

Democratic consolidation and armed conflict in Central America; 20 years after

Most academic literature on political transition and democratic consolidation treat the cases of recent military dictatorships, mainly in South America. The Case of Central America differs from that of the rest of the continent especially if it is compared with the Andean Region and the South Cone. The process that led to the establishment and the consolidation of democracy in Central America was a means to peace and not an end per se. In light of these facts, this document attempts to explain, how the end of the civil armed conflicts in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua influenced the consolidation of democracy in these three countries. In order to do so this document is divided in three sections: first, we study the problem of democratic consolidation and the gap that separates it from the actual establishment of democratic regimes, a phenomenon particularly prevalent in Central America after the 1980s; second, we examine the weakening of the authoritarian power and political transition processes in the three countries and; finally, we evaluate the degree of democratic consolidation as a function of current political conditions in Central America.

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**“Our 22000 deaths would amount to
1 million 687 thousand 125 American deaths”**

Tomas Borge

La Consolidation démocratique et le conflit armé en Amérique Centrale: 20 ans après

La plupart des études sur les transitions et consolidations démocratiques se focalisent sur les dictatures militaires, particulièrement au Cône Sud comme sujet d'étude. L'Amérique Centrale, pour sa part, étant un phénomène singulier vis-à-vis notamment la région Andine et du Cône Sud. Ainsi, la consolidation de la démocratie en Amérique Centrale a été un moyen pour promouvoir la paix. Certes, la démocratie n'a pas été le résultat de négociations de paix entre les guérillas et les gouvernements Centroaméricains. Dans ce contexte, cet article vise à saisir la question suivante : quel a été l'influence de la paix sur le processus de consolidation démocratique au Salvador, au Guatemala et au Nicaragua ? Pour y parvenir, l'article se divise en trois parties. Premièrement, on aborde le décalage entre l'établissement formel de la démocratie et sa consolidation, phénomène présent en Amérique Latine depuis les années 80. Deuxièmement, on examine les manifestations de l'affaiblissement du pouvoir autoritaire des dictatures militaires ainsi que la transition dans les trois pays. Finalement, on examine la consolidation démocratique en fonction de l'actualité politique de l'Amérique Centrale.

One of the greatest challenges in Central America is its lack of democratic consolidation; a problem that has become more evident in recent years. Most papers on political transition and democratic consolidation study the cases of recent military dictatorships in South America. The Case of Central America differs from that of the rest of the continent especially if it is compared with the Andean Region and the South Cone. The process that led to the establishment and the consolidation of democracy in Central America was a means to peace and not an end per se. In other words, contrary to what most pundits claim, the process of democratization did not occur as a result of peace accords. In fact, most elections after the reestablishment of democracy were held under conditions of sheer violence in El Salvador (1982), Guatemala (1985) and Nicaragua (1984). This tinges the case of Central America and provides a comparative perspective in relation to the rest of political transitions in Latin America. In light of these facts, this document attempts to explain, how the end of the civil armed conflicts in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua influenced the consolidation of democracy in these countries. In order to do so this document is divided in three sections: first, we study the problem of democratic consolidation and the gap that separates it from the actual establishment of democratic regimes, a phenomenon particularly prevalent in Central America after the 1980s; second, we examine the weakening of the authoritarian power and political transition processes in the three countries and; finally, we evaluate the degree of democratic consolidation as a function of current political conditions in Central America.

> The concept of Democratic Consolidation:

Young democracies

During the mid 1970s, the world entered a period known as Samuel Huntington's Third Wave of Globalization¹. The Carnation Revolution in Portugal marked the beginning of a series of transformations towards liberal and democratic regimes in the world. In Latin America, this phenomenon was evident during the 1970s when the military governments gave way to civilian administrations and liberal democracy (which would later become the ideal political system). By the end of the 1990s this wave had reached former eastern and central European socialist countries.

According to Huntington, the third wave of democratization was heavily influenced by two tendencies of a particular historical moment. The first wave (1828-1926) had its roots in the American and French revolutions during the 18th century. However, the characteristic traits of a democratic regime appear during the 19th century, particularly in 1828 in the United States. A question arises from this proposition, how can a regime be qualified as democratic? Evaluating the level of democratization of a regime during the 19th century is highly difficult. However, Jonathan Sunshine, sets forth two reasonable major criteria for when nineteenth-century political systems achieved minimal democratic qualifications in context of that century: First, 50 percent of adult males should be eligible to vote; second, a responsible executive who either must maintain majority support in an elected parliament or is chosen in periodic popular elections². Aside from France and the United States, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Argentina and Italy are part of the first wave. Nevertheless, a reverse wave took place during the 1920s. Several

countries moved away from democracy and either returned to traditional forms of authoritarian rule or pervasive forms of totalitarianism.

