

TE DEUM CRISTIANO EVANGÉLICO:  
'THE EVANGELICAL' IN GUATEMALAN POLITICS <sup>1</sup>

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I. INTRODUCTION

Over the course of less than forty years the percentage of non-Catholics in the Guatemalan population has risen from about 2 to 40 per cent, of whom the great majority are Evangelical Christians (Morales, *interview*, Guatemala City 31.01.2012; O'Neill 2012; Pew Forum 2006). The physical representations are hard to miss; throughout the country the construction of Evangelical churches is steadily increasing accompanied by painted messages recommending the public to prepare for the coming of the saviour, and that 'Jesus is the lord of Guatemala'. Alongside these physical changes, the so-called *transformations* can allegedly also be seen in the individual; as people convert, many change lifestyles, friends, and at times even personal economic status.

The phenomenon of rapid evangelisation in Guatemala has received broad scholarly attention, much of which serves as an inspiration for this article. However, as the percentage of Evangelical Christians increases, so does the diversity of the members of the category 'Evangelical', complicating the drawing of general conclusions with regard to the impact and effect of Evangelical growth. Perhaps most controversial and most debated in the field, has been the assessments of the impact of this large-scale Evangelical conversion on Guatemala's socio-political development, and more specifically, on the processes of democratisation. Hence, today most studies concentrate on Evangelicalism as experienced by individuals and smaller communities.

The aim of this article is nonetheless to make the case for analysing the political impact of Evangelicalism at the national level. The findings suggest that in recent years, representatives of Evangelical communities have increased their presence in political spaces such as advisory boards to the President and hearings in Congress. The article explores to what extent this has been a deliberate strategy. As a hypothetical point of departure, the article argues that in national politics 'the Evangelical' can be considered

as *one* single analytical category, defined as such both by official representatives of the Evangelical communities, as well as by other members of society. This will allow for bringing 'the Evangelical' into the analysis of Guatemalan politics, in spite of the heterogeneous character of the universe of *crístianos evangélicos*.

The Guatemalan society is characterised by deep socioeconomic divisions, and the political discourse is characterised by a split between those who want change and those who prefer and benefit from the status quo. The first part of the article examines this portrayal of Guatemala's recent political development in order to contextualise the Evangelical political engagement. Further, some theoretical and methodological reflexions on the study of religion in politics will be presented, suggesting a framework based on the overlapping of religious spaces and political practices. In this 'the religious' will be considered not only as practices, but also as language, both as everyday language and the religious message distributed by leaders. Then follows a brief introduction to the scholarly debates on the 'Evangelical explosion' in Latin America, and particularly in Guatemala. In the second part of the article, the core findings are presented, concentrated around three aspects considered as central for the assessment of the role of the Evangelical as a political actor: (i) the sheer size of the population referred to as 'Evangelicals'; (ii) Evangelical churches' and organisations' activities and presence in civil society; and (iii) the moral and financial status promoted by, and attributed to Evangelical leaders. From this perspective, it has been possible to identify the mechanisms and tendencies of *the Evangelical* in national politics. The last part of the article explores and analyses these political strategies and it will be argued that through cooperation and endorsement on behalf of a large religious community, the political role of the Evangelical Church has so far served to support the socio-political status quo of Guatemalan politics.

## II. POLITICAL CONTEXT

The Guatemalan political system today exemplifies a regime that is, depending on perspective and research agenda, considered either as democratic or a hybrid, often accompanied by a variety of negatively loaded adjectives. The restoration of a civilian regime after decades of civil war and military rule was initiated in 1984 with the elections of a national constitutional assembly and the celebration of multiparty presidential elections the following year. However, the electoral climate was, and still is, characterised by high levels of polarisation, repression, and politically motivated violence. Crime and citizen insecurity have throughout

Guatemala's democratic experience been considered the most pressing political issues to which politicians should attend (Azpuru 2005, 2008; Lehoucq 2002).

The recent experience with military dictatorship and a brutal civil war (1960-1996) is widely considered a determinant factor for understanding the socio-political dynamics of today. The violent conflict emerged as a result of decades of unequal economic growth and an extremely uneven distribution of wealth combined with a repressive state-apparatus that strangled the people's political voice (CEH 1999; ODHAG 1998). The explicit aim of the peace accords signed in 1996 was therefore to target the enormous socioeconomic gap dividing the people and the elite, as well as the traditions of discriminatory policies (Jonas 2000; MINUGUA 1995, 1996, 2005). By 2012 however, the great majority of the reforms presented in the accords are not addressed at any political level, signalling both political resistance to the agreement reached and lack of political capacity.

