

Arévalo managed, however, to survive some 30 plots to overthrow him, thanks to the strong backing of the army, which was led by the young officer who had helped the civilian rebellion against Ubico, Jacobo Arbenz. Arbenz was backed as the next presidential candidate by several labor organizations and parties of the left. He had attracted their attention in 1947, when right-wing elements of the army wanted to expel labor leaders from the country and Arbenz effectively halted the purge. These organizations were impressed by his integrity, his defense of labor unions, and thought that with a progressive military officer in power even more radical changes could be made.

President Arbenz

That the Guatemalan army produced the most progressive, honest, and capable President in Guatemalan history to date is one of the country's great ironies. Arbenz was from a middle-class family which could not afford to send him to university, so he entered the military academy instead. CIA reports described him as brilliant and cultured. He had an open, probing mind and devoured books. He and his wife were both plagued by the knowledge that the social inequities in Guatemala needed to be changed.

U.S. officials had hoped that Arbenz would be an opportunist, and cultivate a close relationship with the U.S., as other Guatemalan officers had done in the past. But the CIA and the U.S. embassy had seriously misjudged his character. Before becoming President, Arbenz was close friends with several men who would later become the leaders of the Communist Party in Guatemala. Arbenz was attracted by the honesty, dedication, and principles of his Communist friends, as compared to the corruption of other political party leaders. Although he publicly declared on various occasions that he was not a Communist, the U.S. press, influenced by McCarthyism, quickly labelled him "Red Jacobo."

On March 15, 1951, Arbenz was inaugurated as President of Guatemala and announced that he would "transform Guatemala from a dependent nation with a semi-colonial economy into a country that is economically independent... from a backward country with a semi-feudal economy into a modern capitalist country, and proceed in a way which will ensure the greatest possible improvement in the standard of living for the great masses of our people."

Arbenz committed three great offenses in the eyes of the U.S. during his presidency. He carried out the first real agrarian reform in Central America and thereby affected the interests of the United Fruit Company. He had close personal ties with the Communist Party, although this party held no official positions of power in his government. And he insisted on

national sovereignty, and continually refused to support the U.S. in international forums. Guatemala would pay a terrible price for being one of the first countries in the hemisphere to act as a sovereign nation. Its experience was a warning to other Latin American nationalists who later attempted to defy the U.S.

On June 17, 1952, the Guatemalan Congress passed Decree 900 and the country embarked on agrarian reform. The reform only covered large expanses of uncultivated land and landowners affected by it were to be compensated by government bonds. The amount of compensation depended on the value of

Arbenz making a public speech, early 1950s



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the land as it was declared for tax purposes. As landowners had consistently cheated on taxes by undervaluing their land, their compensation was meaningless. According to State Department documents, the reform affected a minority of landowners, only about 1,710 people. These few, however, owned over half of the private land in Guatemala.

By June 1954, when Arbenz was overthrown, 25 percent of the arable land in Guatemala had been expropriated. The reform had only affected the largest landowners, most of them absentee, and benefitted approximately one sixth of the population with land and agricultural credits for production. As Arbenz expert Piero Gleijeses described it, the experience was unprecedented in Latin America, where significant land redistribution has been extremely rare and the provision of credit to poor peasants even rarer.

Despite predictions by Arbenz's enemies that the agrarian reform and public spending would negatively affect the economy, the opposite happened. Large landowners, fearing the confiscation of under-utilized lands, increased their production. The cultivation of subsistence crops increased substantially, and in 1953-54, Guatemala had the second greatest coffee crop in its history.

The CIA and Business as Usual

An alliance of the most conservative sectors in Guatemala, the Catholic Church, landowners, and much of the army, provided the local impetus for a CIA-engineered overthrow, known as Operation Success. Given that the Guatemalan civilian right-wing opposition to Arbenz was weak and disorganized, the CIA geared its plan toward the Guatemalan army, and encouraged it to betray Arbenz. Through press campaigns, rumor-mongering and other tactics, the CIA waged psychological war on Guatemalan army officers both loyal and opposed to Arbenz. Some officers, convinced that U.S. Marines would invade if Arbenz did not step down, betrayed their commander-in-chief. At the same time the U.S. imposed economic sanctions against Guatemala and pressured other Latin American countries to isolate the country internationally. The U.S. press depicted the nationalist Arbenz government as the first stronghold of Stalinism in the Americas.

On June 27, 1954 Arbenz resigned and took refuge in the Mexican embassy. A few months later he left the country with only his dignity intact. At the Guatemala City airport he was forced to strip to his underpants, and hand his clothes over, along with his military medals. His wife had to leave her personal jewelry. He drowned in his bath in mysterious circumstances in Mexico City in 1971.

In the days that followed Arbenz's resignation, different military leaders tried to take control. The U.S. embassy had the last word, choosing anti-Communist officer Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas. Armas immediately initiated an anti-Communist witch-hunt throughout the country. Thus began the more than three decades of terror that have kept Guatemala in the international headlines, with a toll of at least 100,000 dead, 40,000 disappeared, and hundreds of thousands in exile.

In 1995, on the 51st anniversary of the October revolution, Arbenz's remains were finally brought back to rest in Guatemala. Thousands turned out to pay homage to the only President who tried to right colonial wrongs. People of all ages fought to carry the coffin, while others lined the streets and threw red carnations. Older Guatemalans cried as they remembered the suffering that the CIA coup caused them. "I was seven when the CIA overthrew Arbenz, and I remember my parents, who were very anti-Communist, cheering when he gave his farewell speech on the radio and left the country. How shortsighted they were, and how different our lives would have been if he had been permitted to carry out those reforms. How many lives has this cost us?" said one man bitterly.

The Long Night of Military Rule

The end of the political "Spring" (1944-54) meant not only the end of the first participatory experiment in democracy, but also the eradication of any vestige of reform in Guatemala. Tens of thousands of union organizers, political and indigenous activists, and other suspected left-wingers were immediately arrested, jailed, and many of them tortured and murdered. Political parties were dissolved overnight, and grassroots organizations were persecuted. Nearly all the land handed out to landless *campesinos* during Arbenz's agrarian reform was returned to its original owners. Zealous anti-Communists burned piles of "subversive" literature in the streets, while the U.S. embassy in Guatemala worked closely with the armed forces. The CIA operation was estimated to have cost between 80 and 90 million dollars.

The country plunged into a 30-year nightmare of military rule and severe repression of the left. Guatemala had become a showcase of U.S. policy in the Cold War fight against Communism. With the exception of the election of a civilian president in 1966, between 1954 and 1985 all heads of state were military men, and the political system was utterly dominated by the army. Political participation was severely restricted, electoral fraud was common, and the vast majority of the population did not vote. Parties on the left were banned, and even centrist parties such as the Christian Democrats suffered severe repression.

Armed Resistance

The exclusion of the majority from electoral politics meant dissatisfied Guatemalans could see no option other than to take up arms. Young nationalist army officers were critical of the corruption in the army hierarchy and their dissatisfaction grew into a revolt within the Guatemalan army on November 13, 1960. The uprising was led by two young lieutenants, 22-year-old Marco Antonio Yon Sosa and 19-year-old Luis Turcios Lima, both of whom later founded Guatemala's guerrilla movement.

The revolt lasted four days and was put down with U.S. help. Ironically, the revolt's leaders, Yon Sosa and Turcios Lima, were both trained by the U.S. army shortly before launching the uprising. They continued to organize clandestinely, forming the first guerrilla movement. They believed they could easily take over military installations, quickly overthrow the government, and force a return to democracy. They had no idea that they were about to begin one of the longest civil wars in the Western Hemisphere.