



Guatemala--developing democracy

Politics and Economy

By Already Huang and Yirone Huang

Guatemala has a presidential government system. Therefore, the president of Guatemala is both the chief of state and head of government. Every four years, Guatemala holds a presidential election. On Jan. 14, 2008, Alvaro Colom Caballeros, of the National Unity of Hope Party, was elected president. His vice-president is Jose Rafael Espada.

“I heard when they won the election the situation of Guatemala is getting better,” said Pricilla Villela, a Guatemalan student of the International College at Ming Chuan University.

Guatemala is a democratic country and political parties are numerous and unstable. Not a single political party has ever won the presidency more than once. In every election period, most parties are formed by small groups or brand new.

Currently, the country has more than 10 political parties. Among the most well-known political parties are National Unity of Hope (UNE), Patriotic Party (PP), Grand National Alliance (GANAN), Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG) and Social Action Center (CASA).

“Guatemala is usually very democratic. Everybody has the right to vote if they are over 18 years old. All they need to do is just to bring their ID. They can also choose whether they want to vote or not,” said Villela.

She said that most Guatemalans who live in suburban areas are illiterate and they fingerprinted their ballots.

“It is a way they vote, most people in Guatemala do not know how to read and write, maybe 92 percent. It is a lot,” Villela said.

Guatemala is a poor country with a gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$64.76 billion in last year. The GDP per capital was US\$5,100, according to the CIA- The World Factbook.

The most important export commodities are coffee, sugar, petroleum, apparel, bananas, fruits and vegetables, cardamom, transport equipment, footwear and automobiles, according to the CIA- The World Factbook.

The US is the country’s largest trading partner, says Wikipedia, providing 32.9 percent of Guatemala’s import and receiving 39.6 percent of its exports. The major export partners by percentage according to 2007 estimates were the United States of America (USA)--39.6 percent; El Salvador--13.4 percent; Honduras--8.1 percent; Mexico--5.9 percent; Nicaragua--4.4 percent; and Costa Rica--4.2 percent, according to the CIA- The World Factbook.

“Guatemala is a third-world country,” Villela said. “That means Guatemala is an under-developed country. So the economy in Guatemala is really bad, maybe 85 percent of the population is poor.”

According to the CIA- The World Factbook, in Guatemala, the labor force by occupation in 2007 was agriculture--13.3 percent; industry--25.8 percent; and services--60.9 percent. The main products in Guatemala are sugarcane, corn, bananas, coffee and chickens.

Guatemala—glaring divisions of life

History, culture and people

By Already Huang and Yirone Huang

Life in Guatemala is greatly influenced by its culture and history. Those two factors play an important role in its politics, living standards, economy, personality, etc.

According to the New World Encyclopedia, large divisions exist in the daily life of Guatemala. The division between rich and poor is glaring. Guatemala City is home to families that live similar lives to their counterparts in Europe, but outside the capital city, Indians live lives that have changed very little over the past few centuries.

Spanish is the language of about 60 percent of the people. The language, however, is not universally spoken among the indigenous population.

“In farming village there are a lot of people even do not know how to speak Spanish,” said Pricilla Villela, a Guatemalan student of the International College at Ming Chuan University.

About 60 percent of the population is of mixed Mayan and Spanish descent and about 40 percent are of purely Mayan origin, according to the Encyclopedia of the Nations. The latter have historically suffered from discrimination, poverty and relative geographical isolation. Roman Catholicism is the dominant religion, and there are also Protestant and traditional Mayan minorities.

The main religion is Roman Catholic and some hold indigenous Mayan beliefs. Guatemala once was the colony of Spain and affected by the Maya civilization a lot. Most of the clothes, food, accessories are still made in the traditional Mayan way. By the Caribbean Sea, people can see the culture’s influences on the way they dance, the food they eat and songs they sing, according to Wikipedia.

The Basin of Petén was the Maya civilization center of Guatemala from the fourth century to the 11th century. In this period, plenty of ruins of cities and pyramids are still preserved till today. Almost at the end of the 11th century, the Basin of Petén was destroyed, but the central high mountain area still existed. As a result, 43 percent of the population in this country today is the descendant of Maya, according to Wikipedia.

In 1523, the Spanish came and destroyed the Maya civilization. Because of their elimination policy, very few Maya books were preserved. Guatemala got rid of the dominance of Spain in 1821. From 1823 to 1839, Guatemala was a member of the Federal Republic of Central America until 1840 when it became independent.

During 1841 to 1871, the country was dominated by the conservative party, which tried to preserve the old rule that categorized people into different classes and treated them unfairly. After 1871 to 1944, the political system was democratic and the main government policy was to modernize the economy, according to Wikipedia.

However, democracy was not achieved until after the October Revolution of 1944. At that time, the first rule to protect workers’ safety and rights was established. During 1950 to 1954, President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán launched a land reform, which made about 2 percent of the landlord’s owned 70 percent of the cultivatable land. Although the country was still very poor under his presidency, democracy and freedom was enjoyed at that time.