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ETHNICITY AND POLITICAL POWER IN GUATEMALA

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BACKGROUND

Guatemala's society and its political history are characterized by the dominant ladino-indigenous ethno-political cleavage (Adams 1990, 152-3; Azpuru 1999, 111), basically a "division between Indians and non-Indians" (Smith 1990b, 6). The term "Ladinos" has come to encompass all of Guatemala's non-indigenous people (Smith 1990b; Taracena et al. 2009, 84, 104, 132).

The great majority of Guatemala's indigenous population belongs to the Maya group. There are about twenty different Maya language groups, of which the four largest – K'ichee', Mam, Kaqchikel, and Q'eqchii' – make up almost 80% of the total Maya-speaking population (Warren 1998, 13). They do not constitute a politically unified ethnic bloc (see e.g. Smith 1990b, 18). Yet, because they were discriminated as *Maya* (independent of any linguistic differences) and because in the last 30 years there has been a strong national pan-Mayan political movement (Adams 1990, 158; Fischer and Brown 1996; Smith 1990a, 279; Warren 1998, 2004), invoking a common "base Maya culture on a macrocultural level" (Montejo 2005, 17), the EPR dataset treats the Maya as one single politically relevant ethnic category. In fact, a national-level indigenous identity already began to emerge from 1944 on (Adams 1990).

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Nevertheless, despite the persistence of this main indigenous-ladino cleavage well into the 20th century, the last decades have seen a certain reconfiguration of ethnic politics in Guatemala. In addition to the dominant Maya indigenous identity, communities of Xinca and Garífuna descent have revived their collective identities. At the same time, the concept of the “ladino” has also become challenged. On the one hand, the term conceals the great diversity between distinct ladino sub-groups. On the other hand, the term “mestizo/a” has emerged as a new ethnic identity that emphasizes individuals’ Mesoamerican, European, and African roots.

Population figures of ethnic groups in Guatemala are highly disputed and range from about 40% of indigenous people to 60%. According to the last national census, carried out in 2002, about 41% of Guatemalans self-identified as indigenous (39.3% as Maya, and 0.2% as either Garífunas or Xinca) (INE 2003, 30-31). The EPR dataset relies on Foster (2000, 275) for an intermediate figure of 52% of indigenous people, acknowledging their demographic majority.

ETHNIC POWER RELATIONS FROM AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Ladinos (in reality, a small “white” elite) have controlled the state for all of Guatemala's history (Adams 1990, 153-4; Smith 1990b, 18; 1990a, 279). Whereas the immediate post-independence years were still dominated by a small white *criollo* elite – descendants of the Hispanic conquerors –, the so-called Liberal Revolution of 1871 represented the rise of the *ladino* group, originally the people of mixed European and Amerindian descent, to political power. It was their nation-building project that introduced the sharp ethnic dichotomy between a broad category of *ladinos* – now understood as the non-indigenous Guatemalans – and the indigenous people, which we still find today (Smith 1990b; Taracena et al. 2009). Under the new rulers, the state continued to be an instrument of the thin economic elite, especially the owners of the large coffee plantations. While Guatemala’s liberal ideologues envisioned the cultural assimilation and national integration of the indigenous people, the actual policies implemented promoted ethnic segregation in the education sector, the labor market and the military, and the exclusion from citizenship. The economic success of the coffee elites was directly based on these policies of ethnic discrimination, as without a flourishing mining sector, the expropriation of communal indigenous lands and the forced recruitment of indigenous labor constituted the main sources of wealth (Martínez Peláez 1998; Pérez-Brignoli 1989; Taracena et al. 2009).

