

# Political Systems in Central America. A Compared Historical Analysis

## Sistemas políticos de Centroamérica. Análisis histórico comparado

## Sistemas políticos da América Central. Análise histórica comparativa

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### Abstract

This study aims to compare the political systems in Central America from a historical perspective. Here, Central America is considered as a very diverse region in experiences and quality of democracy; Costa Rica is the most successful, historical, contemporary case in the subregion. In the rest of the countries, there are relatively young and fragile democracies, without historical experiences of democracy, with very weak States, without social consensus, and with limited citizenship that is treated

in a clientelist manner and is a victim of poverty and inequality.

**Keywords:** Central America, political systems, compared historical study, democratization, political liberalization, quality of democracy.

### Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es comparar desde perspectiva histórica los sistemas políticos de Centroamérica. Aquí se afirma que Centroamérica es una región muy diversa en experiencias y en calidad de la democracia, siendo Costa Rica el caso histórico y contemporáneo más exitoso de la subregión. En el resto de los países se observan democracias relativamente jóvenes y frágiles, sin experiencias históricas de democracia, con Estados muy débiles, sin consenso social y una ciudadanía limitada que



es tratada de forma clientelar y es víctima de la pobreza y la desigualdad.

**Palabras clave:** Centroamérica, Sistemas políticos, Estudio histórico comparado, Democratización, Liberalización política, Calidad de la democracia.

### Resumo

Este estudo procura comparar os sistemas políticos na América Central a partir de uma perspectiva histórica. Aqui, a América Central é considerada uma região muito diversa em experiências e qualidade de democracia. A Costa Rica é o caso histórico e contemporâneo de maior sucesso da sub-região. No resto dos países, as democracias são relativamente jovens e frágeis, sem experiências históricas de democracia, com Estados muito frágeis, sem consenso social e uma cidadania limitada, que é tratada como uma clientela e vítima da pobreza e da desigualdade.

**Palavras chave:** América Central, Sistemas políticos, Estudo histórico comparativo, Democratização, Liberalização política, Qualidade da democracia.

### Introduction

Central America is a subregion where its countries share important geopolitical traits and historical elements that show a certain synchronization, but the specific nature of the national character has configured political systems clearly

differentiated. Therefore, we have set as our objective to compare the political systems in Central America from a historical perspective.

The paper is structured in three parts. First, in the section titled *The birth of the Republic and the (im)possibility of democracy*, an analysis is conducted on the main variables that prevented the emergence of democracy, and how they printed features that were going to have continuity until well into the 21st century, such as militarism, the weakness of the State and the repression of civil society. In the second part, *Transitions toward democracy*, the first experiences of political liberalization are compared. Finally, in *Quality and challenges of the present democracy* section, the current state of democracy is characterized without leaving aside its effects in socio-economic aspects.

### The Birth of the Republic and the (Im)possibility of Democracy

The countries known today as the republics of Central America, except Panama, have a significant common history. From the colonial period, they belonged to the *Capitanía General de Guatemala* (Captaincy General of Guatemala), and they won their independence from the Spanish Empire in 1821. The



Republics were driven by the Plan of Iguala that gave independence to Mexico. Then, from 1822 until 1823, they were annexed to the First Mexican Empire; in 1824, they formed part of the Federal Republic of Central America, until successive civil wars dissolved it in 1838, giving way to the independent States. Meanwhile, Panama gained its independence from the Spanish Empire in 1821; then, it formed part of the Gran Colombia up to the so-called War of Hundred Years and the United States' invasion in 1903.

After these independence processes, as in most of the Latin America republics, there were fights between regional *caudillos*, as well as between liberals and conservatives in each of these countries. In Guatemala, a conservative and clerical regime with José Rafael Carrera (1839-1865) emerged during the so-called Thirty Years Regime. Despite the early drafting of the Constitution of 1824, and the fact that the Constitution of 1841 established the direct election of the president and parliamentarians, in El Salvador, the changes of presidents were resolved by violence. The power in Honduras was also dominated by economic forces and the *de facto* regional military forces. Costa Rica was the furthest away and impoverished

country of the former federation, and without a local army to fight against the colonial power; in this country, the conflicts between liberals and conservatives did not reach greater virulence because they were little defined, nor were there greater *de facto* powers due to the precarious material conditions (Bendel and Krennerich, 2005; Krennerich, 2005a; Somoza, 2005; Zovatto, 2005; Seligson, 2005; Prieto, 1979).

