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Critics Say Guatemalan Ex-Dictator Is Mob Manipulator

By DAVID GONZALEZ

GUATEMALA CITY, July 29 — In a country where the masses of rural poor survive on barely enough food, work or hope, the spectacle of peasant mobs rampaging through exclusive neighborhoods last Thursday should have come as no surprise. But what many people found unsettling — if not altogether unexpected — was that the mobs were well organized and rallying in support of Efraín Ríos Montt, a former general and dictator whose iron-fisted rule devastated many of their communities in the early 1980's and who is now seeking the presidency.

The emergence of these class warriors — apparently bused in and directed by Mr. Ríos Montt's party — is hardly the only contradiction these days. The country's highest courts are ensnared in a debilitating cross-fire debating his right to run for president, a right twice denied him since 1990 under a law that bars coup leaders from office. Although the former general himself is an evangelical Christian who preaches helping the poor and downcast, human rights groups have prodded prosecutors to investigate him for massacres during his time in power.

Mr. Ríos Montt was once embraced by the United States, and one campaign advertisement trumpets him as a defender of democracy and features an early 1980's photograph of him with President Ronald Reagan. But State Department officials have warned that normal relations would be impossible under a Ríos Montt presidency. Others feel that a shadowy network of former military officers now engaged in organized crime would continue to enjoy impunity if he were to ascend to power.

The flashbacks to past allies and battles underscore the essence of what Guatemala has faced since its 36-year civil war ended in 1996 with more than 200,000 dead and 50,000 vanished: how to build peace and democracy in a place with little experience with either.

"You need democratic people, and obviously Ríos Montt is not a democrat," said Helen Mack, a leading human rights advocate here. "You cannot have a democratic state with someone who has relied on fear, force and the tactics of counterinsurgency."

Those tactics were evident last Thursday as roving mobs descended on a downtown high-rise that houses offices of some large corporations. Journalists covering the tumult were chased, and one television reporter died of a heart attack. Just outside a gated community where many diplomats and wealthy businessmen live, groups burned tires and slathered obscene slogans on the barbed-wire-topped walls.

Human rights advocates and opposition leaders saw the protests as a crude attempt to intimidate the judges presiding over the complaints and challenges to Mr. Ríos Montt's candidacy. They fear that last week's violence was also part of a psychological campaign to make people fearful before the election on Nov. 9.

Mr. Ríos Montt insisted that he had nothing to do with the protests, even though he had warned days earlier that he might not be able to control the emotions of hotheaded loyalists if the courts were to reject his candidacy. But officials of his Guatemalan Republican Front were seen at the protests, barely disguised with kerchiefs, directing the mobs, communicating by walkie-talkies and supplying boxed lunches.

The United States ambassador, John Hamilton, called the protests an affront to democracy and a mockery of the right of protest and freedom of assembly. "It is difficult to believe these protests were not centrally planned and organized," he said.

Leaders of Mr. Ríos Montt's party prefer to cast the crisis as a class struggle, aggravated by the refusal of the country's elite to pay its share of taxes to help improve the lives of impoverished peasants. Edin Barrientos, the party's vice presidential candidate, said the opposition hardly knew life outside the capital.

"Nobody has to talk to me about poverty, since I know a bit about that, and not because I studied it," said Mr. Barrientos, who was born in a rural province. "I tasted it."

Mr. Ríos Montt, he said, got the government to pay attention to long-ignored Mayan communities during the civil war. But human rights advocates and policy analysts have convincingly shown that he forced many in these communities to join patrols that committed atrocities, including massacres of women and infants. Mr. Barrientos shrugged off those accusations, blaming previous military leaders or asking why Mr. Ríos Montt had been singled out. Echoing the populist talk that President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela has used to appeal to the masses and confound the elite, Mr. Barrientos said he did not think that the Ríos Montt campaign was manipulating the poor.

"They say we would get the vote of the ignorant," he added. "We say, in a democracy, the vote of the illiterate is the same as the vote of a doctor of laws."

Whether that vote will happen remains mired in the courts. While the Court of Constitutionality — the nation's highest — ruled several weeks ago that Mr. Ríos Montt could run, opposition politicians successfully got a lower court to block the decision.

The struggle in the already fragile judicial system has raised serious fears of an unraveling government. Other institutions have suffered, including the National Police, whose commander was dismissed after officers failed to keep the peace last week.

"There has got to be some agreement between the parties on the legal procedures to arrive at a definitive resolution of the constitutional issues as to whether he can run or not," Mr. Hamilton said. A more general dialogue has yet to take place on the tensions and disputes

that have simmered in Guatemala. Edgar Gutiérrez, the foreign minister, said the country was facing problems that it had only covered up with an overly ambitious and unfulfilled peace accord.

"It is a lie to think that forgetting would bring reconciliation," he said. "Now we are at the crossroads of the real problem."

Tom Koenigs, the head of the United Nations mission monitoring the implementation of the 1996 peace accords, said the root problem was that impunity — whether for wartime abuses or peacetime corruption — had long been the rule.

"If you want to resolve this crisis, then you have to stop impunity," Mr. Koenigs said. "As long as that is not resolved, you have a handicapped democracy."