The first time period specified in this coding – from 1946 to 1954 – refers to the short period of political and social liberalization under reformist presidents Juan José Arévalo and Jacobo Árbenz starting in 1944 (Guatemala’s 10-year “democratic spring”). During their rule, citizenship was universalized and more liberal and progressive state policies were pursued, e.g. a land reform and the abolition of forced labor, from which the indigenous people living in the rural areas certainly benefited the most. The reforms significantly increased indigenous political participation at the local level (where they took over many political posts, like town mayors) and in general fostered indigenous collective organization (Sáenz de Tejada 2015a, 108-110; see also Adams (2011). At the national level, these socio-political reforms did not change the *de-facto* subordination of indigenous people within Guatemalan society (Adams 2011). Indeed, an ongoing ladino fear of Indian uprisings was omnipresent (Adams 1990). The status of the Maya within Guatemala's society during this period of social reform is well expressed in the following press

editorials (quoted in Adams 1990), which mirror the mentality of that time: “The Guatemalan does not want to be Indian, and wishes his nation were not” (El Imparcial, January 10, 1945). “Our Indian - we are assured - is by nature lazy, ...” (El Imparcial, February 12, 1945). “Because of this, our Indians must be westernized or destroyed; but we should not keep them in their entrenched static state because we will then be only a country for tourism; of curiosities; a kind of zoo for the entertainment of tourists; but never a nation” (La Hora, February 19-20, 1945). Nevertheless, the clear rupture with the past regarding the country’s citizenship regime and the possibility of free and open indigenous (i.e. Maya) mobilization in the countryside warrants a coding of the Maya group as “powerless” (as opposed to “discriminated”) in this period. The CIA-instigated coup d’état in 1954 ended the short reformist interlude and marked the beginning of the army’s rise to Guatemala’s most powerful political (and social) institution.

From this point on, and until 1995, the political status of the Maya is most appropriately described as the victims of deliberate and targeted political discrimination – and often of violent oppression – by the Guatemalan state and the ladino population (Adams 2011; Azpuru 1999, 111; Dunkerley 1988, 432-3; Lunsford 2007, 385, 395-6; Pérez-Brignoli 1989, 187; Plant 1999, 319, 322; Smith 1990b, 2-3). As Brockett (1991, 264) put it from an explicitly comparative perspective: As a contemporary manifestation of historical racism, “[t]he people most likely to be victims of state terrorism in Central America in recent decades have been the Indians of Guatemala’s western highlands.” Central-America historian Dunkerley (1988, 432-3), too, points at Guatemala’s exceptionality within the Central American region regarding the issue of the indigenous population: “..., their specific oppression as Indians underlies a singularity in the form of domination (...) with regard to the rest of Central America.”

After the US intervention of 1954, local politics in the majority-indigenous municipalities turned into an intense, at times violent struggle over access to municipal executive power. While the ladino elite attempted to hold on to or regain control over municipal power indigenous people did achieve to win local elections. As the civil war became more violent various indigenous mayors were assassinated (Sáenz de Tejada 2015a, 123-124).

Meanwhile, the 1970s saw the birth of a national Maya movement, in the form of a loose collective of politico-intellectual leaders and semi-clandestine organizations (Cojtí 2010, 102; Hale 2006, 62-5, 89-93). But the mobilization was soon crushed by the military’s “scorched earth” violence, during the heights of Guatemala’s 36-year civil war, that systematically targeted the indigenous population, considered to be the rebels’ natural support base (Ball, Kobrak, and Spierer 1999, 89-94; Falla 1994; Schirmer 1998). While the war erupted within a purely classist, Cold-War framework, it soon took on an explicitly ethnic character, as the rebels recruited heavily from the indigenous population during the 1970s, and indigenous leaders in turn began to use the armed struggle for their own purposes (Jonas 2000, 21-3). The military’s “scorched earth” strategy, that systematically targeted the indigenous population and indigenous leaders, was later classified as a genocide by the official Truth Commission in 1999 (Ball, Kobrak, and Spierer 1999; Falla 1994; Jonas 2000, 24; Lunsford 2007; Manz 2002; Smith 1990a, 271-2; Schirmer 1998). Indeed, one of the main roots of the Guatemalan civil war was precisely the total refusal of the military and the oligarchy to concede any meaningful political participation to the country’s indigenous majority (Lunsford 2007, 395; Smith 1990a, 265-6). A civil-patrol system was created on the village level in the indigenous countryside, replacing the old community authority systems, and hundreds of thousands of indigenous men were forcibly recruited and coerced into monitoring (or terrorizing) their

villages under direct military command (Schirmer 1998). Thus, the military came to control the indigenous countryside, and in this process whole villages were erased (Ball, Kobrak, and Spierer 1999, 25-8; Lunsford 2007, 390, 394; Smith 1990a, 272, 275).

