Neither Old nor New Guatemalan Identities: Mayas and Ladinos
Stuck in Between Liberal and Multicultural Discourse in 21st Century

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Abstract

In 1999, and for the first time in Guatemala's history, a referendum was held to approve (among other reforms), the constitutional recognition of the multi-ethnic, pluri-cultural and multi-lingual character of the country. While the referendum was subsequently rejected, it catapulted the issues of indigenous culture and rights and national identity to the forefront of national public debate and discussion.

Emerging from the fire of acrimonious public debates and discourse on the credibility and viability of officially recognising Maya identity and rights was a form of 'Ladino' (non-indigenous and mixed race Guatemalans) nationalism. Ladino nationalism rejected the notion of specific rights for Mayas as part of a new multicultural development paradigm and insisted upon the sanctity of classic liberal rights framed by notions such as the universal equality of all citizens before the law. The public assertion of Landinidad as an identity marker and source of ethnic pride by academics, journalists and political commentators from all sides of the political spectrum further complicated an already bitterly divided political landscape and was a major contributing factor for the referendum's failure.

The emergence of ladino nationalism can be seen as a response to the threat posed--both real and imaginary--by an increasingly powerful indigenous movement agitating for specific rights for indigenous people and a rejection of multiculturalism as the dominant paradigm for national development. This paper will explore the ironies and complexities of identity politics as they were manifest in the 1999 referendum. It will highlight how, as Mayas and Ladinos struggle to renegotiate and redefine national identity such that it has resonance and meaning for all Guatemalans, they remain immobilised by the vagaries, contradictions and controversies of liberal and multicultural discourse on citizenship, rights and development. Some five hundred years after the first contact between European and indigenous inhabitants of meso-America, inter-ethnic relations in Guatemala are at cross-road. The problem, however, is that the way forward in the new millennium is less certain now than ever.