In Nicaragua, the conflict between liberals and conservatives took a significant virulence and geographical dimension; these movements had their bases in León and Granada, respectively, and the conflict was transformed into a civil war that was resolved with the intervention of the mercenary William Walker in favor of the liberals. Walker reached the presidency of the country by violating the constitution, but he was quickly expelled giving way, from 1857, to a relatively stable period called the thirty years of conservative government, which further reduced the few political freedoms. In Panama, a few days after declaring its independence from Colombia, the Hay-Bunau Varilla Agreement was signed and allowed the American tutelage; it granted the sovereignty over the territory of the canal, the power of military intervention, and



the monitoring of elections to the United States. This situation lasted until 1960 (Krennerich, 2005b; Bendel, Krennerich and Zilla, 2005).

From this first moment, some elements of politics and political economy can be identified; they differentiate Costa Rica from the rest of the region. Moreover, while Panama has a specific history that leads it away from the history of the rest of the Central American countries, it shares critical elements such as the American intervention and the low achievement of political freedoms.

In 1871 in Guatemala, the liberal revolution triumphed; in the meantime, the liberals came to power successively in El Salvador and Honduras and were going to have a significant influence in the rest of the region. This liberal period was characterized by the modernization of the State and socio-economic structures, the separation of Church and State, the privatization of communal lands, exports of coffee, and the liberal reforms, especially those applied by Justo Rufino Barrios (1873-1885) in Guatemala, Marco Aurelio Soto (1876-1880 and 1881-1883) in Honduras, and José Santos Zelaya (1893-1909) in Nicaragua; these facts broke down the traditional power of the landlords, the military

and the Catholic Church. However, the authoritarianism and the violent succession of presidents continued. It is worth noting that in Honduras, during this period, liberals and conservatives were setting up the historical parties in the country: the Liberal Party was founded in 1891, and the National Party (PN) was formally founded in 1923. Likewise, in Panama, the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party alternated in power, although the elections were also fraudulent and the alternations were personalistic. In Costa Rica, where the liberal force had been dominant from the birth of the Republic, the liberals also bound together around a party, the Republican Party; until then, the most significant popular expression of the region was in 1889, when an electoral fraud in the presidential elections of the year was prevented (Torres, 1993; Bendel and Krennerich, 2005; Somoza, 2005; Krennerich, 2005a; 2005b; Krennerich, Bendel, Krennerich and Zilla, 2005; Zovatto, 2005).

The early years of the 20th century were particularly conflictive in the region. In Honduras, several civil wars successively broke out until the dictatorship of Tiburcio Carías Andino (1933-1949), supported by the military and the United States. In El Salvador, Maximiliano Hernández



Martínez (1932-1944) came to power by a coup d'état against the elected president, Arturo Araujo, from the Salvadoran Labor Party; Hernández brutally repressed the peasant demonstrations, a fact known as the *matanza* (massacre). In Nicaragua, Anastasio Somoza García came to power in 1931; he inaugurated a dynastic dictatorship with traits of sultanism, based on militarism and the American intervention. In Panama, the first coups took place in its republican history between 1931 and 1941. Also, in Guatemala, authoritarian governments successively rose, including the long periods of Manuel Estrada Cabrera (1898-1920) and Jorge Ubico (1931-1944); Ubico outlawed political parties until a civil-military junta restored the constitutional guarantees, including political parties (Torres, 2015; Torres, 1993; Somoza, 2005; Krennerich, 2005a; 2005b; Krennerich, Bendel, Krennerich and Zilla, 2005; Bendel and Krennerich, 2005).

In the 1940s and 1950s, and especially in the 1960s and 1970s, Central America had important economic growth rates that, even if these caused important levels of inequality, mobilized the masses, generating a crisis of hegemony and conflicts between elites; each country resolved these conflicts differently.

In Nicaragua and El Salvador, the 1940s and 1950s were of political continuity and stability, and during the 1960s and 1970s, the repression was accentuated due to the weakening of hegemony, until the State terror emerged. In Nicaragua, although there were significant socio-economic changes, and the dictator Anastasio Somoza was assassinated, the Somoza family with the Conservative Party of Nicaragua continued to dominate the country for forty years. However, in the 1970s, the regime lost its national and international allies when the massive fraud and corruption became more evident, political actors radicalized, and the state repression increased; besides the social effects the 1977 earthquake left behind. In El Salvador, the oligarchy, coalesced into the Revolutionary Party of Democratic Unification (PRUD), and the military formed a coalition to keep the political domination of the country, especially after the coup of 1961 when the military institutionalized their power (Krennerich, 2005b; Krennerich, 2005a; Torres, 2015; Torres, 1997; Wood, 2005).

