At War with the Past? The Politics of Truth Seeking in Guatemala

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Abstract

Truth seeking in postwar Guatemala is a political battleground in which perpetrators intent on guarding against accountability confront victims’ associations equally intent on exposing abuses endured during the country’s 36-year armed conflict. Having stage-managed the peace negotiations that established the restrictive parameters of Guatemala’s Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), army officers and guerilla leaders ceded control of truth seeking to Commission staff and their civil society partners, even as the latter mobilized to push the CEH to its investigative limits. The CEH final report’s finding that the army had committed genocide galvanized both sides. Victims’ associations insist on more truth alongside justice and reparations, while army perpetrators reject incriminating Commission findings. The Guatemalan case reveals how truth initiatives are at once politicized and polarizing and how politics interfere with a truth commission’s effort to produce a consensus history, end violence or afford reconciliation. While it confirms that confronting the past risks undermining the labor of transition architects, it also suggests that these may be necessary evils that could eventually contribute to transforming and strengthening democracy.

Introduction

The ‘third wave’ democratization literature shaped the parameters of the emergent field of transitional justice. Authors of this literature wrestled with competing imperatives. On the one hand, they recognized a need to address human rights violations committed by outgoing authoritarian rulers, the political benefits of which would be measured in a strengthening of democratic attitudes, values, rules and institutions. On the other hand, they saw the political danger that justice poses for fragile transitional regimes. Threats to punish wrongdoers can alienate influential actors with a faint commitment to democracy, which means that pursuit of retributive justice risks reversing painstakingly secured transitional gains.1

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If these early discussions were principally focused on assessing the trade-offs of prosecuting offenders, their recipe for cautious action helped launch the idea of pursuing truth as the means of confronting past repression. Popularized by the postpartheid South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), truth recovery had initially gained traction with similar commissions established to uncover the fate of the disappeared during Argentina’s Dirty War (1976–1983); those murdered during the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile (1973–1990); victims of civil war in El Salvador (1980–1992); and victims of armed conflict in Guatemala (1960–1996).

Hailed as a prudent alternative to trials, truth commissions pledged to substitute moral for legal accountability and to yield restorative rather than retributive justice. In pleading the case for truth over trials, commission advocates developed powerful arguments, underscoring the need for political compromise and lauding truth’s conciliatory and peace building potential. They set grand goals for the process that included healing and dignifying victim-survivors, shaming perpetrators and producing a consensus narrative that would shock societies into permanently rejecting violent, authoritarian solutions in favor of a democratic politics rooted in the rule of law.

The landscape of transitional justice has evolved. Truth commissions remain the transitional justice mechanism of choice, with some three dozen created throughout the world in the wake of transitions from authoritarian rule and war to peace. Yet, truth is no longer commonly understood to be in tension with trials. Instead, it increasingly figures as part of comprehensive transitional justice strategies that include some combination of prosecutions, vetting, reparations and institutional reform. The truth commission’s shine has also dulled somewhat over time, as its goals prove stubbornly elusive. In a mix of theoretical and empirical reflection, observers have noted the difficulties of producing an authoritative record and relying on truth to entrench peace, democracy or reconciliation.

Even though transitional justice writings have roots in the democratic transitions literature, which underscores political trade-off and risk, they have shied away from debating the politics of truth. They privilege instead analyses that assess

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the psychological benefits of truth seeking, discuss its philosophical and spiritual significance or propose technical remedies as a means of improving outcomes.

Commentators on transitional justice who engage with politics challenge claims about truth’s potential to achieve ambitious goals, highlight irreconcilable tensions between the competing objectives and question the evidentiary basis for linking truth to outcomes that include peacebuilding and democracy. However, they mostly stop short of providing a political analysis of truth’s shortcomings and refrain from seriously investigating foundational claims about truth as political compromise or the dominant procedural democratic paradigm.

Important exceptions expand our analysis of politics beyond a confining concern with risk avoidance and cast democratic politics in broader, participatory terms. They challenge us to reconfigure reconciliation as a process rather than as a goal, and invite debate over the terms of reconciliation. In a similar vein, recent studies of perpetrator confessions and victim participation in truth telling take up a provocative discussion heretofore waged on the field’s margins by theorists who envisage truth as modeling the possibility for a deliberative democratic politics. These authors neither fear nor resist the political contention that transitional justice provokes, but rather embrace it as constituting the essence of dialogical democracy. To the extent that the process of truth recovery or the truths it yields can draw recalcitrant or marginalized players into the democratic arena and stimulate broad political debate, they should be encouraged rather than shunned.


Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, ‘The Moral Foundations of Truth Commissions,’ in Rotberg and Thompson, supra n 4; Andrew Schaap, Political Reconciliation (New York: Routledge, 2005).
My study of truth recovery in postwar Guatemala exposes a dynamic political struggle that is both attentive to risk and attracted by the optimism of a participatory and deliberative democratic vision. Resurrecting the notion of a high-stakes political game as portrayed in the democratization literature, I depict a Guatemalan scenario in which actors with deeply vested and conflicting interests are mobilized to set the parameters within which truth seeking occurs and to shape the process and its outcomes. The Guatemalan case reveals how truth initiatives are at once politicized and polarizing and how politics can interfere with a truth commission’s effort to produce a consensus history, end violence or afford reconciliation. Confrontations over the past can undermine the labor of transition architects and peacemakers. Instead of consolidating transitional gains, they can unleash them from their moorings, destabilize democratic practices and usher in renewed violence. Adopting a more participatory and deliberative view of democracy, this article suggests that these may be necessary evils that could eventually contribute to transforming and strengthening democracy. While the prospect of reversion is serious, a politicized transitional justice process that yields unsettling, polarizing impacts may prove essential and inevitable if historically unjust, unequal and exclusionary societies like Guatemala’s are to build peaceful and durable democracies.

