

Guatemalan Indians Try Politics

Election of 4 to Assembly Reflects Change in Traditional Role

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QUEZALTENANGO, Guatemala—Mauricio Quixtan, the victorious candidate of a new Indian-led political group based in this western highlands district, was still getting used to the idea that he had achieved his quest for one of the 88 seats in Guatemala's new Constituent Assembly.

"Do you think the politicians in the capital are going to take us seriously?" he asked, gesturing pointedly at the crude sandals and straw hats worn by five peasant supporters visiting his placard-decorated campaign headquarters.

"It's going to be 87 against one," added Quixtan, the first representative of an all-Indian political party ever to be elected to a national office in Guatemala, "and the first thing we want to do is to change the mentality of the other 87 assembly members so that they know who we Indians are."

In Guatemala City, Quixtan's victory attracted little attention, obscured by the national infighting and coalition-building that followed the July 1 vote. But if Guatemala's old-line politicians are not already taking Quixtan and his group very seriously, they would seem to be making a mistake, for anthropologists estimate that Indians make up more than 50 percent of this nation's 7 million population.

Spending less than \$5,000 on a hastily improvised contest for Quezaltenango's four Constituent Assembly seats, Quixtan's 90-day-old Peasant Social Action Organization finished third in the popular vote, defeating all but one of Guatemala's established political parties. Its candidates ran behind the Christian Democrats, traditionally the strongest

party in the Indian highlands, and the new and well-financed National Union of the Center.

"We gave the politicians a lesson in politics," Quixtan said.

But more impressive than the peasant group's unexpected third-place finish in Quezaltenango province was its string of solid pluralities in such picturesque but impoverished mountain villages as San Martin Chile Verde, Zunil, San Juan Ostuncalco, San Miguel Siguala and Concepcion Chiquirichapa.

Among Guatemala's most traditionally Indian townships, these Quiche and Mam Indian communities—descendants of the great Mayan civilization—during the past five years have been the scene of intensive guerrilla recruitment and organizational efforts and devastating government counterinsurgency campaigns. According to diplomats and human rights groups, death squads have killed thousands of Indians suspected of political activism, and few experienced observers expected the Constituent Assembly elections—an abstract exercise to most of Guatemala's Indian majority—to attract many local volunteers.

Yet from Indian peasant ranks, the Peasant Social Action Organization assembled an election-day task force of 600 poll watchers and voting table workers.

"We were out there dressed just like we are now, in sandals and sombreros," Quixtan reported as co-workers laughed and nodded. "Not one of us put on a tie."

Quixtan was not the only Indian to be voted into the assembly July 1. Two Quiche Indians and one Cakchiquel—who like Quixtan concentrated on

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campaigning in their native languages, a surprisingly rare political tactic in this multilingual country—were elected on the Christian Democratic slate from the region made up of the highlands provinces of Totonicapán, Quiché and Chimaltenango.

But the success of the unaffiliated and self-financed peasant organization in cultivating grass-roots Indian support in Quezaltenango provided perhaps the most striking evidence yet of the emerging political awareness and independence among formerly quiescent and pliable Indian voters. The transformation was catalyzed by their disruptive contacts with both reform-preaching, rifle-toting leftist guerrillas and an Army at first wantonly repressive but now intent on securing Indian support.

"By getting the Indians organized and stirred up about the need for change, the guerrillas did progressive political forces a favor," said Roberto Carpio Nicolle, who headed the Christian Democratic ticket. "The Indians are demanding that things be done for them, and the government can no longer count on coercing their support."

Quixtan's election ensures that Indian cultural and political issues will be raised when the assembly convenes next month to draw up a new constitution, Guatemala's ninth since independence. Most Guatemalans have some Indian ancestry; but those Indians who still speak their native language and follow traditional customs historically have been isolated from the mainstream of political and economic life.

"We will insist on a recognition of the value of Mayan culture," including official status for all of Guatemala's 23 indigenous languages, Quixtan said.