Starting in World War II a short wave of democratization occurred especially in Western Europe and Latin America which included Argentina, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela and Costa Rica. However, in all Latin American countries democratic practices did not last and dictatorships were in place in the following years.

In the years following the end of the Portuguese dictatorship in 1974, democratic regimes replaced authoritarian ones giving way to the third wave of democratization. The countries that are part of this third wave during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s are known as young democracies.

During this period democracy was seen as a system that could bring about equality, inclusion, citizenship and social justice. Central America was not foreign to this international trend. In fact the contemporary history of this region is greatly influenced by world affairs especially during the Cold War era. Therefore, after many years of internal armed conflict, the countries of the subcontinent embarked on two indissociable processes: reconciliation during post-conflict and the establishment of democracy.

What is democratic consolidation?

It is important to make clear that democratic consolidation only applies to regimes that had pre-established democracies. This means that democratic consolidation is not valid for authoritarian regimes that did not undergo a democratization process. Bearing this in mind, we consider current Central American regimes as democratic despite practices that would lead most observers to a contrary judgment.

Regarding the definition of the concept Andreas Schedler, a well known consolidation scholar, defines Democratic Consolidation (DC) as "a regime whose democracy is one that is unlikely to break down"³.

1 Huntington, Samuel. (1996). *"The third wave. Democratization in the late twentieth century"*. Oklahoma; University Press. Pp. 13 – 30.

2 Sunshine, Jonathan. *"Economic causes and consequences of democracy"*. Pp. 48 – 58. Cited by Huntington, Samuel. (1996). *"The third wave. Democratization in the late twentieth century"*. Oklahoma; University Press. P. 16.

3 Schedler, Andreas. *"Comment observer la consolidation démocratique?"* P. 225.

Although this definition fails to evaluate the degree of democratic consolidation in Central America, it is good enough as a point of reference. In fact the uncontrolled use of democratic consolidation has swept theoreticians into a state of conceptual disorder that acts, more and more, as a barrier to sub-disciplinary communication and theory-building.

As a result the concept has to be broken down into simple logical steps to make it operative. Therefore, there are two approaches for understanding DC: one negative which involves avoiding democratic breakdown or avoiding democratic erosion; and one positive which involves completing democracy or deepening democracy⁴. Schedler establishes a neutral approach which involves a natural evolution of a society into democracy. Philippe Schmitter described democratic consolidation as a process “transforming the accidental arrangements, prudential norms, and contingent solutions that have emerged (during transition) into structures, i.e. into relationships that are reliably known, regularly practiced and habitually accepted”.⁵

➤ Internal armed conflicts in Central America political and economic background

First of all, it is important to note that although many studies treat the case of Central America as a whole, it is not a homogeneous region. However, it is also important to underline some traits common to the three countries that were the center of internal armed conflicts during the second half of the 20th century, Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador.

In the beginning, like most countries in Latin America, the economies of these countries were mainly dependant on agriculture, and more specifically, coffee. As a result, the production of coffee gave shape to most socio-economic relations and had a great impact on politics after. Land concentration and

exacerbated rural conditions, the exploitation of the peasantry and an oligarchic state characterized the socio-economic situation in these countries during the first part of the 20th century. Thus, most studies associate unfavorable economic conditions with the development of violent conflict.

Similarly, political oligarchy took over the political structure of the state and thwarted any form of popular participation and/or democratization. As the sociologist Edelberto Torres Rivas observed, oligarchs seized agricultural production (mainly banana plantations) in Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica⁶.

Meanwhile the United States underwent a period of emergence as a world power for which Latin America was an important asset. During the first part of the 20th century the United States directed its attention towards the rest of the continent. Three events illustrate this point:

First, The *Spanish-American War*⁷ of 1898 is a significant example in many aspects. The war was fought on the Caribbean Sea and led to the independence of Cuba (although with many restrictions) and Puerto Rico. Moreover, it marked the beginning of American hegemony in the Americas.