I divide the exploration of the battle over truth into three parts. The first examines the crafting of the 1994 agreement that established the Commission for Historical Clarification (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, or CEH) and paved the way for the passage of the National Reconciliation Law (Decree 145/1996). Negotiated by the government, the military and former guerrilla forces – the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (Unidad Revolucionaria NacionalGuatemalteca, or URNG) – the agreement established a circumscribed framework for historical clarification and granted amnesty for political crimes committed by both sides, except when the crimes were genocide, torture and forced disappearance. The second part of the article focuses on the pursuit of truth between 1995 and 1999, an era in which CEH staff and their civil society partners took control of the truth recovery process, and the latter mobilized to push the Commission to its investigative limits. The third part inspects the polarizing reactions generated by the truth, in particular the CEH’s declaration of genocide. Empowered by their involvement in truth seeking, victims’ associations insist on more truth, alongside the justice and reparations they are owed, while the army rejects incriminating findings and resorts to violence to ensure an impunity that neither a peace agreement nor an amnesty law ultimately could guarantee. The concluding section of the article addresses implications for Guatemalan democracy, underscoring the political risks of confronting the past while revealing the untapped, democratizing potential of truth.

This article draws on research conducted over more than a decade of fieldwork in Guatemala City and in three rural departments (provinces) hard hit by the armed conflict.15 My study places the voices of Guatemalan stakeholders in conversation

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15 I interviewed 564 Guatemalans either individually or collectively between October 1997 and June 2009. This comprised 53 interviews with retired or active members of the military or civil defense
with theoretical perspectives on transitional justice. Furthermore, it allows a virtual debate among Guatemalans who, from differing vantage points, have enormous interest in defining the content and contours of transitional justice and, by extension, reconciliation, peace and democracy. I make no pretense of drawing hard or scientific conclusions but instead seek to unpack the motivations, the rationale and the effects of truth seeking as perceived by individual actors, all of whom are subjects in a still-unfolding political drama.

The surveys used in the research were structured with a view to probing commonalities and differences. I presented the results before a range of audiences – rural communities, the Ministry of Defense, the National Reparations Commission, business leaders, politicians and victims’ associations – with the intention of offering data that might help catalyze real dialogue among stakeholders in transitional justice.

Crafting Historical Clarification

The end of the Cold War and the conclusion of peace agreements in neighboring Central American countries left war-weary Guatemalan combatants with little alternative but to reach their own accord. The signing of a peace agreement on 29 December 1996 thus brought the region’s most prolonged and brutal conflict to an official close. A decade had passed since the Guatemalan Catholic Church had launched a reconciliation dialogue and more than 40 years since the repression following the 1954 overthrow of the reformist Arbenz government sparked armed conflict. This conflict resulted in more than 600 villages being razed, an estimated 200,000 people killed or ‘disappeared’ and an additional million becoming refugees.

Several facets of Guatemalan peacemaking are striking. First, the process is considered a model because of its innovative decision to award civil society a formal consultative role, as well as the ambitious and comprehensive nature of the final agreements. It also signals a critical moment in Guatemala’s transition to democracy. Conforming to Dankwart Rustow’s vision of democratization on an installment plan, the Guatemalan negotiations arguably moved the country

further along a democratic continuum initiated by the enactment of constitutional reforms accompanied by a transition to elected civilian rule in the mid-1980s.\(^{18}\) Finally, the negotiations are an example of the elite pact making deemed conducive to successful negotiated transitions, as agreements hammered out by powerful political players – elected civilians, the military and the URNG – secured vital interests that permitted the process to move forward.\(^{19}\)

Participants highlight the importance of the 1994 agreement that established the CEH. A former URNG commander recalls,

We paid a courtesy visit to Havana at one point. There we were, chatting away amicably with Fidel, until he asked us, ‘How are the negotiations going? What are you negotiating now?’

‘Oh,’ we answered, ‘we are negotiating human rights.’

‘How long have you been negotiating this?’

‘Two years.’

‘Damn,’ Castro said, ‘How is it possible to spend two years discussing human rights?’

‘But,’ the Commander continued, by way of explanation,

this was the most explosive agreement. It touched a raw military nerve. The Agreement on Human Rights provoked the most confrontation at the negotiating table. We fought it out line by line, theme by theme.


How to address the serious violations committed during the conflict remained a sticking point. ‘At this stage in the negotiations things would always break off,’ the URNG commander notes, adding,

We were told that the army was in the process of assimilating human rights, that this required some internal work, they needed two or three months to get the army to accept the parameters of a Commission. So we agreed.

When the two sides reconvened, Guatemala’s defense minister announced the army’s position: ‘We are fully in support of a truth commission. Just like in Chile: truth but no trials.’\(^{20}\) A subordinate underscored the point: ‘We will not permit what happened in Argentina [to happen] here. None of us will be taken to trial.’\(^{21}\) The military’s agreement came with a number of conditions, also drawn from a careful assessment of truth initiatives elsewhere on the continent. Accordingly, the CEH was allowed to investigate all violations of human rights committed by

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\(^{19}\) O’Donnell and Schmitter, supra n 2.

\(^{20}\) Cited in Hayner, supra n 6 at 86.

both sides throughout the conflict, but without individualizing responsibility or expecting its findings to have any juridical effect.\textsuperscript{22}

Evenhandedness and impartiality were of paramount concern. ‘We needed to make sure society learned what the guerrillas had done,’ one officer remarks, while another asserts that fairness would have been compromised by attributing individual responsibility, because ‘anyone could look us up, find out where we were and when, but [the guerrillas] were clandestine, they used false names.’ Guarding against retribution was also very much on the military’s mind, as confirmed by its tabling of the National Reconciliation Law, which proposed to update earlier amnesties to cover the entire conflict period.

The military soon secured the guerrillas’ endorsement. By way of explanation, one insurgent leader notes that ‘you have to make some gesture so that you don’t fight until the last bullet,’ adding that in a display of responsible pragmatism, ‘we confirmed that what was revolutionary was also that which was viable, and that revolutionary is not a philosophical category, but one that reflects concrete conditions that pertain.’ More than largesse permitted the guerrillas’ agreement. The two sides recognized their common interest in limiting accountability. A former guerrilla declares, ‘To talk about dirty wars is stupidity, because this would mean that there are clean wars!’ An army participant concedes, ‘We both understood that there was really little point in shoving what happened in each other’s faces.’ For the URNG leadership, this was especially critical given its determination to remove all roadblocks to participation in a peacetime democratic polity.

The elite-crafted accord borrowed the language of peacebuilding, democracy and reconciliation adopted by other commissions of the era.\textsuperscript{23} The drafters’ commitment to sustainable peace, they insist, was sincere. A military official close to the negotiations recalls, ‘The president told us, “There won’t be winners and losers here, we Guatemalans need to rediscover each other,” and we took him at his word.’ A URNG counterpart explains,

> A different and new country could not be constructed on the basis of revenge or simple punishment. The truth about what happened needed to be known, it would create a new culture of reconciliation, as it was called at the time.

