

Invigorating Revolutionary Change: Some Observations from Guatemala

By Jim Handy

Regimes that emerge from revolutions have historically often been disappointing for those who thought they promised dramatic and positive social change. In the Latin American context such regimes often have been caught between the desire to foster meaningful change and the apparently inherent instability that accompanies real democratic input. Too often, the result has been a toxic mix of instability, the wielding of undemocratic, centralized power, and only minimal social change.

According to most histories, the brief Guatemalan 'revolution' would seem to fit into this pattern. Launched in 1944 by a largely urban middle class, students, and modernizing junior soldiers, it struggled to find its footing. Most of the historical literature suggests it increasingly constrained democratic processes while facing intense opposition. Its major economic and social initiatives were suspect and not widely popular; especially, it is argued, the revolution failed to win widespread support among the rural poor. It was quickly overthrown, in 1954, by both internal opposition and external armed force.

This paper argues that a closer look at the last few years of the Guatemalan revolution suggests some very different lessons might be drawn. Focusing on the relationship between the rural poor—both Mayan and Ladino peasants and rural workers—and the government around the agrarian reform law (the only aspect of this period that deserves the 'revolutionary' adjective), it argues that increasing engagement by the rural poor was both strengthening democratic processes at all levels and inspiring the government to foster more substantive economic and social change. Much of this occurred because, while the 'revolutionary coalition' of national and local political parties was dominant, individually each party was weak and unstable. Increasingly dependent on strong local bases, these parties were forced to allow significant local autonomy and to push for increasingly radical economic change championed by their bases. In the end, instability at the national level and the failure to trust in the willingness or capacity of the rural poor to resist, led the revolutionary regime to collapse in the face of armed opposition coordinated by the US.