The Republic of Guatemala today has a multiparty system and has with the 2011 presidential elections celebrated seven subsequent relatively free and fair elections since the restoration of civilian government. With the exception of President Serrano's failed *autogolpe* in 1993, the constitutional order has survived (Bjune and Petersen 2010). While many of the same actors remain on the political stage, only one party has survived as an electoral option in the presidential elections throughout the post-authoritarian period. Most parties disappear or re-brand and enter new formations from one election to the next. This, combined with a remarkably high degree of floor crossing (*transfuguismo parlamentario*), the tendency of members of Congress to change party affiliation *during* their elected period, places the Guatemalan party universe in the category of 'party non-system' as defined by Omar Sanchez: "... if the identity of the top (two or three or four) party vote-getters (regardless of their electoral ordering) is not the same across more than two elections, then that party universe is best described as a 'non-system'" (2009:489). Sanchez further characterises these systems as "...the ultimate expression of party universes shaped 'from above' – that is, shaped by political elites independently of existing ethnic, cultural or socio-economic cleavages in society" (2007:489-90). During the 2008-2012 electoral period, 70 of 158 members of Congress (44 per cent) have reportedly changed party affiliation from the party with which they were elected during this electoral period. 50 of these had changed more than once, and two representatives had changed four times (*El Periódico* 2011). This lack of institutionalisation of the Guatemalan party system is considered to have a

severe impact on the functioning of the Guatemalan political system, in particular the policy-making process (Jones 2011:5; ASIES 2007) and the low levels of trust in the democratic institutions. A fall in the levels of trust in the recently established institutions was registered already in 1990 (Jonas 2000; NDI 1991). According to recent polls, Guatemalans express little confidence in public institutions, least of all in political parties, which received a score of 29 points (out of 100). Congress is perceived as the second least trustworthy institution with a score of 36.6 (LAPOP 2010). In addition, a mere 18 per cent state that they identify with a political party.<sup>2</sup> And finally, according to the *Latinobarómetro*, support for democracy is the lowest in the Latin American region, with only 36 per cent of Guatemalans agreeing to the statement that democracy is the preferred political system to any other forms, down ten per cent since 2010 (*Latinobarómetro* 2011:29-38)<sup>3</sup> As will be addressed in the second part, in this climate of *underinstitutionalisation* and political mistrust, it is of particular relevance to consider the contrasting high levels of trust in non-state institutions, and in particular, in the Evangelical Church.

Central to any analysis of the Guatemalan political system, is the country's position at the extremes of close to all socioeconomic indicators for the Latin American region. This includes one of the highest scores on the GINI index, and the highest rate of chronic malnutrition, currently at 48.9 per cent among children under five years old. The UNDP reports of 51 per cent of the population living in poverty, and of these 15 per cent live in extreme poverty (Escobar 2011). And these numbers and ratings are even more severe when controlling for demographic factors, in particular ethnicity and geography. Recent reports indicate systematic limitations for the fulfilment of social, economic and political rights for Guatemala's indigenous populations (UNDP 2010:247). This scenario is relevant for the understanding of the continuation of the high levels of socio-political polarisation, and equally so for the analysis of the political positioning of the official representatives of the many Evangelical churches, whose members come from *all* socio-economic and ethnic segments of Guatemalan society.

### III. RELIGION AS PRACTICES AND LANGUAGE

Another regional index spearheaded by Guatemala is the one of non-Catholic Christians in Latin America: around 40 per cent of Guatemalans are reportedly members of a Protestant church. Most of these are Evangelicals and belong to Pentecostal churches (Morales, *interview*, Guatemala City 31.01.2012; Pew Forum 2006).<sup>4</sup> People's values and worldview are troublesome categories in political science, in particular

when trying to avoid attributing a particular behaviour or set of values to people merely on the basis of their religious beliefs. Religious identification and beliefs evidently differ among individuals. However, as will be argued below, being Evangelical in Guatemala entails being part of a distinctive *group*, either defined by oneself or by others. Religious beliefs as group affiliation can then be analysed more concretely, for example, by focusing on the *arenas* where the particular religion is practiced, and by considering the opportunities for network building these arenas facilitate. Within the structures of elite power, religious identity can also provide vital, cross-domain cohesion, and the bonds between *Evangelical* leaders are in general considered uniquely strong compared to previous analyses of elite cohesion (Lindsay 2007). Recent studies have sought to highlight the role of *religious* identity for public leaders in the US. In *Faith in the Halls of Power*, findings suggest that being *evangelical* in particular seems to have an empowering advantage, both because of the way many congregations actively train their members in organisational and business skills, but also more concretely how fellow believers help each other rise in power across sectors (2007:212).

Guatemala and the US are many miles apart, but the findings of Lindsay referred to above are nevertheless considered relevant for analysing the Guatemalan context. First and foremost, it should be emphasized that many of the largest Evangelical churches in Guatemala are international enterprises, which in many cases stand in direct contact with and are inspired by the techniques and messages of other churches, particularly churches and groups in the US. However, a mere mapping of this kind of elite networking cannot serve as more than an indication that this *can* have an impact on the way people who are members of similar groups relate to each other professionally as well. Nevertheless, this perspective also opens up for considering the importance of shared experiences, shared practices and a shared religious language. As will be elaborated below, in Guatemala, the language used by many Evangelical congregations explicitly refers to how the country should be governed, what kind of economic management is the right one, what it means to be a good citizen, what is the 'right' way forward, and what is not. This perspective thus favours analysing 'the religious' not only as practices, but also as language, both as everyday language and the religious message distributed by leaders (Wedeen 2008; Wuthnow 2011).