Civil society activists, meanwhile, denounced the agreement as insulting to the memory of Guatemala’s victim-survivors and designed to whitewash the past. One activist asks,

> If you were going to study the history, how can you not also reveal who committed these acts, their names and the offices they held? We have the right to know who committed these acts.

The lack of provisions for justice was equally injurious, as neither victim-survivors nor civil society were satisfied with the idea of historical clarification without


\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
punishment. As civil society was bypassed in the negotiations, its opposition was no match for the pressure exerted by governmental and international participants determined to keep a tentative peace process on track. The best it could do at that stage was to protest and delay the signing of the accord. Negotiators recall a tense atmosphere among the team members assembled to finalize the agreement in Oslo, Norway. One army official remembers,

The guerrillas had run into trouble with their base. They asked to halt the discussions so they could return home to explain their position to these groups, but were told to phone them instead. There was a real concern that things not be delayed further.

The CEH agreement constituted a political watershed in Guatemala’s transition. Adversaries found common ground, reaching a settlement that overcame a potentially serious obstacle to peace. In creating a fissure between the guerrilla command and its support base, however, the agreement also generated new political tensions. Human rights, indigenous and victims’ associations expressed disbelief and anger at the readiness with which the insurgency deserted its constituents. ‘We came to understand their shared interests,’ an activist states, noting that guerrilla leaders were more concerned with protecting themselves from retribution than with responding to victim-survivors’ demands for full disclosure and justice. Vehemently disagreeing, a URNG negotiator claims that civil society was acting unreasonably:

They believed we betrayed all those who died, but they didn’t get what we had come to understand . . . They called us sellouts . . . They [wanted] . . . a Super Nuremberg. They wouldn’t settle for anything less. Their vision was totally idealized.

Having failed to influence the framing of the CEH, civil society mobilized to confront the guerrilla leadership over the proposed National Reconciliation Law:\footnote{24}

We told them in no uncertain terms, you have these interests, well, we have these. We are sorry, but we will not be complicit, if you insist on an amnesty we will take you on.

Wise to the insurgents’ calculation – ‘They’d sign anything as long as it protected their interests, they were always watching their back,’ says one activist – civil society skillfully employed a divide and conquer strategy to secure guerilla support for its objectives. This maneuvering resulted in legislation that granted amnesty for all political crimes, with the exception of genocide, torture and forced disappearance – three violations that were the standard repertoire of the army but not of the insurgency. In the event, from civil society’s perspective, clarification became all the more imperative. If the truth about abuses perpetrated during the conflict could be exposed, the path to legal justice foreclosed by the CEH agreement could be reopened.\footnote{25}

\footnote{25} Jonas, supra n 16.
The Pursuit of Truth: Civil Society Takes the Lead

Activists emerged from the negotiations politically seasoned, cynical and combat-ready. As the focus turned toward establishing the CEH, indigenous and victims’ associations made a calculated decision. However opposed to the CEH’s mandate, they seized the only opportunity for accountability afforded them. They committed themselves to pushing a flawed CEH to its limits, intending to capitalize on their success in excluding key violations from the National Reconciliation Law by insuring that the Commission exposed the punishable crimes suffered by so many Guatemalans.26

The Recovery of Historical Memory Project

In the months following passage of the CEH agreement, the Guatemalan Archdiocese launched the Recovery of Historical Memory (Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica, or REMHI) project – a logical step for an institution long dedicated to the pursuit of peace and reconciliation. In establishing REMHI, the Church demonstrated that it shared civil society’s anger at the adoption of a truth-seeking process regarded as self-serving to its framers and insensitive to civilian victim-survivors. ‘We were in a Latin American context,’ a REMHI architect observes, ‘in which those who spoke of reconciliation were always most responsible for the violations. [Theirs was] a reconciliation against or [imposed] upon victim-survivors.’ REMHI proposed an alternative model congruent with the dialogue and understanding local clergy considered critical for social reintegration. As important, REMHI offered to serve as a launching pad for the CEH around the country. ‘Our search for information centered on rural communities whose physical inaccessibility and linguistic diversity would complicate the commission’s task,’27 Guatemala’s Archbishop explained. A REMHI project leader adds, ‘We got a head start; parishes and churches throughout Guatemala became a place where people could go give testimony.’

Having embarked on truth telling a year before the war came to an official close, REMHI’s focus on encouraging victim-survivors to tell their stories confronted the silencing effects of a prolonged politics of terror, as well as the ever-intimidating presence of soldiers and local militia members. ‘We announced that we would begin to collect testimonies on the Day of the Dead in 1995,’ a rural priest recalls, noting,

This was a symbolic beginning because it’s the day people go to cemeteries. On that day the cemetery was also filled with soldiers, sent there to terrorize people. We did what we could to open a space so that people would tell. Widows would come to the parish and whisper into my ear, ‘Listen, I want to give my testimony.’

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Some 5,500 victim-survivors braved their fears to testify. Excerpts from their stories, combined with statistical analysis and historical contextualization, fill the four volumes of a report whose April 1998 publication shattered a wall of silence and official denial. *Guatemala: Never Again!* exposes the prevalence of the amnesty-exempt crimes of torture and forced disappearance and takes a bold step further, suggesting that the armed forces perpetrated genocide. As intended, the project both laid the groundwork and raised the bar for the CEH, sensitizing rural communities to the need to tell, furnishing data and challenging the official Commission to confirm the prevalence of these punishable crimes and to probe the charge of genocide.28 However, the brutal murder of Bishop Juan Gerardi, the REMHI coordinator, less than two days after the report’s release shattered the illusion that revealing the truth would somehow foster reconciliation, strengthen peace and consolidate transitional democratic gains. It also exposed the enormous political risks of confronting the past.29

**The Commission for Historical Clarification**

Civil society assisted the CEH in myriad ways. As informed experts, advocates, watchdogs and networkers, individuals assumed the range of roles envisioned for civil society in truth-telling initiatives.30 Some served as commissioners and CEH staff members; forensic anthropologists provided analysis of exhumed remains; and REMHI, local and international human rights organizations all shared their databases with the Commission.31

Indigenous and victims’ associations were clear about their advocacy intentions. One activist notes, ‘We knew there was genocide – that wasn’t the question. What we wanted was for the Commission to record it.’ Civil society representatives developed a two-tiered approach. At the national level, they geared their efforts, first, toward securing the Commission’s pledge to investigate genocide and, second, toward ensuring that its commitment to the pledge never wavered. They intervened at key moments to remind commissioners, Guatemalans and the international community that they were closely monitoring the truth-seeking process. A July 1998 trip to Guatemala by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan was one particularly visible occasion for such action. Denied a meeting, two activists disguised themselves as reporters to gain access to Annan’s press conference. Under the media spotlight, they delivered a letter petitioning the CEH to reveal the genocidal nature of the armed conflict. One of those ‘reporters’ retrospectively muses,

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28 Ibid.


