Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Latin America

EDITED BY

Paul Freston



Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in the Global South

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From War to Reconciliation: Guatemalan Evangelicals and the Transition to Democracy, 1982–2001

C. Mathews Samson

The antidemocratic character of the Guatemalan political tradition has its roots in an economic structure characterized by the concentration of productive goods in a few hands. On that basis, a regime of multiple exclusions is established, to which were added the elements of a racist culture that is, in its turn, the most profound expression of a system of violent and dehumanizing social relations. The State slowly articulated itself as an instrument to safeguard this structure, guaranteeing the persistence of exclusion and injustice.

—Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, Guatemala, memoria del silencio (1999, 17)

The past two decades have been a time of intense social and political turmoil in Guatemala. They encompass the most brutal part of a thirty-six-year internal war in which some two hundred thousand people lost their lives, a return to democratic civilian governance in 1986, a peace process culminating in the formal end to the civil war in December 1996, and the subsequent shaky process of institutionalizing aspects of the peace process in the past five years. Institutionalizing peace requires a process of democratization that, in turn, requires a broad range of participation from citizens. Participation includes space for pressing demands for social justice and for the formation of coalitions that can organize against the most pernicious

forms of exclusion, such as those sketched in the epigraph, as described by the Commission for Historical Clarification (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, CEH), established by the 1994 Oslo Accord between the Guate malan government and the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca

In this context, this chapter examines the contributions of evangelicals to the consolidation of democracy in that strife-torn nation. I argue that, despite the pluralism within the Protestant community of Guatemala, there is considerable ambiguity when considering whether or not evangelicals make a positive contribution to democratic consolidation. While the diversity of political perspectives within the evangelical community points toward a type of participation in civil society that leans in the direction of democratization, the meaning of Protestantism's ties to the country's power structure remains highly ambivalent.¹

Given ongoing stereotypes of evangelicals and concern about the specter of religious fundamentalism in many parts of the world, it is difficult to find assessments of evangelicals and politics in Latin America that are not overly optimistic, excessively critical, or simply uninformed about evangelical pluralism, This chapter's focus on the political context and the social location of evangelical political actors contributes a case study to the growing literature on the role evangelicals play in Latin American politics. The nexus examined is the relationship of evangelical faith to the political activities of the people interviewed. While the theory of democracy and the political context of Guatemala provide a frame for analysis, an intentional effort is made to hear the voices of Guatemalan evangelicals as they themselves make sense of their public roles.

The 1982 starting point for this examination is selected because the sixteen-month period from March 1982 to August 1983, coinciding with the presidency of General Efraín Ríos Montt, following a *coup d'état* by junior military officers, saw some of the most brutal violence during Guatemala's counterinsurgency campaign. Ríos Montt's presidency was remarkable not only because of its violence but also because he was an evangelical Christian. As a conservative evangelical with ties to the religious right in the United States during the early Reagan years, Ríos Montt became something of a poster boy for the perception on the part of progressives that Latin American Protestantism contributed to state authoritarianism in the midst of the political and social turmoil in Central America. In addition, 1982 marked the centennial year of Protestantism's formal entrance into Guatemala, with celebrations that culminated in an October rally in Guatemala City led by the prominent Argentine evangelist Luis Palau.³

In the larger context of the study of religion in Latin America, Ríos Montt's presidency drew attention to the issue of evangelicals and politics during a time of rapid evangelical growth throughout the region. It was also the heyday in the Catholic Church of liberation theology and *comunidades eclesiales*

de base (CEBs; ecclesial base communities). The national security state was on the eve of being replaced throughout the region by democratic governments, part of the "third wave" of democracy throughout the world (Huntington 1996). The image of a self-professing Christian general presiding over a genocidal military in a poor Central American country victimized by military aid from the "colossus of the North" fed directly into stereotypical interpretations of a monolithically conservative Protestantism invading Latin America as an agent of cultural and political imperialism emanating from the United States.

Even more nuanced investigations into Protestant growth in Latin America began to employ the term "fundamentalist" as a catchall for the vast majority of evangelicals. The corollary has been the assumption that evangelicals were directly supportive of United States policy in the region or apolitical altogether. As will be demonstrated, too much attention to Ríos Montt as representative of evangelicals in Guatemala hinders understanding of the plurality of evangelical expression. Furthermore, Pilar Sanchíz Ochoa notes how Ríos Montt's use of discursive symbols and the meaning of such symbols varied through time so that, "according to the circumstances, [his] biblical images are presented in a different form" (1998, 24).

Guatemala is a special case by virtue of having the highest percentage of evangelicals in Latin America, and the highest percentage of indigenous people in its population. The Maya represent some twenty-one language groups and between 55 and 60 percent of the population. Despite this demographic dominance, the Maya have been excluded from political and social power since Guatemala obtained independence from Spain in 1821 after nearly three hundred years of colonialism. Inequitable social relations in a context of ethnic pluralism are exacerbated by huge disparities of wealth, which together cause the indigenous population to have one of the lowest standards of living in the Western Hemisphere. At the same time, a new activism has taken hold under the rubric of the Maya Movement that has at its core the demand for a national political culture that is "multiethnic, pluricultural, and multilingual" (Fischer and Brown 1996; Gálvez Borrell and Choy 1997).

Setting the Stage

My approach to evangelicals and democracy assumes that social actors bring a diversity of religious and other commitments to the political arena. In addition, it assumes a diversity of belief and practice among Guatemalan evangelicals. One cue for my analysis comes from Wuthnow's view of religion as "a codified set of concepts and categories that is evident in discourse, reinforced by practical commitments, and advanced in institutional settings" (1992, 129). Any analysis of religion's political consequences must examine both the discourse

and the practical commitments of religious actors in the public arena. Also, my approach includes a definition of democracy that encompasses not only free and fair elections but also participation of the citizenry in political processes. Contrary to the image of evangelicals seeking a mandate from God and the people to impose their will on the populace, an alternative perspective views Latin American evangelical communities as providing space for voluntary associations to function as actors within civil society. As such, they certainly have the potential to help strengthen civil society and develop a more substantial democracy than is possible on the basis of elections alone. The implications of this are succinctly stated by Ireland:

the Latin American religious "infrastructure" plays an important role in molding "popular subjects" imbued with "an ethic of public involvement" and the capacity to propose alternatives to authoritarianism and clientelism. The result is an increasingly textured and nonhierarchical associational life, an essential ingredient in the emergence of a civic community. (1999, 7)

It should be emphasized that the scope of Ireland's work is the more inclusive category of "popular religions." His case studies of what he calls "the Tocquevillian parallel" are drawn from Catholicism, pentecostalism, and Afro-Brazilian religions. It is true that, in these examples and in those of evangelicals in Guatemala, there remains evidence of authoritarianism and clientelism. However, the sheer diversity of evangelical political actors in Guatemala points to a vibrant and flourishing "civic community."

Situating evangelical political actors in the context of contemporary perspectives on democratization globally, Diamond's use of "liberal democracy" provides more space for consideration of political actors than what he terms "electoral democracy." He envisions a continuum beyond "a civilian, constitutional system in which the legislative and chief executive offices are filled through regular, competitive, multiparty elections with universal suffrage" (1999, 10). Liberal democracy has additional constraints upon the exercise of power such as "the absence of reserved domains of power for the military or other actors not accountable to the electorate" and a requirement that leaders in governmental branches be horizontally accountable to other office-holders. A third characteristic of liberal democracy is the most relevant for this chapter: "extensive provisions for political and civic pluralism as well as for individual and group freedoms, so that contending interests and values may be expressed and compete through ongoing processes of articulation and representation, beyond periodic elections" (1999, 10–11).

Despite some direct involvement in electoral politics by individuals and groups, the vast majority of political action by evangelicals in Guatemala falls in the realm of expressing "interests and values" in response to items on the national political agenda. Since the signing of the peace accord, this has

included mobilization on issues such as constitutional reforms mandated by the accords and the Children and Youth Code, which will be discussed later. Individuals who participate directly in electoral politics might represent the concerns of their particular evangelical community, but they are also representing themselves. Likewise, evangelical groups organize for their own internal purposes in addition to participating in political activities. This is the space of "articulation and representation" that Diamond refers to; and it is something of a truism in democratic theory that one key reason to protect the rights of minorities is to ensure that they can express themselves and to act in accordance with their beliefs in ways that do not infringe upon the rights of others.

In three stages, this chapter demonstrates how Guatemalan evangelicals express themselves in the political arena in a manner consistent with Diamond's conceptualization of liberal democracy. Following a brief section contextualizing evangelicals within the Guatemalan political scene, my account begins with a review of the 1999 elections and interviews with two evangelical candidates for national office. The interviews demonstrate how some evangelicals understand their political involvement, speaking from different sides of the political spectrum. The discourse of both candidates disavows any effort to create an evangelical political party, while simultaneously articulating a vision of how and why evangelicals should be involved in politics at the national level.

Second, by examining a case of evangelical involvement in the ongoing debate over the United Nations' Children and Youth Code, I draw attention to the pluralism of Protestantisms and of Protestant relationships in regard to a specific political issue. This is a primary issue for understanding the evangelical presence throughout Latin America as well as its relationship to the state. While there was considerable opposition to the code from evangelical quarters, a group from the conservative Alianza Evangélica (AE; Evangelical Alliance) participated with Catholics and others in pushing a consensus document that has not been adopted. This openness to dialogue affirms the willingness of some segments of the evangelical community to seek common cause with other Christians in particular cases. More than an example of "religious" dialogue or action, this type of activity demonstrates evangelical pluralism within the political process itself in regard to an issue of national importance.

