

Guatemalan Strategic Culture

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FINDINGS REPORT

FIU

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The FIU-SOUTHCOM Academic Partnership

Strategic Cultures Assessments

Florida International University's Applied Research Center (FIU ARC), in collaboration with the United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) and FIU's Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC), has recently formed the FIU-SOUTHCOM Academic Partnership. The partnership entails FIU providing the highest quality research-based knowledge to further explicative understanding of the political, strategic, and cultural dimensions of state behavior and foreign policy. This goal will be accomplished by employing a Strategic Culture approach. The initial phase of Strategic Culture assessments consists of a year-long research program that focuses on developing a standard analytical framework to identify and assess the Strategic Culture of ten Latin American countries. FIU will facilitate professional presentations of the following ten countries over the course of one year: Venezuela, Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. In addition, a findings report on the impact of Islam and Muslims within Latin America will be produced.

The overarching purpose of the project is two-fold: to generate a rich and dynamic base of knowledge pertaining to the political, social, and strategic factors that influence state behavior; and to contribute to SOUTHCOM's Socio-Cultural Dynamics (SCD) Program. Utilizing the notion of Strategic Culture, SOUTHCOM has commissioned FIU ARC to conduct country studies in order to explain how states comprehend, interpret, and implement national security policy *vis-à-vis* the international system.

SOUTHCOM defines Strategic Culture as follows: "the combination of internal and external influences and experiences—geographic, historical, cultural, economic, political and military—that shape and influence the way a country understands its relationship to the rest of the world, and how a state will behave in the international community." FIU will identify and expound upon the strategic and cultural factors that inform the rationale behind the perceptions and behavior of select states in the present political and security climate by analyzing demography, history, regional customs, traditions, belief systems, and other cultural and historical influences that have contributed to the development of a particular country's current security rationale and interpretation of national security.

To meet the stated goals, FIU ARC will host a series of professional workshops in Miami. These workshops bring subject matter experts from all over the US and Latin America together to explore and discuss a country's specific history, geography, culture, economic, political, and military climates *vis-à-vis* Strategic Culture. At the conclusion of each workshop, FIU publishes a findings report, which is presented at SOUTHCOM.

The following Guatemalan Strategic Culture Findings Report, authored by Dr. Edward F. Fisher, is the product of a working group held in Miami on May 24, 2010, which included 6 prominent academic and private sector experts in Guatemalan history, culture, economics, politics, and military affairs.

The views expressed in this findings report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the US Government, US Department of Defense, US Southern Command, FIU-ARC, or Florida International University.

On behalf of FIU-ARC, we wish to acknowledge and thank all of the participants for their contributions, which made the Guatemalan Strategic Culture workshop a tremendous success.

Preliminary Report

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Executive Summary

- Geography matters for Guatemalan Strategic Culture. A diverse topography and poor infrastructure give rise to socio-political divisions that hinder a sense of national unity, and present internal security issues. The country's proximity to the US shapes its view of foreign policy, and has made it a major center of drug trafficking, which threatens the State's monopoly on the use of force.
- Guatemalan Strategic Culture is driven by a sense of exceptionalism and aspiration. The elite keepers of Strategic Culture see Guatemala's role in the world as larger than its size or economic capacity indicate. They see Guatemala as the economic and political leader in Central America, and as having fought a crucial frontline battle against communism in the face of international condemnation of their tactics.
- Guatemala's Strategic Culture is shaped by more conservative elite than we find in other Central American countries. The urban elites hold a cosmopolitan view of their place in the world, and yet are intensely parochial in terms of family and social ties; for most oligarchical elites, kinship and social networks clearly come before the nation. While also socially conservative, indigenous communities tend to be much more open to change.
- Guatemala perceives its threats as internal. This is true for government leaders, private sector elites, and the masses. Since the Conquest, Guatemala's indigenous population has been viewed by the elite as a barrier to national unity and economic development. During the 1970s and 1980s, the threat came from

revolutionary groups that the military associated with the indigenous population; today, threats emanate from drug trafficking and organized crime.

- Guatemala's fragile state of affairs creates an environment in which non-State actors (from NGOs to narco-traffickers) have increasing power that rivals or influences the State. Indeed, the State has, in some areas, lost its monopoly on the use of force. The rise of non-State actors creates a situation of instability in Guatemalan Strategic Culture, with little sense of direction, continuity, or control over strategy making at the State level.
- In Guatemala, fragmented and fluid political parties create legislative instability. Political parties are too fragmented and too corrupt to point toward a long-term strategic direction.

Strategic Culture and Guatemala

Strategic Culture¹ offers a useful approach that combines recognition of the dynamic and constructed nature of culture with an awareness of the path dependency aspect of cultural trajectories, the weight of history, and the structural constraints of institutions. Anthropologists have been focusing on the constructed nature of culture for decades, but the concept, as it is borrowed by other disciplines, too often ignores this crucial aspect, treating culture as a static entity or as the sum of a trait list. At the same time, recent trends in understandings of culture have downplayed the structural constraints on innovation and construction; the notion of Strategic Culture seeks to remedy this.

The Strategic Culture approach incorporates what I have elsewhere termed “cultural logics,” which are predispositions, grounded in history and tradition but also responding to immediate circumstances, of how to look at (and act in) the world in certain ways.² Cultural logics provide the basis for culturally logical improvisations. Some elements change more quickly than others; we have customs and habits, ideological beliefs, and underlying core values, worldviews, and cultural logics. The latter change slower and broadly orient the direction of future changes as well as responses to external forces.

In examining Guatemalan Strategic Culture, that is, how the State perceives threats and security, and how the State interprets data to articulate and implement security policy, we look not so much for exceptions (as our academic disciplines

¹ See Lantis, Jeffrey S., 2009, *Strategic Culture: A Multifaceted Cultural Approach to the Study of Latin America*, Miami: FIU Applied Research Center.