I don’t know if Annan ever read our letter, but this wasn’t our objective. We needed to make sure that Guatemalans and the world understood that we were serious when it came to genocide.

A parallel grassroots mobilization was conceived for a similar purpose. The calculation was simple: Picking up the trail blazed by REMHI, the movement would provide the Commission with the trust and support of the civilian victim-survivors upon whom the success of the CEH investigation hinged. The more people testified, and the more they spoke in unison about having witnessed indiscriminate killings of women and children, the harder it would be for either the CEH or Guatemalan society to deny genocide. ‘We encouraged them to talk about how they were corralled, as they called it, as the army carefully planned massacres,’ an organizer recalls. A colleague adds,

We recognized that the voice of thousands and thousands of victims could represent the collective voice of the Maya people . . . The voice would be so loud, it would be so strong that the CEH could not ignore it.

The impressive resources marshaled by civil society were critical in enabling the CEH to collect some 7,300 testimonies in just eight months of fieldwork. Queried about civil society’s contributions, a CEH staff member answers matter-of-factly, ‘I don’t know any organization of major importance with some sort of victim base that didn’t participate . . . Without victims’ organizations we couldn’t have done the work.’ Posed a similar question, civil society leaders describe organizing meetings in community after community, during which they stressed the importance of speaking truth to power:

We told them that it’s the moment to tell, so that this becomes part of history . . . We told them that they lived through it and if they don’t speak now, others will write books and it won’t be about them.

Although fear, mistrust and sadness prevented many from testifying or from telling all they knew, testimony givers regularly attest to the difference ‘people from organizations’ made in convincing them to appear before the Commission. Many agree, ‘Our leaders helped me understand why it was important to tell, even though I was afraid.’ Activists emphasize how those meetings jump-started truth telling, as assembled victim-survivors stayed long after the speeches and the invocations to rehearse their stories:

By offering a venue for survivors to collectively reconstruct the history, facts, actions and anecdotes about the past, we helped jog memories and gave victims a way to speak and to be listened to. Being able to speak about it collectively gave them more strength, more energy. Knowing that your neighbor will speak was an external motivation that reinforced an internal commitment to express yourself.

In the process, they also began to reweave a badly frayed communal social fabric. The telling and listening enabled victim-survivors to appreciate the shared nature of their individual experiences of suffering and survival. They began by remembering facts that interested a CEH tasked with documenting violence, but frequently
moved on to remembering collective acts of resistance – how they would organize to flee an advancing army, survive in the mountains and forests and, whenever possible, together bury their dead. An organizer who served as an interpreter for the CEH recollects the long wait to give testimony:

[The testimony givers] brought their rice, corn, beans and cooked together. In the kitchen and in the corridors they talked, trying to figure out what they’d be asked:

‘So do you remember?’
‘Right, that’s how it was.’
‘Do you remember when they came? And then we left?’

Sometimes they’d chuckle; it wasn’t all tears.

She also describes collective testimonies during which victim-survivors told of massacres: ‘People felt less alone, they felt freer to talk, they would reconstruct together – it was more social.’

Perpetrators and the CEH: On the Sidelines

For much of 1994, Guatemala’s warring sides occupied center stage, crafting a clarification agreement tailored to suit their sectoral interests by precluding the assignment of individual responsibility and preventing findings from having juridical effect. Once the ink on the agreement was dry, they retreated backstage, occasion-ally threatening but mostly observing an unfolding process and stonewalling it whenever necessary. Although the pursuit of their aims assumed a different form, their behavior continued to be shaped by a profound interest in avoiding accountability. Much as Leigh Payne suggests, their resistance to being labeled perpetrators had a legal and moral dimension that entailed avoiding punishment as well as preserving honor.32

In his retrospective assessment, CEH Coordinator Christian Tomuschat tempers his criticism of the URNG’s failure to provide requested documents with praise for its participation in working meetings and willingness to ‘openly acknowledge its responsibility.’33 This view is not universally shared by the Commission’s civil society partners. Drawing a parallel between the URNG’s attitude during this period and the defensive posture insurgents assumed during the peace negotiations, the partners remember bitter confrontations with commanders who pressured them to conceal unsavory truths:

They first asked us not to reveal information about the guerrillas. But although the army committed most of the massacres and forced disappearances, there were communities where the guerrillas did too. They wanted us not to say what they did. But we just couldn’t and then our compañeras received threats.

32 Payne, supra n 12.
The URNG leadership prefers Tomuschat’s view. One former commander says, ‘We had nothing to hide . . . Look, as Tomuschat said, we gave them whatever they asked for.’ The former leaders recite their contributions, notably their willingness to accept the conclusions of the Commission and ‘publicly ask for forgiveness, eight days after the release of [the CEH report,] Memory of Silence.’ The guerrilla rank and file is more circumspect in its assessment. Fearful of the consequences of testifying, most guerillas tended to keep their distance from the CEH and REMHI or to measure what they revealed. Their testimonies focused on military atrocities suffered or witnessed, rather than on their roles in the conflict. When they did mention participating in the insurgency, they were sure to explain the extenuating circumstances that led them to join. When I ask them why they did not testify or why they censored their testimonies, former guerillas typically answer, ‘It was too dangerous,’ or, ‘We weren’t dumb or crazy.’ Pressed to tell what and whom they feared, their responses are evasive. Some shrug or respond with the classic Guatemalan saying, ‘Saber?’ (who knows?), delivered with a pointed look that can only be interpreted by those in the know. Most say, ‘The others,’ but a few add, ‘Everyone,’ signaling their own commanders as well as their military adversaries.

