

Review of Rachel Sieder (ed.), ***Guatemala after the Peace Accords*** (London: University of London, Institute of Latin American Studies, 1998), in the *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 33, February 2001, p. 199-201.

To the outside observer, perhaps no other country in Latin America generates as much confusion or controversy on a regular basis as does Guatemala. To an extent, this situation derives from the cryptic nature of Guatemalan political life itself, in which public discourse only partially conveys the underlying political realities of any given topic. Indeed, the complexities of Guatemala's past and present inhibit most scholars from even attempting an overall judgment about recent political history.

In this context, *Guatemala After the Peace Accords* represents a propitious collection of essays by US, British and Guatemalan scholars, as well as by key Guatemalan political actors. This volume edited by Rachel Sieder is based on a conference held at the Institute of Latin American Studies in November 1997, less than a year after the December 1996 signing of the Guatemalan peace accords. The book was released within six months of the conference, which was possible because the papers and presentations were left in their original language, either in Spanish or English.

At the time of this conference in 1997, both domestic and international reactions to the promise of the Guatemalan peace accords were far more positive than they are as of this writing in 2000. However, the fifteen essays and perspectives presented in this volume reflect on and anticipate some of the potential obstacles to democratic development in post-war Guatemala.

The collection is divided into four main topics--demilitarisation; indigenous rights; truth, memory and justice; and political reform--with a useful introductory presentation on the peace process by the Arzú government's key peace negotiator, Gustavo Porras, one of two government participants in the conference. Each topic is followed by the moderator's summary analysis along with the transcription of questions and answers from conference participants, a discussion which points to, but hardly resolves, some of the more hotly disputed issues in each topic.

These four topics are well chosen, if only because each represents an aspect of Guatemalan political life that continues to be highly contested. Papers on demilitarisation by Jennifer Schirmer and Guatemalan human rights activist and analyst Edgar Gutiérrez include substantial doubts about the prospects for a real diminution of military power, while anthropologist David Stoll raises questions about the human rights community's ability to understand local conflicts that resist facile explanations. The papers on historical memory, by the government's human rights coordinator Marta Altolaguirre, human rights activist Frank LaRue and anthropologist Richard Wilson, focus mainly on the role of the UN-sponsored Historical Clarification Commission, but reveal the lack of consensus--not unique to Guatemala--over the meaning of reconciliation.

The papers on indigenous rights are among the best, and reveal substantial

agreement in the authors' diagnoses of the principal problems of governance and legitimacy facing the Guatemalan state as well as the challenges of the majority indigenous population in pushing for due recognition of their rights. Two of the most important Guatemalan scholars on ethnicity and indigenous issues, Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil and Marta Elena Casaús Arzú, contribute essays here. Roger Plant, who formerly worked on indigenous affairs with the UN Verification Mission in Guatemala, contextualises the issues within the peace process, while Rachel Sieder provides an insightful overview of issues of customary law and local power.

The final topic discussed in this collection is that of political reform, and includes pieces by leftist congresswoman and indigenous leader Rosalina Tuyuc, as well as by Anne Vinegrad, who provides an excellent overview of the political transition of the armed rebels of the URNG (who are otherwise not represented in this collection, despite the best efforts of the conference organisers.)

Significantly, in this topic opposition politician (and now President) Alfonso Portillo provides a critique of the Arzú government's autocratic management of the peace process, arguing that its modernising image was not reflected in practice. Portillo's contribution does not answer how or why he--as a populist lawyer and economist with political roots in the left--decided to ally himself with former military general Ríos Montt, under whose rule genocide was carried out, but one can see a great deal of consistency between his discourse in 1997 and that which propelled him to power two years later.

Equally important, and baffling to many outside observers, is that fact that two other contributors to this volume, Gutiérrez and Cojtí, both long-standing critics of militarism and respected proponents of human rights causes, have also taken up posts in the new Portillo government. The answer may lie, in part, with the dissimulation of the Guatemalan left and the exhaustion of any viable alternative political parties for those seeking progressive changes.

While this volume may not provide ultimately satisfying explanations to the eternal puzzle of Guatemalan politics, it nevertheless makes a laudable contribution to presenting a wider audience with some of the complexities confronting contemporary political life in Guatemala. As such, it should be an obligatory reference volume for scholars and others attempting to decipher the meaning of the Guatemalan peace process and assess the obstacles to democratic transition.

David Holiday  
*Creative Associates International, El Salvador*