² See Fischer, Edward F., 2001, *Cultural Logics and Global Economies: Maya Identity in Thought and Practice*, Austin: University of Texas Press.

often lead us to do), but for patterns. We will certainly speak of Guatemalan exceptionalism (how it is unique), but our goal in examining Guatemala is to uncover themes and patterns. We cannot predict where Guatemala will be in five or fifty years, but we can outline the broad historical, social, cultural, and political forces that have shaped Guatemala today, thus providing an understanding of the constraints and motivations of Guatemalan Strategic Culture.

It is difficult, and often misleading, to speak of one, singular, national Strategic Culture in Guatemala. First, Strategic Culture is not a “thing,” not even just a moving target, but the ever-changing outcome of a process, constantly constructed and reconstructed as competing interests are worked out in practice. At the same time, there is also a lot of consistency—a disturbing one in many respects—and a direction to the trajectory of development informed by history and tradition.

To talk about Strategic Culture then implies that we are (1) dealing with trajectories over time; and (2) that the processes of dynamic culture are bounded by institutions—institutions with degrees of stability over time. Dinorah Azpuru also points out that we need to distinguish between Strategic Culture proper and the context in which it arises (i.e., its interactions with local customs).³

At one time, even in the recent past, we could meaningfully speak of a clear Guatemalan national Strategic Culture, a dominant strategic direction dictated by the heavy hand of the State and military. Certainly, there were competing interests and shifting alliances (the military, for example, has a long tradition of having its own power base, not fully subsumed to the civil government), but nonetheless, there

³ Azpuru, Dinorah. “Guatemalan Geo-Politics in the Context of Strategic Culture,” paper prepared for the Guatemala Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, May 27, 2010.

emerged a clear Strategic Culture. In Brazil, for example, we find an even greater diversity, and yet the formal institutions of the State and major non-State actors are strong, established, and resilient enough to make it possible to speak of a clear strategic direction. This is not so in Guatemala, where State institutions are weak and largely distrusted.

Origins of Strategic Culture

What is today Guatemala (and southern Mexico) formed the heartland of classic Maya civilization. Spanish colonization began in 1524 and lasted for almost 300 years before independence was declared in 1821. Guatemala's recent history is overshadowed by the country's ongoing civil wars, the most violent of which occurred in the late 1970s and 1980s, with at least tens of thousands killed and hundreds of thousands displaced.⁴ A UN Peace Commission determined that the vast majority of atrocities were attributable to the military over 36 years of conflict, and that this was a case of genocide, intentionally targeting the Maya population for extermination through "scorched earth" policies and tactics.

In 1996, the government and revolutionary forces signed a peace accord, and Guatemala has been struggling to implement the accord in a context of growing drug violence. The DEA estimates that over 80% of the cocaine destined for the US is

⁴ See the 1999 *Guatemala: Memory of Silence* report of the Historical Clarification Commission (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico [CEH], 1999, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*, Guatemala City: CEH; available at <http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ceh/mds/spanish/toc.html>, and the report of the Guatemalan Archbishop's Human Rights Office (Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala [ODHAG], 1998, *Guatemala: Nunca Más*, Guatemala City: ODHAG). Note that the numbers of persons killed and exiled are contested; Caesar Sereseres, for example, believes the figures to be much lower than those cited by the CEH and ODHAG. Also note that it is common to speak of Guatemala's 36 year war (1960-1996), but in fact these were really two distinct, if related, conflicts, one in the 1960s in the eastern part of the country, and another (with some of the same leaders) emerging in the indigenous western highlands in the mid-1970s.

transshipped through Guatemala. Almost 60% of the population lives in poverty, and 15% lives in extreme poverty. By any measure, the rural indigenous population has been hardest hit, with 76% in poverty and 28% in extreme poverty. Over 40% of children under the age of five are chronically malnourished; this constitutes one of the highest malnutrition rates in the world.

Physical

Guatemala is a small country (the size of Tennessee) with a population approaching 14 million (the most populous country in Central America). Its small size, however, encompasses great diversity. Geographically, the country ranges from tropical forest to coastal plains to the more densely populated highland regions. Guatemala exports tropical crops (e.g., bananas and sugar) as well as high altitude coffee; the country has ports on both the Pacific and Caribbean coasts. Natural resources include moderate petroleum deposits, rare woods, and some silver, gold, and nickel reserves.

Geography matters for Guatemala's Strategic Culture. The country's varied topography isolates regions, making internal security difficult to attain. The social, political, and economic effects of topographic diversity are exacerbated by the country's poor infrastructure. The geographic diversity is also mirrored in ethnic diversity, and 40-50% of the population is indigenous (Maya Indians), speaking one of the 23 native languages, each with its own range of local dialects. The Guatemalan highlands are a seismically active region, and the country faces a number of risks from natural disasters (such as earthquakes, landslides, and volcanoes). Perceptions of security are thus multifaceted due to topography.

Guatemala is the gateway to Central America, and Guatemalan Strategic Culture is based on the notion that the State acts as a gatekeeper and conduit for US-Central American geopolitical relations. Guatemala was a hotspot during the Cold War, manning the front line in battles against the “international communist threat” the US supported but was unwilling to fight. Its geographic location (and weak state) makes it a key transshipment point for Colombian cocaine. Guatemala’s physical proximity to the US has, to a significant degree—Guatemala City is closer to Washington, DC than Los Angeles—shaped its Strategic Culture in terms of foreign policy and domestic issues, both of which tend to be defined (either positively or negatively) in relation to the U.S.