Second, the declaration of independence of Panama from Colombia on November 3rd 1903 was backed by the United States in order to build the Panama Canal. In 1903, the United States and Colombia signed the Hay-Herran Treaty to end the construction of a canal that would communicate the Pacific and the Atlantic, but the Colombian Congress did not pass the Treaty on August 1903 under the presidency of Miguel Antonio Caro. Panamanians wanted the canal finished and were angered with the Colombians. US-Colombian relations were strained and, therefore, the US decided to support the independent movement for Panama.

4 Schedler, Andreas. “Concepts of democratic consolidation”. P.18.

5 Schmitter, Philippe. “The consolidation of political democracy in Southern Europe”. P. 12

6 Torres Rivas, Edelberto. (2002). “Las causas históricas del conflicto y la guerra”. In: Documento Especial Radio Netherlands XX Aniversario de Esquipulas II. In: <http://www.informarn.nl/especiales/esquipulas2/>

7 For several Cuban historians the term “Spanish American War” is imprecise since it does not include the name of Cuba. According to Cuban historians, this term excludes the participation of Cuban troops during the wars of independence.

Finally, the third event that confirms American hegemony in the continent is: the Chamorro-Bryan Treaty signed between Washington and Managua in 1914. It is worth noting that Nicaragua had been under American dominance since 1912. The treaty indicated that the United States would gain the right to construct a canal across Nicaragua, and an option to build a base on the Gulf of Fonseca. Nicaragua's neighbors protested, claiming the treaty imperiled their security, and the Central American Court of Justice upheld the validity of their claim. Both Nicaragua and the United States ignored the ruling. As a consequence of this treaty Managua refused to recognize the international borders with Colombia over the San Andres and Providencia Islands on the basis that, when the treaty was signed Nicaragua was under American pressure.

Therefore, one can argue that during the first half of the 20th century Central America was closely bound to US foreign policy. This is an important aspect for understanding the internal armed conflicts in the following years.

All throughout the second half of the 20th century the economic conditions in the region worsened. During the 1960s and 1970s these economies underwent a process of modernization that transformed the sugar, cotton and meat industries. In fact Central America became the first cotton wool world producer. Economic growth increased to an annual rate of 5% during a considerable period of time⁸. As a coda to these developments, two significant events marked the beginning and laid the foundation of the democratization problems and the armed conflicts in the region. First, poverty and social exclusion levels skyrocketed leading to social distress and tensions. And the second event, closely linked to the first, the military governments increased the size and power of state intervention as never before in the region's history.

In El Salvador the involvement of the military in politics increased over the years. Throughout the

1950s the country experienced, in words of Yves Grenier⁹, an "authoritarian modernization" process led by Mayor Oscar Osorio. Osorio defended ideas such as the reestablishment of civil liberties, amnesty for dissidents, granting women the right to vote and autonomy for universities but, for the most part, the reforms served to encourage economic growth and to benefit the middle class. Osorio's successor, (and against Osorio's will) Lieut. Col. José María Lemus (1956–60), continued these programs, but there was no improvement in the living standards of Salvadorians. When faced with open discontent, Lemus resorted to repressive measures, and a military coup deposed him in 1960. A second coup, in January 1961 brought Lieut. Col. Julio Adalberto Rivera (1962–67) to power. The PRUD (a civil military junta) was dismantled and replaced by the National Conciliation Party which would control the national government during the 1970s.

In the case of Guatemala, Colonel Jacobo Arbez assumed power in 1951. Arbez widely defeated General Miguel Ydigoras known for his anticommunist discourse. The extreme right accused Arbez of supporting communism; however, his policies were progressive. One of the most controversial policies introduced during his government was the agrarian reform which regulated land tenure and the management of unproductive properties over 90 hectares¹⁰. Most large estate owners and multinational companies that profited from uncultivated land (United Fruit Company) protested the decision. Once American interests in Guatemala were compromised the reasons for an intervention in the country increased. Moreover, the United States unconditionally supported the "liberation" of Guatemala which began in 1954 after Arbez was overthrown and Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas took office. In the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, military governments became prevalent in Guatemala and received quick blessings from the United States. The following years were marked by the instauration of repressive governments which led to the internal armed conflicts of the region.