In Guatemala, the attempt to manipulate the presidential elections gave way to the Guatemalan revolution, led by the United Front of Arealistas Parties, and that same



year their leader, Juan José Arévalo (1945-1951), won the country's first free elections, ending the liberal *caudillismo* and introducing significant reforms that included the limitation of presidential power, the legalization of political parties, and numerous socio-economic reforms in favor of impoverished people. Arévalo's successor, Jacobo Arbenz (1951 - 1954), deepened the agenda of structural reforms, including the proposal for agrarian reform, which generated the opposition of the Guatemalan oligarchy and the American interests. The oligarchy and the United States never organized a party or a democratic opposition; instead, they staged a counter-revolutionary coup d'état with the support of the Church, the military, and the American interests; the coup brought Castillo Armas to power who, massacring the peasant and trade union movements, repressed the political and socio-economic freedoms achieved so far (Torres, 2015; Seligson, 2005; Bendel and Krennerich, 2005; Torres, 1981).

In Costa Rica, in the 1940s, significant political and socio-economic reforms were also introduced. In 1940, Rafael Ángel Calderón Guardia (1940-1944), postulated by the Republican Party, won the elections, giving an end to the cycle of liberal

*caudillos* and implemented one of the most ambitious social reforms in the region for its time, which included the incorporation of social guarantees in the Constitution, labor codes and the creation of the Costa Rican social security, thus, founding the bases of modernity, of a strong redistributor State, and of democracy in the country. All these reforms affected diverse interests, especially those of the coffee-grower oligarchy that gathered around the National Unity Party. Calderón became more authoritarian and refused to hand over power after losing the presidential elections, giving way to a civil war in which the José Figueres' militias, constituted by irregular recruits of the agrarian and urban petty bourgeoisie, and financed by the coffee-grower bourgeoisie, fought against the labor militias led by the Communist Party: Figueres' militia won the civil war (Zovatto, 2005; Torres, 2015; Camacho, 1983).

Up to this point, we have found some differences between Costa Rica and the other countries of Central America; however, the differences were not so evident as they are in the contemporary world. During this period, electoral fraud and violence were also reported in Costa Rica. There are also shared structural processes that pointed toward



democracy, such as the social policies in Guatemala, but that the critical situations resolved in different ways.

In Honduras, the military continuously intervened during the decade of the 1940s, and when the President Juan Manuel Galvez (1949-1954) started a process of political liberalization, and the president José Ramón Villeda Morales (1957-1963) wanted to implement agrarian reform, coups overthrew them. The military became the main political actors, marginalizing parties and suspending the elections. (Somoza, 2005; Queen, 1981).

In Panama the National Guard staged a coup d'état in 1968, leading General Omar Torrijos to the power; he closed the parliament and banned political parties; his government was an authoritarian and personalistic one.

As noted, until now political modernity had not existed in the region in the sense that there was a differentiation of political power in regards to the economic and military power: the first was exclusively a continuation of these last two. On the contrary, the political and social conditions were precise in order for the system to polarize to levels that made it impossible a harmonization within the political field.

The material benefits that resulted in the entire region from the agricultural exports, and that, in Guatemala and Costa Rica, coincided with governments that applied specific social policies, made the social relations tense to the point that this tension was resolved by civil wars and the emergence of guerrilla groups. Societies were divided between the violence of the State and that of the guerrillas.

In the 1970s, the guerrilla fights began and intensified in the 1980s in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador. The guerrilla groups were mainly driven by the rejection of social exclusion and the military dictatorships, of the electoral fraud, and the anti-American and anti-oligarchic feeling.

In Nicaragua, the Sandinista revolution triumphed in 1979. The entrance of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) to Managua gave an end to forty years of the Somoza family's dictatorship. With broad popular support, the FSLN began a set of political and socio-economic reforms which included the land reform, but the traditional powers, with the support of the United States, organized the *Contra* (a counter-revolutionary movement), triggering a civil war.



The Sandinista victory gave impetus to other actors in Central America to challenge the traditional powers. In El Salvador, the guerrillas coalesced into the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN); but unlike Nicaragua, they failed to achieve victory by the force of the *Contra*; however, they managed to set up more horizontal relations in the civil society, especially in rural areas, transforming the country into another scenario of civil war. In Guatemala, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (in Spanish *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca*, URNG-MAIZ) did not come to power either. Instead, a group of young military officers gave a coup in 1982, breaking the continuity of the dominant military group; General Efraín Ríos Montt assumed the presidency. He inaugurated an era of violence and was the main actor of ethnocide against the Mayan population. Besides, in the 1970s, the mobilization of workers and peasants defined its interests and achieved its autonomy. The Christian movements and their political and ideological doctrine of liberation theology had, and have, crucial importance in the formation of these popular political actors. The *de facto* powers could not control or disrupt the social struggles that emerged (Torres, 2015; Torres,

1997; Krennerich, 2005b; Colburn, 2009; Wood, 2005; Turcios, 1997).

In these countries, the civil society has been very active from this moment, but the political parties have not always been able to harmonize themselves on a positive agenda of policies. Moreover, their expressions have not been entirely democratic, in the first instance, due to the absence of these spaces, and, then, because of the absence of democratic effectiveness.