Tomuschat’s assessment is far more critical of the armed forces than of the guerillas. He states that, pursuing a ‘deliberate strategy of obstruction,’ the military ignored the CEH’s letters of inquiry, denied the existence of military archives and, according to Commission fieldworkers, dissuaded its rank and file from testifying. Victim-survivors and activists agree with him, while army officers loudly contest the charges. They plead ignorance, claiming that the requested strategic documents did not exist. The war, they contend, was fought in a highly decentralized fashion that allowed individual regional commanders to improvise in making operational decisions. Moreover, they note, army overtures were rebuffed by partisan commissioners. Soldiers eager to testify about abuses suffered were routinely turned away from rural parishes and CEH offices – ‘They weren’t interested in what [soldiers] had to say,’ says one officer – and the documents the army provided were tossed:

We paid two experts to retrieve and photocopy evidence. We produced six volumes of press clippings and brief commentary about what the guerrillas did. When we delivered [these], they said, ‘No, this comes from the army,’ and they threw it in the garbage.

Occasionally, conversations with members of the armed forces tell a different story, one in which power and fear combine to account for an admitted lack of collaboration. The CEH had no legal means to compel the army to comply with its requests, and the army retained sufficient clout and internal cohesion during the transition to refrain from cooperating. Rural conscripts worried that giving testimony would make them too visible and provoke acts of revenge from civilian victim-survivors or former insurgents living nearby. The officer corps’ fears were of a different magnitude. Given the exclusion of genocide, torture and forced disappearance from the amnesty legislation, military testimony would almost

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34 Ibid., 250.
certainly implicate officers. The punishment that might ensue from truth telling could take a variety of forms and emanate from different sources. A special forces commander admits what others insinuate:

Because we all come from the same shrub, as we say, we all conform, and we shut our mouths. Nobody wants to burn anyone, because then that person will burn someone else – it’s a chain. It’s not convenient, people can get killed off. It’s better to keep silent.

As if that fear were not enough, the prospect of facing legal proceedings loomed. ‘Information about acts that the army allegedly committed, on such and such a date . . . or about who was part of which patrol?’ a general concedes, ‘Yes, that’s the kind of information the army didn’t provide . . . We thought that this information would then lead to trials against military officers.’

Silence, stonewalling and denial were also rational responses to an emotional need. What remained unsaid or unknown could not tarnish reputations. In stark contrast to my conversations with civilian victim-survivors who recall in vivid detail the events surrounding a kidnapping or massacre, the military avoids discussion of wartime violence. Those few soldiers willing to broach the topic are vague about what happened and invariably refuse to place themselves at the battle scene. ‘I watched my comrades from up, over the hill,’ ‘I was at the rear’ or ‘I only learned later’ are standard phrases they use to describe acts of violence. Stopping short of denial, one officer with whom I spoke several times insists dismissively that ‘any excesses’ were the responsibility of rogue officers who violated Annex H of a military strategy that carefully delineated military engagement in terms consistent with the conventions governing warfare.35

By encouraging soldiers who suffered insurgent abuse to testify and by compiling tomes of evidence on guerrilla atrocities, the military also endeavored to shift the terms of reference, hoping to portray its soldiers as victims rather than aggressors. Members of the armed forces speak of their personal traumas, of watching comrades die and of personal lives destroyed. ‘My family disintegrated,’ a general tells me,

My wife had two miscarriages because she was so frightened, and then she left me. When my son saw me come home with blood-stained boots, he asked me why there was so much blood, and I said, ‘No, my son, this is paint’ . . . These are the traumas of war.

From time to time, they reach further, casting themselves in the role of maligned hero. The significance attached to this alternative narrative is captured in the mural that graces the walls of the lobby of Guatemala’s Ministry of Defense. It depicts smiling soldiers calmly directing frightened civilians away from their burning village to safety. It is similarly reflected in those few stories told in great detail that place officers at the scene of a massacre after the fighting ended. In these, soldiers

35 See also, Mario A. Mérida G., Venganza, o, juicio historico (Guatemala City: Litografias Modernas, 2003).
tell of leading rescue missions. ‘I remember I was 23 or so at the time,’ an air force pilot dramatically recalls,

The guerrillas had massacred, and a comrade and I flew in two helicopters, the houses were still smoking, there were tons of dead, and we were there to help the wounded, to evacuate them . . . And as we tried to land, they started to shoot at us with machine guns. It was like a movie, and it was then that we had to shoot rockets, and drop bombs.

Soldiers’ agreement on objectives does not extend to strategy. Officers break their pact of silence to dispute the wisdom of the military’s approach to truth telling. Many sound a defensive note, claiming impotence in the face of betrayal by a biased and politicized Commission, ‘made up of teams . . . of leftists who remained true to their beliefs . . . Marxists influenced by the human rights community.’ Others are sharply critical of their colleagues, insistent that another response, alternatively more collaborative or sharply aggressive, would have better served the aims of the institution and its officers. They contend that the officers in charge were not ‘vested in the peace process’ or were naïve and misguided, ‘too trusting of the president’s word and the Commission’s mandate . . . overconfident and tired of fighting, happy that it was finally over.’ One argues that instead of passively watching a dangerous process gather momentum, propelled by civic groups bent on seeking revenge,

they should have mobilized to prevent passage of a reconciliation law that was neither amnesty nor reconciliation, and should have insisted on a military presence on the Commission to counter the communist[s].

Hoping to preserve military honor, they instead stained the army’s reputation. By sitting down with the . . . Commission [and] explain[ing] why certain actions were taken . . . they could have clarif[ied] at least those they could . . . But no, they preferred to shut themselves off – that was their attitude.

Worse yet, to this group, the language employed in presenting evidence about guerrilla atrocities constituted an admission of military guilt:

In submitting [this evidence], the army said, ‘I am bringing you these to balance out the information you [have] collected against the army.’ But, they had no reason to be balancing information . . . this wasn’t what the army should have been doing.

