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Introduction

Progressive activists grew more assertive in Central America during the 1960s, mobilizing groups around their shared grievances and struggling through collective action to create a better life for themselves and others. Normally initiated by students, teachers, and other professional groups, these efforts were joined by urban labor organizations, which by the 1970s were frequently in the forefront of the broader social movements that had emerged. Organizing in the countryside invariably has faced greater constraints in Central America, but here, too, peasant movements grew and on notable occasions played important roles in furthering the demands of popular (i.e., non-elite) movements.

Across the region, these movements faced great odds, from the intransigence of economic elites to harassment and intimidation by both public and private security forces. They also were attacked violently by agents of the state. As nonviolent mass movements grew in size and contentiousness – often paralleled by the rise of armed groups fighting for their revolutionary cause – states became more repressive, less so in Costa Rica and Honduras, much more so in Nicaragua, and horrifically so in El Salvador and Guatemala. Yet, even in the face of virulent state terrorism, some committed and courageous activists continued on; and whenever repression slackened, popular movements reappeared.

This confrontation between committed popular movements and state violence is most striking in the cases of El Salvador and Guatemala, which are the primary focus of this study. The two countries are tragically well known for their high level of political violence – around 200,000 killed in Guatemala in the three decades up to 1996 (CEH 1999,

1:73)[1] and more than 80,000 in El Salvador for the period of 1980–1991 (Seligson and McElhinny 1996, 224), overwhelmingly noncombatants killed by the state (and its allied death squads) in both countries.[2] What are less well known are the persistent contentious but nonviolent activities by dedicated popular forces, such as marches, strikes, factory and farm occupations, and sit-ins at public offices, not only prior to the escalation of regime violence but even in the face of it. This was true in both countries even in the mid-1980s, following extraordinary levels of state terror earlier in the decade and in the midst of civil war.

These developments resonate with a number of important controversies in social science. It is my hope that this study of Central American contentious movements will make an important contribution to our understanding of such issues as the following:

- *Grievances:* Are socioeconomic grievances such a constant among the disadvantaged that, as many scholars assume, they are relatively unimportant for explaining the emergence of popular movements and the intensity of their collective political activities? Or, as will be argued here, are new socioeconomic grievances often critical to understanding why even the poor and powerless sometimes undertake risky contentious efforts to redress the wrongs they believe they have suffered?
- *False consciousness:* To what extent is "consciousness raising" a precondition for the successful mobilization of popular forces? What is the role of higher status political allies and other support groups (or "outside agitators" from the elite's perspective) in the mass mobilization process?
- *Political opportunities:* To what extent is the opening of greater political opportunities a precondition for the emergence of mass contentious movements and for their growth and persistence? For success in their objectives? If the relationship between contention and opportunities (or constraints/threats) is conditioned by other factors, what generalizations can be made about these interrelationships?

[1] The report of the Comisión para el Esclaracimiento Histórico (CEH), the Guatemalan truth commission, is available in twelve print volumes as well as on CD. The latter may be obtained from the American Association for the Advancement of Science at http://www.aaas.org.

[2] The report of the Salvadoran truth commission, the Comisión de la Verdad para El Salvador, can be downloaded from the U.S. Institute for Peace at http://www.usip.org/library/tc/doc/reports/el_salvador/tc_es_03151993_toc.html.

- *Revolutionary movements:* Are the relationships among the variables that explain the emergence and trajectory of social movements different when nonviolent social movements transform into, or are incorporated by, armed revolutionary movements? How important is the role of the revolutionary leadership to this transformation? How important is repression by the state?
- *Repression-protest paradox:* More specifically, why is it that under some conditions repression has the unintended consequence of spurring even greater popular challenges to state authority? Clearly, at other times repression does succeed in its objective of reducing popular protest and even eliminating contentious movements themselves. Is it possible to resolve in a consistent way this repression-protest paradox?
- *Protest Cycle:* Is the protest cycle (or cycle of contention) merely a descriptive summary of the changing level of collective action? Or might the cycle of contention be the analytic key to resolving the repression-protest paradox?
- *Role of emotion:* Finally, how helpful is the inclusion of emotion as a crucial component of individual and group motivation to answering these questions?