The final section links the more localized concerns of community-based evangelicals with national-level issues. It analyzes interviews with evangelicals who have held political office in largely Maya communities as illustrating the link between faith and practice in contexts far removed from the capital and national politics. By focusing on Maya evangelicals, some of the contradictions of the Guatemalan political context will be brought forward, revealing the issues involved in implementing the peace accords and consolidating democracy in the face of considerable inertia.

Guatemalan evangelical groups, then, are part of a broad spectrum of civil society organizations that are exerting pressure to change the status quo politics of the past two decades, including the transition to civilian rule since 1985 after more than thirty years of overt or implicit military rule, beginning with the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954. Despite the peace process resulting in the formal end of the civil war in the 1990s, the transition itself has yet to be consolidated. Susanne Jonas, reflecting on the first civilian presidency, remarked: "the Cerezo period (1986-1990) turned out to be not so much a genuine 'transition to democracy' as a necessary adjustment for trying to deal with Guatemala's multiple crises and to reestablish minimal international credibility" (2000, 26). Difficulties in consolidating the peace process a decade later show the long-term tensions in any democratic transition in Guatemala. In this context, evangelical involvement, paradoxically, has been both consistent with the basic norms of liberal democracy as well as somewhat ambiguous in form and substance when viewed historically and in terms of aspirations for full-fledged democratic consolidation.

Contextualizing Evangelicals and Democracy in Guatemala

The history of Christianity (Catholic or Protestant) in Guatemala has long been politically charged in one way or another. Whether it was the Spanish invasion and imposition of Catholicism on native peoples or the more recent arrival of evangelicals as part of political projects to break Catholic power and bring the perceived benefits of modernization, the state has repeatedly been involved in politicizing religion for its own ends. Protestants were formally invited into the country in 1882 when president and dictator Justo Rufino Barrios brought the Presbyterian minister John Clark Hill to Guatemala as part of a liberal political agenda. This reflected earlier liberal policies of encouraging European immigration to "whiten" the population, and extended the scope of Barrios's proclamation of freedom of worship in 1873. As a rule, evangelicals have not often been openly at odds with the Guatemalan state, regardless of who has been in power. Following the liberal dictatorship of Jorge Ubico (1931–44), Protestants even expressed tacit support for the revolution of 1944, which ushered in a period of social and political reform, until the 1954 coup supported by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). With some notable exceptions, evangelicals since have tended to side with political stability as long as churches were allowed to conduct their business as they saw fit. This lends credence to the notion of evangelicals as apolitical.

As already indicated, Ríos Montt's ascension to the presidency via a *coup d'état* gave evangelicals high visibility, at the same time that his counterinsurgency policies and complicity with genocide made many on the left more suspicious of evangelical presence as an "opium" that kept the masses in their

place and promoted order at the expense of justice. Protestant growth by the end of the 1980s had some predicting that there would be a Protestant majority by the end of the century. Although those projections were not borne out, Ríos Montt did hold office during a period of considerable Protestant growth, beginning in the 1960s and gaining momentum after the earthquake of 1976, when doors were opened to relief work by religious and other nongovernmental agencies. Growth in the 1980s and early 1990s has often been attributed to massive social dislocation caused by the war, a variation of the crisis-solace or deprivation theory of conversion (Annis 1987). Other interpretations argue that it was "safer" to belong to an evangelical than a Catholic congregation when many rural inhabitants were caught in a crossfire between guerrillas and governmental repression (Stoll 1993). It is certainly true that some evangelical pastors and congregations took the side of the army. Meanwhile, Catholics were targeted because of their social commitment as expressed in movements like Catholic Action and presumed connections with the liberation theology that had been a powerful ideological force during the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979 (Berryman 1984; Falla 1994).

Examination of Protestantism during the 1990s has focused less on growth and more on the diversity within the Protestant movement. Much research has looked at pentecostals and neopentecostals, who together make up 65 to 70 percent of the evangelical population (Cleary and Stewart-Gambino 1997; D. Smith 1991; Wilson 1997). Historical Protestantism has been the subject of some analysis (Bogenschild 1992; Garrard-Burnett 1998a), and Maya Protestants have received increasing attention as well (Adams 1999; Chiappari 1999; Goldin and Metz 1997; Scotchmer 1986, 1993). Reference to evangelicals in the political arena and their relationship to political authority is frequent. More recently, concentrated work has been done on evangelical involvement in political processes from both ideological sides of the spectrum the side represented by Ríos Montt and that associated with the peace accord and the reconstruction of civil society (Jeffrey 1998; Steigenga 1999). Yet another line of research places evangelicals as transnational actors with international connections linking concerns in the international community with local social and political agendas (Garrard-Burnett 1998b; Levine and Stoll 1997).

Two issues in the late 1990s brought the relationship of evangelicals to liberal democracy vividly to light. One was the murder of bishop Juan Gerardi in April 1998, two days after the Archbishop's Office for Human Rights released its report on human rights during the civil war, *Guatemala: Never Again!* (ODHAG 1999). Although this was largely perceived as a political assassination, the most visible Presbyterian congregation in the capital, symbolically located just off the central plaza behind the national palace, refused to give permission for an ecumenical memorial service in its sanctuary. The Gerardi case has been a true test of the Guatemalan judicial system;

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three men with links to the military and an auxiliary priest were eventually convicted.

The second example has to do with the constitutional reforms voted upon in a national referendum in May 1999. The reforms were mandated in agreements between government and guerrillas before the final peace accord of 1996. In the midst of 80 percent absenteeism nationally, the Evangelical Alliance had urged its members to vote no to the reforms. The victory of the no vote made the future of the peace process uncertain, and two and a half years later the naming of a retired general to the ministry dealing with national security contributed to the specter of Guatemala's remilitarization.

While the role of evangelicals in both these matters is complex, the examples lend support to the idea that evangelicals are by nature in league with forces little concerned with any broader participation by civil society, much less the consolidation of democracy. Furthermore, the cases appear to argue in favor of conceptualizations of a sort of evangelical "spiritual hegemony" of the type articulated in the early 1990s by Stoll:

With evangelical growth, the spectacle of Ríos Montt, and the election of Jorge Serrano as a guide, born-again Protestants seemed to be establishing a precarious spiritual hegemony in Guatemala. While the Catholic Church will continue to be an important institution, evangelical assumptions are increasingly defining how Guatemalans understand themselves and their world. No matter how deeply Guatemala plunges into poverty and chaos, the personal discipline encouraged by evangelical churches will have survival value compared to traditional folk Catholicism. What remains doubtful is whether evangelicals will be able to deal with the underlying inequalities and institutionalized violence which have brought Guatemala to its present state. (1994, 119)

After more than ten years have passed, Stoll's concern with the ability of evangelicals to deal with social inequality and violence remains well placed.

However, evangelicals never achieved any "spiritual hegemony" in Guatemala, "precarious" or otherwise. Any such perception is further undercut by the fact that both Ríos Montt and Serrano left the presidency under clouds related to human rights violations and corruption. While Ríos Montt's continued presence on Guatemala's political stage dictates that he be considered the most prominent evangelical political actor in the last two decades, too much focus on him obscures the true shape of the country's religious pluralism. In addition, the resurgence of interest in Maya spirituality and diverse expressions of Catholicism complicate impressions of evangelical dominance in the religious field. Finally, there is the messy business of statistics regarding the evangelical percentage of the population. Although claims as high as

one-third have been common in recent years, few would disagree that the rate of increase slowed drastically in the late 1990s. Studies earlier in the decade indicated that 20 to 25 percent of the population is more accurate. While the percentage of evangelicals varies tremendously from one municipality to the next, the lower overall percentages refute any claim of evangelical "spiritual hegemony."

The 1999 Elections and Politics, Guatemalan Style

This perspective is borne out by considering the political role of evangelicals in the 1999 elections, including those who stood for president and vice president. These two candidates come from vastly different segments of society. Francisco Bianchi is a businessman with ties to the elite, while Vitalino Similox is a Kaqchikel Maya from Chimaltenango, one hour west of the capital. Although Similox is well educated, has worked in the city, and has connections with the international religious community, he also maintains connections to his area of origin. The intent is to discern what political involvement means to evangelicals active in party politics. Even here, however, some attention has to be given to Ríos Montt at the outset, as well as to some of the dynamics of party politics in contemporary Guatemala. The presidential elections of 1999 provide a lens for this examination.

The first round results in November 1999 led to a runoff between the same parties that had vied for the presidency in 1995 (table 2.1). The second round in December gave the presidency to Alfonso Portillo, candidate of the Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG; Guatemalan Republican Front), with 68 percent of the vote (table 2.2). The FRG's victory raised concerns inside and outside Guatemala because Ríos Montt was the party's executive secretary and president of the congress. Despite being constitutionally

TABLE 2.I. 1999 Guatemalan Presidential Elections First Round, November 7

Party	Presidential Candidate	Vice Presidential Candidate	Total Vote	Percentage
FRG	Alfonso Portillo	Francisco Reyes	1,045,820	47.72
PAN	Oscar Berger	Arabella Castro	664,417	30.32
ANN	Alvaro Colom	Vitalino Similox	270,891	12.36
PLP	Acisclo Valladares	Guillermo Salazar Santizo	67,924	3.10
ARDE Six other	Francisco Bianchi	Manolo Bendfeldt	45,470	2.07
candidates			96,985	4.42

Source: Tribunal Supremo de Guatemala (TSE).

