

Evangelicals and Politics in Guatemala

By Jason Howd

On 27 May, the evangelical church known as the Christian Brotherhood (Fraternidad Cristiana) inaugurated its new *Mega Fráter* or “mega-church” in the city of San Cristóbal, a suburb of Guatemala City, after seven years of construction.

The new church facility, which was built at a cost of about \$30 million (\$10 million over-budget), is reportedly the largest of its kind in Latin America and the main auditorium can hold slightly more than 12,000 people. Christian Brotherhood, founded by Pastor Jorge López in '78 with just 22 parishioners, is notably one of the larger evangelical congregations in Guatemala, with more members than the maximum capacity of the new building.

In recent decades evangelical groups have gained popularity among the middle and lower classes in major cities as well as in small towns that are often on the margins of larger cities. The evangelicals have earned respect by concentrating on combating the excessive use of drugs and alcohol, which has become a major problem throughout Guatemala.

For centuries a country dominated by Roman Catholicism, Guatemala is experiencing a surge in evangelical church growth and is said to have the largest evangelical following in Latin America. According to the most recent studies, Protestants in Guatemala who universally identify themselves as evangelicals represent about 30% of the nation's total population of about 13 million people.

Public opinion polls for decades have documented the decline of Roman Catholic parishioners in Guatemala and the steady increase in evangelical members, as well as an increase in those who now claim to have no religious affiliation.

“In the last 30 years Guatemala has seen more growth in the Evangelical Church than anywhere else in the world,” claimed Protestant pastor Rodolfo Mendoza of Iglesia Casa de Dios.

Evangelical groups also are reported to own or control many radio and television stations in Guatemala. This is evidenced by the communication empire of pastor Carlos “Cash” Luna of the House of God Church (Iglesia Casa de Dios), who is reported to own at least 25 broadcasting outlets and has his own mega-church in the works to rival the Christian Brotherhood's new building.

The political power and influence of the Christian Brotherhood was made obvious by the attendance of Guatemala's President, Óscar Berger, and other officials such as the both the presidents of the Congress and Judiciary and the ambassadors of Taiwan and Israel at the megachurch's inaugural services on 27 May.

Politics have played an important role for many evangelicals in Guatemala, such as popular mega-church leader Harold Caballeros, who is making his bid for president. Caballeros, who resigned his pastorate to run for public office, founded his own large congregation, Iglesia El Shaddai, with satellite churches in many other countries. However, Caballeros is very low on the list of presidential hopefuls.

“Not everybody here is going to vote for him; we are one church but in politics each person thinks differently,” said Jorge Ramos, during the opening ceremonies of the new Christian Brotherhood church.

"In the United States, since the time of the founding fathers, there has been a manifestation of Puritan beliefs in politics," said Caballeros. "Here, the evangelicals think participation in politics is a sin."

However, as the Caballeros political movement grows, it is making attempts to distance itself from its past with retired Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt, a former military dictator and a controversial evangelical politician who has served in Congress and wants to make another run for the nation's presidency. During his time in the executive office ('82-'83) his weekly televised speeches were blended with both political and biblical messages, but he is more universally known for his "scorched earth policies" against Maya leftists during the bloody civil war when tens of thousands of *campesinos* were massacred by Guatemalan military forces and allied Self-Defense Patrols (Vol. 26, No. 2).

Ríos Montt founded the Guatemalan Republican Front political party in '89 and tried to run for president in '90, but was prohibited from entering the race by the Constitutional Court due to a constitutional provision banning people who had participated in military coups from becoming president. With his attempt to run in '94 also banned, he supported his fellow FRG friend Alfonso Portillo as candidate for the presidency, which Portillo narrowly lost in '95 and won in '99.

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