In Honduras, there was no civil war, and guerrilla forces did not have much popularity; the guerrilla movement consisted of about twenty men who were easily annihilated. The 1980s were of relative political stability, and for the first time in the history of the country, a civilian assumed the presidency thanks to the agreement between the United States and the Honduran army, which included the commitment to allow, several times, the American military to make the Honduran territory the basis of the *Contra*, the American investment for the modernization of weapons, the training of the Honduran army, and, finally, the transfer of the presidency of Honduras from the military to civilians. In Panama, at the end of the 1970s, also under American pressure, the



only legitimizer of the dictatorship, political parties were legalized, and the separation of powers and direct elections were reintroduced. After Torrijos' death, elections were held in 1984, when Nicolas Barletta was elected in the middle of a recognized electoral fraud: the ruling Democratic Revolutionary Party supported him. However, the armed forces, under the figure of General Manuel Antonio Noriega, kept *de facto* power; thus, Barletta was forced to resign before completing the first year of mandate, and the 1989 elections were suspended, when the opposition candidate emerged as clear winner; this caused the American intervention that, in four days, overthrew Noriega and left a thousand civilian casualties (Torres, 2010; Torres, 2015; Ruhl, 2010; Nasi, 1990; Bendel, Krennerich and Zilla, 2005).

This moment was of high relevance for the historic moment of the region and has effects to date. In Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, vibrant civil societies were configured; while in Honduras and Panama, the main actors of changes were the elites. Nowadays, the gap between civil society and the political system is wider in the last two countries.

## Transitions to Democracy

Costa Rica is the country that sooner reached democracy in Central America; even along with Venezuela and Colombia, it was one of the few countries in which democracy remained after the second counter-wave of democracy, and along with India, it holds the oldest continuous democracies in the periphery countries. From 1953, free and competitive elections have been celebrated; since then, the National Liberation Party (PLN) and coalitions of the opposition parties have alternated peacefully. In 1983, these opposition parties coalesced into the Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC).

The following presidents took office since the establishment of democracy: José Figueres Ferrer (1953-1958) of the PLN, Mario Echandi (1958-1962) of the National Union, Francisco José Orlich (1962-1966) of the PLN, Jose Trejos (1966-1970) of the National Union, again José Figueres (1970-1974) of the PLN, Daniel Oduber (1974-1978) of the PLN, Rodrigo Carazo (1982-1986) of the National Union, Luis Alberto Monge (1982-1986) of the PLN, Oscar Arias (1986-1990) of the PLN, Rafael Calderon (1990-1994) of the PUSC, José Figueres Olsen (1994-1998) of the PLN, Miguel



Ángel Rodríguez Echeverría (1998-2002) of the PUSC, Abel Pacheco de la Espriella (2002-2006) of the PUSC, again Oscar Arias (2006-2010) of the PLN, and Laura Chinchilla (2010-2014) of the PLN.

After the civil war, unlike the rest of Central America, Costa Rica institutionalized essential political and civil liberties and democracy. José Figueres Ferrer won the civil war, but he did not appropriate the power; he signed an agreement with Otilio Ulate, the winner of the 1948 elections, so that the so-called *Junta Fundadora de la Segunda República* (Founding Junta of the Second Republic) presided over the country for eighteen months, and then Ulate would assume the power. The agreement was implemented. During the period of the Founding Junta of the Second Republic, the Calderon Guardia's reforms remained, and even capital taxes were set, affecting the oligarchy. A system of universal social security was created, and public education with quality was guaranteed. The banking was nationalized, and rural credit was expanded. Finally, the army was abolished. Costa Rica and Uruguay were able to develop the most extensive social states in Latin America; the democratic mechanisms, such as elections, enjoyed prestige among the

winner and losers candidates and in the civil society. The State had a fundamental importance in conflict resolution, the redistribution of income, and in the social and economic change. Today, Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Chile are considered the highest quality democracies in Latin America (Torres, 2015; Mainwaring and Scully, 1997; Torres, 1996; Mainwaring and Perez-Liñán, 2005; Morlino, 2014; Mainwaring and Perez-Liñán, 2016; Prieto, 1979; Zovatto, 2005).

Since the elections of 1951, a centripetal bipolar dynamic was set up, which had the National Liberation Party (PLN), founded by Figueres, as main force, and with which Figueres was going to win the first democratic elections with the highest majority ever reached (65% of the votes). The PLN had the support of the middle class, and in its early years, it applied an agenda with a social democrat profile that allowed to accompany democracy with higher socio-economic freedoms. It also had center-right actors in opposition, as the Social Christian Unity Party; both are heirs of the civil war: the PLN from Figuerismo (Figueres' political movement) and the PUSC from Calderonismo (Calderón Guardia's political trend). These two blocks formed a system of institutionalized



political parties with deep roots in the civil society; they held about 90% of the presidential and parliamentary votes. The low polarization was also present in civil society, which was characterized by a robust democratic culture (Torres, 2015; Zovatto, 2005; Hernández, 2011).