TABLE 2.2. 1999 Guatemalan Presidential Elections Second Round, December 26

Party	Presidential Candidate	Vice Presidential Candidate	Total Vote	Percentage	
FRG	Alfonso Portillo Oscar Berger	Francisco Reyes	1,185,160	68.31	
		Arabella Castro	549,936	31.69	

Source: Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE).

Note: Absenteeism was 59.61 percent.

prevented from acceding to the presidency for having earlier come to power in a coup, he is generally considered the power behind the FRG's throne and continues to be referred to simply as "the General."

Generally considered the first evangelical president in Latin America, sometimes referred to in the past as "Dios Montt" because of his television sermonizing while in the president's office, Ríos Montt's continued presence certainly raises the issue of the place of evangelicals in democratic processes. Impressions of a link between evangelicals and authoritarian politics received further impetus in the early 1990s when another evangelical, Serrano Elías, was elected president in 1990 and subsequently forced into exile following an aborted attempt in 1993 at a self-coup in the style of Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori. Although Ríos Montt has decreased his public religious rhetoric and Serrano Elías has been largely disowned by his evangelical brethren, together they represent an image of conservative evangelicals in the service of Christian and political interests emanating from the United States. No doubt there is a certain mystique (in several senses of the word) that accrues to Guatemala for having had two evangelical presidents, but this distorts the degree of financial and other material influence from the United States and American evangelicals on Guatemalan political and social processes, which was never as great as some of the more apocalyptic projections claimed it would be during the period covered in this essay. Furthermore, attention to the potential relationship of Guatemalan evangelicals to the United States glosses over the pluralism of Protestantisms within Guatemala, as well as the extent to which evangelical religion in its various guises has become indigenized.

Several other aspects of the Guatemalan political process are important for contextualizing evangelical participation. First, Guatemalan presidents are not allowed reelection, in accordance with a constitutional amendment of 1994. Second, in the four presidential elections between the return to democracy in 1985 and the 1999 election, no party retained office for more than one term, and each party exiting the presidency subsequently fractured. Even as other parties have grown more competitive, the FRG has remained a strong

TABLE 2.3. Guatemala Congress Deputies by Party (January 2000)

FRG	PAN	ANN	DCG	UD-LOV	PLP
63	37	9	2	1	1

Source: www.congreso.gob.gt.

political force, though it was unable to garner more than 19 percent of the vote under Ríos Montt in the 2003 presidential elections.

The fractious nature of Guatemalan politics can be seen in a comparison of party affiliations in congress in the wake of the presidential elections in January 2000 and at the end of 2001. Table 2.3 shows the makeup following the presidential elections. Notable was the dominance of the FRG, the power of the Partido Avanzado Nacional (PAN; National Advancement Party) as a second force, and the leftist Alianza Nueva Nación (ANN; New Nation Alliance) as a small but viable third force.

Although the same two parties vied for the presidency in the 1995 and 1999 elections, the PAN, which under the leadership of Alvaro Arzú pushed through the final peace accord in 1996, fragmented into three groups after losing the 1999 election. One group, the Unionistas, had thirteen deputies in 2001, while a second group formed the base for the Unión Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE; National Union of Hope). The fragmentation of the PAN occurred despite its having won the mayoralty of Guatemala City. As a political party, the UNE began its formation in March 2001 under the leadership of Alvaro Colom, a past presidential candidate of the ANN, a coalition including the political wing of the former guerrilla movement. The ANN got 12 percent of the presidential vote, and Colom's defection once again placed the left in disarray following fourth- and third-place finishes in the last two elections.

To further complicate the picture, one of the major voices of the FRG, in addition to Efrain Ríos Montt, is actually Ríos Montt's daughter, Zury Ríos Sosa. Ríos Sosa had actually taken over leadership in congress for several months before Ríos Montt himself was cleared of charges in the Guategate scandal involving the alteration of taxes on an alcoholic beverage law passed in June 2000. Two other former elected presidents (Vinicio Cerezo and Ramiro León de Carpio) also had seats in congress. The party that elected Serrano in 1991, the Movimiento de Acción Solidaria (MAS; Movement of Solidary Action), is no longer functioning. In January 2000, congress was dominated by the FRG, with sixty-three deputies, the PAN was second with thirty-seven, and the ANN had nine. The left-wing Frente Democrático Nueva Guatemala (FDNG; New Guatemala Democratic Front) that had placed fourth in the 1996 elections was abolished under a law stipulating that parties in the presidential

TABLE 2.4. Guatemala Congress Deputies by Party (December 2001)

		Bancada					
FRG	PAN	Unionista	ANN	DCG	UD-LOV	PLP	Independent
63	17	13	8	2	1	1	8

Source: www.congreso.gob.gt.

race must receive at least 4 percent of the popular vote to stay in existence. A perusal of party affiliations in December 2001 further demonstrates the unstable nature of Guatemalan politics (see table 2.4). While the FRG maintained the vast majority of its deputies, the PAN had lost half of its delegation and the ANN was now fourth.

Evangelicals and Political Parties

Another party that was abolished, after receiving only 2 percent of the vote in the first round of the presidential elections of 1999, was the Acción Reconciliadora Democrática (ARDE; Democratic Reconciling Action). Its presidential candidate, Francisco Bianchi, is a businessman who was until recently an elder in the El Verbo (Word) church, which Ríos Montt made famous. References to El Verbo are typically understood as referring to a large neopentecostal church in Guatemala City that proclaims a version of prosperity theology. In fact, El Verbo functions as a denomination with churches throughout Guatemala and other countries, including Nicaragua, Canada, and the United States. Bianchi attended and Ríos Montt continues to attend "La 16," a large congregation now located on the outskirts of Guatemala City's zone 16, near an elite residential area. The church compound includes schools for all ages, including the new Panamerican University.

Bianchi has been involved in politics for a number of years, having served in the Ríos Montt administration as secretary of public relations for the presidency. In that capacity, he was one of two representatives El Verbo sent to the government ostensibly as counselors to the president (Anfuso and Sczepanski 1984; Stoll 1990, 208). What is Bianchi's view regarding evangelicals and the political process? I asked him directly whether or not his intent was to found an evangelical political party. The ARDE was widely reported to have been an evangelical party, yet it consistently preferred to call itself a party of biblical principles. The distinction is important for Bianchi, and his response demonstrates a nuanced perspective on the relationship between evangelicals and politics.

I don't believe it is a question of an evangelical party. One needs to be very careful with that because it creates divisions between Catholic and evangelical. I believe that Catholics and evangelicals

believe in the same God, the same Christ, and have the same Bible. All Guatemalans have to be [considered] and not evangelicals and nobody else.... If one realizes that Guatemala is 97 percent Christian, either evangelical or Catholic, and we go according to our principles that are given in the Word of God, well, it is the same Bible, the same God, the same Christ. So ... we also work with Catholics, not only with evangelicals. But with people of principle, one might say.

Worthy of note here are Bianchi's implicit ecumenism (within limits) and the sense that the political process (and the nation itself) could be transformed if the unity existing between Catholics and evangelicals as Christians were put into practice.8 Even if the stated intent is not to form a political party in the narrow sense, the intent is to guide the nation into prosperity and civic virtue, and thereby transform society through political involvement. For Bianchi, those who belong to the church are to be an influence for the good of society. To accomplish this, it is imperative to look for the principles of God's Word, which are universal. At one point he cited Acts 3:21, drawing on the image of Christ being kept in the heavens until the restoration of all things. The implication is that even Christ is waiting for Christians to become involved in the active redemption of society. Bianchi also mentioned his work with Asociación LIDER,9 which he described as a registered Christian political association, with no party affiliation, that sponsors seminars for people involved in business and for religious leaders to encourage their political involvement. The intent of the seminars is to "give them a vision that a nation can be transformed by biblical principles.... Christ said that he sent us to be the light of the world. If we take refuge in the four walls of the church, to whom are we giving light?"

Even at that, the results are dubious. Asociación LIDER and ARDE have the same ends, and the discourse is pitched at the same elite sector of society. It is telling that ARDE received only 2 percent of the vote in the presidential elections, due partly to the stubborn perception that the party was a party of evangelicals. But Bianchi's continuing public discourse is consistent with my interview with him. When he spoke at a meeting where the topic was the formation of a new political party in March 2001, Movimiento de Principios y Valores (MPV; Movement of Principles and Values), he said: "We want the evolution of our society, and we can only accomplish that by defending the immutable values and principles given by God" (Campos 2001). 10 Finally, the rhetoric and latest attempt to resurrect a party of biblical principles has to be situated in a more expansive frame. A Maya evangelical and former mayor I interviewed in the western highlands said ARDE "was born dead." And he observed that one of its problems was the past association of a number of ARDE leaders with the political party of Serrano Elías, the MAS.