Guatemala is a country of divisions. Geographic and demographic diversity condition the form of Guatemalan national Strategic Culture. The most prevalent and pervasive is the ethnic divide between Ladinos (non-Indians, of European cultural ancestry) and the Maya. While large strides have been made over the last decade, racism and discrimination are endemic and structural. Likewise, women rate high on indicators of social and economic exclusion. The country is a youthful one, with generational divides; the median age is only 19.4 years. This means that memories of the civil war are quickly fading, and that popular culture and social relations are especially dynamic as new guards emerge, both among the elite and among the masses. It is estimated that about 1.4 million Guatemalans live in the US, equal to about 10% of the population. Ties are generally tight between immigrants and family in Guatemala, making the US an ever-present figure in the popular imagination and in political and economic decision making. Geographic distinctions thus create distinct socio-political regions. The most fundamental

distinction is between Guatemala City and everywhere else. If national Strategic Culture could be said to have a physical home, it would certainly be Guatemala City.

The predominant economic base for the rural population, and thus for the majority of all Guatemalans, is agriculture. Reliance on subsistence agriculture is widespread in the countryside. Guatemala has one of the highest GINI indices of inequality in the world (.55 in 2007).⁵ Social exclusion also follows ethnic, gender, and rural-urban divides. We can see this in educational opportunities and the data on educational attainments. The average number of years of education in the country as a whole is 6.1. Men average 6.5 years, and women 5.7. The indigenous population averages only 4.7 years of schooling; while the non-indigenous average is 6.9 (Educational expenditures in Guatemala amount to 2.6% of GDP [2006].).

Until recently, communication in the countryside was difficult, with very few phones. While bus service has long been good in rural areas, it is slow. The privatization of the State phone company, and the influx of cellular phone companies over the last decade have changed that dramatically; now cell phones are ubiquitous throughout the country, except in the most remote areas. Cell phone penetration now exceeds 1000 per 1000 residents, changing communication patterns enormously and aiding price determination for small farmers and businesspeople. Guatemala has a pronounced digital divide, with relatively few Internet hosts, and yet in virtually all modest-sized towns in the countryside, one can now find an Internet café. The youth in particular have adopted the Internet.

⁵ The Gini index measures inequality; 0 is a hypothetical situation of perfect income equality, and 1 equals the hypothetical case of perfect inequality.

Political

Guatemala has a democratic parliamentary system of government, with the president and legislature elected by popular vote (The last elections were in September 2007; the next elections will take place in September 2011). Guatemala has at least 14 active, national political parties as of this writing, and parties often fragment or form new alliances. This creates a situation of little continuity between administrations; not only does the party in power change, but also often those parties in second and third place change as well. In the 2007 elections, for example, the top three vote-earners were the National Unity for Hope (UNE), the Grand National Alliance (GANA), and the Patriot Party (PP), each of which had emerged for the 2003 elections. After the 1996 Peace Accords, the guerillas were incorporated into the political system through the conversion of their organization into the URNG (the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity) political party, although they have not been able to garner widespread support. This situation of fragmented and fluid political parties creates legislative instability. Political parties are too fragmented and too corrupt to point toward a long-term strategic direction.

The judicial branch is headed by the Constitutional Court, whose members are nominated by law schools and professional organizations, and are then selected by Congress. Corruption in the judiciary is rampant; killings of prosecutors and judges are not uncommon. Indeed, Guatemala controversially ceded some of its sovereignty to allow an international commission of jurists (CICIG, the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala) to independently investigate major crimes and corruption. CICIG is well-respected and has pushed several high-profile cases, but it still has to work

through the Guatemalan courts. Carlos Castresana, the Spanish jurist who headed CICIG, resigned in June 2010, citing an inability to work with Guatemalan institutions, especially the Attorney General's office, through which CICIG has to work to bring charges and pursue cases. The between-the-lines message was that the Attorney General's office was so fundamentally corrupt as to make CICIG's work untenable. And the newly appointed Attorney General's close connection to narco-traffickers was seen as a mockery of the process. Indeed, Attorney General Conrado Reyes was subsequently sacked by the Constitutional Court, which ruled this necessary so that criminal groups do not threaten the Constitution.

As the State has been unable to maintain physical security (see "Contemporary Security Challenges" below), private security companies have flourished. Santiago Fernández points out that in 1996, there were 37 security companies in Guatemala; today there are 110.⁶ Hal Brands notes that there are 100,000-150,000 private security guards in Guatemala today (more than five times the number of police, with 22,000 officers).⁷

Guatemala may be characterized as a "neo-colonial State," reproducing traditional colonial relations between the elite and the masses, and between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples through democratically legitimated, albeit corrupt, institutions.⁸ Guatemala has had a long history of military rulers, from the time it gained independence in 1821 until 1985. The armed conflict that took place from the 1960s-1980s played a

⁶ Fernández Ordóñez, Santiago: "Variables Socio-Económicas de Guatemala en el Contexto de la Cultura Estratégica," paper prepared for the Guatemala Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, May 27, 2010.

⁷ Brands, Hal: "Crime, Violence, and the Crisis in Guatemala: A Case Study in the Erosion of the State," paper prepared for the Guatemala Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, May 27, 2010.

⁸ See Cojtí Cuxil, Demetrio, 2009, "Indigenous Nations in Guatemalan Democracy and the State: A Tentative Assessment," in *Indigenous Peoples, Civil Society, and the Neo-liberal State in Latin America*, ed. Edward F. Fischer, Oxford: Berghahn Books.

role in shaping the State and its Strategic Culture. Indeed, for many, the military has long been seen as the primary strategic mover within the Guatemalan State. Yet, as Caesar Sereseres notes, saying that Guatemala has long been a “militarized state” is misleading.⁹ In the early twentieth century, it was the oligarchy working with and through the police (not the military) that ran Guatemala. It was the 1944 coup that liberated the military to become a powerful national institution; then, there were periods of true militarization of the State in the mid-1960s and early 1980s. However, this has not been the normal state of affairs. The civil war violence, as Marvin Astrada points out, historically, is reflective of the guiding spirit of the State, that is, regime preservation.¹⁰ Other states might have a public interest as the basis of their power, legitimacy, and authority, but the Guatemalan ruling elite has, historically, been more focused on preserving the status quo.