The Evangelical (*lo evangélico*) occupies a clear presence in the public sphere in Guatemala. Believers as well as non-believers recognise the particularities of the evangelical discourse, be it on the radio or in political speeches. The production and reproduction of the religious

messages and practices must thus be considered in relation to the particular context in which it operates. Identifying and recognising the religious message can reveal how this is being distributed and assimilated in various settings. As an example, in Guatemala it is likely that the recent history of two much-criticised, openly Evangelical heads of state, Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-83) and Jorge Serrano Elías (1990-93), have affected the way political participation is talked about in these religious communities. The analysis of the Evangelical in Guatemalan politics presented here relies on thorough ethnographic studies, both focusing on the religious language and the everyday practices and lived experiences.<sup>5</sup>

#### IV. PROTESTANTS, PENTECOSTALS AND EVANGELICALS

The terms 'Evangelicals' and 'Pentecostals' are characterised by their highly pluralistic nature, which thus makes them analytically troublesome categories. There is great variation in scholarly definitions of these Protestant denominations. Some emphasise the kind of *practice*, dividing them into charismatic and non-charismatic Christians, whilst others rely on the churches' self-identification. In Guatemala, many observers have, in addition, adopted the term *neopentecostal* to describe the phenomenon of Evangelical, mostly urban congregations, attended first and foremost by the upper classes, often with strong elements of the 'prosperity gospel' in the sermons (See for example Garrard Burnett, this volume). However, such classifications rarely correspond to the conception that the members have of themselves. In Guatemala, most Pentecostals usually refer to themselves as *evangélicos* or *cristianos* (as opposed to *católicos*) or both: *cristianos evangélicos*, and they identify with one or several churches, rather than with Pentecostals as a group (*interviews*, Guatemala City 2012; O'Neill 2010). In line with this, the term 'Evangelical' will in this article be employed when referring to this group of believers, unless specification of the particular denomination is considered relevant.

There is a large body of literature on the subject of the growth of Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism in general, and in the Guatemalan context in particular. The growing tendency of Evangelicals becoming politicians and politicians becoming Evangelicals is also documented, if not that extensively (Steigenga 2001; Ortíz 2004; Garrard Burnett 2010; O'Neill 2010). The scholarly debate on the *political* impact has long been centred on whether or not the *pentecostalisation* of the religious landscape of Guatemala has led to an overall political 'pacification', or by contrast, contributed to the awakening and pluralisation of civil society. Analysts who refer to the years of the civil war had a tendency to concentrate on the escapist and self-proclaimed neutral position of the Evangelical churches in

the highly polarised conflict, as well as their connections to the USA.<sup>6</sup> Responding to the increased pluralisation of the demography of the research subject, analysts from the 1990s onwards have sought to broaden this vision of the Evangelical churches in Guatemala, and much emphasis has been placed on Evangelicals as active members of society. By encouraging participation in local communities, stressing the ban on alcohol and allowing female pastors, these congregations are said to have contributed to empowering their members, to a strengthening and pluralisation of civil society, and thereby democracy.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, some researchers and observers emphasise the individual believers' experiences of personal development and change, obtained from courses organised by the churches in areas such as language, financial management and leadership, and how these skills are transferable to other arenas. As noted by Steigenga "... [Pentecostalism] represents an interaction structure that, over time may affect the personal traits that individuals bring into political life" (1994:168).

Jointly then, social scientists of many disciplines have found that the growth of Evangelicalism in Guatemala has both led to increased civil participation *and* quiescence; it has both facilitated *and* hindered the processes of democratisation. With the aim of moving beyond the 'authoritarian vs. democratic' debates, emphasis here is rather placed on identifying the ways and mechanisms through which Evangelical representatives and institutions *do* participate in political arenas, and thereby to identify how Evangelical initiatives and activism are received and reacted upon by the political establishment.

The findings presented below concentrate on three aspects central to the assessment of the Evangelical effect on Guatemalan politics: the sheer size of the population referred to as 'Evangelicals'; Evangelical churches' and organisations' activities and presence in civil society; and the moral and financial status promoted by, and attributed to Evangelical leaders.

## V. A LARGE AND HETEROGENEOUS GROUP

One of the most immediate, and perhaps obvious findings with regard to Evangelicals and politics in Guatemala is the large *number* of Evangelicals in the population. Around 30-35 per cent of Guatemalans consider themselves as Evangelicals (Morales, *interview*, Guatemala City 31.01.2012; O'Neill 2012; Pew Forum 2006). This is reflected in Congress where roughly 30 per cent of the deputies do the same, and at least three of the candidates in the 2011 presidential elections were openly *cristianos evangélicos* (Morales, *interview*, Guatemala City 31.01.2012; *Prensa Libre* 2009; Rodríguez 2011). Such numbers tell many stories, which indeed are

interpreted in several ways, in particular as regards *why* this is happening and what it will lead to. Evangelical pastors themselves tell of a deliberate strategy of expanding and entering into all sectors of Guatemalan society, including politics (*Interviews*, Guatemala City 2012), yet these assumptions are not confirmed by research. One message is nevertheless quite undisputed; many people have changed, and Evangelicals today represent *all* segments of Guatemalan society, the very poor as well as the extremely wealthy. While Evangelical congregations in Guatemala were for a long time characterised by being impoverished and rural, in the late 1970s, elements of this religion broke through its ceiling in the middle-class and moved upwards on the social ladder (Stoll 1994:101). Today, Guatemala City has many so-called mega churches, whose members are typically from the upper classes of Guatemalan society, including an increasing number of people from the business sector as well as politicians. 'Evangelicals' in Guatemala is thus a category that contains a large and particularly heterogeneous group of people.