Another evangelical seeking high office in the 1999 elections was Vitalino Similox, a Kaqchikel Maya and Presbyterian minister who ran for vice president on the leftist ANN's ticket. While he had to resign from his church ministry to stand for election, he was soon functioning again as executive director of the Conferencia de Iglesias Evangélicas de Guatemala (CIEDEG; Conference of Evangelical Churches of Guatemala), a loose confederation supported by congregations related to the indigenous peoples and focused very much on social concerns. Similox has been involved in social and political activities in the Chimaltenango area for nearly twenty years. As a leader in the Kaqchikel Presbytery of the National Evangelical Presbyterian Church, he has been involved in pressing for justice in several cases during the 1990s, such as the murder of elder Pascual Serech and minister Manuel Saquic, largely for their efforts in the human rights work of the presbytery. Interestingly, he campaigned in 1999 in a coalition party that included former guerrillas. I asked him what he could offer to Guatemala's political process as an evangelical. Similox replied:

There is a need in this country, including a reality of exclusion, of sectarianism, of intolerance. There isn't an opening to dialogue, to pluriculturalism, to political and ideological pluralism. So, I feel my work is to overcome this situation so we can all participate openly in whatever activity. It should not be felt that economic activity corresponds only to one sector of Guatemalan society. Neither does political life correspond only to one group, to one people; instead it corresponds to all the peoples of Guatemala.... Insofar as we are human beings, we are political beings; so we have the right to participate in the decisions of whatever type in order to construct a different nation, a different country. This includes political participation . . . without renouncing one's identity, without renouncing one's faith. Instead, inspired by those principles of our faith, we can make an effective contribution. Regarding the Bible, there are very clear passages in which we are told that light is not to be hidden.... That is to say, where there is necessity, there is the need to struggle. . . . Guatemalan politics urgently needs to be healed, to be transformed.

Although from the other side of the political spectrum, elements of Similox's reply are not so different from Bianchi's. The emphasis on transformation seems an essential part of evangelical discourse, although the desired outcomes are worlds apart. Ethnicity and the issue of democracy come subtly into play in the emphasis on exclusion from economic and political resources that lead one to seek changes through political involvement. This subtext of exclusion is not contemplated in Bianchi's discourse of Christian unity. Both

perspectives do, however, favor broad participation of evangelicals in a manner consistent with broader political and social goals.

Evangelicals and the Codigo de la Niñez y la Juventud

The response of segments of Guatemala's evangelical community to the Children and Youth Code provides another lens for understanding the efforts of some evangelicals to participate in issues on the national political agenda. The code is essentially a human rights code for children that was unanimously adopted by congress in 1996 within the frame of Guatemala's signing of the Convention of Rights of the Child in 1990 and the need to replace the Código de Menores (Code of Minors) of 1979 currently in force. Among other concerns, the Code of Minors "does not clearly delimit the differences between youthful transgressors and children in situations of danger or abandonment." The 1996 Children and Youth Code was produced by a commission of government and nongovernmental agencies with the collaboration of UNICEF and other international organizations, and was to have come into force in September 1997. By 2002, the activation of the code had been postponed indefinitely by a legislative decree of February 24, 2000.

The code has become one of many contentious issues on the Guatemalan political scene in recent years. Much of the contention revolves around the sense in many quarters that representatives of the international community produced the code and that the same community has been actively involved in working for its passage. Similar to issues surrounding the peace process in general, the involvement of the international community in sensitive political issues is often interpreted by the political and social elite in Guatemala as undue foreign influence in internal affairs. The intense nationalism manifested on such issues becomes particularly strident around questions the international community interprets as having human rights implications. While part of this is a typical reaction to guard national sovereignty, the nationalistic rhetoric sometimes betrays an ironic twist in that so much of the Guatemalan elite turns toward the United States for models of consumerism and even political structure and ideology. It is striking how much of the argumentative discourse in regard to the Code parallels political battles waged over "culture war" issues perceived to have religious implications in the United States. 11

Central to discussion over whether or not the code should enter into force are debates over the patria potestad, parental authority, within the household. The Episcopal Conference of Guatemala (CEG; Conference Episcopal de Guatemala), representing the Catholic Church, together with many segments of the evangelical community, have protested what they perceive to be the

danger of state interference in family affairs and parental authority under the Code. The CEG issued a press release criticizing the document for the lack of a "fundamental ethical principle" and indicating that the code could be reworked to give more emphasis to the integrity of the family (CEG 1998). 12 As former vice president of the Evangelical Alliance, Francisco Bianchi's perspective on the code is representative of the negative views held by many evangelicals.

The government doesn't have to involve itself in what belongs to the family. Again, this is the typical case of the government taking on the attributes of God. What happened there is that a lot of parental authority was taken and given to the government. How can they go pitting children against parents? It all sounds really nice—the rights of children—and we are defending them. But it hasn't worked. It has created a tremendous rebellion in a lot of children. We all know that we have to educate children. God's Word clearly says that the child needs discipline. What the codes end up doing is pitting children and adolescents against their parents. . . . Those who are responsible before God for their children are the parents, not the government.

Bianchi echoes a concern in various sectors regarding the level of bureaucracy needed to monitor the code, as well as the possibility of manipulating that bureaucracy for political ends. In my interview with him, he said the AE had presented over fifty thousand signatures to congress in opposition to the code. He also said that some people from the AE who had worked on the consensus document had perspectives that were more political than biblical. This seems to point to some of the subsequent infighting within the AE over the code, as well as to the genuine challenge for evangelicals of balancing political realism with biblical principle.

This was the frame for a striking example of ecumenical cooperation in October 1999 when a broad group of representatives created a consensus document in favor of implementing a revised version of the code. The group included the AE, the CEG, the Office of the Defense of Children and Youth of the Attorney General for Human Rights, and the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI; Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias). A second document outlining some budgetary implications of the enforcement of the code was also produced. Supposedly, the committee representing the AE had the freedom to participate as it desired. Eventually, the consensus document itself created controversy in the AE when one leader allegedly withdrew support for the consensus. Other representatives of the AE still felt progress had been made, as the locus of responsibility for children had shifted from the state back to the family. While other issues were probably involved, the issue of the code contributed to tension within the alliance, and to a shakeup in its

leadership. One observer of the process said that the entire scenario manifested the lack of political seriousness within the church and of qualified interlocutors within the evangelical community. Certainly, it manifests the potential for internal tension whenever a segment of the evangelical community reaches out into the political arena, even in regard to an issue as traditionally dear to evangelicals as child-rearing.

Nevertheless, the participation of the AE in the process itself remains a significant example of an attempt by the organization representing the largest contingent of evangelicals to make a contribution to a political issue in Guatemala. That it was done in ecumenical fashion demonstrates the potential role of evangelicals in strengthening civil society in a manner that creates independent, yet inclusive, contributions to debate on social policy. At one point in the interview in the offices of the AE, I was told that both the AE and another group called the Liga Pro-Patria (a group with evangelical connections described by a prior interviewee as nearly fascist) had worked against the code at the beginning. The sense communicated was that the Liga Pro-Patria had been uniformly negative in its criticism, while the AE had tried to be constructive. The contrasting evangelical positions represent a wide range, from neopentecostal perspectives such as Bianchi's to other approaches such as that embodied in the FRG's efforts to derail the code.

The postponing of the implementation of the code took place about a month after Alfonso Portillo took office. The decree stated that

the Congress of the Republic must listen to the diverse opinions that are expressed in the context of society regarding the theme of children and youth, in order to reach a code of consensus and legislate how this corresponds to social interests, adopting measures for attaining the integral strengthening of the family.

This action not only seemed to take the code off the national legislative agenda, but also not so subtly aligned itself with the emphasis on the integrity of the family that is so important to various religious sectors, Catholic as well as evangelical. The decree betrays some of the FRG's political emphasis on what are called in North America "family values." As the circus-like atmosphere surrounding the FRG administration continued into 2001, debate over the code receded. The CEG did remind the government of the consensus document in January 2001 (*La semana en Guatemala*, January 22–29, 2001). The United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA) also issued a lengthy document on the status of children and adolescents in the peace process (MINUGUA 2000b).

It is important to note that Similox's organization, CIEDEG, supported the code from the beginning. This is not surprising, given CIEDEG's support from international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and its rather populist working agenda and left-wing political contacts. In many ways, the

stances of CIEDEG and the AE represent divergent political options within Guatemala's evangelical community. Still, neither Bianchi nor Similox can be considered spokespersons for evangelicals apart from the political and social perspectives of their constituencies. Bianchi's agenda represents his ties to the political, social, and economic elite in Guatemala as much as an overtly religious perspective, despite the religious language in which he couches his objections to the code. While his religious commitment and his discourse about what informs his political participation should not be discounted, there are many components to his social location and the manner in which even his ecumenism is in the service of upholding the extant political and social structure in Guatemala.

Similarly, Similox's stance is informed by his political contacts as an indigenous activist and by his religious involvement with the National Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Guatemala (IENPG; Iglesia Evangélica Nacional Presbiteriana de Guatemala). This denomination is not currently active in the AE and has historically not shied away from taking stances on public issues. Nevertheless, the IENPG's political involvement at the national level has rarely challenged the power structure of Guatemala. Moreover, the internal politics of the denomination since the 1980s has often mirrored politics at the national level. The Maya population within the church experienced great difficulties during the war, and often received little support from their Ladino brethren in the denomination (Schäfer 1991; Scotchmer 1989, 305–6). 13 Internally, fights for positions of power within the denomination took up much energy during national meetings throughout the 1990s, and a housecleaning of corrupt denominational leadership in May 2001 resulted in Ladinos occupying the three primary positions of executive secretary, president, and treasurer.