The Battle over Outcomes: Contesting Truth and Reconciliation

In a view widely embraced by scholars and practitioners, Audrey Chapman and Patrick Ball applaud the CEH for producing ‘a more complete, consistent, and coherent report than any other commission to date.’ The Commission’s broad, historical approach and in-depth social scientific research, its staggering statistical evidence and rigorous, hard-hitting social and economic analysis, the diligence of its staff and the unflinching language in which it reported its findings are praised by many. Referenced mainly in passing, civil society contributions are described as strong and helpful, while perpetrators’ lack of cooperation is portrayed as highlighting the need for truth commissions to have offsetting capabilities, including
witness protection programs, search and seizure powers and a credible threat of prosecution, none of which the CEH enjoyed.\textsuperscript{36}

These observations are consistent with approaches to truth telling that tend to emphasize its technical features and downplay its politicized character. Yet, from the outset, Guatemalan victim-survivors and perpetrators were at political loggerheads over confronting the past, as perpetrators consistently resisted the accountability and redress that victim-survivors steadfastly demanded. The conflict played out in different ways at successive moments in the truth-seeking process, depending on the shifting political leverage of the sides and the strategies each employed in pursuit of its aims. Having thus established a CEH that diminished the likelihood of accountability, perpetrators found themselves on the defensive, seeking to counter the intense pressure and mobilization of an ascendant civil society waging a bitter struggle for truth.

The truths produced undermined the aspirations of the elite settlement. Harsh verdicts were rendered in \textit{Guatemala: Never Again!} and confirmed in \textit{Memory of Silence}. Both armies stood accused of war crimes and the military faced charges of genocide. The latter shouldered blame for 93 percent of the conflict’s human rights violations and the insurgent forces for 3 percent, with the remainder assigned to other actors, notably political parties and elite economic sectors. The two reports’ recommendations were similarly ambitious. The Guatemalan state was called upon to disseminate the contents of \textit{Memory of Silence}, to fulfill its duty to prosecute individuals whose crimes were not covered by the National Reconciliation Law and to enact a reparations program partly designed by victim-survivors. The findings also provided a platform from which to appeal for broader reforms designed to consolidate civilian rule, strengthen the rule of law and address the root causes of the armed conflict by tackling racism and striving for increased socioeconomic inclusion of indigenous Guatemalans.\textsuperscript{37}

The release of the CEH report ushered in a third, sustained phase of political struggle, one aimed at shaping the consequences of truth. At issue was whether the truths told by the CEH would lead to political paralysis and backsliding or provide the push needed to implement proposed recommendations. Victim-survivors and army perpetrators – those most vested in the outcomes – have both mobilized to influence the course taken. They dispute the veracity and significance of truths revealed and clash over the terms of reconciliation, demonstrating the difficulties truth commissions face in producing an authoritative narrative that fosters repair and deterrence. The challenges are often framed in spiritual, philosophical and psychological terms. Behind the frame, however, lurks a contest about who gets


Mostly combatants died

The army committed genocide

Figure 1. Perceived consequences of the armed conflict, by sector of society, Guatemala, 2005.

to configure the contours of the political landscape and what shape Guatemalan politics will assume.

Truth

Memory of Silence has not generated a consensus history of Guatemala’s war. As demonstrated by my survey results (Figure 1), civil society and the peasantry (sectors that bore the brunt of the violence) understand the conflict in a manner consistent with CEH findings. Almost all say that the army committed genocide, and a solid majority believe that innocent civilians figure disproportionately among wartime casualties. By contrast, the groups to which the CEH assigns primary responsibility for the violence, mainly the armed forces, but also politicians and wealthy Guatemalans, challenge core Commission findings. They deny that genocide occurred and insist that those killed were mainly combatants. Not surprisingly, respondents hold equally contradictory attitudes about the need to disseminate findings. Victim-survivors I interviewed clamor for a public education effort so that ‘everyone can know what happened,’ while those implicated vehemently oppose the inclusion of either report in school curricula. ‘It is not

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38 The surveys were not designed to establish a direct causal link between respondents’ views and truth recovery, but to probe popular perceptions roughly six years after the report’s publication.

39 More research is needed in order to arrive at a better understanding of guerilla attitudes. Nonetheless, the apparent willingness of former guerrillas to embrace the CEH’s findings may be related to the fact that the Commission accuses them of few punishable crimes, condemning them mostly for exposing the civilian population to military retaliation.
educational,’ a retired officer observes, ‘We can’t tell a truth that many people don’t accept . . . Fathers have told me they don’t want their children reading this.’ Another officer recounts a conversation:

‘Daddy, did you kill people?’

‘No, my son, why are you asking this?’

‘Because in school they are saying the military killed people and they showed us a book where they say everyone in the military killed.’

These are lies that should not be taught . . . they are poisoning our children’s minds.

These reactions are testimony to the significance the two sides attach to truth. Victim-survivors convey indignation, pride and sadness as they stress the importance of the CEH. The Commission matters deeply to them, both as product and as process. Its importance to them is in part a function of the bold truths the CEH was willing to reveal and in part a reflection of their own, critical engagement in the pursuit of those truths.

Conversations with victim-survivors invariably drift toward discussion of genocide. For the most politically minded, the finding constitutes a watershed, providing long overdue official recognition of the historical oppression endured by Guatemala’s indigenous peoples. One victim-survivor notes,

We weren’t just telling a story about people being killed, we were telling a story that has its own antecedents . . . We saw the CEH as an opportunity to write part of our history, to tell of systematic policies to exterminate indigenous people.

Others emphasize its psychologically restorative properties. ‘[The military’s] talk of social cleansing causes us a great deal of pain,’ an organizer explains, ‘because it means our Mayan communities were garbage. This was why it was so important that the truth be known.’ They also stress the unfair guilt that victim-survivors continue to shoulder:

They say this was a civil war because the soldiers doing the killing were indigenous. But that is how they force us to carry a responsibility they don’t assume. We don’t see it like that and the CEH agreed. We lived it as a plan that destroyed villages, communities, in which thousands of men, women and children were killed.

Activists are emboldened by the CEH’s condemnation of a state that brutally violated the rights of citizens and its recognition that those harmed deserve justice and repair, both of which confirm their innocence and the legitimacy of their ongoing struggle for redress. ‘The Commission was just the beginning,’ victim-survivors’ representatives forcefully state, pledging a continued fight to acquire more information on the conflict years (notably the location of clandestine grave sites), to secure punishment for the guilty and to obtain just compensation for survivors. The process itself is empowering.40 By dignifying victim-survivors, truth seeking helped transform Guatemalan victims into survivors and resisters. In recovering

40 See, Laplante, supra n 13; Victoria Sanford, Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Rachel Sieder, ‘War, Peace and the Politics of Memory,’ in
their stories, the CEH reminded them of the shared nature of their experiences and their capacity collectively to organize and resist. As they discover their voices, they also grasp their capacity to intervene politically and sense their potential influence. Individual testimony-givers frequently draw a causal link between their willingness to remember and tell, the CEH staff believing in them and witnessing a commission reveal their truths to the world. Several note that they continue to tell their stories. Elaborating on the form the telling now takes, many recount participation in protest marches staged to draw attention to the plight of the ‘disappeared’ or to demand that the architects of the genocide be held accountable and victim-survivors receive reparations. They confidently describe displaying laminated photographs of their dead or missing relatives, pointed reminders of what they lost and what they are owed. ‘Whenever we participate, whenever we march,’ one widow states,

we wear our traditional dress and we bring our photographs, because there was a genocide, and the government needs to look us in the eye. They won’t forget our loved ones.