Santiago Fernández offers a chronology of elite histories in Guatemala, noting that historically, this has been a small group of families. During the colonial period (starting in 1524), Guatemala was ruled first by military conquistadores (up to circa 1600), and then by a peninsular elite. For the first decades following independence (1821-1871), the country was dominated by the Creole elite, political Conservatives who were supported by the Catholic Church. This was followed by a more liberal period (1871-1944) in which the traditional agrarian elite aligned with the emergent industrial elite—the same elite class that controls the economy today. During this time, the coffee plantation owners emerged as major players. They found their champion in President Justo Rufino Barrios, who worked with them to implement quasi-forced labor schemes;

⁹ Sereseres, Caesar: “The Guatemalan Military and Security Forces in the Context of Strategic Culture,” paper prepared for the Guatemala Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, May 27, 2010.

¹⁰ Astrada, Marvin L. “Guatemalan Strategic Culture: Historical Factors and Themes,” paper prepared for the Guatemala Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, May 27, 2010.

these were later abolished by President Jorge Ubico, who canceled most indigenous debt servitude arrangements and created a bit more mobility.¹¹ Starting in 1944, the industrial elite aligned with the Army to create a new hegemonic power bloc. This new ruling elite saw itself as having to choose clear sides in the post-World War II international political landscape; after 1954 and the CIA-backed coup that ended the ten years of democratic spring, this took the form of active and vigorous anti-communism. During this time, the Army was incorporated into the power structure. After the signing of Peace Accords in 1996, the power structure shifted back to the industrial elite, and the Army was replaced by a class of ascendant elites.

To understand Guatemala, one has to understand ethnic relations there; this is a social fact that colors almost everything else. Like Bolivia, Guatemala struggles with how to create a more unified society in light of a profound legacy of colonial relations. Discrimination and racism against the indigenous population have long been rampant. There has been a sea-shift over the past ten to fifteen years in terms of ethnic attitudes and responses to international valuations of all things indigenous. For most elites, it is no longer “polite” to be racist in overt ways. In many ways, the race relations situation has moved from the US south of the 1950s to the US south of the late 1960s.

Over the past 15 years, there has been a dramatic growth of an indigenous political class, arguing for civil rights and cultural recognition and protection.¹² However, it still has limited national influence. Linguistic rights legislation has been

¹¹ For more detail, see Woodward, Ralph Lee, 1999, *Central America: A Nation Divided*, Third Revised Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press; McCreary, David, 1994, *Rural Guatemala: 1760-1940*, Stanford: Stanford University Press; Handy, Jim, 1984, *Gift of the Devil: A History of Guatemala*, Boston: Between the Lines.

¹² Fischer, *Cultural Logics and Global Economies*.

passed, an official Academy of Mayan Languages has been created, and several Maya leaders have been appointed to positions in the Ministry of Culture and Sports and the Ministry of Education. For the most part, these gains have been made without electoral mobilization at the rural, grassroots level.

Guatemala exhibits a classic colonial dependency model of an export economy: Guatemala exports primary products and imports finished goods and equipment. Major exports are coffee, sugar, petroleum, and bananas, along with maquila-produced apparel and, increasingly, exotic vegetables. Almost 40% of exports are to the US. Primary imports are fuels, machinery, equipment, construction materials, grains and fertilizers. The US supplies over 37% of imports. Norman Bailey notes that Guatemala missed the industrial revolution completely, and has been dependent on the whims of the international market.¹³ In 2010, the World Economic Forum rated Guatemala as the second least business-friendly country in the world, at 124th of 125 countries for business costs associated with crime and violence, and 123rd for shipping costs; there is little hope of major direct foreign capital investment in this environment.¹⁴

Threats in Guatemala are seen as being overwhelmingly internal. Guatemala claims Belize as part of its territory, but this is used rhetorically; the chance of Belize becoming a Guatemalan Malvinas is slim. Historically, the Indian population has been seen by ruling elites as a hindrance to political unity and economic development. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Liberals advocated assimilation, and Conservatives promoted strategic isolation of the Indian population; however, for both

¹³ Bailey, Norman A. "Guatemalan Socio-Economic Variables in the Context of Strategic Culture," paper prepared for the Guatemala Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, May 27, 2010.

¹⁴ World Economic Forum, 2010, "Global Competitiveness Report 2009-2010."

groups, the “Indian problem” was seen as just that: a problem. These sentiments morphed into a view in the 1970s and 1980s that Indians were all potential subversives.¹⁵ Today, the “communist threat” has been replaced by the threats of drug-trafficking, gangs, and organized crime.

Social/Cultural

Guatemala is marked by a lack of unifying cultural narratives. As in the case of Bolivia, fragmentation describes the cultural context. After gaining its independence, no real national culture emerged (as it did in Mexico and other areas), and even today there is little sense of nation, as Norman Bailey points out.

Yet, Guatemalan national Strategic Culture sees the country as being exceptional. It is the largest Central American country, and was the site of the Captaincy General in colonial times. Guatemalan elites see Guatemala as the leading country in Central America, and there is a salient sense of superiority.

There are deep pro-American sentiments, although these are mixed with deep ambivalences and anti-American sentiments as well, especially following the 1954 coup. Azpuru observes that US influence can be seen economically (the largest trading partner by far is the US; there is a preponderance of US firms operating there), politically, and culturally. There are certainly serious issues with US policies, with what is sometimes perceived of as a bullying foreign policy, and with immigration. Yet, there is also an overwhelming sense of closeness to the US (for good or for bad), and a profound influence of US popular culture and political discourse.