As a preface to our consideration of these questions in the Central American context, consider the following two vignettes. The first comes from Guatemala, the second from El Salvador. One concerns rural movements, the other urban. In one case, repression smashes a nonviolent popular movement; in the other, popular resistance persists in the face of great risk. Combined, they bring to life the central themes of this study.

Rural Contention and Repression in Guatemala

Among the most dreadful aspects of the years of mass contention and state violence in Central America were the many massacres of unarmed civilians in El Salvador and Guatemala outside of combat situations, usually including women and children. This was especially true in Guatemala, whose truth commission detailed 601 massacres occurring between 1978 and 1985 (CEH 1999, 3:257). The first sizeable massacre – one that shook the nation and international observers – took place on May 29, 1978 in the indigenous town of Panzós in the department of Alta Verapaz when fifty-three unarmed Q'eqchi' Maya were shot down and another forty-seven were injured

(CEH 1999, 6:13–24).[3] The town plaza was filled that day with an estimated seven hundred peasants from the surrounding area protesting their treatment at the hands of landowning elites and their friends in local government and the military. Tensions had been escalating in the region for several years as peasants protested again and again this assault on their access to land, to both their economic security and way of life.

The roots of this conflict went far back. As the Guatemalan coffee export economy expanded, up to three-quarters of the land in the entire department ended up in the hands of German planters by the latter part of the nineteenth century. The indigenous population was left with little recourse but to provide the necessary cheap labor as a resident workforce. These German lands were expropriated during WWII and then – along with other large holdings – were redistributed to peasants in the Panzós area in the early 1950s through an agrarian reform implemented by the progressive Jacobo Arbenz government. When Arbenz was overthrown by a U.S.-engineered coup in 1954, prereform owners got their lands back and the nationalized farms were distributed over the following years to the well-connected. The construction of new roads and the discoveries of oil, copper, and nickel deposits in the region made the area more attractive to entrepreneurs. Competitors to peasants for land with the know-how, resources, and connections secured title to parcel after parcel. A prime example was the mayor of Panzós himself. Elected in the 1950s as the candidate of the ruling party of the counterrevolution (the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional, MLN), he stayed in power into the 1970s, using his political base to become one of the largest landowners in the area.[4]

The demonstration in Panzós on the day of the 1978 massacre was the latest in a series of protests occurring in the area across the past decade. For example, conflicting land claims were the point of a demonstration in June 1970 by hundreds of peasants in one Panzós area town (IMP77 June 20, 1970),[5] as well as of many other efforts in the following years. Greatly expanding the arena of their protest, in 1975 Alta Verapaz peasants from towns in the municipalities (which are like U.S. counties) of both Panzós and Chisec managed to get their denunciations read on the floor of the national

[3] For further discussion of the region and the massacre, as well as the exhumation of the bodies and the subsequent burial ceremony that broke the silence within the community over the 1978 tragedy, see Sanford 2003, 53–58, 63–75.

[4] CEH (1999 6:13–24). Also see Aguilera Peralta 1979; Carter 1969; IWGIA 1978.

[5] For an explanation of this and other identification codes, see the beginning of the Bibliography section.

congress. Before the nation, they charged local landlords with threatening to dispossess them at gunpoint of lands they had worked for many years (IPV Apr. 2, 1975, 320). In August 1977, peasants met to denounce the abuse of authority by the mayor of Panzós, charging him with using threats and jailings in the interest of the local oligarchy to prevent them from organizing (IPV, Aug. 19, 1977, 194). A few months later, peasant representatives claimed that 10,000 residents under threat of eviction would resist, if necessary with machetes, sticks, and stones (IPV Oct. 10, 1977, 320).