Testimony-givers’ pride in their achievements as ‘memory entrepreneurs’ also stems from the perceived effectiveness of a strategy designed to make them heard by combining their lived experience with their numbers and unity. ‘We didn’t just help with the testimony,’ an activist points out, describing how CEH staff would ask me what I thought, what I said mattered. They would say, ‘Who should we talk to about indigenous things?’ They wanted me to contribute, because, as they would say, ‘You are the person who really knows.’

Instances in which particularly collaborative relationships developed imparted important confidence and skills. The same activist gives this account of her personal transformation from community organizer to national activist:

I understood that our personal and even our organizational experience were not enough. I discovered the importance of reading. I knew what happened in the Quiche, where I lived, but I needed to know about other places, because otherwise you can’t really have an opinion, you can’t speak or get others to listen to you.

Denial of the veracity of the truths told, meanwhile, becomes a crucial first line of defense for perpetrators who scramble to resist both the moral and the legal accountability suggested by the CEH findings. The perpetrators condemn a truth that undermines the notion that ‘we did not have a policy of extermination’ and that forecasts trials in which ‘there won’t be justice, only condemnation.’ They discredit the messengers as biased, politicized liars. How could a Church openly aligned with the guerrillas produce an objective report about wartime violations? ‘Of course they weren’t going to point a finger at themselves,’ a former defense

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41 Elizabeth Jelin, State Repression and the Labors of Memory (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
minister observes in denouncing the REMHI. And how could a truth commission
run by ‘subversives’ clarify history? ‘I don’t know which truth is stuck [in the final
report], but it’s not mine,’ a colonel notes, adding,

[The CEH] was not interested in searching for truth . . . They just wanted to publish
this truth, to get this truth out . . . so as not to displease those covering CEH expenses.

‘Those with money got what they wanted: to paint the army as vile assassins,’ an
air force pilot angrily concurs, weaving a wide conspiratorial web that entangles
the international community and Guatemalan civil society.

The tenor of army criticisms echoes a familiar wartime refrain in which those
who dare criticize military activities are branded as subversives. In a changing
political environment, however, the appropriate course of action is not immediately
apparent. The new peacetime era does not automatically lend itself to a politics of
terror and, for the first time in a long time, civil society shows signs of becoming
a potentially formidable adversary. Its unanticipated victory in shepherding the
course of truth seeking has given civil society not only a voice but also a platform
and a cause. Because that cause so directly threatens the military institution, the
more energized victims’ associations become in demanding truth-based redress,
the more vigorously perpetrators lash out, in an almost frantic effort to undermine
both truth and its proponents.

**Reconciliation**

Reconciliation is another casualty of the political battle to shape the contours of
truth-based accountability. The results of my 2006 survey are indicative: Only
14 percent of respondents described Guatemala as reconciled, while close to half
(44%) believed another war is possible. Although civil conflict has not resumed,
Bishop Gerardi’s assassination was just the opening act of a political drama in a
decade marked by threats and acts of violence. Indeed, between 2000 and 2008, the
human rights ombudsman’s office registered over 1,300 violent attacks on truth
defenders, individuals who either furnish evidence about atrocities or who publicly
demand accountability.42

Perpetrators and victim-survivors trade blame for this political and social polar-
ization and offer competing prescriptions for achieving reconciliation. The military
accuses CEH commissioners and their civil society partners of being provocateurs,
deliberately pursuing a truth that precludes reconciliation. ‘Under the spell of hu-
man rights people,’ one officer notes, the Commission sought to ‘dehumanize us.’
Another defiantly insists,

Reconciliation begins and ends with the [CEH] report. These are the kinds of things
that make the armed forces retreat to the ideological trenches. Look, we can’t be stupid
or disingenuous. We can’t undress in front of them. What they want is a final judgment.

Military participants in the peace process also contrast personal friendships devel-
oped with URNG commanders during the negotiations with the hostility that has

been a hallmark of their interactions with civil society representatives ever since. On the rare occasions when individuals who hold contradictory views about the conflict meet, ‘there is a lot of confrontation, entrenched positions, accusations and finger pointing. Missing is the desire to tell in order to achieve reconciliation, to seek relief and forgiveness.’

Assailing civil society organizations, army officers describe feeling cornered and under attack by activists who, in their view, mobilize society in opposition to the military, wrongly accuse the armed forces of being an institution of crimes that, at best, a few rogue officers committed, aggressively petition for information the military cannot or will not provide and demand a type of legal justice prohibited by law when they have no desire to see justice done at all. Officers argue that civil society derails progress toward reconciliation by threatening and tarnishing an institution that constitutes the backbone of the Guatemalan nation.

The views of representatives of victims’ associations strongly differ. These individuals applaud civil society’s activism and the information they helped expose as affording a tentative step toward meaningful social repair. As they see it, responsibility for political polarization rests decidedly elsewhere. The army’s refusal to acknowledge genocide deters progress toward peace and reconciliation. Their attempts to frame the situation differently are a transparent political ploy intended to shift the onus of responsibility from truth resisters onto truth seekers. ‘While those who are responsible talk of polarization, victim-survivors see an opportunity to know the truth,’ a Mayan activist maintains.

Because the meaning attached to reconciliation has real implications for how the next transitional justice chapter is written, its definition, content and trajectory become an even deeper source of contestation. As Figure 2 shows, military prescriptions require forgiving and forgetting. As one officer remarks, ‘We need to wipe the slate clean and start over again. It’s as simple as that.’ His colleague pleads,

We can’t achieve reconciliation through documents but through people’s will. If they really want to reconcile, they will forgive. Forgiveness needs to be born in your heart. Without forgiveness, there is no reconciliation.

