
Eyewitness Report from Guatemala City

Guatemala enters a period of great hope and grave danger

by Jeffrey Steinberg

The Jan. 14 inauguration of Christian Democrat Vinicio Cerezo as President of this pivotal Central American nation marked the beginning of a new epoch in Guatemalan and Central American history, one that, for the moment, is defined by great opportunities as well as grave dangers. Entering office following a decade scarred by a devastating earthquake, by a brutal U.S. Carter administration military cutoff and even more crippling U.S. economic embargo, and by an invasion of foreign dope profiteers who gave new life to a defeated Cuban- and Soviet-backed insurgency, Guatemala's new civilian President faces a series of challenges in the first hundred days of his rule that will determine the fate of Guatemala and Central America for years to come.

It is not an oversimplification to say that Cerezo must decide in the immediate days ahead whether he will model his presidency on that of Peru's Alan García, who has courageously taken on the narco-terrorists and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) while moving to forge Ibero-American integration, or that of Argentina's Raúl Alfonsín, a "comprador" of the Kissinger faction in the United States and the IMF who devoted his first year in office to destroying Argentina's economy and its armed forces.

Cerezo's inaugural speech, and a series of prominent interviews given during the same week, indicate that, for the moment, Ibero-America's newest elected President has not caved in to the enormous pressures, both domestic and international, to swallow the Alfonsín "medicine."

Speaking with journalists from the Mexican daily *Excelsior* on inauguration day, Cerezo attacked the IMF for helping create the present international debt crisis and vowed, "before we pay, the people who are hungry must eat."

In answer to a question about his willingness to support the proposals for an Ibero-American-wide approach to the debt put forward separately by Fidel Castro and Alan García, Cerezo carefully distanced himself from the Cubans while leaving himself open to participation in a dialogue on the debt if "any of the democratic countries wants to propose it."

Cerezo returned to the same themes during his inaugural address, when he declared, "We have a project of a nation before us. . . . There is a fatherland that is yet to be built. . . .

Other fellow countrymen and other distinguished Latin Americans have already made specific reference to the injustice of the international economic order and how our weak economies have been ravaged in the turmoil of world recession. . . .

"We are now faced with an unprecedented economic crisis. Economic activity has dwindled due to serious factors of imbalance in international trade and in the finances of the public sector. Savings and investments have also been reduced and the margins to overcome such imbalance and adopt an effective economic policy are very tight. There are no funds to begin new projects and the government lacks sufficient resources to finance its operating expenditures. Our foreign debt is four times the value of our yearly exports, having mortgaged the future of our children and grandchildren. By virtue of this debt, each Guatemalan will have to pay over \$320. . . .

"According to the cold and cruel language of statistics, by dividing the earnings of all Guatemalans into the number of inhabitants, each Guatemalan has one quetzal [approximately 40¢] daily for food, housing, education, transportation and health. . . . There are 8 million Guatemalans, 5 million of whom live in poverty. Many of our children die at birth, and of those who survive, only one out of three is not undernourished, while the other two are doomed to suffer malnutrition and deficient growth, lack sufficient strength for study and work, and consequently be branded lazy and worthless in the future. Fellow Guatemalans: This is the nation we are receiving."

Implicitly rejecting the pressure to launch an Alfonsín-style blood letting against the nation's military leadership, Cerezo said there is "a military structure which supports this [nation building] project." He went on to warn: "Today, as we return home and pick up that challenge, we see our Guatemala with our eyes and heart rising with determination and without rancour, full of hope with every Guatemalan shoulder-to-shoulder, united in the free play of our democratic decision to build rather than destroy, to cooperate rather than demand, to give ourselves another opportunity rather than to bicker about it, and to give ourselves more space to rectify

rather than seek revenge. . . . We must promote development that seeks to improve the living conditions of the population and to meet their needs with our own resources, fully respecting the community's aspirations. It must be a development where man, not the isolated individual but rather a human being, is the central axis of our efforts."