Similar denunciations were made by peasants from the municipality of Cahabón, located about twenty winding miles to the north of Panzós. Local landlords using their political connections had obtained formal titles to the land claimed by peasants and in 1972 began attempts to remove them by armed threats and burning down their homes. Through the national labor organization, the Federación Autónoma Sindical de Guatemala (FASGUA), which was providing legal assistance to the peasants, their representatives succeeded in 1973 in gaining an audience with President Carlos Arana Osorio and believed the problem settled. But it only worsened (IPV Feb. 8, 1975, 250). In November 1974, the landlords struck with force. Through their contacts at the Confederación Nacional Campesina (CNC), peasants charged landlords with shooting two community residents, beating six others, and having three more arrested (IPV Dec. 4, 1974, 128). In January 1975, residents brought in representatives from FASGUA to discuss the situation, but the meeting was broken up by a squad of soldiers who forced the FASGUA representatives out of town. The hundreds of children waiting for their parents scattered during the attack by the soldiers; three weeks later, fifteen were still reported as missing (IPV Feb. 8, 1975, 250).

A similar story was told by peasants from the Tucurú area, located some thirty-five miles to the west of Panzós. Representatives of 115 families who had been working on the *finca* (farm) La Esperanza for about fifty years visited Guatemala City newspaper offices in both December 1976 and February 1977 to tell their story and gain support for their position. After the finca was expropriated from its German owner during WWII, these families continued working their same plots as a cooperative on about half the finca. Sometime during the late 1950s/early 1960s, the finca was reportedly "given" to its current owner. The peasants continued farming their plots while working for the new owner. But due to the low wages he paid, around 1976 they decided to stop working for him – but with the intention of staying on "their" land. He, though, intended to evict them from "his" land. The peasants had traveled to the capital, but "since we are indigenous,"

they complained, "nobody in the government wants to attend to us" (IPV Mar. 24, 1977, 117). The conflict continued up to the eve of the Panzós massacre. At one point in April 1977, the local military commissioner led an assault of 300 men on the cooperative, ravaging member's fields. Through FASGUA in February 1978, the peasants denounced the landlord for burning their crops and their homes, running cattle through their fields, and for being behind the disappearance of one of their members the year before, when he traveled to the department capital to secure assistance, as well as for the failed kidnapping of two others and the beating of yet two more.[6]

The large landowners of the area were so disturbed by the pace of peasant organizing and their activities that in May 1978 they met with the governor, asking for military protection for citizens "threatened" by peasant actions. Soon thereafter, a military contingent was moved into the town of Panzós in anticipation of the upcoming demonstration. The military commander in the region believed the peasant organizations were linked to communist guerrillas, as undoubtedly other elites believed as well (CEH 1999, 6:15). Indeed, it was true that armed revolutionaries were beginning to organize in the region. Probably the more important "outside agitators" at this time, though, were the advisers from the national labor movement. Both groups of outside activists saw fertile grounds for their organizing: Poor peasants, mistreated for decades because they were powerless and indigenous, now faced new and serious threats to their economic security. In addition, intermittent repression from private and public elites was now threatening their physical security, adding to their grievances.

In the months prior to the Panzós massacre, tensions in Alta Verapaz also were escalating because of labor conflicts in the region. In October 1977, workers went on strike for a week at the important Chixoy hydroelectric project, located about twenty miles south of the departmental capital of Cobán.[7] Another large group at Chixoy went on strike for a few days in March 1978 and then in early April marched to Cobán, where they were joined by striking mining workers from Oxec, who also had marched in from the countryside from about 15 miles north of Panzós.

[6] IPV (Mar. 24, 1977, 117; Mar. 25, 1977, 24; Dec. 8, 1976, 135); IPSET13 (FASGUA Feb. 20, 1978). Similarly, at the end of 1975 and again in early 1976 representatives of thousands of peasant families in the nearby municipalities of both Cahabón and Chisec journeyed to the capital to publicize the evictions and threats occurring in their areas, as well as four recent murders by landowners (IPSET5 campesinos Dec. 2, 1975; Jan. 20, 1976), IPV (Feb. 2, 1976, 263–264).

[7] This was also the site of the Río Negro massacre to be discussed in Chapter 2.