Superficial democratization, i.e. the holding of elections, from 1985 on did not really change the power structure in Guatemala; the military remained the most influential political force and the violence continued, albeit on a somewhat lower level (Ball, Kobrak, and Spierer 1999, 28-9, 32; Goodwin 2001, 202; Jonas 1995; Smith 1990a, 274-5). For the sake of completeness, it must be noted that the military also implemented certain development projects in indigenous areas with the goal of economically, politically and culturally integrating indigenous people into Guatemalan society (Smith 1990a, 275), but in light of the evidence it is safe to say that such integration would not have been as politically equals. Rather, the project must be seen as an attempt by the state to eradicate autonomously expressed indigenous culture (Smith 1990a, 278-9; see also Schirmer 1998).

DEMOCRATIZATION AND ETHNIC POWER RELATIONS IN POST-CONFLICT GUATEMALA

In 1996, the Guatemalan peace accords were finally signed, including the separate 1995 accord on indigenous rights. Warren (2004, 149) refers to the peace process, started in 1994, as the actual “transition to democracy” where “the Maya could finally participate openly in national politics”. The political opening served as a catalyst for Maya mobilization. Indigenous organizations – some newly created, some emerging from their previously semi-clandestine existence – took advantage of the peace process and became one of the main political forces (Azpuru 1999; Bastos and Camus 2003; Jonas 2000; Warren 1998). Indigenous issues were finally put on the public political agenda and Maya leaders received much attention from the mass media (Azpuru 1999, 111, 117-8; Warren 2004, 150-2, 159). The national dialogues led to the recognition of Guatemala as a multiethnic and multilingual country. However, the peace accords were non-binding in nature, to be implemented through congressional legislation and constitutional reform, and led to persistent political disputes, even within Maya organizations and communities (Bastos 2010; Brett 2010; Carey 2004; del Valle Escalante 2009; Jonas 2000; Sieder et al. 2002; Warren 2004). The national referendum on indigenous rights, emanating from the accords, but extenuated considerably by the legislative process, was defeated with 47% to 53% of votes in May 1999 (with an abstention rate of 81%). Parts of the campaign against the referendum were built upon strategies to scare voters based on images of ethnic conflict and fears of a “balkanization” of the country (Carey 2004; Jonas 2000, 189-213; Warren 2004). The defeat of the constitutional referendum can also be seen as a sign of the declining political strength of the movement at the turn of the century (Adams 2011, 146; Bastos and Brett 2010).

Nevertheless, Guatemalan governments have proved to be more open towards indigenous issues since the peace accords, and some prominent Maya leaders have been appointed to governmental/administrative posts although not of major importance (Minority Rights Group International 2007; Warren 2004, 174-5). The new period inserted in 1996 reflects this change by dropping the discrimination coding. Instead, present-day Guatemala falls into what Hale (2004, 2006) has termed “neoliberal multiculturalism”, characterized by a rhetorical endorsement of cultural rights and formal equality combined with firm resistance to substantial changes in the distribution of political and

economic power. The Maya are formally included in political processes, but often not more than rhetorically (Bastos and Camus 2003). Especially when important economic issues are at stake, indigenous people still suffer from acts of (violent) expropriation and state policies of repression and judicial persecution (Lunsford 2007, 398; Minority Rights Group International 2007; Velásquez Nimatuj 2008, 196-204; Witte 2005). This situation is appropriately captured by the power status category of “powerless”. Correspondingly, the ladino Guatemalans are coded as “dominant” (instead of holding monopoly power) in this second time period.