Using the exclusive lens of either politics or religion to understand the commitments of Bianchi and Similox is inadequate. While not discounting their religious commitments and the manner in which these inform their political perspectives, the relative stances of both men and their organizations toward the Código de la Niñez reflect their social location. Bianchi represents the conservative elite, and he not only upholds the notion of family values but also the principle of noninterference in Guatemalan affairs by outside organizations. This would include the international organizations responsible for the code and for some of its oversight once implemented. Similox represents an activist stance supported by the more progressive elements of the international community. This stance is also indicative of his religious commitments to social justice and to human rights. Focusing on their social locations and their political commitments, it is difficult to say that either person is truly representative of any large segment of the Guatemalan evangelical community. The focus on the AE and the Código de la Niñez provides a more

nuanced perspective shaped by the concert of evangelical voices and their interaction with Guatemalan political and social institutions.

Evangelicals and Political Involvement at the Community Level

Moving from the macro level, it is instructive to consider something of evangelical political practice in local communities. For the rural population, especially the indigenous population, of Mesoamerica, localism is the frame of reference for culture and identity. One study comparing political regimes in Costa Rica and Guatemala argues for more attention to rural areas in the analysis of the construction and maintenance of either democratic or authoritarian political systems. The reason is that the countryside is often the locus of forces that can be disruptive and destabilizing for democracy, while, simultaneously, the focus on institutional arrangements in the urban environment neglects the relationship between political participation and the control of resources in rural areas (Yashar 1997, 213-15). I have already pointed out the overwhelming, and seemingly contradictory, support of rural communities for the FRG during the 1999 presidential elections. In addition to the mystique surrounding the figure of Riós Montt, three decades ago Roland Ebel noted the tendency toward oficialismo (support for the government) among voters in the Mam Maya community of San Juan Ostuncalco from 1935 to 1944. 15 Defined then as support for the party in power at the national level (Ebel 1972, 164), perhaps the pattern can now be interpreted as the tendency to side with those who seem to have the power and are able to deliver resources. Community members are adept at reading some of the winds of change and adapting.

The brief analysis provided here summarizes the perspectives of two sitting and two former alcaldes (mayors) representing three municipios in the department of Quetzaltenango in the western highlands. Cajolá, San Juan Ostuncalco, and San Martín Chileverde are predominately inhabited by the Mam Maya ethnic group, the second largest Maya-speaking group in Guatemala. The communities are located in the southern zone of the larger Mam culture region in the altiplano at about eight thousand feet in altitude, although San Martín is slightly lower on the escarpment. The area remains largely agricultural, with potatoes and corn the primary crops, plus some coffee in the municipio of San Martín and in the lower reaches of canyons in the San Juan, which is also a furniture-making, transportation, and marketing center.

All four mayors or ex-mayors are Presbyterians; this was the first denomination to establish a presence in the area in 1911 (Bogenschild 1992, 160). ¹⁶ Both the former and current mayors reflected in interviews on the relationship between political activity and evangelical political involvement. At this

local level, the examination of the diversity of Protestant involvement shifts to indigenous communities and historical denominations, which, at least in theory, are more predisposed than pentecostal organizations to political involvement. None of the current or former mayors belong to the dominant political parties at the national level in recent elections. One held office in association with the Christian Democrats, two with the Democratic Union, and another with a civic committee.

Very likely there are more evangelical mayors in the Mam region, and certainly throughout the Guatemalan countryside. There are also a number of ways to analyze the presence of these individuals in relation to Guatemalan politics. Two patterns stand out at the level of the mayors' discourse and the potential creation of social capital within evangelical communities, both of which might contribute to strengthening liberal democracy in Guatemala. First is the uniform notion that it is the role of the evangelical to be active in one's community. As one mayor remarked:

Many people think that we evangelicals can't participate in politics, and this is false. If we look at it biblically, the Bible says that evangelicals are the salt of the earth. How is it possible that we can be salt of the earth and afraid of participating? How can we be the light of the world if we don't like to serve our neighbor? It isn't possible. Sometimes people pray, "Take from me the danger in my road"...[but] I say, "God help me to overcome the obstacles of today. Give me force and strength and I'll survive anything." But I don't ask God to...clear my road... My mentality is a little different and sometimes I've been in contradiction with other hermanos. I don't believe this business of going to worship service in the afternoon, in the morning, and the next day. For me, the evangelio is working with the people, living it out, giving counsel, providing projects.

In certain regards, the language of salt and light is foundational for evangelical thinking about how to engage with the world—a place of darkness from which some believe they should be set apart. This concept of separation is the basis for the church's requirement that elders or ministers among Mam Presbyterians leave posts in the local congregation when they hold political office. While some see this as a conservative stance on the part of the denomination, it also frees them for political action by removing some of the scrutiny that might be placed upon them in other circumstances. The stance of the *alcaldes* (mayors) themselves emphasizes action in the world, a type of action both requiring and being rooted in local political involvement. To use Sanchíz Ochoa's term, this attitude is a "concreción de ética política" ("realization of political ethics") within the lives of these individuals who are, in fact, tied to a more mundane discourse than those who, like the neopentecostals, see themselves in the same light as the kings and prophets of the

Hebrew Bible. The Presbyterians I interviewed tend to see themselves as called to work in the world for the sake of God, whereas much neopentecostal discourse claims believers are destined to rule the world in the name of God.

Second, the mayors express the sense of having been called to their political involvement. "El partido me buscó" ("the party sought me out") was the comment of one mayor. And another said, "Yo fui llamado" ("I was called"). This calling is reminiscent of Christian discourse regarding the call to follow Christ or to undertake some prophetic action. Often, the words were not even attached to overtly religious discourse, but the sense is not so different. Here again, the emphasis is on both the desire and the responsibility to serve one's community. The reflection is one of the indigenous community's sense of unity (which evangelicals are often accused of destroying), and this is one place were evangelical discourse and localism come together in communities very much in the throes of political, social, and cultural change, and yes, conflict. While these *alcaldes* do indeed interact with the state, the horizon of interest is the village and not the struggle for power and authority of political parties, national social agendas, or even the possibility of national political office.

A caution is in order here. To an extent these *alcaldes* are not representative, even of evangelicals. All have their roots in Presbyterian circles, and this surely has an impact on their apparently Calvinistic sense of vocation rooted in service to the local community. The Presbyterian presence in their area includes the establishment of a medical clinic and educational and training center as early as 1940 with a concomitant focus on the Mam language in education. A translation of the New Testament in Mam was produced in the same year. While others were involved through the years, the philosophy guiding this work was largely that of a missionary couple, Dudley and Dorothy Peck, who arrived in Guatemala in 1922 and remained until 1970 (IENPG 1982, 169–77). Dudley Peck even completed a doctoral dissertation, "Practices and Training of Guatemalan Mam Shamans," for the Hartford Seminary Foundation in 1970.

The sense of community solidarity the Presbyterian *alcaldes* communicated is an aspect of the unity of indigenous culture, of Mayan-ness. It certainly dovetails as well with the concerns emphasized by those in the Movimiento Maya who are struggling to recover indigenous values and place them in dialogue with political and religious values that have historically repressed indigenous culture and religion.¹⁷ In the words of another Maya Presbyterian, Kaqchikel minister Antonio Otzoy:

The cosmogony and religious life of the Maya are not isolated from the rest of their lives. . . . There are people in the world who find fulfilment only in church; others find it in politics, or in the exercise of their personal and civic rights and duties. Such people make a clear-cut distinction between religious rights and privileges and everything else they do in life. In stark contrast, spirituality is the totality of life for us Maya. (1997, 266)

Beyond the sense of community in the *alcaldes*' perspective on political involvement is the notion of calling reflected in the Maya religious context—a calling whereby the shaman is destined to assume the role of leadership at birth in accordance with Maya day and number signs, and through dreams and illnesses wherein shamanic apprenticeship is the path to healing. Arguably, Maya evangelicals come by their sense of calling from the depths of both their ethnic and religious identity. The confluence of ethnicity, religion, and the sense of authority invested in local-level political leaders also reflects what a Maya friend of mine has referred to as "the multiple identities of each person."

Returning to the issue of pluralism, this examination of evangelicals and politics at the communal level ignores some of the inroads pentecostalism has made into the historical Protestant community (and Catholicism) in Guatemala. While pentecostalism itself changes and creates change, there is surely tension between its apolitical expression and the kind of political involvement signaled in this research. The Mam mayors represent an ethic rooted in the local communities and congregations of the *alcaldes* themselves. It is some distance from the pentecostal ethic once articulated negatively to me as rejection of the five "p's," *pecados*, or sins. *Politica* was at the top of the list that included *pelota*, *peinado*, *pintura*, *y pantalones* (ball playing, hairdressing, makeup, and wearing pants).¹⁹

Recapitulation

The intent in this chapter has been to present diverse perspectives on the manner in which evangelicals relate to democratic political processes in Guatemala. Guatemala continues to confound conventional wisdom regarding evangelicals and politics in the region in that there are no evangelical political parties, and indications are that no evangelical voting bloc has developed on the national level in spite of the large percentage of evangelicals in the general population and two evangelical presidents in the past twenty years (Grenfell 1995). Moreover, prominent players on the evangelical political stage oppose the idea of forming an evangelical political party. The observations here constitute neither a prediction about the viability of democracy in Guatemala nor the last word on the ongoing and dynamic relation of evangelicals to political power. With or without the FRG, indications are that the military continues to wield tremendous power in relation to the civilian government. This is part of

the structure of Guatemala's limited democracy, what some have even called "guardian democracy" (McSherry 1998).