Improving life for miners had proved particularly difficult. An earlier organizational effort in 1974 had been met by a wave of firings at a number of companies. At the huge Oxec copper mine operated by the multinational Guatemalan Mining Corporation, for example, some 136 miners went on a hunger strike protesting purported violations of the labor code concerning working conditions and salaries. Forty were fired. Frustrated by the lack of response by management and the courts to their petitions, in the spring of 1978 Oxec miners went on strike for fifteen days. Joining the Chixoy workers in Cobán in April, the two groups totaled around 1,500 marchers. Instead of disbanding after their demonstration, they settled in the central plaza, occupying it for eight days. Both groups won concessions from management. But commentators later saw a connection between these protests and the tragedy a little over a month later in Panzós.[8]

Not so successful was the other major unionizing effort in the area. At Calzado Cobán, a business located in San Cristóbal Verapaz about twenty miles down the road from the department capital, the struggle had been long and difficult. An initial organizing meeting held in June 1975 attended by some six-hundred workers and supporters, including a local priest and assisting lawyer, was met the next day at the plant with the firing of twenty-four workers, including two of their leaders. Unionizing efforts continued but a few weeks after the Panzós massacre two dozen more workers were fired and management succeeded in busting their union.[9]

How many of these Alta Verapaz peasants and workers continued their activism in the months and years ahead, perhaps to the point of supporting or even joining the armed revolutionaries, is impossible to say. Clearly, some did continue, but under growing risks. For example, peasants in the community of Baldio Pombaac in Panzós continued to press their claims to contended lands, but they were warned in April 1979 by a local landlord that the agrarian reform agency, the Instituto Nacional de Transformación Agraria (INTA), was "in favor of the landlords" and that President "General Lucas gave permission to the landlords to kill" (IPSET5 campesino Apr. 17, 1979). In the four years after the Panzós massacre, at least 310 selective killings by the military occurred in the valley where Panzós is located, many of the victims identified by Guatemala's truth commission as community leaders, especially those concerned with land conflicts. Also among the dead

[8] IMP12 (Nov. 4, 1977); IPSET8 (Companias mineras); IMP17 (July 4, 1974); IMP25 (Apr. 6, 1978); ASIES (1995, 3:514–519).
[9] IPSET5 (Calzado Coban); ASIES (1995, 3:516).

were Amalia, Elvira, and Faustina Caal, ages five, four, and three, little girls murdered at home by soldiers right in front of their parents in January 1981.[10] No further demonstrations occurred in the Panzós area through the years of armed conflict that dragged on until 1996 (CEH 1999, 6:19).[11]

Urban Contention and Repression in El Salvador

Public school teachers have been significant participants in the contentious politics of El Salvador since the mid-1960s. Teachers created one of the interest groups most important to the politics of the late 1960s/early 1970s. They then provided crucial leadership to the multisector mass organizations that dominated the contentious political activities of the last half of the 1970s, as well as to the armed revolutionary movement that fought the civil war of the 1980s. Hundreds of teacher-activists were among the thousands of victims of the state terror that traumatized El Salvador in the early 1980s. Many of the surviving teacher-activists who did not join the revolutionary armies were later central to the resurgence of an important nonviolent contentious movement in the mid-1980s, even while the civil war continued.

After unsuccessful strike attempts in 1965 and 1967, the newly formed Asociación Nacional de Educadores Salvadoreños (ANDES) went on full strike in early 1968. Lasting 54 days, in the end the teachers won many of their demands. Strikers held a number of demonstrations and marches, occupied the Ministry of Education, and spurred the mobilization of broad sectors of society in their support. The "elected" but military government often responded with harassment and sometimes with violence – at least four protestors were killed. This repression was said to be critical in developing the "revolutionary consciousness" of those teachers who were later to join the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación (FPL), including the FPL's number two in command up to 1983 (Melida Anaya Montes) and its top commander from 1983 on (Salvador Sánchez Céren).[12]

Conflict between ANDES and the government was again central to Salvadoran politics throughout much of 1971. Teachers pressured the government during the first half of the year for passage of an education

[10] CEH (1999, 8:23). A listing of all of the documented dead and disappeared in Alta Verapaz is found between pages 21 and 86.

[11] Alta Verapaz ranked fourth among Guatemala's twenty-two departments in the total number of massacres of civilians during the 1962–1995 period, with 9 percent of the country total (CEH 1999, 6:257). It ranked third in total human rights violations for the same period, again with 9 percent of the country total (CEH 1999, 2:328).