8 Torres Rivas, Edelberto. "Las causas históricas del conflicto y la guerra". In Documento Especial Radio Netherlands XX Aniversario de Esquipulas II. In: <http://www.informarn.nl/especiales/esquipulas2/>.

9 Yves, Granier. "Guerre et pouvoir au Salvador". Pp. 37 – 38.

10 Fuentes Mohr, Alberto. "Situación y perspectivas políticas en Guatemala". P.85.

Finally, the authoritarian government of the Somoza Family dominated Nicaragua's political panorama throughout the 20th century. Anastasio Somoza (1925-1980) became president of Nicaragua in an election in 1967 which was marred by fraud. The son of *Nicaragua's strong man* remained in power until 1979 when, led by Daniel Ortega, the Sandinista Revolution broke out.

Bearing in mind all the previous elements including the expansion and strengthening of authoritarian military governments, it is clear that the causes that led to the internal armed conflicts in these countries are not limited to the general economic conditions. In fact, the origin of most confrontations is closely linked to complex political problems. It is possible to assert that the grave situation in Central America during the second half of the 20th century is a consequence of the government's incapacity to adequately establish a democratic regime in these countries. Moreover, bad government practices and the interventions of foreign actors had a negative impact on the conflicts.

> The fall of authoritarianism and an atypical transition towards democracy

As mentioned above, the process of democratization in Central America is different from that of the rest of Latin American countries given that it happened amidst generalized violence and because it meant a movement not only towards peace but also towards change.

Only Colombia and Peru showed similar characteristics of internal armed conflict. However, democratization processes in these two countries did not happen as a result of a peace process between the government and revolutionary guerrillas. On the contrary, the establishment of a democratic regime stimulated the fight against existing guerrillas. In Colombia, the National Front agreement which was in force from 1958 to 1974 provided not only the foundation of modern democracy in the country but also created the political and socio-economic

conditions for the formation of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)¹¹. In Peru, the establishment of a democratic regime was boycotted by Sendero Luminoso (SL) who opposed the establishment of any political regime different from popular democracy. Both the FARC and SL consider the democratic regimes of Colombia and Peru respectively as "bourgeois democracies that must be removed from government".

In contrast, in Central America democracy served as a means to weaken violence. This is paradoxical given that the first elections were held amidst either a persistently unstable security environment or a war. However, in time, war gave way to the consolidation of democratic institutions.

This was possible thanks to two concrete political changes. The first has to do with the domestic discrediting of authoritarian governments in Guatemala and El Salvador which negatively affected their international standings, their capacity to exercise power and to successfully affect change in communities and negotiate with the guerrillas. Simultaneously, rising political tension in the government of national unity amid increasingly strident calls for change in Salvador and Guatemala undermined the credibility of the governments. On the other hand, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent consummation of liberalism provoked the distancing of the US from the region. From a geopolitical vantage point, during the post-Cold War, US intervention in Central America was unnecessary after the collapse of communism globally and regionally.

In El Salvador, General Carlos Humberto Romero was deposed in a coup d'état led by army officers in 1979¹². Romero was deposed by a group of younger military officers led by Col. Jaime Abdul Gutiérrez and Col. Adolfo Arnoldo Majano; Romero fled to

11 The National Front agreement blocked every chance both for marginal and new social sectors to participate in the government. It established the alternation of government between liberals and conservators between 1954 and 1974.

12 Torres Rivas, Edelberto. (2002). "La democracia como estrategia contra-insurgente". In Documento Especial Radio Nederland XX Aniversario de Esquipulas II. In: http://www.informarn.nl/americas/guatemala/esp020808_lademocracia4.html.

Guatemala. The coup led by the group of young officers was directed at stopping the government's oppressive policies and ending political violence. The political situation in El Salvador was very similar to that which brought the Sandinistas to power in Nicaragua. The Spanish newspaper *El País* published an article that described the situation as "the military garrisons in San Miguel, Sonsonate, San Vicente and many others in the country rose against the regime that oppressed the country (...) and threatened to burst into civil war. The levels of violence and the leftist insurrection remind us of Nicaragua's situation right before the arrival of the Sandinistas into power.¹³" The presence of civilians in the Military Juntas increased during the following years and in 1984 ex-president José Napoleón Duarte was elected president. Duarte attempted to stabilize the economy and end the war. However, he failed in his attempts to distribute major landholdings to the peasants and to end death-squad activity; his negotiations with the rebels were also failures. The pressure from leftist and rightist groups and from rebel guerrillas thwarted Duarte's attempts at any sort of political, economic, or social improvement. However, he set the foundations for democracy and a future peace process.