Note that Maya group representatives do not hold effective political power above the local level (Bastos 2010; Minority Rights Group International 2007; Warren 2004, 155). Yet, one interesting consequence of the civil war is the emergence of a new indigenous elite at the local level, parts of them linked to the former civil-patrol system, as many ladino elites withdrew from villages inhabited by indigenous people. These new leaders have taken over local political power in many instances and, as the democratization process unfolded, have often become elected as mayors (Saenz de Tejada, 2015b: 208).

While the vast majority of historiographic, anthropological, and political science literature has been concerned with Guatemala’s Maya people, the history of the small Xinca group represents an outstandingly interesting case of “ethnic revival.” The Xinca people are communities with communal landholdings in the southeast of the country that in the official colonial documents were still recognized as indigenous and that, in fact, feature the physical traits of Amerindian people, but which lost most of their cultural markers (including their language) over the course of the history, due to the strong presence and penetration of the Guatemalan state and economic activities in that region. In the 1995 accord on indigenous rights, they were officially recognized as ethnic group at the instigation of the leftist guerrilla organization URNG. The URNG subsequently used the ethnic Xinca “label” strategically to create an electoral constituency for itself in that region. Since then, some people of these communities have readily taken up the ethnic bait, probably both partly out of a genuine concern with their historical roots and partly for strategic reasons. The funding available from international donors concerned with indigenous rights after the peace accords created an incentive to identify as Xinca, contributing decisively to the emergence of an albeit feeble Xinca ethno-political “movement”. (The foregoing information all stem from Prof. Dalila Gaitán, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, personal communication, August 7, 2014). The first political organization representing the group was the “Consejo del Pueblo Xinca de Guatemala” (COPXIG) founded in 1994, which also participated in the peace negotiations as a part of the Guatemalan civil society. In 2002, the “Consenso por la Unidad del Pueblo Xinka de Guatemala” (CONXIG) was founded and later became the “Parlamento Xinca” (also with the support of international donors) (Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xinca_people (accessed August 7, 2014)). Yet, this ethno-political resurgence has also caused serious divisions within these communities themselves, as many of those who “should be” Xinca are against the ethnic re-identification (Prof. Dalila Gaitán, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, personal communication, August 7, 2014). Overall, thus, this can be considered a “borderline” case regarding political relevance, as defined here. However, since Xinca resistance against natural resource extraction in their territories has important repercussions in national politics, the group is coded here as politically relevant (“powerless”) from 1996 on, i.e. after its official recognition in the peace accords.

A similar process of timid political mobilization can be observed in the case of another small minority in Guatemala: the black Garífuna group, a trans-national African-Caribbean people present in Honduras, Belize, Guatemala, and Nicaragua (with a large diaspora in the USA, especially in New York), which is also now attempting to politically constitute itself as a historical “nation” (Prof. Alfonso Arrivillaga, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, personal communication, August 5, 2014). As in the case of the Xinca, the Garífuna group’s political activism has become noticeable at the national political level in Guatemala only since the 1995 accord on indigenous rights. As Hooker (2005, 297, fn. 32) notes: “In Guatemala, (...) the Garífuna gained the same rights as the Maya by virtue of being included in the ethnic/indigenous group category ABSENT any demand on their part for such inclusion” (emphasis added). Today, they also mostly mobilize around the issue of the protection of their ancestral territories (in this case, mostly endangered by large-scale tourism projects). They are represented by ethno-political organizations, such as the “Organización Negra de Guatemala” (ONEGUA), “Buduru”, etc., although their mobilization also has become more intimately linked to traditional religious/spiritual movements in recent years (Prof. Alfonso Arrivillaga, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, personal communication, August 5, 2014). Therefore, like the Xinca, they are coded as politically irrelevant in the first two periods and as “powerless” from 1996 on. It should be noted, however, that, just like the Xinca, the group is also a “borderline” case regarding political relevance as its mobilization at the national level is really marginal (see also e.g. Minority Rights Group International 2007).

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