¹⁵ See Richards, Michael, 1985, “Cosmopolitan World View and Counterinsurgency in Guatemala,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 58 (3): 90-107; Nelson, Dianne M., *A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

The post-Cold War period ushered in major changes for Guatemala. Unlike in the rest of Latin America, it was pushed by international pressure to institute democracy (it was not by choice). The industrial elites thought that democracy might be a good thing (to bring more investment), Azpuru reports, but there was resistance and doubt among agrarian elites.

This push toward democracy points to another salient fact: Guatemala has felt the most international influence on domestic issues of anywhere in Central America over the past 20 years. International actors have had a major influence on local politics, most vividly seen in CICIG and the MINUGUA, the U.N. commissions charged with implementing the 1996 Peace Accords.

Guatemala is marked by a culture of impunity, and some people are seen as above the law. This ties into the great distance between elites and the masses (the elites being rightly seen as largely operating with impunity), and feeds the culture of violence.

LAPOP (the Latin American Public Opinion Project) reports that in terms of trust in institutions, the top three are: 1. the Catholic Church; 2. the Media; and 3. the Military. At the bottom of the list are: 10. the Constitutional Court; 11. the National Police; 11. Congress; and 12. political parties. This lack of trust in State institutions creates a situation where non-State actors are even more important. It should be noted that even for the institutions with a lot of public support, those still only fell into the 50-60% range; even the most trusted institutions do not have overwhelming support.

Guatemalan public opinion is overall very conservative, particularly among the upper and middle classes, which comprise the primary keepers of Strategic Culture. At the same time, a large percentage of the population does not identify with any particular

political ideology. Azpuru reports on data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project:¹⁶ On a 1 (most liberal) to 10 (most conservative) scale, Guatemala's mean ideology rating is 5.79. Yet, 25% of respondents did not answer these questions, leading to the conclusion that a sizable percentage of the population is not ideologically defined. The Catholic Church still exerts considerable influence on public debates and politics. Socially conservative Evangelical Protestant churches (including a few key mega-churches in Guatemala City) are growing in influence, with over 30% of the population now identifying as Protestant.

Elite views of the Maya, though changing and ever less hostile, are still shaped by the perspective that the Maya are essentially backwards and a hindrance to modernity (as opposed to a direct threat to the State's stability and security). At the same time, ancient Maya culture (and the tourism that it attracts) is strategically used to bolster national pride and contributing to the sense of Guatemalan exceptionalism.

In the countryside, deep local attachments and weak national attachments exist concomitantly. Maya peoples still primarily identify with their home communities rather than as a unified ethnic political bloc. This was seen clearly in the candidacy of Rigoberta Menchú (the Guatemalan Indian Nobel Peace Prize laureate) in 2007; she was unable to win even the rural indigenous vote.

The biggest challenge to mapping Guatemalan Strategic Culture is in condensing the multiplicity of competing intentions into a singular position. This would be true

¹⁶ Azpuru, Dinorah, 2008, *Cultura política de la democracia en Guatemala: El impacto de la gobernabilidad*, Nashville: LAPOP.
http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/files/d8QI4U/Format_V1_RESUMEN_EJECUTIVO_Guatemala_08_edV1%5B1%5D.pdf . See other LAPOP data on Guatemala at <http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/GUATEMALABACK>

anywhere and everywhere, but is especially pronounced in Guatemala because of the extreme weakness and fragility of the State.

Keepers of Strategic Culture

In many ways, Guatemala is a country with an aspiring Strategic Culture. The country sees its role in the world (historically and actually) as larger than its territorial size or economic power. Guatemala is seen as an exceptional place given its unique history (the home of the ancient Maya and on the front line of the Cold War). The Guatemalan keepers of Strategic Culture want to be players in the world. They are strong US allies, with all the usual mixed feelings that tends to involve, but are not content to be just a client State. Indeed, Guatemalan elites argue that they did the hard, dirty work of the Cold War when the US was too timid.

A key characteristic of Guatemalan Strategic Culture is a desire for international respect. It wants to be treated not as a lackey regime but as a partner, with the US and with Mexico (in dealing with mutual problems of migrants, refugees, drugs, and human trafficking). It feels it is too often not accorded the respect it deserves. The view of Guatemalan exceptionalism sees Guatemala as a leading country, a leader in Central America. In recent years, Azpuru reports, there has been a concerted effort to build back up an international reputation (from being seen as a pariah State during the violence).

Among the elites and movers-and-shakers, we find an urban, cosmopolitan worldview. For the elite, this is certainly the case, for they are as likely to know Miami or Paris better than Quetzaltenango or Zacapa. This makes elite views of Strategic Culture

very outward looking. And yet while the key points of reference are outside the country, the elite also maintain very insular social and familial networks.¹⁷

Among younger industrial elite and upper-middle class businesspeople, we find strong advocates of a free-market ideology. Yet these same elites also show a pragmatic, often ruthless, manipulation of markets and regulation along familial, social, and political-economic ties to protect and retain market positions. Their attitude toward taxes is exemplary: seeing taxes as simply feeding the corruption of the State, with many claiming that they would gladly pay higher taxes if they could trust the government to be good stewards of their money. This becomes a vicious circle, as the government is starved of resources to provide key services, and the lack of those services is used to justify keeping taxes low. Guatemala devotes the lowest percentage of GDP to taxes of any country in the region (9.8%).¹⁸

Elites

The old guard agrarian and industrial elites of Guatemala are more homogenous and conservative than their counterparts in other parts of Latin America. They have been seen as using the State to maintain the social and economic status quo. Guatemalan elites are more conservative than in El Salvador and elsewhere. They have been quicker to reject change, and living in Guatemala City, they were more isolated from the effects of the war. There is still a small, well-recognized ruling elite of families tied by blood and marriage relations. Indeed, as Norman Bailey argues, it would be hard to underestimate

¹⁷ Richards, "Cosmopolitan Worldview"; Casaús Arzú, Marta Elena, 2007, *Guatemala: Linaje y Racismo*, Third Edition, Guatemala City: F y G Editores.

