

# Is the President in? No he's out — for ever!

UNTIL 1966, Guatemala was characterized by long periods of heavy-handed dictatorship punctuated from time to time by shorter intervals of chaotic "democracy".

Four dictators (Rafael Carrera, 1839-1865; Justo Rufino Barrios, 1871-1885; Manuel Estrada Cabrera, 1898-1920; and Jorge Ubico (1931-1944) ruled Guatemala directly or through puppet presidents for a total of seventy-five years, or over half the entire life of the republic (1838-1984).

According to one source, Manuel Estrada Cabrera managed a one-man coup in 1898 by striding into a cabinet meeting chaired by President José María Reina Barrios, laying a revolver on the table, and announcing: "Gentlemen, I am the president of Guatemala". He remained in that office during the next twenty-two years.

The same source claims that in December, 1921, a caller at the presidential palace asked: "Is President Herrera in?" and was surprised by the reply: "No, he's out. Orellana is president today!"

Carlos Herrera had been president during 1920-1921, but José María Orellana took over during 1921-1926.

From 1966 to 1982, constitutional regimes rotated military personalities and even one civilian in and out of the presidency on the basis of increasingly dubious elections. Since then, the country has experienced three different *golpes* resulting in short-term military impositions.

In Guatemala (as also in Honduras), the American fruit companies have disposed of most of their land which is now held by individual cultivators, but buy the crops of local producers and ship the fruit to market, as well as offer advice which can amount to supervision in the growing of such crops.

Large coffee plantations dominate the scene on the Pacific side of Guatemala, and account for one third of her exports. Especially in the highlands of Guatemala, the Indian majority of the population ekes out a miserable existence farming on little *minifundia* below five hectares in size, usually owned by *ladinos* (white or light mestizos, from "Latins") who collect the rent and charge for tools and seed. About 12 per cent only of all farms are not in this category, or that of the huge *haciendas*.

THOUGH the Somoza family enjoyed by far the longest reign in Nicaragua (1936-1979), they were by no means the first to introduce dictatorship or political irregularities into the country.

Struggles between "Conservatives" based in the city of Granada and "Liberals" with their headquarters farther north in León kept the country in disorder through the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. Tomás Martínez served as Conservative strongman from 1857 to 1867, and José Santos Zelaya as Liberal dictator from 1893 to 1909. Several presidents served for only one or two years each, before being shoved out by others.

Among other odd events, Nicaragua, or part of it, was ruled for a few months (1856-1857) by "President" William Walker, a freelance filibuster from the United States, who had been invited in by the Liberals. His inauguration, conducted in English amidst the standing formations of riff-raff and brigands he had picked up on his journey, is said to be one of the more outlandish performances to occur in a region not unknown for bizarre occurrences.

The country was occupied from 1912 to 1933 (with a brief interruption, 1925-1926) by the U.S. Marines. They helped to train Anastasio Somoza in the military arts, and soon after their departure he rose to the post of commander of the Nicaraguan National Guard — that is, of the armed forces of the country. Unable to independently perform his functions

## COSTA RICA

COSTA RICA'S so-called agricultural frontier has run out.

"The issue is nothing like as pressing as in semi-feudal agrarian economies such as El Salvador, but it is beginning to worry government ministers who recognise that the concentration of land ownership in Costa Rica has reached dangerous proportions," reports Jonathan Steele.\*

Increasing landlessness resulted in the invasion of an estate close to the Panamanian border earlier this year. A clash between peasants and police resulted in one death.

The government acted swiftly — in favour of the peasants. An emergency decree was passed to expropriate 1,000 acres of the 5,000-acre estate, for the benefit of the landless farmers.

Social progress in this democratic haven has been based on the tradition of family small holdings.

But now the increasing profitability of cattle ranching has led to the purchase of peasant land by local land speculators and by people from Latin American countries such as Chile and Argentina.

According to one estimate, there are 200,000 families who would go back to the land — if they could get it. Conservative groups are blaming communists for the recent growth in land invasions. Although the most stable country in the region, land hunger is threatening to cause widespread discontent in Costa Rica. "The comparative idyll of its placid last two decades appears to be coming to an end," reports Steele.

\*Jonathan Steele, 'The land stand', *The Guardian* (London), April 6, 1984.

# Keeping land in the family

as civilian president, Juan Bautista Sacasa resigned from his post in 1936, one year prior to the legal end of his term — and the way was open to the new epoch of the Somoza dynasty.

This long period of forty-three years (1936-1979) included exercise of power by Anastasio Somoza García until his assassination in 1956; and by sons Luis Anastasio Somoza Debayle and Anastasio Somoza Debayle (1956-1979), intermixed with five short-term presidents and a junta, who served as puppets during parts of the period. In 1979, as is well known, the Sandinista Front for National Liberation finally brought the dynasty to an inglorious end.

In Nicaragua before the Somozas, a few great landowning families centered around the city of Granada, called themselves Conservatives, and dominated a huge portion of the land of that part of the country. To the north-west, another small cadre of landlord families lived in and near the city of León, and were known as Liberals. Because of the unending feuding and violence that prevailed between these so-called Liberals and Conservatives, the capital was moved in 1858 from León to Managua, more or less between the two cities.

From 1936 to 1979, the Somoza family not only ran the government, but also came to own at least a fourth of the arable land, to dominate a very large portion of the commercial, banking and industrial institutions of the country, to monopolize the only national airline and steamship companies, and even to buy up large parts of devastated downtown Managua at bargain prices after the earthquake of 1972, as well as buy emergency supplies donated by other countries and then re-sell both the land and the supplies for a profit of about \$50 million.

The Somozas, who deemed themselves to be of the Liberal Party, were able to work out an uneasy accommodation with the Conservatives of Granada, and had to permit the Conservative family of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro to publish an opposition daily, *La Prensa*, though with much harassment and frequent shut-downs, as well as arrests and other torments visited on Chamorro himself. Indeed, it was the murder of this courageous editor-publisher on January 10, 1978, that brought essentially all elements of Nicaragua to their feet in support of the *sandinista* revolution then in progress against the Somoza regime, and assured victory for the revolution.

Between the two of them, the Liberal and Conservative families of Nicaragua managed to illustrate quite nicely the important rôle of land monopoly in setting the configurations of a Latin American republic. Before the *sandinistas*, politics centered around struggles between the coterie of families who controlled the land.