salvador, and dealt with social and economic issues in a more profound way as well, of course, with the question of indigenous rights; on the other hand, the UN's role, has purportedly been one which has been informed by all the lessons of previous peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions: there's coordination of international donors, and the international financial institutions are not working at crosspurposes with the process; the strengthening of national institutions has been a component of the UN verification mission from the start, acting upon one of the lessons from ES, where any efforts at institutional strengthening were too little, too late; where the UN tended to replace ineffective institutions; and where the few institutional strengthening efforts which did exist were, in any case, arguably offset by the fact that criticism of institutions derived from verification activities may have undermined, rather than strengthened, public confidence in state.

In addition, there are academic observers of the process, who in their zeal to defend their own uncritical and unequivocal support for the URNG rebels, even after their strategic military defeat in the early 1980s, have sought to declare that the peace process should not be seen as a negotiated surrender by the left, but rather was the result of a legitimate popular struggle, just as it had been in El Salvador. In this case, the tendency has been to argue that there is more continuity, than discontinuity, between the peace processes of El Salvador and Guatemala, with the resulting analysis leading to more hopeful scenarios for the possibilities of progressive change.

I would disagree with this latter claim, which we can discuss in greater detail later, and note that one can only understand the nature of the peace processes in Guatemala and El Salvador by understanding that, if in El Salvador the peace process and negotiated

settlement came about largely because of the political and military **strength** of the left, along with the evolving position of the preponderant external actor (which was, of course, the U.S. government), the peace process in Guatemala was made possible because of the virtual **weakness** of the leftist forces.

This latter point deserves further analysis, but my point here is rather that both of these perspectives by non-Guatemalan sources fail to take into account several fundamental weaknesses of the Guatemalan peace process. In doing so, these perspectives have contributed a false reading of the Guatemalan process by the international community. In brief, the Guatemalan process has been oversold to the international community as a great consensual process that has established novel participatory mechanisms which embody ongoing efforts at reconciliation and the building of a national consensus around the future direction of the country.

Now let me try to briefly comment on what I see as these weaknesses, and why they may end up undermining the political viability of the whole process.

First, which is the most obvious point given what I've said thus far, is the fact that, like the writing of the peace accords themselves, the peace process has continued to be an elite project, the content, design and ownership of which has not filtered down to large sectors of the population who do not feel represented by national political forces, whether it be political parties, the left, or civil society organizations.

This may be the most important weakness, because the current problems in governability have stemmed largely from the inability of political elites to socialize their project with social sectors and organizations. In two recent episodes this year failure to do so has paralyzed and polarize public policy goals. In the first case, a key tax bill—which would have partially enabled the government to reach it's 1998 target for increased tax revenues, as set by the peace accords—was annulled by the President in response to limited, but organized, protest in several communities in the Guatemalan countryside. (Here it's worth noting that there is some evidence that the old rural networks of the military might have been tapped into by the right in order to organize these protests.) The second case involves the failed passage of a new childrens rights code, a proposal which had evolved out of several years of consultation with a wide range of social sectors, but which ran into opposition from conservative sectors, including the Catholic and evangelical churches.

Instead of continuing the process of building support for the kinds of changes envisaged in the peace accords, the government and the URNG have continued the kind of elite consultations which they carried out during the negotiations. The government is only now beginning to realize that the implementation of public policies derived from the peace accords requires a different dynamic, one of broad consultation and consensus building

A second, related point has to do with the relative weakness of the actors pushing forward the process. Unlike El Salvador, where the two major forces who negotiated and

implemented the peace accords were broadly representative of important sectors of society (and this was evidenced by the results of the 1994 elections, in which the governing ARENA party and opposition FMLN party were ratified as the two strongest political forces), the same cannot be said of Guatemala. The governing PAN party came into the presidency in 1997, having lost in 18 of Guatemala's 22 departments to the conservative FRG party headed by former dictator Rios Montt, and winning only by a slim majority because of strong support in the capital city. Most analysts would concur that thus far, the PAN has not been able to capitalize politically on the peace process, and many are beginning to contemplate the very real possibility of an FRG victory in next year's elections. On the other hand, I've argued that the URNG was not only a spent force militarily, but they too have not been to provide the kind of leadership which would allow it to capitalize on the political space and opportunities on the left. Unlike El Salvador, then, it appears that the peace process could well be the undoing of the two principal political actors which pushed it forward.

Another way of looking at this is that it may well be that not all of the right players were at the negotiating table, namely, the conservative forces represented by the Rios Montt's FRG party. Some in Guatemala argue that real reconciliation needs to occur not between the right and the left, but between that modernizing group on the and the more traditionally conservative, and even reactionary, sectors on the right. Again, this analysis makes sense if we return to the premise that in Guatemala, the peace process was not really about ending a war which had reached a stalemate, but rather about ending a low-grade conflict, which had become more political than military, but for which a political solution was necessary to provide an honorable exit for a defeated guerrilla force.

There are many other problems with this process, but let me end by commenting on three obstacles emanating from the design of the peace accords themselves.

First, it is important to recognize that what is good about the Guatemalan accords—that they provide for a number of participatory mechanisms for civil society influence—may not be feasibly realized given the urgent requirements for legislating and implementing the peace. In other words, in the classic tradeoff between democracy and efficiency, democracy (that is, greater participation and public discussion) may fall by the wayside in favor of efficiency.

Second, reading the accords, which are wide-ranging, complex and eminently participatory in nature, one has to answer the question: can it be done? This question applies both to the state as well as to civil and political society, and the short answer appears to be no. The state apparatus, political parties and civil society are all far weaker, less capable and with fewer human resources than, say, are the military or the private sector.

Third, to a far lesser extent than in El Salvador, the peace agenda has not been fully incorporated into the national political agenda. This has meant that, unlike ES, there's a sense among far too many sectors that, if the peace accords are NOT implemented, it will not be the end of the world.

Finally, it's worth noting that—even if one accepts that the UN has learned the lessons of previous peacekeeping missions—the fact is that the lack of specificity in the accords and the lack of a strong timetable for compliance circumscribes the UN verification role to a great extent, such that the relevance of that role has been increasingly questioned by broad sectors of the society.

Future:

- As I mentioned previously, one positive result of the current impasse has been that the government has finally realized the need to rebuild and reconstruct support for the peace process, if it is to move forward. On the other hand, there also seem to be a tendency within the government, or within the PAN party, arguing for an abandonment of the peace commitments, given the political difficulty and cost of moving forward with them.
- It's important to realize that a breakdown of the peace process occurs, this does not mean there will be a return to civil war. No one sees that on the horizon.
- I've come to have greater appreciation for the space opened up by the accords on the indigenous issues. In the short term, we find that they're using this space, along with womens' groups, to an important extent, under the political cover of the peace accords, which legitimate a discourse more favorable to their interests. Indigenous rights have earned a legitimate place on the public agenda, and the future ramifications of that fact are endless.
- On the other hand, if we accept that Mayan organizations, more than any other organized group in civil society, has assumed ownership of the peace accords, one should also note that the mobilization of the majority Mayan population is perhaps the one that most scares the ladino political elite about the process.
- Next year is an election year, so many of the legislative reforms derived from the peace accords will need to be passed this year. If it doesn't happen now, and the current tendency is towards political retreat, then we can discount further changes until after the 1999 elections. And then, of course, what the legislative-executive balance of power might be at that point is hard to predict.