Guatemala is the only country in Latin America that has had two Evangelical presidents, and over the last decades several candidates for the presidency have been known to be Evangelicals. However, in contrast to other Latin America countries with a significant percentage of Evangelicals such as Brazil, no political parties or candidates with explicit Evangelical platforms have emerged in Guatemala.<sup>8</sup> Instead of aggregating into a single party or legislative block, Evangelical politicians in Guatemala appear in all political parties, such as in the ultra-conservative VICTORIA party as well as in self-proclaimed left-wing parties forming part of the *Frente Amplio*. Even though the level of homogeneity of an 'Evangelical vote' has not been established in Guatemala, to political actors, their expanding number arguably tells of a potential electorate from which they are likely to seek support, "without confirmation of their influence and homogeneity even seemingly necessary" (García-Ruíz and Michel 2011:421). Most recent examples include the evangelical *Te Deum* ceremony<sup>9</sup> for current President Otto Pérez Molina in which he was greeted by the Evangelical leadership with the message that "we are six million people who pray for you." This will be addressed below.

## VI. RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES, POLITICAL PRESENCE

Most of the numerous Evangelical churches in Guatemala arrange sermons several times a week, and the Sunday sermon is often repeated once or twice. The largest churches, the so-called mega-churches in Guatemala City,<sup>10</sup> are equipped with in-house media centres, which enable live-recordings to be broadcast via the internet or their own TV and radio



stations.<sup>11</sup> In addition to participate in the ordinary sermons, many Evangelicals participate in faith-based groups and courses arranged weekly, either organised by the congregations on specific topics such as matrimonial behaviour, financial management, business skills, and leadership, or in independent groups meeting regularly for Bible studies, discussions and social gatherings (O'Neill 2010). Evangelical churches also organise festivals, concerts and other entertainment events during weekends, directed towards young people or families. The training of leaders is thorough and organised centrally, conducted by the pastor of the 'mother-church.' There are also clear and detailed strategies for the ways the prayer groups and meetings should be organised, and the churches are actively distributing the suggested topics, messages and the verse of the week through various channels such as the church's website, social networks, e-mails, pamphlets and programmes on radio and television. These techniques contribute to a remarkable spreading of the word and, at the same time, to conserving a coherent religious message.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the activities organised by the churches, there are also many independently organised faith based groups. The largest and perhaps most well-known, is the Guatemalan branch of the 'Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International' (FIHNEC by its Spanish acronym). This group, which welcomes both Catholics and Evangelicals as long as they are 'charismatic,' organises regular meetings in hotels and restaurants in Guatemala City and has local branches across the country. Anthropologist Manuel Cantón Delgado followed this group in the early 1990s and tells of a membership by people at the highest level in their sector, among them CEOs of large banks, high-ranking militaries, and then President Jorge Serrano Elías and his vice-president Gustavo Espina (Cantón Delgado 1993). Today the FIHNEC has about a hundred cells in Guatemala City alone, and about a hundred more throughout the country. The model for organising the meetings is distributed in the magazine "La Visión" where the organisers of the meetings also can find testimonies from newly converted members, to be read out loud in the meetings.<sup>13</sup> The members stress that they are not a church, although the form and the language of these reunions are remarkably similar to the Evangelical sermons, both in content and form.<sup>14</sup>

Institutionally, Evangelicals are to a large extent represented by either the Evangelical Alliance of Guatemala (*La Alianza Evangélica de Guatemala*, AEG) or by the Conference of Evangelical Churches in Guatemala (*La Conferencia de Iglesias Evangélicas de Guatemala*, CIEDEG). The AEG is by far the largest of the two, currently representing around 18,000 Evangelical congregations in Guatemala (Morales,

*interview*, Guatemala City 31.01.2012).<sup>15</sup> The AEG also constitutes the national branch of the international organisation World Evangelical Alliance seeking to strengthen local churches through national and international alliances. The political role and intentions of the AEG have undergone clear changes since its foundation in 1937. From being more like a small scale umbrella organisation with the main objective of protecting its member churches against the state, the AEG is today a large representative institution, and its leadership is frequently consulted by politicians and national media on social as well as political and economic issues, often side by side with the Catholic hierarchy. Being the oldest, largest, most visible, and now openly politically active institutional representation of the Evangelical churches in Guatemala arguably makes the AEG into a relevant actor and arena in Guatemalan politics.

The AEG is structured around a directive leadership of nine persons, who ideally represent different denominations or church groups. Each of these leaders heads a commission, which represents the different work-areas of the alliance, such as the commission on theology, on civic and political issues, on children and youth issues and social development.<sup>16</sup> The commissions are formed by members of the alliance with particular interest and skills relevant for the particular area. For example, the commission on civic and political issues is composed of lawyers and members with experience from and interest in politics. The commissions are expected to provide the member churches with inspiration and training in their respective areas.

(...) Working with the state apparatus, we have the civic committee ('la comisión cívico permanente') and the lawyers on this committee are well-known and very well respected in political circles and in civil society. They have contributed to opening the doors for us to these political spaces as well as to the business sector. Then there is another commission, the commission on development, which also is 'alert' and ready to attend needs and necessities, nationwide, and more specifically, to needs in the countryside (...)