¹⁸ Guatemala collects 9.8% of GDP as tax revenue. For comparison, the Latin American average is 18%, the US is 28.3%, and Germany is 39.3%.

the importance of blood, family, and social ties that cut across political and ideological lines, and that still make major decisions for the country over the dinner table.

Azpuru points out that in Guatemala we find an elite-dominated political system (including foreign policy and security policy). There is relative little mass influence (as we find in Argentina or Brazil). And patronage is central to the workings of the State.

The military, historically, has played a major role in domestic and foreign security policy, although the military has lost a great deal of power and influence since the 1996 accords. The Minister of Defense, for example, had to be a military officer (not a civilian). And the military, until the mid-1990s, enjoyed virtually uncontested power (particularly during the armed conflict). The military had its own bank, its own television channel, and exercised direct control of these and a number of institutions for years. Norman Bailey notes that presidents tend to come from the European elite segments, dictators from the Mestizo/Ladino segments, and for the most part, the indigenous do not participate in national Strategic Culture.

Guatemalan Strategic Culture has been and continues to be dominated by a powerful oligarchy of agrarian and industrial elites. CACIF (Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial, and Financial Associations) serves as the formal vehicle for the oligarchical interests. We also find a nouveau riche, generally much more open to market and political reforms, which finds political allies among a growing urban upper middle class (The middle class nationally is definitely not unified, as the urban/rural divide extinguishes most common interests; and the Guatemala City middle class is not a unified block, either, as it covers such a range of

socio-economic positions.). Guatemala has also seen the related rise of a new center-right, led by the GANA party.

As Sereseres points out, there is no love lost between the military and CACIF. While there have been strategic alliances, such as during the 1970s and 1980s, their interests are often divergent, and the military sees itself as independent of the political interests of the Right.

Emerging on the national stage in the 1990s, the pan-Maya movement has been led by a group of well-educated and cosmopolitan indigenous leaders, mostly from the K'iche' and Kaqchikel ethnolinguistic groups. The pan-Maya movement is a loose conglomeration of NGOs, political organizations, and indigenous scholars. It has successfully fought for indigenous rights legislation, although implementation has rarely followed. It has become a minor political force, with an influential public voice. The major newspapers cover pan-Maya activities in some depth, and organizations have been working for the past ten years to build up grassroots support. The results have been mixed. There is indeed a greater awareness of cultural issues and less tolerance for blatant discrimination, and yet leaders have been unable to convert this into a unified voting bloc. In 1999, a Consulta Popular seeking constitutional changes to implement elements of the 1996 Peace Accords, including the Agreement on Indigenous Rights and Identity, was soundly defeated (the abstention rate was over 80%). Likewise, in 2006, Rigoberta Menchú (a polarizing figure in Guatemala, but the first serious indigenous contender for the presidency) received only 3% of the vote.

Santiago Fernández and Caesar Sereseres argue that the Peace Accords led to the legitimization of new political elite. The Army was largely dismantled as an institution,

and lost most of its budget share. By law, officers and intelligence agents were prohibited from continuing with their work. In 1996, there were 44,000 troops, and in 2008 only 15,000. The void that was created by this dismantling was filled by a criminal elite involved in narco-trafficking and other activities. Fernández argues that ex-combatants came into political power after 1996, funded by international NGOs, and the military fell out of power. These ex-combatants, however, moved into power not as an ideological group, but as representative politicians, along the lines of Lula in Brazil or Fernando Lugo in Paraguay.

Human rights groups, such as *Grupo Apoyo Mutuo* (GAM) and the *Campesino Union* CUC, exert some influence on national politics, although this is often triangulated through international law and organizations.

There are significant domestic conflicts and rivalries with the keepers of Strategic Culture. This became clear during the process leading up to the peace accords, with hard-line and soft-line factions emerging within the military and within the private sector elites. In some ways, these were arguments about inward growth versus outward growth, and were commercial versus landowning interests—commercial elites wanted more trade, and landowning elites wanted to protect the status quo (and opposed trade with Cuba, for example).

There has also been significant debate over international intervention (e.g., MINUGUA, CICIG) v. sovereignty (e.g., CEDECON, the Center for the Defense of the Constitution, an anti-reformist interest group).

Military Organization/Bureaucracy

The Guatemalan military, as it emerged in the 1960s, has sought to keep its independence from elite interests and political factions, and prides itself as being the protector of the constitution (and of order and development). Indeed, Sereseres argues that it was the military that reformed the Guatemalan State. He reports that the military disdained having military dictators, and it was a Captains' coup in 1982 that led the country back to democracy. Likewise, it was General Otto Pérez Molina that restored order after President Jorge Serrano's 1993 auto-coup. Indeed, the military's significant commercial holdings were meant to give it an insulating, independent base of power. The creation of its own bank, for example, was meant to protect the military from external forces.

Sereseres relates that up to 1944, the Army played a secondary role to the police (and secret police); it was not much more than a glorified road builder. However, the 1944 revolution (remembered for ushering in the ten years of democratic Spring), was a civil-military activity (not purely civilian), and began the transformation of the military and its role within the State.

The first real modernization came in the 1960s, with US training. Guatemala was the first recipient of major military support in the region. The US Military Group in Guatemala was strong, helped develop para-militaries, and worked through established power structures.