[12] Harnecker 1993, 38–41.

reform sponsored by ANDES. Tactics included brief work stoppages and demonstrations extending throughout the country. When the government finally acted in July, it passed a law disliked by teachers. A major strike then ensued. Two weeks later only about forty percent of the nation's teachers were working. Lasting through August, the strike was supported by almost daily marches. Some were broken up by authorities, especially a teacher and student torchlight parade on July 16 that was attacked by some 200 security agents who injured and arrested many. In the end, teachers accepted less than desired, turning their hopes now to the February 1972 presidential elections (UCA 1971).

A broad center-left coalition gathered behind the candidacy of José Napoleón Duarte of the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC). Duarte appeared to be leading the results when the military regime handed the victory through fraud to its own candidate. A general strike called by Duarte was unable to deter the regime; neither was a coup attempt from within the military a month later. Teachers were among the major activists behind the center-left coalition's efforts and major targets of the repression that followed. For many, more contentious forms of struggle now appeared the only viable direction, a conclusion reinforced by fraud again with the 1977 presidential elections which brought in an even more repressive military president. For the rest of the decade the most important outlet for teachers' political activities was not institutional politics but multisector mass organizations focused on contentious activities.

ANDES was one of the groups involved in the formation in spring 1974 of the first of the mass organizations. Through the Frente de Acción Popular Unificada (FAPU), teachers were brought together with organized groups of peasants, students, and workers, as well as the communist party and religious workers. The following year, ANDES again was involved with the formation of a second mass organization, the Bloque Popular Revolucionario (BPR). It was these organizations, and especially the BPR, that were the core of the contentious movements that dominated Salvadoran politics in the last years of the 1970s and going into 1980. Revolutionary in their objectives (and covertly tied to the armed left), part of the genius of the mass organizations was their dramatic nonviolent contentious repertoire.

In addition to numerous marches and other demonstrations, a frequent tactic of the mass organizations was to occupy buildings, especially those of the government, churches, and foreign embassies. Usually done to dramatize grievances, sometimes occupants were held as bargaining chips (and protection) in negotiations with authorities. As the popular movements

grew in size and contentiousness in the later 1970s, government violence escalated as well and on a number of occasions activists were murdered, sometimes in isolation but then increasingly in groups of growing size during government attacks on protesters. By mid-1979, teachers claimed that more than thirty of their activists had been murdered. Yet, their activism continued. For example, a September march by several thousand teachers in defiance of a government ban protested the murder of one of their leaders.[13]

Such popular activism was largely responsible for a coup on October 15, 1979 led by progressive junior military officers. Reaching out to civilian counterparts, they hoped that their new reform government could stop the polarization and the violence. But the violence continued, in part from some of the armed left but most especially from the hard right. The mass organizations continued their nonviolent efforts into 1980, but the escalating violence took its toll. For example, in mid-February 1980 fifty ANDES militants seized the Education Ministry, taking one hundred to two hundred hostages. ANDES also had brief strikes in April and June, largely to protest the intensifying repression – but without success.[14] It was during this time that state terrorism closed all of the remaining space for nonviolent political activity in El Salvador. Except for an occasional denouncement of the violence, no further political activity by ANDES is recorded for the next several years by the sources consulted for this study. In one of these denouncements, coming on Teachers' Day, June 14, 1981, ANDES made public the names of 211 teachers that it claimed had been killed since October 15, 1979 and of another 20 who were in prison (ECA #393: 703).

During 1980 El Salvador moved toward civil war, one certainly fully underway by the time of the guerrillas' misnamed "final offensive" of January 1981, as the war continued for another 11 years. Yet, incredibly, nonviolent mass mobilization resumed during the mid-1980s, albeit primarily in the capital. Despite the massive violence directed at the popular sector during 1980–1983, despite the continuing intermittent killing of activists through the rest of the decade, and despite the larger context of an on going civil war, organizations such as ANDES slowly and courageously resumed their contentious activities.

Public employee unions led the way with a few strikes in San Salvador in late 1983 and a growing number in 1984. ANDES returned to action with

[13] ECA (#372:1002); *NY Times* (Sept. 16, 1979, 6).
[14] *NY Times* (Feb. 19, 1980, 6; June 6, 1980, 3); *El Imparcial* (Feb. 19, 1980, 1); ECA (#379:506).