In Guatemala, the weak and fragmented government of General Efraín Ríos Montt proved that the military regime was coming to an end. The seventeen month régime of the man from the coup of 1982, were the bloodiest of the country's 36-year civil war. Between 17000 and 20000 people were killed during his government¹⁴. In 1984 another coup d'état was led by General Humberto Mejía, who promised a quick return to the democratic process by allowing civilian Vinicio Cerezo as president.

In Nicaragua, the establishment of a democratic regime is strongly bound to the weakening of the Somoza regime and the strengthening of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (SFNL) and their military victory in 1979. The establishment of democracy rested on the hands of the historical leader of Sandinismo, Daniel Ortega. In 1984, Ortega

called national elections; he won the presidency with 63% of the vote¹⁵. Three years later, his government adopted a new constitution embarking on a new road towards democracy. Finally, Sandinistas' political will and commitment to democracy was tested in the 1989 elections. One year later they were defeated in their bid for reelection by the candidate of the National Opposition Union (NOU).

> Establishing democracy and the internationalization of the peace processes

It is a well known fact that the peace process in Central America was closely overseen and linked to the participation of third parties not only to facilitate the peace process but also to confirm the peace accords. Two processes are fundamental for the future development of the three Central American countries: the internationalization of the peace process and preventing the regionalization of the conflicts. Both processes were compatible with the establishment of mechanisms for a medium and long term peace process. As a result, one question arises, what is the internationalization and regionalization of an internal armed conflict? This question is of vital importance for understanding the dénouement of the situation in Central America.

Internalization occurs when an actor decides to involve the international community in one or several aspects of the conflict in order to resolve it or to gain international support. It is important to clarify that a process of internationalization does not necessarily imply that the conflict acquires an international nature, although this may happen in some cases. The internationalization of peace processes has increased during the post-Cold War period as the sovereignty of states is challenged and weakened. On the other hand, the process of regionalization of a conflict

13 *El País de España*. (1979). "El golpe está dirigido por militares jóvenes de pensamiento democrático". P.7.

14 BBC Mundo. (2001). "Querella contra Ríos Montt". At: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_1373000/1373885.stm.

15 Houtart, François. (2001). "Occasion perdue au Nicaragua". At: *Le Monde Diplomatique* <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2001/12/HOUTART/15944>.

involves the spreading of the conflict into hitherto more stable neighboring areas. The two terms should not be confused or interchanged.

The cases studied reflect the paradoxical role of foreign actors as both a means to find a solution to a conflict and as an aggravating factor of a conflict. Nevertheless, the participation of foreign actors was important for the establishment and consolidation of democracy.

Consequently, the Contadora Group, an initiative launched in the early 1980s by the foreign ministers of Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela, played an important role. The Contadora Group was established to help create the conditions for peace in the sub-continent while excluding the participation of countries that might have fueled the situation. This was considered a first step towards comprehensive regional peace treaty. The key elements of the treaty were: 1) the establishment of democratic systems of government; 2) reduction of current inventories of arms and military personnel; 3) banning foreign military bases in Central America, 4) an end to support for subversion, and 5) reduction and eventual elimination of foreign military advisers and troops¹⁶. The government of the United States opposed the proposed plan on the grounds that it was being excluded. However, it was the opposition of the governments of El Salvador, Costa Rica and Honduras that frustrated any further developments of the plan. The proposal included the repatriation of 1200 American troops stationed in Honduras and 500 American military advisers stationed in El Salvador¹⁷. Similarly, the proposal established the removal of dissidents against Sandinismo from Costa Rica.

Despite the obstacles and the failure of every proposal made by the Contadora Group, the initiative set the foundations for the Esquipulas Accords I and II which sought peace and democratization in Central America.

➤ Democratic consolidation in post-conflict: new threats to weak democracies

The absence of authoritarian governments and the end of the coups d'état and armed movements that threaten the regime should not be seen as irrefutable proof of democratic consolidation. Although these are basic conditions that reflect the establishment of democracy as the dominant form of government, they are not enough to guarantee the consolidation of a democratic regime.