Despite the instability and political violence in neighboring countries, and the economic difficulties of the 1980s, Costa Rica has managed to maintain its democracy without interruption. All disputes are resolved within the democracy. It is this critical situation that gives us the most abundant elements to understand the current difference between high-quality Costa Rican democracy with the minimum quality democracies in the rest of Central America. The crisis of hegemony and the civil war in Costa Rica led to democracy, while in the rest of the region violence and authoritarianism continued. What was achieved with democratic reforms in Costa Rica was unsuccessfully attempted with revolutions in the rest of the region.

In the rest of Central America, the political liberalization initiated with the wave of presidential elections that began in Honduras in 1981 and continued in El Salvador in 1982, in Guatemala and Nicaragua

in 1984, and in Panama in 1989. These elections cannot be considered democratic due to the limited competition that excluded the entire spectrum of the left wing; in a context of war, there were high levels of military intervention, without division of powers or freedom of the press, but there was progress in political liberalization.

In Honduras, with the presidential elections of 1982 and 1986, the two historical parties of the country returned with one of the largest participation in the region. For the first time in the history of the country, the Liberal Party (PL) and the conservative National Party (PL) resolved the conflict of their patrimonial interests through elections. In the end, the military began to be subordinated to civilians. However, the military continued to be the main *de facto* actors; additionally, the continuity of the American intervention and violations of human rights do not allow us to consider this regime as democratic. In El Salvador, with the traditional allies from the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) and the American support, the military appointed a civilian as acting president, Álvaro Magaña (1982-1984); then, in a context of war and exclusion of the left parties, José Napoleón Duarte (PDC) and



Alfredo Cristiani were elected for the National Republican Alliance (ARENA). Guatemala elected the constituent assembly in 1984 and a new president in 1985. For the first time in 20 years, a civilian was appointed as president, the Christian Democrat Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo (1986-1991) who had to overcome several coup attempts (Torres, 2015; Salomón, 1996; Reina, 1981; Somoza, 2005; Taylor, 2009; Krennerich, 2005a; Wood, 2005; Bendel and Krennerich, 2005).

In Nicaragua, after the triumph of the Sandinista revolution in 1979, presidential elections were held in 1984: Daniel Ortega (1985-1990) was elected as president. By the time of the elections, the FSLN controlled all the powers of the country through the Provisional Junta of National Reconstruction. The legitimacy that the FSLN received to overthrow the Somoza's sultanic dictatorship allowed the revolutionary group to reunite diverse mass political organizations, and, thus, a bipolar logic of political competition between Sandinistas and anti-Sandinistas settled. For Nicaragua, the years of Sandinista government were the worst period of economic crisis that whichever country in Latin America has lived (Torres, 2015; Torres, 1997; Krennerich, 2005b;

Colburn and Cruz, 2012; Cajina and Lacayo, 1999; Ortega, 1997).

In 1989, under George H. W. Bush's presidency, the United States invaded Panama with a large military mobilization to arrest General Noriega. Thus, the dictatorship ended, and the country elected Guillermo Endara (1989-1994) as president with high abstention the same year; he was sworn in at an American military base. Then, in 1994, the first competitive elections took place to elect Ernesto Pérez Balladares (1994-1999) as president, and in 1999, Mireya Moscoso won the presidency (1999-2004). Even though these last two elections were competitive, neither were free nor democratic, because democracy is a form of government of the State, and the Panamanian State did not have control of its sovereignty, nor the monopoly of violence until 1999 when American troops fled the country. Panama can be considered as a sovereign and democratic state as of 2000. Also, during the 1990s invasion, neo-liberal policies were implemented in the socio-economic field; they minimized the State even further. Even though the civil society was more active, it was also a mess.

The beginning of democracy in Honduras can be dated to the first



free and competitive elections in the country; they led Rafael Leonardo Callejas (1990-1994), of the PN, to the presidency and signified the first peaceful alternation of power and the start of a democratic culture. This period coincided with the beginning of peace in the region and the end of the Cold War. In 1994, the alternation in the presidency continued with Carlos Roberto Reina (1994-1998), of the PL, when he won the elections, consolidating the Honduran bipartisanship that has been characterized by agreements between elites; these agreements included the distribution of privileges. A series of personalistic factions exist in the Honduran parties. These factions compete between themselves without a coherent programmatic agenda, nor an ideologically differentiated one. Both parties can be located on the right wing. The lethal factions correspond to territorial and commercial elements; for example, the PL was funded by United Fruit Co. and the PN by Cuyamel Fruit Co. (Salomón, 1996; Torres, 2010; Ruhl, 2010; Somoza, 2005).

