

Religious and political wounds open as Montt installed as president

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Guatemala City, Guatemala--The installation of a former Guatemalan dictator as president of the national congress has opened old political and religious wounds.

General Efraim Rios Montt, who was described by Reuter's news service as a "fundamentalist evangelical" ruled Guatemala in the early 1980's, and was later accused of war crimes.

Montt was sworn in as congress president with promises to strengthen democracy and respect for law and order. He called on Guatemalans to live by the principles of Christian civilization and to make "good behavior a way of life."

In a speech full of religious images, he said, "I reiterate my commitment and firm determination to abide by the constitution and other laws of the republic."

Guatemala's archbishop Prospero Penados de Barrio recently compared Montt to the late Iranian religious leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The bishop said he feared that Montt's religious fanaticism could lead to what he called a "religious war" between the country's Evangelicals and Roman Catholics.

Human rights groups accuse Rios Montt of killing and permitting the disappearance of thousands of mainly indigenous Guatemalans after he seized power in a military coup in March 1982.

Rios Montt, however, has attempted to strike a conciliatory note, calling for an end to racial discrimination in Guatemala, where more than half the population are indigenous Mayas.

He also called on the International Red Cross to help create demilitarized zones in conflict areas where government troops and rebels continue to fight a 34-year civil war.

Indigenous groups continue to protest the former presidents reentry into politics. "I'm here to reject Rios Montt becoming president of Congress," said indigenous leader Rosario Pu. "He's an assassin."

The Guatemalan Republican Front party led by Rios Montt swept to victory in congressional election held last August.

Despite a constitutional court ruling that former dictators cannot be president, Rios Montt has said he will run as a candidate in elections to be held in November.

His political comeback has worried members of Guatemala's private sector who regard him as an eccentric, unpredictable fanatic who will turn foreign investors away from Guatemala.

Rios Montt was a retired general and Sunday School teacher when he was appointed president in 1982. Claiming his government was inspired by God, Rios Montt suspended the constitution,

declared a state of siege, fired 324 elected mayors, and replaced civil courts with secret tribunals.

He stopped death-squad killings in and around Guatemala City, although the killing of Indians in the rural areas continued.

Rios Montt financed and facilitated the work of Evangelical churches. He used church groups to indoctrinate indigenous communities with the idea that rebellion was against the will of God and that liberation theology was the work of the devil.

Evangelical Christianity became a principle element of counterinsurgency, with the army helping to build churches. By the end of Rios Montt's rule, around 20 percent of Guatemalans were Evangelicals.

Rios Montt was overthrown in late 1983 in another military coup.

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