*Jorge Morales, President of the AEG (interview, Guatemala City 31.01.2012)*<sup>17</sup>

Member churches pay a fee to be a part of the alliance, and the pastors of each church are granted representation at the alliance's yearly general assembly, where the leadership is elected as well as strategies and objectives for the alliance's core areas of interest and influence are decided.

The AEG was long explicitly non-political. The organisation still stresses its independence and non-partisanship. However, in recent years the leadership have openly entered political spaces, not only to secure the interest of the member churches, but also to spread the religious message and "offer spiritual guiding and moral support to Guatemala's political leadership" (interview, Morales 2012). This strategy is referred to as

*occupying spaces*, and the commissions mentioned above are considered important instruments in this regard. The president of the AEG explains the success of this strategy by pointing to numerous examples of the AEG having gained influence. For example, since Evangelical churches are doing much charity work in the Guatemalan countryside, the AEG is called upon when there are national catastrophes such as hurricanes and droughts, to engage its numerous members, to council in how the work should be done, and to pray. Since 2006, the AEG has formed part of a group of presidential advisors on health, security and crime-related issues, the G4.<sup>18</sup> During the 2011 electoral process the AEG was encouraged to host forums for debates between the presidential candidates, and was also invited by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal to witness the presidential candidates sign pacts for a non-violent campaign.

Last week the CEO of the cement company [Cementos Progresos] also came to us, inviting us to come and visit the new cement plant, so that we could see the site and give some recommendations. And this is the business sector. The CACIF, the organisation that unite the industrial sector, all commerce, the bankers, the landowners and all of those, they also know us, and they have provided us with their work plans and their strategies. So this means that we practically are present in all spheres of society.

*Jorge Morales, President of the AEG (interview Guatemala City 31.01.2012)*

According to the AEG's own interpretation of the changes in its relationship with politics, it is now in a position where governmental officials and other political and economic authorities approach them, not the other way round. By invitation, the leadership is today frequently participating in secular arenas such as governmental initiatives, the Guatemalan Congress, the judiciary and the education sector.

A philosophy of the evangelical church as such is that we are neither ecumenical nor political [partisan]. But yes, we participate in politics, but not with one particular party and no particular tendency. Nevertheless, our participation over the last years has been one of a low profile, it is not until now, the last six years, that we have begun to have more publicity and more impact on society and within the state.

*Jorge Morales, president of the AEG (interview Guatemala City 31.01.2012)*

The organisational model of the AEG thus seems to provide its members with concrete arenas for distributing information and for networking. Some Evangelicals are still sceptic to this mingling with politics, worried that the Evangelical church as such is becoming politicised. There are indeed examples of individuals having sought to combine the religiously based authority with political office or advisory positions in government, without having produced more moral and

(Christian) value oriented political outcomes.<sup>19</sup> However, a majority of Evangelical leaders now seem to embrace the perspective coinciding with that of the Evangelical Alliance, that 'everything is political' and that Evangelicals should seek to occupy all possible spaces in order to shape the country according to their faith based values (Camargo, *interview*, Guatemala City 27.01.2012; Díaz, *interview*, Guatemala City 06.02. 2012).

## VII. (HIGH) MORAL AND FINANCIAL STATUS

The particularities of the Evangelical spaces and practices, as well as the more official representation, arguably exemplify some of the mechanisms and channels through which Evangelicals in Guatemala form part of civil and political society and gain influence. Additionally, the moral and financial status attributed to and preached by Evangelical leaders should not be underestimated. Even though there have certainly been examples of Evangelical leaders not having practiced what they preach in terms of ethics and morals, 'the Evangelical' as a concept clearly includes associations to 'high moral and ethics,' referring first and foremost to family values, honesty, and the abstention from 'vices' such as drugs and alcohol.

With the financial status of Evangelicals in Guatemala it is here referred to the theological references of piety and savings, as well as to the personal wealth and entrepreneurship of many Evangelical pastors. In the sermons of the mega-churches such as *La Fraternidad Cristinana*, *La Casa de Dios* and *El Shaddai*, the pastors often talk of different kinds of economic practices ('good' and 'bad') referring to concrete passages in the Bible. Pastor Jorge H. López of *La Fraternidad Cristiana*, one of the best known Evangelical pastors and frequently consulted by local and national politicians, has published several books on financial management. The titles include *Alas para tu Economía: Conceptos Sabios sobre Deudas y Libertad Financiera* (2012) and *Formulas Bíblicas para Prosperar* (2011). These are distributed in Christian as well as non-Christian book stores, and López is invited to literary as well as financial seminars to discuss his ideas and economic theories.<sup>20</sup> Little is known about the details of how the churches manage their resources, from which one can only presume that a significant part derives from the *diezmos* collected at every sermon. The practice of paying the tithe is both loudly criticised and passionately defended in the public sphere. In the sermons, the importance of paying the tithe, or to *diezmar*, is defended with biblical references and money is ceremoniously collected from the congregation, often in little envelopes on which the believer can specify the amount, family name and occupation.<sup>21</sup> But the churchgoers are also expected to contribute financially beyond the

*diezmos*. In pamphlets such as *4 tipos de dar* (four ways of giving), churchgoers are provided with an explanation of how and why financial support should be given, and a distinction is made between the *diezmo* (contribution to the administration of the church), giving of the ‘first fruits’ such as a raise in salary (contribution to the pastor), and two variant forms of offerings (small and large) which are intended for the poor and for the prospering of the givers’ own resources (El Shaddai 2012).