Meanwhile, the FRG experienced ongoing conflict between factions allied with Portillo and others allied with Ríos Montt. Despite ongoing rumors of Ríos Montt having terminal prostate cancer, and efforts to put him on trial in Spanish courts for human rights abuses, there were continued attempts at overturning the constitution to allow him to try for the presidency. In July 2003, the Constitutional Court finally decided that he was eligible to run in the presidential elections at the end of that year. That decision brought some fears for Guatemalan democracy, as FRG sympathizers were accused of tactics designed to intimidate voters, especially in the violent protests that nearly paralyzed the capital for two days in late July. In the end, Ríos finished third in the first round of the election, with 19.3 percent; his percentage in the capital was well below that. But the FRG remained the largest party in congress and won a third of the mayoralties, showing it still has strong support in rural areas. Ríos's evangelical identity played little part in his campaign discourse. His elimination in the first round triggered new concerns that the democratic process might be interrupted (especially as he might face genocide charges after his congressional term had finished and he had lost his parliamentary immunity), but in fact he accepted defeat calmly.

Although on paper the sheer number of evangelicals could have turned the election in Ríos Montt's favor, there were clearly other factors at play. Already in 1999, the vote for the FRG was consistent across ethnic boundaries, despite the fact that the Maya had suffered disproportionately during the war.

While evangelicals and evangelicalism may have the potential to skew aspects of Guatemala's political system, several years after the end of the war, the system as a whole might still best be described as "low-intensity democracy." This is characterized by its fragility in response to increasing social demands when "the new democratic order widens the space for popular mobilisation," and by the continuing presence of the military, "always suspicious of the lessening of social control and the consequent threat to established interests" (Gills, Rocamora, and Wilson 1993, 21). The rubric of low-intensity democracy is reflective of Diamond's insistence that liberal democracy cannot have reserved domains of power, but its strength as an analytical tool is the focus on the tension between the appropriation of political and social space by social actors on the one hand and the military as the ultimate arbiter of power on the other. The fragility of Guatemala's peace, even in the wake of several transfers of power through democratic processes, is rooted in the very real conflict between coalitions expecting greater levels of participation from all sectors of society and those who continue to resist opening the system to coalitions demanding access to power and some equality in the distribution of

social and material resources. The seemingly deaf ear toward calls for justice for crimes committed during the war, such as the murder of anthropologist Myrna Mack, and Ríos Montt's position until early 2004 as president of the congress, alongside his military connections and his past history, did nothing to allay these fears. The coincidence of his military and his evangelical identities confuses interpretations of the relationship between democratic processes and evangelical faith at the present time. As both president of congress and "the General," he casts a shadow over democratic consolidation and the difficult work of implementing the peace accords.

Another telling example in this vein was the stated effort of Alfonso Portillo in 2000 to put into his cabinet a civilian minister of defense. Placing a civilian was not possible in the end, because the Constitution of 1985 requires that a person from the military hold the position. In this case a reserved domain of power is legally codified. In the context of Guatemala, such a requirement puts the civilian population (and the president) on notice that there is more to the chain of command than meets the eye. More positively, one must acknowledge that at least the issues are now being debated. Nevertheless, I remember vividly how sometimes in the course of research among the Maya in the western highlands a person would simply look at me when we discussed the apparent political opening following the peace accord and say, "Las cosas pueden cambiar" ("Things can change").

How, then, do evangelicals fit into the larger framework of contemporary politics in Guatemala? My first response is to restate what I affirmed at the beginning. I believe the presence of Protestants and the internal diversity of the Protestant community represent an extension of burgeoning manifestations of social, political, and cultural pluralism within the nation. As such, consideration of evangelical subjects is best done out of a theoretical frame viewing religion not only as a contested field of identity and influence within the context of the state but also as a sphere of transnational activity wherein people and resources, according to Susanne Rudolph, "reach across national boundaries, disregarding or contravening the principle of national sovereignty" (1997a, 256). In the same article, Rudolph responds to Samuel Huntington's focus on "civilizational identity" as an important variable in future conflicts throughout the world. First, she reminds the reader that "religion competes for primacy with alternative categories of interest and identification. It is as likely to be used instrumentally to justify other interests as it is to be the dominant interest" (243). And in a more direct critique of Huntington, she says: "totalizing explanations are likely to miss more fine-grained interests and motivations that lead to war and peace" (243).

These seem appropriate caveats in the consideration of evangelicals and democracy in Guatemala.²⁰ Contrary to stereotypes of authoritarian evangelicals establishing separatist kingdoms as bulwarks of political conservatism seeking to impose ethical and moral agendas on society, evangelicals emerge

as participants on a larger political stage where they act in concert with and in opposition to other interest groups that seek influence in political processes. No doubt some evangelicals would impose their will on the populace if they could, but the Guatemalan context does not allow for a single interpretation of evangelical reality. Evangelicals do represent a multifaceted presence in politics, and there is no basis for claiming that they alone are responsible for trying to bring the kingdom of the FRG or any other political kingdom at the present time.

It is difficult to make projections about the direction of democratization or evangelicalism in Guatemala. Steigenga's (1996, 1999) survey research on Protestant and Catholic relations and the perspectives of various religious groups toward political activity from 1993 makes an important contribution to understanding evangelical diversity in regard to ecumenical relations and politics. Part of his survey found relatively high levels of "perceived religious discrimination" and "religious conflict" among Catholics and across the spectrum of evangelical, sectarian, and nonaffiliated Guatemalans. The danger that such tension might create difficulty for the consolidation of democracy after the peace (1999, 172-73) is real. Still, religious strife has not proven any greater a source of instability than the other forms of communal strife, such as those represented by a rash of lynchings that claimed the lives of some 185 people in mostly rural and indigenous communities between 1996 and the release of a report addressing the problem by MINUGUA in December 2000 (MINUGUA 2000a). Many of the killings are in response to crimes against persons or property in places where the justice system seems not to function in any substantial way. There is talk of a culture of violence and impunity within Guatemala as a whole that manifests itself in vigilante justice. In this context, religious discord seems to be less a limitation on the consolidation of liberal democracy than other structural and institutional constraints.

Steigenga offers a measure of caution in surveying Guatemala's religious panorama:

It is not difficult to predict a future of continued religious pluralism in Guatemala. It is more difficult to discern the implications of this pluralism for Guatemala's democratic consolidation. Clearly, we should not assume that continuing religious pluralism represents some sort of inevitable step forward in a process leading toward political modernization or even secularization. (1999, 174)

Like an increasing number of analysts of evangelical diversity throughout Latin America, Steigenga argues that the mobilization of Protestantism in the political sphere fosters a widening and deepening of "communal participation" that, in turn, will lead to a strengthening of civil society. According to Steigenga, however, this hope depends on the overcoming of "the vertical and authoritarian tendencies within Guatemalan Protestantism."

No sensible observer of the Guatemalan case wants to claim much more than the potential for evangelicals to contribute to the construction of liberal democracy. The two evangelical presidents marred the image of evangelicals for significant segments of the public both within and outside of Guatemala for the better part of a generation. Incidents of evangelical complicity with the Guatemalan military on the local level have also fed into the negative stereotypes of the entire evangelical community. Even within the evangelical community itself, there is skepticism regarding the ability and preparation of evangelicals for political involvement. One minister and longtime observer of neopentecostal religion in Guatemala was adamant that evangelicals had lost much in their dealings with Serrano Elías. "Perdimos la viriginidad política" ("We lost [our] political virginity"), he said. "Perdimos por la violación" ("We lost it through rape"). The rape had occurred at the hands of party politics.

In the midst of this rape was a type of spiritualism, or even a hermeneutic, seeking to apply situations from the Old Testament directly to the Guatemalan political situation. This hermeneutic included a prophecy that circulated in the Elim church comparing Serrano Elías to King David and his predecessor Vinicio Cerezo to King Saul. David would rise from the ashes and replace Saul. The contrast between the hermeneutic and political reality simply reveals that "evangelicals are not prepared to be involved in politics." Those who do get involved wind up losing their prestige or becoming *manchados* (stained) because of their political naïveté.

This kind of naïveté is also evident in the relationship between evangelicals and civil society. When I asked the same person about the concept of civil society, the response revolved around violence and the lack of space for action when one thinks of opposing the military. Religion is seen as particularly divisive because of the way new evangelical churches appear whenever someone becomes disaffected and leaves to found a new congregation. Raising the concern of whether this has to do with creating new space or a mentality of power returns us once again to the issue of whether or not evangelicals might actually contribute to strengthening democratic processes in Guatemala.