Significantly, victim-survivors and civil society do not entirely disagree with this view. A solid majority endorses forgiveness and one-third of individual victim-survivors concede that forgetting permits reconciliation (see Figure 2). Victims’ and victimizers’ views differ markedly, however, on the content and sequence of reconciliation. Victims consider perpetrators’ demand that they forgive and forget unrealistic and injurious. ‘How can we be reconciled when we have never been conciled?’ they wonder.

A just reconciliation requires perpetrators and their accomplices, the state and the Guatemalan political and economic elites first to do the hard work they strenuously resist. Those who committed crimes must now take the initiative. They must begin to remember, building on the foundation laid by REMHI and the CEH, by providing more information and offering the attendant acknowledgment, justice,
reparations and reform that victim-survivors need and deserve. As one activist argues,

They first need to recognize what they did . . . There is no reconciliation yet because there are so many things that aren’t yet clear. Their clarifying things and assuming responsibility would help. They would say, ‘I did this, it was me,’ and then explain why they did it, why it happened. That would be a start.

Concluding on a Democratic Note

Truth seeking has generated a prolonged and unsettling political struggle in Guatemala over configuring and reconfiguring the contours of transitional justice. What began as a battle to set the initial agenda for historical clarification evolved into a contest over shaping the quantity and quality of truths revealed. This escalated into a confrontation over determining the possibilities and limits of accountability. The struggle is also unsettling because of its broader political ramifications. Transitional justice is not the only agenda subject to reconfiguring; the contours of Guatemalan democracy are being shaped and reshaped as well.

The CEH agreement embraced the conciliatory peace- and democracy-building objectives typically associated with truth commissions. Significantly, it also exemplifies the kinds of conservative political pacts negotiated during elite-controlled transitions to democracy.43 Guatemala’s authoritarian regime retained sufficient

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control of the transition process to dictate the terms of an agreement that protected it from legal accountability. Its ability to do so was bolstered by the positive reception its proposal received from insurgent commanders who shared the army’s interest in avoiding retribution. Assent to army terms, however, was also predicated on guerrilla concerns that pushing for more would derail a transitional process that was the only remaining avenue through which the URNG could pursue its political aspirations.

The unexpected then happened. Far from freezing democracy, as scholars of pact-making expect under such conditions, the elite political settlement unraveled. The truth-seeking process was able to achieve the unintended because of a number of unforeseen factors, including civil society’s newfound powers of persuasion and its ability to marshal evidence, the miscalculations of passive or stonewalling perpetrators, the receptivity and due diligence of CEH staff and the exemptions inserted into the National Reconciliation Law. The process revealed patterns of abuse that included crimes of genocide, torture and forced disappearance, which are subject to prosecution.

If this article has helped erase doubts about what happened and why, uncertainty lingers over its implications. For those who wager on truth as a mechanism that can secure the transformations perceived as necessary to consolidating transitional gains, Guatemala’s CEH appears to disappoint. It produced too much truth, apportioned too much blame, unleashed excessive civic mobilization and raised the specter of retributive justice. A truth unhinged was bound to trigger an aggressively defensive reaction on the part of perpetrators, thereby confirming the worst fears of those who signal the political dangers of confronting the past. Feelings of betrayal tinged with anger, injury and fear led those implicated by Commission findings to abandon their lukewarm embrace of democratic practices and predispositions in favor of the time-tested strategy of intimidation and violence. That so many Guatemalans predicted renewed civil strife is hardly surprising given the prevailing political environment, in which human rights are routinely violated and impunity reigns, allowing the architects of genocide to be shielded from the law and even to compete for the highest political offices.

Even though the pursuit of truth in Guatemala failed to secure the cultural and procedural transformations envisioned by transitional justice advocates, democratic transition scholars’ and CEH crafters’ dire predictions of democracy’s demise have proven unwarranted to date. Actually, truth seeking may have sown the seeds for another set of equally consequential democratic transformations. It galvanized indigenous and victims’ associations – representatives of historically marginalized sectors of Guatemalan society. Their mobilization reflects a wise calculation of their political capabilities and a brave commitment to marshaling these in the exercise of their democratic rights. Their efforts also yielded dividends. Some were organizational: the associations coordinated their efforts, (re)established their leadership

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credentials and launched a massive, grassroots initiative that convinced victim-survivors of the need to break their silence and speak truth to power. Significantly, these activists and their constituents also attained a much sought-after victory: the investigation and, better yet, the declaration of genocide. This recognition of historical wrongs and, by extension, of human rights carries enormous symbolic political weight. Finally, the CEH’s findings of genocide and historical patterns of racism and exclusion, accompanied by extensive recommendations for reforms, has legitimized the ongoing struggle of indigenous and victims’ associations for justice, reparations and, as one Mayan activist stresses, work to ‘reform the oppressive structures that permitted the genocide.’

The same activist notes that the truth-seeking process led to the (re)genesis of an indigenous political movement aimed at reclaiming lost political voices:

After the violence, there was a pause, as people were afraid of exercising their rights. But then REMHI and the CEH contributed to awakening a collective consciousness among victim-survivors, demanding that these harms be repaired.

This awakening triggered an expansive process of organization and mobilization that is beginning to show tangible results:

As indigenous people we have woken up, and we have come to recognize that we have dignity as individuals and as a people. It is a long-term process, but I am confident that within a few years we will see its fruits, because this process has helped us build our collective consciousness.

The emergence of indigenous and victims’ associations as contenders on the Guatemalan social and political scene figures among the few tangible results of the truth-seeking process. As indigenous victim-survivors flex their newfound muscle, they are resisted by historical elites whose weakened grip remains firm enough to protect the status quo. Elites manipulate the political levers they have always controlled and repress those who demand change, branding peaceful protesters as terrorists, as they have long done. The outcome of the struggle over truth and its consequences hang in the balance. Guatemala could plunge into a deeper war with its past if the goals of truth seeking indeed prove irreconcilable. A more hopeful scenario is that sustained mobilization by the country’s indigenous victim-survivors secures increasing democratic dividends by forcing Guatemalan politics to become more inclusive, participatory and respectful of the rights of all citizens.

History’s verdict on the transitional justice process has yet to be rendered. Guatemala’s truth commissions may well be remembered for triggering polarization and violence that shattered a fragile democratic foundation. Yet, by generating political debate and empowering new political players, truth also has the potential to emerge as an unsung hero in Guatemala, enabling a broadened and deepened transition from war to peace and from authoritarianism to democracy.

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