In sermons and literary sources published and distributed by the largest churches in Guatemala and throughout the region, there is thus a significant focus on financial management and ‘biblical economics.’ With direct and indirect references to the (traditional) concepts of piety and Protestant work ethic, correct and divine financial management constitutes a central part of what is being preached in the urban Evangelical churches, in religious seminars and study groups, not only when referring to the individual and his or her potential for change and prosperity, but specifically when referring to the socioeconomic development of the Guatemalan nation. In “Neo-Pentecostalism and Prosperity Theology in Latin America: A Religion for Late Capitalist Society” (this volume) Garrard Burnett develops how these practices and rhetoric can be considered as examples of the prosperity gospel.

Furthermore, these Evangelical churches are in themselves turning into large enterprises with the head pastor in the role as the chief executive officer. The mega-churches with the accompanying nurseries, colleges, universities, health centres, and media labs constitute great and well-known geographical landmarks and employ thousands of people, in paid as well as voluntary positions. These religious institutions are thus growing into large-scale businesses, to which the public and relevant authorities necessarily must relate, by affecting infrastructure projects such as road construction and bus routes, and by taking up roles as employers, pedagogues, and opinion leaders.

In sum, as the number of Evangelicals has increased and many of the churches have grown into large businesses and important providers of welfare for a many Guatemalans, the institutional representation of the Evangelicals, the AEG has been moving closer to decision making processes. In a country in which the category ‘politicians’ enjoys the lowest levels of trust in the population, and where the universe of parties and ideologies is best described by what it is not, the trust and confidence expressed in non-state actors such as the Evangelical church is noteworthy. However, in what way has this increased presence in the public debates and in the political corridors affected Guatemalan politics as such?

As mentioned above, the Guatemalan society is characterised by deep socioeconomic cleavages, which to a large extent run along ethnic and cultural lines. The political discourse is divided between those who want change and those who prefer and benefit from the status quo. The remainder of this article is aimed at analysing the impact of Evangelical participation in this scenario. The arguments are concentrated in the following interrelated assertions: 'Evangelicals' are considered a potential electorate; Evangelical individuals and institutions such as the AEG constitute valuable resources for local and national authorities; and lastly, allying with Evangelical individuals and institutions can provide political and economic bodies with much needed legitimacy.

### VIII. A POTENTIAL ELECTORATE

As mentioned above, to political actors in Guatemala, the sheer number of a group like the Evangelical tells of a potential electorate from which they are likely to seek support, even without confirmation of their influence and homogeneity (García-Ruíz and Michel 2011:421). Politicians thus contribute to defining Evangelicals as one group. When current president Otto Pérez Molina was greeted by Evangelical leaders in the *Te Deum Cristiano Evangélico* ceremony during his inauguration days, the message to him was that 'we are six million people who pray for you.' The ceremony was hosted by Jorge H. López in the so far largest church building in Guatemala City, the 'Megafrater.' Accompanied by the leader of the AEG, Jorge Morales, pastor López addressed the president-elect and the incoming government on behalf of the Evangelical community. Present were also the other well-known pastors of the mega-churches in Guatemala City, such as pastor Cash Luna of the *Casa de Dios*. By its joint presence, the Evangelical leadership portrayed all Guatemala's Evangelicals as a single group, signalling a 'we' that expects to be taken into consideration as a moral authority and a numerical strength (La Megafrater 14.12.2012). The incoming president responded in the same manner, as if speaking to one group of people:

We count on you, we count on God's blessing and this will enable us to move forward and develop together with all the people of Guatemala. (...) I feel confident that in all of the in 25, 000 Evangelical churches and in all of the hearts of six million Guatemalan Evangelicals – you will include us in your prayers and this will help us and the country of Guatemala to move forward

*President Otto Pérez Molina* (La Megafrater, Ciudad San Cristóbal, 14.12.2012)<sup>22</sup>

During the electoral campaign for the 2011 presidential elections, three of the main candidates were openly referring to themselves as