Beginning with the Ríos Montt–Serrano Elías trajectory in the presidency, which ends at the midpoint of the time period under consideration here, Manuela Cantón Delgado has labeled the neopentecostal hermeneutic just referred to as a "biblical-ideological discourse." She links the experience of personal salvation with the salvation of the nation in an epilogue bearing the title "Political Millenarianism and Moral Reform." Much of her discussion grows out of interaction with the neopentecostal movement, and her description is useful as an exclamation mark to the foregoing paragraphs:

Those who trust that Guatemala's salvation is a part of God's plan, the ones who have the ability to intervene in the affairs of the country (or who are close to those who have this ability, or who consider themselves close by reason of their social position), have an idea that what constitutes salvation for Guatemala is a link between prosperity and the maintenance of a strict morality. This morality is associated with the rejection of drug addiction, homosexuality and pornography, and, at a distance, corruption. But institutional violence or the violation of human rights, for example, are never considered. If the concept of salvation as applied to "the nation" is the patrimony of those who are able to perform acts related to the political destiny of Guatemala, the content given to such a concept is also their patrimony. And it is in this content that they formulate proposals that recreate the discourse over moral reform without entering in a single case into consideration of concrete political actions. (Cantón Delgado 1998, 265)

One remarkable aspect of evangelical political discourse is its apparent class base. While the neopentecostal presence necessarily deserves attention in terms of its past and present relation to Guatemalan politics, too much attention slants the results of the investigation. Steigenga is correct in remarking how neopentecostals are "a unique group of Protestants in Guatemala" (1999, 173). They stand out for their higher levels of education and for having "lower levels of perceived religious discrimination and religious conflict in their communities." Cynically, one suspects that the reason for the lack of conflict is the relative homogeneity of the community of neopentecostals. Here one might even think of an enclave mentality similar to that which seems to afflict political processes at the national level. Nevertheless, Steigenga is also correct in asserting that the unique position of the neopentecostals in terms of "background, resources, and motivation" helps position them to capitalize on openings within democratic politics in Guatemala (Steigenga 1999, 173–74).

The assessment is compelling precisely because so much written about Guatemalan evangelicals in the media, and even in some scholarly circles, focuses on the neopentecostal presidents and on neopentecostal connections to conservative political and social agendas that seem to mirror evangelical discourse in the United States. There can be no doubt that neopentecostal discourse draws attention to itself because of its radical edge, as well as its association with the recent dark past of Guatemala. It also commands attention because it sounds out of place in a nation that is still one of the poorest in the Western Hemisphere and human rights violations are so rarely addressed by those in power. Returning to the rubric of "low-intensity democracy," it is striking how much neopentecostal discourse refuses to deal with economic issues beyond decentralization of the economy. The shortcomings of neoliberal economics (evident in the widening gap between rich and poor throughout the world) and continuing violations of human rights are simply

not on the agenda. A strong argument can be made that this is further evidence of the political (and social) naïveté of those who would run for office with an evangelical perspective. On the surface, Ríos Montt appears the exception in terms of naïveté, as his continued appeal in the political arena has to do with his strong response to violence and corruption. People as diverse as representatives of the AE and a resident of a largely Maya community who would be considered left-wing remarked to me in different contexts that it was striking how people could actually leave their homes and walk in the streets after Ríos Montt took power in 1982. This may also be one of the reasons why the FRG retains some of its electoral popularity. Whatever Ríos Montt's political realism and successes, however, they come at a high human cost.

A prominent theme in the literature on evangelicals and democracy in Guatemala is that the hope for a contribution by evangelicals to the strengthening of democracy begins with recognition of diversity within the evangelical community itself. The cases examined here show that diversity in practice. With the consensus running against the formation of an evangelical political party, the research suggests that the significance of evangelicalism in the political sphere is best addressed by continued research on the manner in which various evangelical actors engage political and social issues in very specific contexts. Examples of how evangelicals engage particular national issues such as the Código de la Niñez have as much to teach us as concentration on candidates for national office, or former presidents who represent limited currents within the evangelical stream. Dennis Smith and James Grenfell have reflected on the dearth of substantive involvement by evangelicals in public policy issues since the then Evangelical Synod of Guatemala supported a literacy campaign during the 1944-54 revolutionary period (1999, 27-28). Involvement in debate over the Código is the most recent example of such potentially constructive involvement.²²

Likewise, Maya occupants of local political office have much to teach about the role evangelicals play in daily village life where people enjoy first-hand contact and where their religious commitments are worked out in proximity to opposing positions in local contexts. Moreover, as representatives of groups systematically excluded from power at the national level, their influence holds the potential to be even more significant in terms of national politics than might at first appear. This is a complex issue from the political and religious vantage points, as well as from any type of perspective emphasizing identity politics. From the vantage point of civil society, the latter issue has taken on new salience since Serrano Elías left the presidency in disgrace. The issue of indigenous rights is a poignant example. Although Rigoberta Menchú won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, there was little talk in 1993 of a national-level Maya movement that could advocate in a concerted way for cultural as well as political and economic equality in Guatemala.

Research on the nexus between ethnicity, evangelicalism, and national politics after the war is only now beginning. Two of the Maya office-holders interviewed for this project were in power during the time leading up to the negotiation of the peace. The implications remain to be fleshed out in the light of new examples. What is demonstrable is a transcending of narrow preoccupations with conversion and personal salvation that holds out the possibility of evangelical engagement in other political contexts.

Conclusion

The most hopeful perspectives regarding evangelicals and politics in Guatemala are those that view evangelicals as part of a burgeoning civil society that challenges the impunity of the state. This comment is made with clear knowledge of the near truism that "civil society can be uncivil"; the recent spate of lynchings is the proof in contemporary Guatemala. Yet it is the pluralism of perspectives among evangelical communities and the desire to offer something out of their diverse experiences to processes larger than the communities themselves that hold out hope for constructive political participation based on more than a naïveté that seeks to create direct parallels between contemporary politics and images drawn from the Bible and a culture literally three thousand years and half a world away.

Comparing Guatemala's politically engaged evangelicals with those in Brazil and Zambia, a few key generalizations hold.²³ One is that the political legitimacy of both Guatemalan presidents, like the legitimacy of key evangelical actors in Brazil and Zambia such as former president Chiluba, has been called into question. Serrano Elías dug his own political grave and is now commonly referred to as a thief. Ironically, Ríos Montt maintains the image for many of a good evangelical. When I was finally able to meet him, he was teaching Sunday School at "La 16" congregation of El Verbo, and he referred to himself as an anciano viejo ("old elder") when I asked what his position was in relation to the governance of the church. In June 2001, a group called the Asociación de Justicia y Reconciliación filed a complaint against Ríos Montt and four other former army officers for the crime of genocide (Guatemala Hoy, June 7, 2001). Rumors indicate that he no longer leaves the country for fear of a Pinochet-style arrest on foreign soil, and in July 2006, a Spanish judge issued an international warrant for his arrest. Yet Ríos Montt remains a formidable figure in Guatemalan politics, announcing in early 2007 that he would run for Congress later in the year.

To be sure, the concept of civil society itself is complex and fraught with ambiguities (Diamond 1999; Lively and Reeve 1997). Dodson (1997) argues for the potential of evangelicals to make a positive contribution to civil society. His perspective is that the participation of pentecostals in congregational life

and the subsequent "finding of one's voice in the context of an association" might "lead to participation in the wider activities of civil society" (1997, 37). This is the kind of optimism leading Ireland (1999) to suggest that popular religion in Latin America in Catholic communities, pentecostalism, and Afro-Brazilian religions does indeed have something to offer for the creation of democratic societies in the region. Ireland emphasizes the role of the groups mentioned in creating and maintaining civil associations, reinforcing the "Tocquevillian parallel." In the specific case of Guatemala, this perspective on evangelicals has to be seen in light of Yashar's conclusion "that without a publicly expressed division within the traditional elites over authoritarian practices, in conjunction with a rise in popular organization, prospects for a democratizing coalition in Guatemala...appear dim" (1997, 230).

By taking some of the attention away from Guatemala's evangelical presidents, I have tried to bring a greater focus on the diversity of evangelical responses in the midst of efforts at the state level to consolidate peace and democracy in a society scarred by violence, poverty, and bitter ethnic strife. The Guatemalan case is unique in Latin America because of the demographic prominence of the evangelicals and the exclusion of the majority ethnic group from political and social power. The pluralism of the evangelical community forces the recognition that overconfident predictions about the influence of evangelicals on democratic consolidation are unwarranted. While the "biblical-ideological" discourse of some individuals and groups favors a perception of evangelicals as power mongers, it is difficult to see them taking the full reins of power without an effective political base such as a political party. Beyond all stereotypes, the evidence points to a new day in the relationship of evangelicals to their society. Even in the shadow of the fear that "things can change," the evidence points to a more diverse and more astute evangelical engagement with political issues than ever before.

In the end, the question is not so much whether or not evangelicals contribute to liberal democracy or to the consolidation of democracy; the question has to do with the role evangelicals play in the larger context of a democratic process, the "how" of political participation—including democratic movements in rural areas. There is an edge of ambiguity at the moment. As Levine and Stoll note: "Building social capital is a project for the long haul: Closing the gap between empowerment and power is less a matter of bringing the majority to power than of learning to live and survive as a minority, playing the political game day to day at all levels" (1997, 94). While Ríos Montt continues to embody the authoritarian past, some groups perceived to have links to that past, such as the AE, demonstrate a willingness to pursue dialogue on some issues, although their agenda seems limited. The Maya mayors interviewed would seem to lend support to a positive response when one thinks of the formation of coalitions and the representation of new voices in politics. There is evidence that some evangelicals are moving beyond

naïveté and into sustained engagement with political processes, at least on the community level and in regard to some national-level issues.

Too often evangelicals have been examined as a group somehow distinct from society. Yet if Yashar is correct in saying that "certain conditions encourage or discourage coalitions that will build democracy . . . and sustain [it] in the face of opposition" (1997, 15), then evangelicals are in fact part of coalitions broader than the constituency of their own hermanos in the faith. This recalls my friend's notion of the multiple identities of each person. In the hoped-for movement from the repressive and authoritarian politics of the past to the progressive politics of peace, no understanding of evangelicals and their relationship to power is possible without attention to the pluralism of Protestant voices. The multiple identities of each person do indeed affect the issue of who contributes to democracy and how. In 1982 when Ríos Montt landed in the presidency, the specter of spiritual as well as actual war hung over Guatemala. More than twenty-five years later, consolidation of peace and democracy holds out the possibility for reconciliation in the heart of Guatemalan society and between the country's diverse peoples. In this hard and multifaceted task, evangelicals are surely playing a role.