Other Indian leaders are also demanding that local languages and culture be accorded formal recognition in the new constitution.

Demetrio Cojti Cuxil, a Belgian-educated anthropologist of Cakchiquel origin, proposed in a political forum during the campaign that a "federal solution" be applied in Guatemala, with regional government business conducted in local languages and national affairs in Spanish. Carpio Nicolle said he planned to lobby for a similar "decentralization" formula that would include district parliaments corresponding roughly to the country's major ethnic regions.

But many traditional parties are resisting such proposals, citing practical and philosophical objections.

"We can barely afford to run our courts and publish government documents in Spanish, and I don't see how we could possibly start doing it in a dozen other languages," commented a Guatemalan political observer. "Besides, Indians who are literate are literate in Spanish."

Many traditional politicians complained of "racism" when Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt—overthrown last August in a palace revolt 17 months after assuming power in a coup—appointed Indian delegates to his advisory Council of State. But many Indians appreciated Ríos Montt's gesture.

"It was the first time we Indians have had representation," said Juan, a Quiché school teacher from Solola province whose father, an assistant mayor, was kidnapped and presumably killed in October 1981 by gunmen believed to be linked to security forces. He requested that his last name not be published.

Frightened by his father's abduction, Juan at first avoided political activity, but began working actively for

the Christian Democrats this year, calling them "the party that is the most interested in indigenous people."

The armed forces, which despite the July 1 election remain Guatemala's dominant political institution, are also responding to Indian demands for greater cultural recognition and participation in the nation's economic and political life.

"For centuries, the Indians were abandoned and neglected," said Col. Mario Enrique Paiz Bolanos, the Guatemalan Army's civilian affairs director. He noted that in the fortified hamlets set up by the Army in formerly guerrilla-occupied mountain districts, children are now sent to school to be taught in their own languages through the fourth grade.

Col. Antonio Carballo Morales, military commander of Solola province, expressing a view voiced more frequently now by senior officers, said the Indians' natural conservatism, respect for authority and peasant "penny capitalism" make them natural allies of the anticommunist fight.

"We are trying to encourage Indian culture, because it is convenient for us," he said.

But while the Army's leadership may be revising its attitudes toward Mayan folkways, it continues to resist incorporation of Indians into its ranks. Col. Carballo estimated that "90 percent" of the more than 1,000 conscripts under his command are Indians—a percentage corresponding closely to the demographics of Solola. But he also reported that just four of his 60 subordinate officers are native Indian-language speakers, a pattern prevalent throughout the Army.

This is not true of the Army's leftist opposition, however, Col. Carballo said. The Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms, militarily the strongest of the four allied guerrilla groups operating in the highlands, now has 2,000 armed fighters, "almost all of them Indians, including the leaders," Col. Carballo said.

The Army's ambivalent attitude toward native-language education and Indian community development was highlighted in February of last year, when three bilingual teachers—including a U.S. AID contract employee—were shot "while attempting to escape" from a military unit in the highlands, the armed forces reported. The incident provoked a temporary suspension of U.S. economic assistance.

Eight months later, another bilingual Indian educator was kidnapped and killed in circumstances that the U.S. Embassy said "raise serious questions as to the possible involvement of Guatemalan security forces."

In the most dramatic departure from past Army disregard of the indigenous population, Indians across the highlands are now obliged to participate in Army-run "civilian self-defense patrols," village vigilante squads that now claim 800,000 members. The patrols are a cornerstone of a counterinsurgency strategy that also includes a decentralized military command network in the western mountains. Civil patrols represent a radical break with both the immediate past—when guerrillas briefly claimed much of the region's loyalty and territory—and the pattern of recent decades, when Indian communities enjoyed considerable autonomy. Army bases were concentrated in the cities and the eastern lowlands, inhabited by Spanish-speaking Guatemalans.

But there is a growing Indian resentment against this mandatory vigilante service, particularly among residents of remote rural settlements. Obligated to patrol through the night as often as every three or four days, they complain about the effects on their health and work.