*critiano/a(s) evangélico/a(s)*: Harold Caballeros, ex-pastor of the mega-church El Shaddai heading the ticket of the VIVA; Patricia de Arzú, the wife of ex-president and current mayor of Guatemala City, Alvaro Arzú; and Manuel Baldizón of the LÍDER. Of the three candidates, Patricia de Arzú was the one who made the most explicit references to her beliefs and her opinions on God's and Jesus' role in Guatemalan politics.<sup>23</sup> Caballeros's VIVA party does not define itself as an Evangelical party, rather in communication with the media it is stressed that it is a party of values and that their members are of all beliefs. However, during the campaign, members of the party actively drew on their own and Caballeros's networks of Evangelical pastors and local leaders in the thousands of Evangelical congregations across the country, and thus actively targeted Evangelical communities when mobilising support for VIVA and Caballeros's candidacy (Sandoval, *interview*, Guatemala City, 20.01.2012). At the same time, Caballeros himself placed much rhetorical emphasis on not portraying himself as the *Evangelical* candidate, but rather drew on what by many is considered as 'Evangelical skills' in areas such as anti-corruption, messages of peace, leadership, business, education, as well as international relations (VIVA 2011). With roughly six per cent of the votes, Caballeros and VIVA ended up in the fifth place in the first round, and decided to back the candidacy of Pérez Molina in the run-off. Nevertheless, president Pérez Molina's decision to appoint Caballeros as his minister of foreign affairs and Caballeros' running mate Efraín Medida as minister of agriculture in the new administration was considered a highly surprising move. Manuel Baldizón is known to be an Evangelical Christian, which is reflected in his electoral rhetoric as well as political positioning, particularly noticeable on issues such as the opposition to the creation of a Palestinian state and the endorsement of re-activating the death penalty practice in the Guatemalan penal code (LIDER 2011; *Prensa Libre* 2011a; *Siglo XXI* 2011). During the electoral campaign, Baldizón frequently appeared holding the Bible in one hand and the Constitution in the other, his two principal 'tools'.<sup>24</sup>

As in previous electoral campaigns, the presidential candidates visited Evangelical organisations as well as institutions like the AEG and individual pastors such as Jorge H. López and Cash Luna (Morales, *interview*, Guatemala City 31.01.2012; López, *interview*, Mixco, 06.02.2012; *Prensa Libre* 2009a). The communication with Evangelical communities was both that of receiving support, advice and blessing, and that of offering electoral promises by the respective candidates. For example, in a meeting with the National Commission of Evangelical Pastors (*la Comisión Nacional Cívico Pastoral*), which claims to represent

2,500 pastors, Baldizón committed himself to letting the Evangelical churches run a suggested social programme called *comedores solidarios*. Baldizón is cited as stating that “the participation of Evangelical churches will guarantee the transparency of the management of resources” (*Prensa Libre* 2011b).

Neither of these examples proves any kind of causality and it is certainly common for presidential candidates to approach a great variety of groups and institutions during electoral campaigns. However, the tendency of approaching Evangelical communities, churches and most of all – their leaders, is noteworthy, firstly because it indicates that the candidates expect that there is something to gain from this kind of contact. This may be due to a combination of several considerations and strategies such as hoping to be associated with positively laden values (correctness, honesty, piety, family), or more rent seeking objectives such as financial support and outspoken electoral support, or perhaps to some, for the mere purpose of being blessed and prayed for. Secondly, the Evangelical infrastructure in terms of both physical and more interactive spaces can serve as a highly effective diffusion of a political message. Indeed, the extensive cross-cleavage networks of Evangelical pastors and their congregations across the country should not be underestimated, as it appears to be taken very seriously by the political actors themselves.

It must be stressed that most Evangelical leaders and churches claim a non-political or neutral position on political issues. However, over the last years we have seen a clear increase in participation in the political conversation, and several churches and Evangelical organisations organise political debates to which local and national candidates are invited to discuss political issues, often with an explicit value-perspective.

## IX. VALUED RESOURCES

As referred to above, according to the leadership of the AEG, the Evangelical communities are increasingly being approached by local and national governments for assistance and advice, in particular concerning societal challenges in areas such as health, crime and education. As interpreted by the AEG, this is due to their extensive ‘coverage’ throughout the country and the fact that these are areas and challenges which Evangelical churches and organisations already are engaged in. Examples that are frequently referred to include Evangelical pastors’ work with youth gangs, offering them ‘salvation’ as a way out of the gang. As described by Brenneman in *Homies and Hermanos* (2012), Evangelical churches and gangs share many of the same social spaces, spaces that are characterised by the total absence of the state. The phenomenon of *gang exit*, and, in



particular, the ‘Evangelical exit’ of the life as gang members is relatively understudied. It is noted, however, that Evangelical organisations which target youth gangs almost exclusively work with such exit programmes, as opposed to Catholic programmes, which are more oriented towards preventing youth from entering gangs (2012:17). Evangelical exit programmes are characterised by an individual framework, aimed at rescuing individuals by Evangelical conversion, followed by offers of a new life with a new belonging, new networks and with this, opportunities for finding work (2012; *El Periódico* 2010)<sup>25</sup> Such practices are in accordance with the preaching in Evangelical churches in Guatemala, in which social problems are addressed through a framework of sin and the corruption of the individual, and solutions are presented as equally individualistic through conversion and personal transformation. Many Evangelical churches, such as *La Fraternidad Cristiana*, also have long traditions of organising programmes in prisons, teaching values and morals as well as visiting inmates for conversation and conversion (López, *interview*, Mixco, 06.02. 2012). The AEG also organises activities in prisons as well as being invited to lecture on morals and values at state police and military academies.

According to the AEG leadership, these are examples of programmes, where the government has recognised the Evangelical churches’ presence and experience and willingly lets these non-state actors continue their work. In such cases, Evangelical leaders and organisations are considered ‘experts’, to whom the state and local governments turn to for advice and assistance (Morales, *interview*, Guatemala City, 31.01.2012). As mentioned above, the AEG also forms part of the G4 group of presidential advisors together with the Archbishop of the Catholic Church, the Ombudsman for Human Rights and the head of San Carlos University. As a member of the G4 group, the AEG leader frequently appears in national media commenting upon political issues and suggesting solutions, both on behalf of the G4, but also as a representative of the Evangelical community as such. However, the publically presented solutions to address Guatemala’s pressing socioeconomic and political challenges rarely depart from calls for national unity, mutual respect between the people and the government, and prayers for peace.