In El Salvador, democracy can be dated from the presidential elections of 1994, the first free, competitive, and plural ones. Only the signature of the peace agreement in 1992 set up the conditions for democracy. An

essential element was the incorporation of the FMLN into the democratic life in the form of a political party, which, along with the ARENA extreme right party, formed centrifuge bipartisanship. The high competition between these parties and their mutual supervision have assured that the public administration showed the highest levels of efficiency and the lowest corruption levels for Central America, except Costa Rica. In the early years of democracy, the ARENA party obtained important control when it won the presidential elections with Armando Calderón (1994-1999), Francisco Flores (1999-2004), and Elias Antonio Saca (2004-2009). These elections were characterized by a low turnout, especially in the rural areas where the inhabitants did not see, in the democracy, their potential to resolve their immediate problems, due to a significant asymmetry in the power of election campaign financing and a weakly democratic institutionalism in general. The ARENA party showed greater cohesion than the FMLN that suffered splits; but even if the FMLN was not able to win the presidency in the early years, it obtained important positions at the local and legislative level (Colburn, 2009; Krennerich, 2005a; Wood, 2005; Torres, 2015).



In Guatemala, the main political actors have not been committed to democratic rules. Even though with the negotiations of peace in El Salvador and the distension of international relations with the fall of the Berlin Wall the military had no significant influence on the elections that led Jorge Serrano Elias (1991-1993) to the presidency, Serrano, himself, accused of corruption, engineered a coup that was foiled by the rejection of the civil society in general and by the military. The Guatemalan Congress appointed Ramiro de León Carpio (1993-1996), former ombudsman and human rights defender, as president. This moment can be considered the beginning of democracy in Guatemala, as the institutions demonstrated sufficient strength to guarantee the subordination of the military and the democratic rules of the game. This democratic beginning also significantly contributed to the peace agreement signed in 1996; and the agreement contributed to democratization.

As of this moment, the elections have been free and competitive. However, the voter participation has been among the lowest in Latin America, and the majority of the indigenous population has not been incorporated to the political life. The political spectrum is reduced,

and only the right-wing has an institutionalized space because, after nearly four decades of military violence, the Guatemalan guerrilla movement has not had the same capacity that the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan guerrillas have had to transform themselves in political parties. The Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG), which brings together the former guerrillas, did not take part in the first elections and has been systematically ceding space. The democratic and progressive forces, such as the indigenous, gender, and human rights movements, have not been able to coalesce into political parties and are weak and fragmented. The right-wing candidates represent groups that disappear after each election, so that these groups cannot be considered as parties. However, the right-wing does have strong organizations, including with veto power, such as the Coordinating Committee of Associations and Chambers of Agriculture, Commerce, Industry, and Finance (CACIF). The Guatemalan State remains weak; it does not have the monopoly of violence in large part of its territory due to the presence of drug traffickers and is one of the States at the world level that has the lowest social investment. That is why Guatemala remains one of the poorest countries in Latin America



(Torres, 2015; Seligson, 2005; Bendel and Krennerich, 2005; Torres, 2010; Rojas, 2010; Torres, 1981).

In Nicaragua, the first free and competitive elections marking the beginning of democracy were conducted in 1990 and led the winner, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, to the presidency (1990-1997); she led the right-wing coalition National Opposition Union. This moment is considered the beginning of democracy in the country, not only for the qualities of the elections but for the significance of resolving such rapid change of power from the Sandinistas to anti-Sandinista movement within the political space.

After these elections, the political violence decreased, the *Contra* demobilized, the Sandinista Popular Army reduced by more than half, and social organizations emerged with significant impetus. Chamorro focused on creating a right-wing party, and the FSLN concentrated on recovering from defeat and organizing a party. The Somoza's forces also created a party, the Nationalist Liberal Party, which led Arnoldo Alemán to the presidency (1997-2002). Alemán and the Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega signed a pact to distribute the positions of power, regardless of the merit or the demands

of civil society. Finally, the period culminates with the presidency of the conservative candidate Enrique Bolaños (2002-2007). These three presidencies were marked by a neo-liberal economic agenda and political instability. (Torres, 2015; Martí i Puig, 2015; Krennerich, 2005b; Colburn and Cruz, 2012; Vargas, 1995).

A bipolar logic continued, but not a bipartisan one, mainly because since the Alemán-Ortega pact there were no effective differences of programmatic agenda, and the *caudillo* who was leading each group was the most important element.

In Central America, during the period under analysis, with the exception of Costa Rica, we find impoverished and unequal countries, with disrupted societies, where the military were the only organized political actors. Nevertheless, changes in the international context, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and, at the regional level, with the triumph of the Sandinista revolution, fomented the hegemonic crisis of the military and militarism and a transition that began in a state of war and, then, managed to obtain the commitment of the main political actors in the region, at least as a facade, with the rules of the democratic competition.