In the 1970s, modernizing efforts took hold, leading to a modern, multilingual and cosmopolitan officer corps, many in which were trained by the US. By the height of conflicts in the early to mid-1980s, troop numbers grew to close to 60,000. The Army

was strategically expanding, and bringing in more reserves and conscripts. It was decided that it could not count on the US. Therefore, it began militarizing the civilian population to win the guerilla war. It began a military commission system, and local commissioners often became both sheriff and judge. It also began Civil Defense Patrols (PACs), and enlisted 400,000-500,000 PAC members. In this post-1979 Nicaraguan Revolution context, it was decided that to convert the civilian population, they must be trusted with arms.

Guatemalan insurgents were bolstered by the successful 1979 Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. However, the Guatemalan military responded in kind by escalating the conflict even further, destroying hundreds of entire villages and killing tens of thousands of civilians. Guatemala's violence reached its height in 1982-1983 under the rule of General Efraín Ríos Montt, a fervent evangelical Protestant. In August 1983, after just 17 months in power, Ríos Montt was deposed by more moderate factions within the Army. General Oscar Mejía Víctores became president, and in 1984 presided over the country's first truly free elections since 1950. Vinicio Cerezo, a moderate-liberal Christian Democrat who had lived for years in exile, assumed office in 1986, famously admitting on the eve of his election that his role as president was still very limited by the real power held by the military high command.

During this time, the military flooded the political spaces left vacant by the violence, thus changing the direction of national politics. This continued for several years in the 1980s, as the countryside was slowly brought under control. Sereseres argues that while the Guatemalan military was winning the domestic war, they had already lost the international diplomatic war.

While the Guatemalan military officers felt comfortable negotiating with the URNG leaders, Sereseres argues that in the 1988-1996 period, the military was unable to control the negotiation process with the URNG, and gave up many of its advances before the accords. By 1994, he argues, the Army was at the mercy of the civilian presidency, and from 1996 on, presidents dealt with the military as they liked.

Sereseres argues that the present military has lost much of its capacity. The officer training school no longer does in-depth strategy. There are almost as many officers as there are enlisted troops, an unhealthy balance. The strategic thinking in Guatemala today comes more from the NGOs and the private sector; the military is still a player but not a major one. Coups are not out of style, and the military still sees itself as the defender of the constitution and public order, but it lacks the capacity it once had to affect change or to pull off a successful coup that would garner domestic support and international tolerance.

Public Sentiments/Attitudes

Without security, people don't care much about anything else. And there is little sense of personal security in Guatemala right now. The current levels of violence have attracted "mano dura" politics, even to persons sympathetic to the Left, and to human rights and indigenous movements.

In the 2000s, violence and security have become the dominant concerns. Almost 63% of respondents to 2008 LAPOP surveys reported that security is the country's most pressing problem.¹⁹ Recent years have seen the rise of major narco-trafficking networks (with close ties to sectors of the military, police, and judiciary), the growth of international and domestic gangs, the emergence of other organized crime networks, and

¹⁹ LAPOP: <http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/GUATEMALABACK>.

the associated rise of disorganized crime. There were over 6,500 homicides in Guatemala in 2009. This is a murder rate of over 50 per 100,000 (for comparison, the rate in Sierra Leon was 50; in Colombia, 36; in the US, 5.4; and in Germany, 0.88). Extortion and vigilantism have become commonplace.

LAIPOP surveys in 2008 in Guatemala reported that support for democracy stands at 60.5% (only Honduras is lower in Latin America); political tolerance is 43.6% (only above Bolivia); the perception of corruption is 80.4% (only below Jamaica and Argentina).

Marvin Astrada argues that violence has long been a central feature of Guatemala. The State has been driven to seek absolute power at any cost, including the repression of all other competitors. The military was fused with the State, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, and promoted the idea that power can only be preserved through absolutist security.

Astrada argues that the State has been the cause of major traumatic experiences; it is rightly viewed as more of a predatory State that does not serve the public interest. The primary targets during the war were non-combatants, and violence and torture have been norms since the 1960s. It was believed that political violence was the only way to move the agenda forward, and this became the basis for death squads and other strategic uses of violence toward political ends. Structural violence became a defining characteristic of the modern Guatemalan State.

Thus, the civil war had a profound impact on the state of things today. Guatemala is a fragmented State, and there is a lack of consensus about what it means to be Guatemalan, and the State's perception of what it means to be Guatemalan. The State is

largely perceived as a forum for elites to contest for power. The Cold War and armed conflict created greater divisions rather than creating unity. There was great psychic trauma from the violence and associated terror that very much lives on today. We see a post-war transition to greater democracy, but the legacy of military-State fusion persists. Likewise, the poverty and other conditions that gave rise to revolutionaries persist.

Challenges, Continuity, and Change

Contemporary Security Challenges

In many ways, the Guatemalan State is under siege from the wave of organized crime that has taken place over the past ten years. For the 2007 elections, there was an unprecedented climate of insecurity and political murders and threats. With drug gangs and transnational youth gangs, large stretches of the country are not under State control. This is not simply a crime wave, but a full blown crisis of the State.

This is not unique to Guatemala: the MS-13 gang is based in El Salvador; the Zetas and other narco-traffickers are active in northern Mexico. But it is in Guatemala where both of these forces (gangs and narcos) are active. Both the gangs and the narcos have sophisticated corporate structures and wide ranging networks. They have the capacity to attack the State. In some areas, these criminal groups have become the real forces, and often produce the same effects as insurgency warfare yields.