Short after signing the peace agreement and establishing a democratic framework, other threats that compromise the security of the state and the consolidation of democracy appeared.

In the beginning of the 1990s when the peace accords had just been signed, Guatemala faced an important institutional crisis that tested its democracy. In May 1993 during a political crisis President Jorge Serrano Elias dissolved congress, suppressed a number of constitutional rights and fired the General Attorney as well as the judges of the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Court. Political, economic, and social policies pursued by the government of Serrano had alienated nearly everybody by 1993, and the country was in disarray. Guatemalans reacted against the auto-coup d'état¹⁸. The Organization of American States (OAS) Secretary General João Clemente Baena Soares summoned to hold an extraordinary meeting.

The OAS adopted a resolution strongly condemning the coup d'état but no accords were reached. International and domestic condemnation for his auto-coup was also immediate. After only a few days, Serrano was ousted by a combination of military, business, and opposition leaders. Vice-president Gustavo Espina Salguero took office temporarily. Congress chose Ramiro de León Carpio, previously the human rights ombudsman and one of the officials arrested by former president Serrano, as successor.

16 Polk, Virginia. "The U.S. and the Contadora effort for Central American Peace". P.2.

17 Caño, Antonio. (1985). "El Grupo de Contadora inicia la cuenta atrás hacia la firma del Acta de Paz en Centroamérica". Diario El País de España.

18 An auto-coup d'état is a situation in which the Executive dissolves congress and the legal system or limits their authority.

Several years later, in 2003, political violence and disruption characterized Guatemalan politics. Opponents of President Alfonso Portillo accused his administration of corruption, fraud, and incompetence. Overshadowing the president in the public eye, however, was General Ríos Montt, head of the ruling Guatemalan Republican Front and the leading contender to succeed Portillo as president. Ríos Montt had previously been deemed ineligible for the presidency, but after a series of violent demonstrations known as the Black Thursday¹⁹ the Court of Constitutionality ruled that he could run in the November election. Though there was widespread criticism of this decision, Ríos Montt withstood all legal challenges. Oscar Berger of the Grand National Alliance claimed the presidency with 54% of the vote. More recently a Spanish court filed an extradition request for General Ríos Montt for his participation in the commission of crimes against humanity. The decision was backed by the European parliament²⁰. However, the extradition never took place.

In Nicaragua criticism against most governments after the peace accord was signed has become more widespread. Although elections have been held uninterrupted since 1990 and the political parties have accepted the results, corruption is also widespread and is the most important threat against democratic consolidation. In 2000, members of the opposition Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) and the ruling Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC) used their majority in the National Assembly to give final passage to constitutional and electoral-law changes implementing a controversial 1999 “pact” between the leaders of those two ostensibly polar-opposite parties²¹. Several legal and other changes protected the personal interests of FSLN leader Daniel Ortega Saavedra and PLC President Arnoldo Alemán Lacayo and made it very difficult for other parties to qualify to compete in upcoming municipal elections.

In 2009 the Sandinista National Liberation Front FSLN consolidated its rule in Nicaragua, taking advantage of continuing divisions between the country’s opposition and, later, the PCL denounced corruption in congress. According to Ramon Gonzales, leader of the PCL, nearly US\$ 60.000 have been offered as well as “sexual favors” with members of the FSLN in exchange for votes to support their proposals. The opposition argues that the government uses these and other methods to back the bill for the indefinite reelection of the president. This is not the first time that a situation like this occurs in the country. In 1998 Sandinist deputy Roberto Calderon was accused of using sexual favors to gain votes²².

Despite the economic situation, El Salvador continues to strengthen the process of democratic consolidation. Presidential elections held in March 2009 seem to confirm this; moreover, they have become fundamental proof of the consolidation of the peace accords. Members of the ARENA party and its candidate Rodrigo Avila accused the leader of the FMLN Mauricio Funes of wanting to establish a communist regime and of selling the interests of the country to Chavez’s Bolivarian Revolution. The left party, on the other hand, accused ARENA of fraud. Candidate Avila was even attacked by FMLN demonstrators. Following a hard-fought campaign, television journalist Mauricio Funes of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) won the presidential election in El Salvador on March 2009 by a margin of 51.3%–48.7%,²³ ending ARENA’s long control of the Salvadoran government. Salvadorans showed great democratic culture by accepting the results and proved the political maturity of the country.