El Salvador and, then, Nicaragua managed to create civil societies with significant levels of mobilization because their processes of transition were from the bottom up. However, as we will see, this transition was co-opted in Nicaragua, and the economic forces have not automatically transformed their economic power in political power any longer. In Honduras and Panama, the *de facto* powers led the democratization from the top down, so that the gap between civil society and political society widened. Moreover, in Guatemala, the inability to transform the guerrilla movement into a political party with a programmatic agenda has also resulted in a political system characterized by a significant gap between political actors and fragmented social actors.

In all countries, the democratization and the first years of democracy coincided with deep economic crisis and neoliberal policies that have maintained the socio-economic inequalities and the weakness of States, allowing in all the region, except Costa Rica, that traditional actors, like the economic forces and their corporate pressure groups, keep control of public policies, reducing the political sphere.

## Quality and Challenges of the Present Democracy

Talking about quality and challenges of democracy in Central America is an important step forward for the region because it means that the conflictivity in all the countries of the region develops in a political and democratic space.

However, nowadays in Honduras, we can find a breakdown of the democracy in the coup d'état of June 28, 2009. Manuel Zelaya (2006-2009) was elected president, supported by the Liberal Party, in a context where the bipartisanship was systematically losing support, expressed in the continuous increase of abstention and the questioning of the electoral results. However, Zelaya quickly moved away from the traditional way of doing politics of bipartisanship and from traditional support groups such as the business sector. This situation caused tension in the relations between the President and the other *de jure* and *de facto* powers, especially at the end of 2008 when a presidential decree increased the minimum wage by more than 50 percent. At the beginning of 2009, the conflictivity between the powers sparked when Zelaya intended to call for a referendum to allow his presidential re-election, just after the Supreme Electoral Tribunal declared



this act illegal; this situation resulted in his removal from office, without a preliminary hearing or judicial process. Undoubtedly, this is the greatest expression of contemporary institutional weakness in Central America. The civil society remained on the streets for more than five months, denouncing the coup d'état and demanding better living conditions, while they were heavily punished, with a balance of 10 people dead and numerous injured (Sosa, 2014; Rojas, 2010; Torres, 2010).

The extreme institutional weakness, the high levels of crime that make Honduras one of the most violent countries in the world, the criminalization of social, peasant, indigenous and identity (as the LGBTI community) protests, the neo-liberal policies that maintain the State weak vis-à-vis the economic powers, the decline of social investment, the rising inequality, the clientelist practices, and the corruption in general continued during the presidencies of Porfirio Lobo (2010-2014) and Juan Hernández (2014-currently in office).

The positive note is that the coup d'état has re-politicized the Honduran citizenship, which is especially evident from the presidential elections of 2013 when the traditional parties lost their historical electoral

oligopoly, and the center-left Freedom and Re-foundation Party (LIBRE) and the Anti-Corruption Party (PAC) emerged; these two parties obtained the second and fourth position in these elections respectively. This expansion of the spectrum of the political offer, which allows a left political option out of bipartisanship for the first time in history, is one of the most important events in the republican history of the country. The civil society also looks more vigorous and less tolerant to corruption and lack of institutionality.

The challenge to improve the quality of the Honduran democracy implies that new parties overcome their tendencies towards factionalism and personalism, and so they can build programmatic parties with differentiated agendas that articulate the demands of the civil society.

In Nicaragua and El Salvador, the former guerrillas, now converted in political parties, have reached the presidency. In 2007, the FSLN, with Daniel Ortega, won the presidency; Ortega remains in office after winning the election for the periods 2012-2017 and 2017-2022. Also, in El Salvador, the FMLN won the elections with Mauricio Funes (2009-2014) and Salvador Sánchez (2014-2019).



After more than 15 years, Daniel Ortega returned to the Presidency of Nicaragua, but this time through free and competitive elections; in these tight polls, the FSLN faced a divided Liberal Party. Ortega is another case of personalism in the history of Nicaragua. Under the Alemán-Ortega pact, he has been able to obtain the re-election in two opportunities, in elections every time less free, less competitive and highly questioned. The re-election was possible thanks to the clientelism financed by international agreements, such as the ALBA that has allowed considerable material improvements for the impoverished population, negotiations with the business sectors that have guaranteed them their material interests, and his approach to the Catholic Church by adopting conservative positions and clerical rhetoric. Especially after the reforms of 2014 that allows Ortega to be re-elected indefinitely, he has concentrated the power of the State in his figure and has been systematically undermining the division of powers, which places the FSLN as an actor with hegemonic pretensions. Additionally, Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo, exercise tight control over the FSLN; thus, the presidential couple has become the main actors of the Nicaraguan life (Anderson and Dodd, 2009; Colburn and Cruz, 2012; Rocha,

2010; Martí i Puig, 2016; Martí i Puig, 2008; Martí i Puig, 2013; Martí i Puig, 2009; Perez, 2012).