Hal Brands estimates that perhaps as many as six of Guatemala's 22 departments are in dire straits. Brands outlines the "unholy trinity" of security threats in Guatemala:

1. International Drug Trafficking Organizations (IDTOs): The Mexican-based Zetas are the strongest, but they compete with many smaller local traffickers;
2. The so-called “hidden powers”: organized crime networks that started as corrupt military fraternities; some are informal, and others are more sophisticated; they work in “cleaner” crimes (avoiding customs duties, kickback schemes, securing construction contracts, etc.);
3. Youth gangs: with as many as 14,000-16,000 members, most members of MS-13 and Barrio 18, but with growing numbers of pandillas (local neighborhood gangs).

All of these groups are extremely violent. And the IDTOs and “hidden powers” have significant political influence. IDTOs were major behind-the-scenes players in the 2007 elections (with sophisticated intelligence operations); they have paid off Congress members and have strong links to the FRG party and the National Police.

The Peace Accords prohibit the military from domestic action, but this is being flouted with anti-drug activities. Still, the police and military are overwhelmed—and the Zetas are better armed.

This situation has flourished because Guatemala has a weak state that is further being weakened. This has been corrosive to the national psyche, and most persons feel personally threatened in terms of security; most believe the police are actively involved. Therefore, Guatemalans are turning away from the ineffective State and are turning toward private security guards (now, there are more than five private policemen for every State policeman). The Guatemalan State has lost its monopoly on the use of force.

CICIG still has to work with the Guatemalan police and judicial institutions. It has had a power influence in Guatemala (and a symbolic one), but it relies on these corrupt institutions, and so its influence will be limited.

Outside institutions can only do so much, and government revenues have to rise to combat the vicious circle, but Guatemalan elites have always resisted tax reform. If there was the political will, Guatemala could go the route of Colombia under President Uribe (but would need major US assistance). And in Guatemala, there is a strong elite suspicion of foreign and national NGOs. Many claim that these are responsible for agitating and funding the Left, seeing NGOs as outside political manipulation.

Continuity versus Change

There is no clear strategic direction like we find in Brazil (or in Colombia, Chile, or most other countries). Sereseres argues that there is no systematic State strategic thinking developing in Guatemala. The last real strategic thinker, he argues, was Hector Gramejo when he was Minister of Defense. The only sector that thinks strategically now is CACIF because it is concerned about the global economy—and even it is not reinvesting its profits in Guatemala.

Some argue that Guatemala, like Haiti, is approaching a failed State. Norman Bailey gives it 50/50 chance of becoming a failed State, noting that if a state cannot provide security and law to a population, then it is not a functioning state. In this context, it is difficult to create a foreign policy or coherent Strategic Culture.

Dinorah Azpuru counters that, according to failed state indices, Guatemala is actually not so bad: it is a fragile State and not a failed State. And while there is a precipitous deterioration of instruments of power of the government (the judicial system,

the Army, the police), the State still carries on many of its other functions. Guatemala is not Somalia: it has a government, with some legitimacy. Yet, the government is failing to meet basic tasks that we expect a government to accomplish (namely, to provide security), and the political system (parties, institutions, elites) does not have the ability to strengthen itself.

LAPOP reports that 40% of Guatemalans would support a coup for security reasons.²⁰ Thus, there could be a popularly supported coup in Guatemala. The military would not do it alone, but would need private sector support, and such an event would have to be precipitated by a major crisis (an illegitimate electoral decision involving a candidacy, for example, for which popular support is lost and the private sector sees its interest going elsewhere).

We have seen a shift from political violence to criminal violence. Insecurity is seen as the country's main problem, and the State is unable to impose the rule of law due to weak institutions and weak political parties, as well as the penetration of the State by criminal networks. Often, criminal organizations function as para-states, and garner the support of local communities. Impunity remains; elite-dominated politics continue to be the norm; there are lingering pockets of authoritarian culture, and a strong conservative bias, which has been influenced by the Church.

Azpuru points out a number of positive trends. Guatemala now sends soldiers on UN missions; there is a more diversified pattern of foreign relations, and more political autonomy from the US (on Iraq and Honduras, for example). Guatemala is fully engaged in international trade agreements (including CAFTA-DR and an EU agreement) in an effort to diversify its economy and purge itself of the colonialist legacy. There is an

²⁰ LAPOP: <http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/GUATEMALABACK>.

overall acceptance of outside intervention (as was the case with CICIG), and less involvement of the military. More progressive forces participate in discussions of security issues, and there is more coverage of both the Left and Right in the media.

Nonetheless, this has not led to a sense of strategic direction. There is still strong diversion between the Left and Right, and is little exploration of a possible third way.

The threats and dangers are clear. What is unclear is how the State will react. There exists a salient vision of a prosperous, multicultural Guatemala. And yet, grander, longer-term goals are largely subsumed to more immediate material rewards (for the privileged classes).

Conclusion

The current Strategic Culture in Guatemala is largely worked out through the competing interests of (1) an oligarchical private-sector elite, (2) organized crime (primarily drug traffickers), and (3) the aspirations of public and private sector elites for greater international respect and recognition (the concerns of indigenous groups, human rights organizations, NGOs, and other civil society actors also shape national Strategic Culture, although these lack the power base to affect major change.). Where these interests diverge significantly, the narco-traffickers' agenda tends to prevail.

About the Author

Edward F. Fischer is Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Center for Latin American Studies at Vanderbilt University. His work focuses on issues of political economy, identity politics, and globalization; he has conducted long-term field work with the Maya of Guatemala and in Germany. His publications include *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala* (1996), *Cultural Logics and Global Economies: Maya Identity in Thought and Practice* (2001), *Tecpán Guatemala: A Modern Maya Town in Local and Global Context* (2002, with Carol Hendrickson), *Broccoli and Desire: Global Connections and Maya Struggles in Postwar Guatemala* (2006, with Peter Benson). Most recently he has edited *Indigenous Peoples, Civil Society, and the Neoliberal State in Latin America* (2008). His current research focuses on the interplay of moral values and economic rationalities.

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