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NOTES

- I. I have not entered the discussion of the difference between pluralism and diversity in this article. Within the confines of democracy in Guatemala, evangelical diversity translates into pluralism in terms of attempts to influence political processes. See Riis (1999) for a useful discussion of religious pluralism and the introductory comments in Beckford (1999) for a distinction between diversity as a fact and pluralism as an ideological strategy.
- 2. I generally use "evangelical" as opposed to "Protestant" as the term for non-Catholic Christians who are variously labeled Protestants, evangelicals, pentecostals, neopentecostals, and even fundamentalists. *Evangelical* is the most common self-identification among these groups in Guatemala. While the word glosses over diversity within the evangelical community, it does retain the sense that all groups give a certain degree of authority to Christian scripture (the Evangel), while simultaneously signaling their religious identity as other than Catholic. Pentecostals constitute the majority of evangelicals in Guatemala and elsewhere in Latin America. When further descriptors are necessary to emphasize differences, e.g. between historical Protestants and pentecostals or neopentecostals, I provide that information.
- 3. In her documentation of the celebration, Garrard-Burnett (1998a, 157–58) says that five hundred thousand people were reported to have attended the rally, although she questions that number in a footnote. Her chapter entitled "The Protestant President" (138–61) provides an analysis of Ríos Montt's tenure in office and the ambiguities his presence created within the evangelical community.
 - 4. See Jonas (2000, chap. 8), on the referendum.
- 5. This was one of a series of scandals that have dogged the FRG and given the party the image of impunity in light of its dominance of the executive and legislature. Although several were later cleared, some twenty-four FRG deputies, including Ríos Montt, were initially implicated and stripped of their immunity from prosecution.
- 6. Bianchi left El Verbo in early 2001 and joined El Shaddai, another large neopentecostal congregation in Guatemala City in which Serrano Elías had been a "prophet" at the time of his election to the presidency. Information about the ARDE before the elections says that he served as "the director general for El Verbo ministries" beginning in 1996. The piece also indicates that he was vice president of the Evangelical Alliance of Guatemala during 1998–99. El Verbo congregations are governed by a council of elders, one of whom has primary responsibilities at any given time.
- 7. The Anfuso and Sczepanski volume is a hagiographic work emphasizing Ríos Montt's path to the presidency and role of his religious beliefs and relationship to El Verbo during his time in office. According to this work, Bianchi and Alvaro Contreras were required to renounce their positions in the church when they went to work in the national palace. Stoll mentions the "shepherding-style doctrine or spiritual pact" at the center of El Verbo's theology, so that "when Ríos went to the national palace, he did so under the spiritual authority of the Word church."
- 8. The use of the term *cristiano* here clearly has a more ecumenical sense than in much evangelical discourse in Mesoamerica, where it is often used only for those who have converted from Catholicism. Sanchíz Ochoa indicates that this is common among elite pentecostals and reflects class interests (1998, 55).

- 9. The term means *leader* in Spanish and the acronym is for "the liberty, development, and renewal of Guatemala."
- 10. This article notes that a new party has to formulate bylaws (*estatutos*) and collect five thousand signatures in order to register. Interestingly, the article also mentions the possibility of creating a school to train future political leaders. Two universities are said to have been contacted in this regard: Mariano Gálvez University, which has historical ties to the Protestant community in Guatemala, and the Panamerican University founded by El Verbo.
- II. I thank Thomas Offit for helping me think through issues regarding the Code.
- 12. A lengthier document outlining this principle as "THE FAMILY, understood as the basic and natural form of the community and human society," was later disseminated by the bishops.
- 13. Ladino is the term used in Guatemala and southern Mexico for the Spanish-speaking, usually mestizo, population. The term has cultural connotations in the sense that it represents those who are not indigenous. One of the aspects of contemporary identity politics in Guatemala is the issue of what it means to have a large population perceived as not having a culture, such as the Maya population. The Journal of Latin American Anthropology, vol. 6, no. 2 (2001), has a major section devoted to "Rethinking Polarized Ethnicities" in Guatemala.
- 14. One work examining Guatemala's relationship with the United States and, consequently, with the international community emphasizes that "even in the 1980s this Central American nation had forged diplomatic relations with fewer than fifty other countries" (Ebel, Taras, and Cochrane 1991, 157). The authors use the lens of caudillaje (strong personalized leadership) as the interpretive frame for their work. Regardless of whether one accepts that model, social criticism from inside or outside the country is more difficult in such a context.
- 15. The "intendente system" of this period involved the president appointing the senior governing official in towns and rural communities. Intendentes were community outsiders, Ladinos, and not answerable to the local communities (Ebel 1972, 162–63).
- 16. The Iglesia de Cristo congregation was organized in 1926 (IENPG 1982, 292). Most early missionary work in the country and in the western highlands was among urban Ladinos. Amid struggles over the appropriate language for evangelization and the relationship of language to acculturating the native population, Cameron Townsend began work in 1919 among Kaqchikel speakers in San Antonio Aguascalientes (Garrard-Burnett 1989, 130). At the time Townsend was working with the Central American Mission. He went on to found the Wycliffe Bible Translators, also known in the field as the Summer Institute of Linguistics (Stoll 1982, 19–61).
- 17. The word used in Spanish for recovery in this sense is *reivindicación*. It denotes recovery, but also the vindicating of Maya culture in the face of opposition. A basic source for the Maya Movement is Fischer and Brown (1996). See also Gálvez Borrell and Esquit Choy (1997).
- 18. I thank Dr. Robert Carmack for making the parallel. See the helpful discussion in Tedlock (1992, 53–58). Two useful sources for the Mam area are Greenberg (1984, 93–162) and Peck (1970).

- 19. The interview was in 1996. For evidence of burgeoning social consciousness among Latin American pentecostals, see Petersen (1996).
- 20. For another critique of Huntington and a proposal for dealing with religion in pluralistic contexts, see Stepan (2000). One of Stepan's essential arguments is that there is a reciprocal need for "twin tolerations" between religious individuals and groups on the one hand and political institutions on the other. Fulfilling this necessity for toleration would result in "minimal freedom of action" for the institution or group in question at a particular moment. I thank Ed Cleary for this reference.
- 21. Tillich's notion of the Protestant Principle is relevant here. The term seems to have been used in a couple of senses, including as "an expression of the conquest of religion by the Spiritual Presence and consequently an expression of the victory over the ambiguities of religion, its profanization, and its demonization" (Tillich 1967, 42). The relevance to religious discourse is the contrast between the spiritual realm and the present realities of a particular religious community. This contrast allows for the subjective interpretation of religious truth, or for the possession of authority by individuals who might be inclined to form a community more reflective of the spiritual truth they know (subjectively) to be true. In this way, the transcendent becomes a source of division. This diffuse sense of authority in evangelical religion is a useful corollary to observations of Catholic corporatism and its relation to the state in Latin America. The notion poses the issue of religious meaning as a contrast to interpretations of evangelical reality based on institutional analysis or the marketing and appropriation of symbolic goods.
- 22. It is important to note that the AE had some participation in the National Reconciliation Commission that grew out of the Esquipulas II meeting in 1987 and led to the Diálogo Nacional in 1989, which demonstrated that civil society would have to be taken into account in discussions between the URNG and the government. The AE also participated in dialogue between the URNG and the religious sector in 1990. These were early steps in what became the peace process that was formally initiated in March 1990. One of the primary brokers of this process was the Lutheran World Federation. One interpretation is that AE participation faded when another evangelical voice from the left became more prominent in commission meetings and the leadership of the AE felt their participation was diminished. Several years ago, the AE also established the Permanent Civic Commission (COCIPE; Comisión Cívico Permanente) to deal with political and social issues of a civic nature.
- 23. For Brazil, see Freston (1996, 2001) and Fonseca (chapter 5 here). Freston (2001) also summarizes the Zambian case in some detail.

3

The Evolution of Protestant Participation in Nicaraguan Politics and the Rise of Evangelical Parties

Roberto Zub

To speak of Protestantism and politics is to speak of almost all the central themes of Nicaraguan history in the twentieth century. The Protestant presence dates from the last decade of the nineteenth century, although significant political involvement began only in the 1970s and gathered pace thereafter. In the 1990s, with governments once again enjoying close relations with the Catholic Church, the by now numerically strong and socially representative evangelicals turned to political action via a series of parties of evangelical inspiration. In this chapter, I concentrate mainly on the 1990s and on these evangelical parties, and especially on an analysis of the first pentecostals who reached the Nicaraguan congress during this period. I have used diverse documentary sources (internal documents produced by churches and parties; books; journals), questionnaires, and interviews with political and ecclesiastical leaders, as well as many years of close observation of Nicaraguan churches and politics.

My hypothesis is that Nicaraguan Protestantism contains antagonistic ideologies and structures; that the churches and evangelical parties reflect the *caudillismo* (strong personalistic leadership) that predominates in society; and that evangelical parties are in large part schemes for tapping into political power with the aim of creating a duopoly and sharing the privileges that the state offers to the Catholic Church.