In El Salvador, the FMLN won the 2009 elections with Funes, an independent candidate, in the midst of a campaign with high levels of aggressiveness and political violence. The FMLN victory resulted in the division of the right and the emergence of the Great National Alliance Party (GANA); there was also a distance between the President and the FMLN. During the governments of the FMLN, politics has been judicialized, and El Salvador remains a poor country with a weak State and is one of the most violent countries in the world; however, unlike Nicaragua, there are no considerable accusations of corruption (Roody, 2016; Roody, 2012; Ramos, Loya, and Arteaga, 2009).

Nicaragua and El Salvador share high levels of poverty that prevent citizenship to be fulfilled, and high levels of polarization that hinder social consensus. In Nicaragua, the FSLN has accumulated more power than the FMLN in El Salvador. The FSLN has been using non-democratic resources for such purposes and has been facing a divided right-wing; and even, in its rhetoric, it does not include issues of justice and social policies. In



addition, being a small country, Nicaragua has clientelist policies that have reached a significant percentage in the population. In the meantime, the FMLN has been respecting the democratic game and has been facing a united and more solvent right-wing in public management.

In Nicaragua, a little democratic left-wing faces a right with little social conscience. Instead, in El Salvador, the multiplicity of difficulties seems to overwhelm the administrative capabilities of both parties.

In Panama, Costa Rica, and Guatemala, non-traditional candidates were elected presidents in the most recent presidential elections. In Panama, Ricardo Martinelli, a self-called anti-political outsider entrepreneur, triumphed in the presidential polls of 2009. In Costa Rica, for the first time in its democratic history, Luis Guillermo Solís was elected president without the support of any of the blocks of the traditional bipolarity in the presidential elections of 2014. Likewise, in Guatemala, Jimmy Morales won the presidency in 2016; he is a recognized actor and comedian without previous party ties or experience in public administration.

In Panama, the Democratic Revolutionary Party and the Panameñista

Party won the presidential elections during and after the American invasion, except for the elections of 2009 when Ricardo Martinelli was elected, despite the union of the traditional parties. Panama has maintained the economic growth, but this dynamism has not had the same rhythm to reduce poverty and has increased inequality; this situation has generated a perception of corruption and inability or disinterest on the part of the government to address the social demands of those who are related through the clientelism. The Political Parties do not have either programmatic agendas or discipline (Guevara, 2016; Brown and Moon, 2013; Luna and Sánchez, 2009).

The spectrum of the offer of political parties in Costa Rica was significantly reduced when the party system became increasingly centripetal, and the historical, social democratic National Liberation Party converged toward the center-right generating the misalignment of the political system. This situation coincided with the process of economic complexification in the country and with greater competition in the international economy that broke the traditional social democratic pact and increased inequality. For this reason, since the presidential elections of 2002, a third force in the political party system emerged



from the center-left. This third force is composed of former members of the PLN, which obtained the second place in the presidential elections of 2006 and won the presidency in 2014: the Citizen Action Party (PAC). In Guatemala, the political party system remains reduced to the right and shows the highest fragmentation in Latin America, the parties are personalistic without defined programmatic agendas and disappear with ease; and despite some improvements of the economic growth, poverty and inequality continue (Hernandez, 2011; Torres, 2015; Alfaro and Gomez, 2016; Alfaro and Gomez, 2014; Alfaro and Gomez, 2012; Feoli, 2009; Azpuru and Blanco, 2008).

Changes in Costa Rica show the capacity of its mature democracy to adapt to social demands. The new political actors are formally institutionalized, are political parties with differentiated programmatic agendas, and have emerged to give a response to the misalignment. The challenge of the quality of democracy in Costa Rica is that the executive can make its policies effective with the high party fragmentation in the legislative power. In turn, the Guatemalan system of political parties has not had the same ability to adapt in order to have a broader offer that allows the arrival to the presidency

of an outsider without a defined programmatic agenda. Even though the rule of law has been strengthened, as shows the arrest of the former president Alfonso Portillo for several offenses occurred during his mandate. The Guatemalan democracy has many challenges ahead, such as the capacity of the political system to give answers to the most pressing problems of the civil society. Finally, Panama is a country with political stability, but where the political sphere is very reduced; this calls the quality of democracy into question.

## Conclusions

Central America is a very diverse region in experiences and quality of democracy; Costa Rica is the most successful, historical, and contemporary case in the subregion. The rest of democracies are relatively young and fragile democracies, without historical experiences of democracy, with weak States, without social consensus, and limited citizenship that is treated in a clientelist manner and is a victim of poverty and inequality.

However, from a historical perspective, Central America has at present achieved a significant political liberalization that allows raising the analysis of political systems in terms of quality of democracy.



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