

# FROM LESS WAR TO MORE PEACE: GUATEMALA'S JOURNEY SINCE 1996

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This paper examines Guatemala since December 1996 when the Guatemalan Government and the insurgent guerrillas (the URNG) signed a Peace Accord, ending a violent thirty-six year civil war. This achievement, remarkable at first glance, ushered in a state of “negative peace” or the absence of war. This event, however, also marked the beginning of an attempt to achieve “positive peace” or a civil society built upon the principles of social justice. The paper’s analysis reveals these years to be a timely and important struggle with international implications. It examines how Guatemalans have addressed longstanding economic, social, and political disparities that engendered the civil war in the first place and are still evident today. It also examines how Guatemala has been influenced not only by external political and economic forces but also by the inherent challenges that follow a violent civil war: the tension between truth and reconciliation, the tension between peace and justice, the legacy of violence, and the reintegration of former combatants.

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## INTRODUCTION

Guatemala is a country with a traumatic recent past. The legacy of its thirty-six year brutal civil war is still very evident today, twelve years after the historic signing of the peace accords between the Guatemalan government and the insurgent Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union (widely known by the Spanish acronym of URNG). Although the ceasefire between the rebels and government forces has held up to the test of time, the legacy of direct and structural violence, evidenced in systematic human rights abuses, impunity, and unacceptable economic disparity, continues to haunt this nation of over twelve million people.

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