

Guatemala coup: Kissinger tightens his grip

by Dolia Estévez Pettingell

Guatemalan dictator Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt was deposed Aug. 8 in a coup orchestrated by Henry Kissinger, who heads the new U.S. Bipartisan Commission on Central America. The man chosen to replace the religious cultist is his former defense minister, Brig. Gen. Oscar Humberto Mejía Victores, who describes himself as a "close friend" Montt.

No one among leading Ibero-American journalists and political figures considers the Ríos Montt overthrow a change for the better; on the contrary. "The sad thing about the change is not that Ríos Montt went but that he is replaced by someone similar,"

For the influential Mexico City paper *El Dia*, the coup was nothing but a "face-lift."

to inaugurate his term as head of the Bipartisan Commission by changing the government of Guatemala,"

Former Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez told reporters in Caracas on Aug. 9 that "Ríos Montt did not deserve our respect or our confidence . . . he was an ayatollah-like dictator. . . . But the information that we have on General Mejía is that he surpasses Ríos Montt in his desire to participate in a regional, a Central American war."

It is not that the killer of Chile's Salvador Allende and Italy's Aldo Moro disliked Ríos Montt. The "born-again" dictator had successfully contributed to regional instability by making Guatemala the site of violent religious warfare during his reign, warfare threatening to spill over into Mexico.

But in the context of Kissinger's plans for expanding regional warfare and having full control over the unfolding of that process, Ríos Montt had to go—he was too "kooky" and ultimately too unreliable. Mejía, a Roman Catholic who maintains ties to factions of the U.S. military close to the evil Vernon Walters, is Kissinger's man for the job.

Top-down coordination

Observers characterized the American embassy's involvement in the coup as "blatant."

ment officially admitted that U.S. deputy military attaché in Guatemala was in the National Palace with a walkie-talkie at the time of the coup but, the State Department spokesman defensively added, "He was not directing the coup."

Forty-eight hours before the coup, General Mejía met in Tegucigalpa with the defense ministers of Honduras and El Salvador and the head of the U.S. Army Southern Command

based in Panama. He reportedly got the final approval for the coup at that meeting.

Ríos Montt was not jailed following the Aug. 8 coup and continues to draw his salary as an active-duty military officer. Mejía announced that the ousted dictator was not being stripped of his military duties. "This is not a coup d'état but a transition of power,"

In his first statement to the press, making an effort to gain popular support, Mejía issued a call for early elections and eliminated the secret tribunals created by Ríos Montt. He claimed that he had taken power in order to end the "use and abuse" of the government by a "fanatic and religious group"—a reference to Ríos Montt's fundamentalist cult, the California-based Church of the Word.

The beginning of the end

The countdown of Ríos Montt's days in power began last March during the visit to Guatemala by Pope John Paul II.

In a stunt that gained him notoriety throughout the world, Ríos Montt ordered the execution of six Guatemalan prisoners—said to be "subversives"—only a few hours before the Pope's arrival, and after the Vatican had specifically requested that Ríos Montt grant clemency to the victims as a gesture to the Pope. Since the Pope's visit to Guatemala, the Vatican had made known its interest in a change of government in this Catholic country.

But General Mejía's takeover will not bring an end to the chaos and bloodshed in Guatemala and the rest of the region. The new dictator openly opposes the Pope's efforts to stabilize Central America.

Only 24 hours after he had taken power, General Mejía called a press conference to announce that the Contadora Group—Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama, which have undertaken intensive diplomacy to prevent a widening military conflict in the region—"has nothing to do in Central America. Central America's problems should be resolved by the Central Americans." Mejía also supported U.S. military maneuvers in the region and covert operations directed against the Nicaraguan government.

Venezuelan President Luis Herrera Campins, a leader of the Contadora Group, told reporters in Caracas that the Guatemalan coup d'état had "alerted" peacemaking efforts. "Every coup brings a change, and now we must find out the motivation behind this one,"