However, there are two most pressing issues facing El Salvador regarding democratic consolidation: the first is insecurity which has put the country in the top of homicide rates in Latin America. This is closely linked to the increase of maras (Salvadoran street gangs created in the 1980s involved in drug trafficking and

19 Reynoso, Conié. (2006). “Ríos Montt queda fuera del caso del jueves negro”. En: Prensa Libre. <http://www.prensalibre.com/pl/2006/enero/31/133557.html>.

20 Miró, Jordi. (2006). “Apoyan extradición de Ríos Montt”. In: BBC Mundo. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_6089000/6089910.stm.

21 Torres Rivas, Edelberto. (2007). “Nicaragua: el retorno del sandinismo transfigurado”. In: Revista Nueva Sociedad No. 207. http://www.nuso.org/upload/articulos/3401_1.pdf.

22 Diario Hoy de Quito. (2009). “‘Favores’ por votos en Asamblea”. In: <http://www.hoy.com.ec/noticias-ecuador/favores-por-votos-en-asamblea-336644.html>.

23 Ordaz, Pablo Victoria. (2009). “histórica de la ex guerrilla izquierdista en El Salvador”. In Diario El País de España.

kidnapping). Public safety is a fundamental aspect of the process of democratic security initiated during post-conflict in Central America. The Framework Treaty on Democratic Security in Central America of 1995 in which the Central American countries commit to democracy, based on the rule of law and the guarantee of fundamental freedoms, economic freedom and social justice during a post-Cold War period.

The second challenge has to do with the guarantees of the opposition and its role in relation to the government. It is worth noting that this is the first leftist government which has since the beginning accused the right of conspiring against them. This is the case of Joaquín Villalobos a Salvadoran politician and former guerrilla founder of the People's Revolutionary Army²⁴ argued that the "FMLN, is a force that does not deserve its political position and above all, is incapable of governing; it is a violent, intransigent and intolerant political force."²⁵ Moreover, Villalobos is afraid that the country may become a narco-state.

A review of current political and social trends in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua illustrates the differences between the threats to democratization processes today and during armed conflicts in the precedent decades. They are also a test for these young democracies which are still under construction.

Conclusions

It is important to bear in mind that the democratic regimes in these three countries are still under construction. It is important that these regimes build institutional mechanism for the management of future crisis which hamper the interference of governing individuals. These may strengthen and consolidate the political system.

Some experts on democratic consolidation such Samuel Huntington and Adam Przeworski agree that economic stability and development are primary factors which allow democratic consolidation. Both argue that countries with GDP per capita inferior to US\$ 1000 are more vulnerable. Przeworski indicates that an annual income of US\$ 6000 may help a democracy endure²⁶. However, the case of Central America poses certain difficulties. The socio-economic problems of Latin America are not necessarily linked to the generation of wealth but to a problem related to the distribution of wealth, therefore, income per capita does not reflect the economic reality of a given society in the continent. In El Salvador, 10% of the poorest households represent 0.7% of the country's total income; meanwhile, the richest 10% represent 38%²⁷. In Guatemala, the proportions are 0.9% and 43%²⁸ and in Nicaragua 2.2% and 33.8%²⁹. Therefore, it would be more useful to evaluate the degree of democratic consolidation in economic terms by using the Gini coefficient.

Although institutional and economic factors are closely related, they are insufficient to explain or evaluate the degree of democratic consolidation. As a result, once a democratic regime is established, it is important that it strengthens enough to meet the expectations of the people. An important part of the crises in Central America and the rest of the continent are not necessarily tied to the lack of a clear political and institutional framework or poverty. Most crises are the result of what the people see as a "disappointing democracy". The origin of armed conflicts in the region was the incapacity of the governments to implement the democratic reforms needed which resulted in an increasing discontent among the population. Consequently, it is important to integrate the expectations of the population with the policies and plans designed by governments; an ineludible challenge for future governments in Central America.

24 The People's Revolutionary Army was part of the opposition movements against the FMLN during the civil war. 25 Villalobos, Joaquín. (2009). "Extinción del fantasma autoritario y desafíos del futuro presidente". In: El Salvador.com. http://www.elsalvador.com/mwedh/nota/nota_opinion.asp?idCat=6342&idArt=3452975.

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27 El Salvador. (2009). En: CIA World Fact Book. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/es.html>.

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