Facing up to the IMF

The first serious test of Cerezo's noble inaugural words will come in the pending negotiations with Guatemala's foreign creditors. The International Monetary Fund has declared open war against the Guatemalan armed forces and will, along with the U.S. State Department and the international "human rights" mafia, heavily arm-twist Cerezo to launch a pogrom against the nation's military. Pressures in the same direction will also come from within Cerezo's own cabinet, which includes a heavy dose of jesuitical radicals led by Education Minister Eduardo Meyer Maldonado, the chancellor of San Marcos University which was the center of the September 1985 riots that nearly brought down the Mejía Victores government and preempted the elections. The role to be played by Development Minister René de León Schlotter, the elder statesman of the Guatemalan Christian Democracy, and Cerezo's "European connection" into the international Christian Democracy, is yet to be determined.

If Cerezo goes into the IMF negotiations with any delusions that the international financial community is "pleased" that Guatemala has "returned to democracy," and, will, therefore, soften its loan conditions and aid in the economic revitalization of the country, he would do well to take a careful look at the economic and institutional devastation that is today's Argentina.

The measure of Cerezo's leadership will be his rapid forging of an alliance with the García-led forces of Ibero-American integration, and his collaboration with the Guatemalan armed forces, who still represent the most powerful institution committed to the preservation of Guatemala's national sovereignty. In a pre-inauguration interview with *EIR* Ibero-American editor Dennis Small, Cerezo gave his endorsement to the Guatemalan military's recent anti-narcoterrorist operations in the Peten region in the north of the country. His appointments of two experienced and professional military officers, Gen. Jaime Hernández and Gen. Hector Gramajo, as the defense minister and chief of staff of the armed forces respectively, indicated a channel of cooperation with the armed forces to which Cerezo made frequent reference in his public pronouncements before Jan. 14. He has assiduously avoided pressures to call for show trials against the members of the previous military governments, and has deferred to the Supreme Court the responsibility for investigating any such abuses.

For its part, the Guatemalan military has adopted a "wait and see" attitude towards the new President, taking careful

note of both the Argentine example and that of Panama, where National Guard Gen. Manuel Noriega recently moved—belatedly—to depose President Nicolás Ardito Barletta, a former World Bank technocrat who had moved to turn Panama into a safe haven for offshore dope money and a model of capitulation to IMF looting, and install a new President. During a trip to Guatemala City just 48 hours before the inauguration, in which he met with outgoing head of state General Mejía Victores and incoming Defense Minister General Hernández, General Noriega had released an interview to the Panamanian press in which he accused the IMF of "financial terrorism."

Reinvigorating Contadora

Cerezo has already indicated that he has an appreciation of the potential role of Guatemala in reversing the recent years' slide into chaos in Central America by making a strong intervention to reinvigorate and redefine the Contadora peace process. After winning the election by a landslide margin in December, Cerezo briefly visited the United States and every Central American country, as well as the countries comprising the Contadora Group—Panama, Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela. Then, on Jan. 11-12, foreign ministers from the Contadora countries and from the so-called Contadora Support group—Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and Uruguay—met in Carabellada, Venezuela to discuss new options for Central America. At the conclusion, a 10-page declaration was issued, announcing that Contadora will immediately renew its diplomatic efforts based on a call for a ban on offensive weapons and an elimination of all foreign support for "irregular forces which operate in the region."

During the morning of Cerezo's inauguration, the presidents of four of the Central American nations held a breakfast meeting at which they endorsed the Carabellada document and accepted Cerezo's proposal for a heads of state summit within two months at a Guatemalan town on the border with El Salvador and Honduras. A major agenda item at that summit will be the creation of a Central American parliament.

Enter the Vatican

At a packed press conference at Christian Democratic Party headquarters days before the inauguration, called to formally announce the new cabinet, President-elect Cerezo made a point of emphasizing his pleasure that Pope John Paul II was sending four representatives to his inauguration, a precedent. Observers pointed to this as a potential signal that John Paul II may play a strong support role in securing Guatemala's democratic revival and fight for economic sovereignty, in much the same way that the Pope has had a dramatic impact on Peru's Alan García. The role of the Catholic Church in the 80% Catholic country will undoubtedly be a critical factor in the next hundred days' unfolding.