Evangelical actors have thus established a presence in the organisation of public security, a sector which is perceived by a large majority of the Guatemalan population as the most pressing political issue politicians should attend. The role of religion and religious actors in the juridical and penal systems is well-documented and thoroughly theorised, in particular concerning the potential power of educating and defining

'rights' and 'wrongs' to the national security sector, be it the prisons, the police force or the military. These perspectives lie beyond the scope of this article, and will be developed elsewhere.

#### **X. LEGITIMACY?**

The findings presented in this article thus portray the emergence of a new actor on the Guatemalan political stage, as a potential partner in new political alliances. It is perhaps too early to draw final conclusions with regard to the overall impact of the Evangelical initiatives operating within what could be defined as political spaces. However, there are some tendencies in this religio-political cooperation that are worth considering and that may lead to some tentative conclusions. First, as the institutional representation of the large majority of Evangelical churches in Guatemala, the AEG has increased its presence in politics both by strategy and by invitation, and appears comfortable in the role as collaborator and advisor to the government. The AEG and Evangelical pastors are increasingly being approached by presidents, politicians, as well as by representatives of the organised business sector, who invite them to discuss topics as diverse as electoral reform, open air mining, gang violence and police training. This arguably demonstrates a mutual recognition and respect for each other as relevant and valuable partners. Moreover, the relationship Evangelical leaders and organisations enjoy with political and economic elites comes across as collaborative and non-confrontational. Evangelical social programmes and initiatives typically adopt an individualistic focus and an emphasis on 'restoration' and salvation of the 'lost' individual (Brenneman 2012:216–217). Societal problems are referred to in moral terms and the solutions to social, economic or crime related challenges are therefore presented as spiritual and value oriented, and very rarely considered as political or structural (Bjune 2005). As a result, the Evangelical church, as represented by the AEG, has arguably positioned itself politically alongside the political and economic establishment.

As illustrated by the examples from the last election campaigns, Guatemalan politicians increasingly appear to consider the category Evangelical as an important group from which to draw electoral support. By allowing Evangelical actors to take care of social work that otherwise would be the responsibility of the state, also seems like a plausible strategy for a state with scant financial resources and capacities. However, whether intended or unintended, nursing such cooperation with Evangelical actors may also provide the Guatemalan political and economic elites with some of the credibility of the Evangelical actors. As indicated by various recent public opinion surveys, the Evangelical church enjoys the highest level of

public trust of all political and non-political institutions in Guatemala. Cooperating with the AEG and its members, as advisors or assistants on health, education and security issues, may thus not only be practically useful for the government, but this collaboration might also be aimed at strengthening its legitimacy.

In a group that counts around six million people, there is obviously a great variety of political opinions on how the country should be governed and by whom, and many Guatemalan Evangelicals would not recognise the political positioning of the AEG. However, the aim of this article has been to demonstrate how the Evangelical church is perceived as a political actor, and that this part is to a large extent filled and performed by the AEG and a couple of high-profile Evangelical pastors in Guatemala City.

## **XI. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The aim of the article has been to analyse the political impact of ‘the Evangelical’ in Guatemala at the national level. It has been revealed that in recent years, representatives of Evangelical communities have increased their presence in political spaces, and the article has explored the extent to which this is a deliberate strategy. The initial hypothesis of the study departed from the assumption that in national politics, ‘the Evangelical’ can be considered as *one* analytical category, defined as such both by official representatives of the Evangelical communities, as well as by other members of political society. This allows for bringing ‘the Evangelical’ as a political actor into the analysis of Guatemalan politics, despite the heterogeneous character of the universe of *cristianos evangélicos*, and the fact that many Evangelical leaders and churches claim a non-political or neutral position on political issues.

In order to establish and assess the role of this relatively new political actor, ‘the Evangelical’, the empirical data presented have focused on three central aspects: the sheer size of the population referred to as ‘Evangelical’; the activities and presence of Evangelical churches and organisations in civil society; and the moral and financial status promoted by, and attributed to Evangelical leaders. The findings then served to illustrate the mechanisms and tendencies of *the Evangelical* in national politics. First and foremost, the Evangelical Alliance of Guatemala emerges as the most visible and politically active representative of Evangelicals in Guatemalan politics. The increased presence of the AEG is a result of the organisation’s deliberate strategies, as well as the increased tendency of politicians approaching the leadership of the AEG for advice and cooperation. In particular, this article has highlighted the way the AEG, as well as other Evangelical organisations and churches, are allowed and

invited to conduct a variety of social work in areas such as education and citizen security, areas which would otherwise be the responsibility of the state. It has been argued that through this kind of cooperation and endorsement on behalf of a large religious community, central Evangelical actors such as the AEG have positioned themselves on the side of the political and economic establishment in Guatemalan politics. In the polarised and turbulent political landscape of Guatemala, this positioning arguably lends support and legitimacy to the socio-political status quo of Guatemalan politics.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The research on which this article is based forms part of a doctoral project on the political development in post-war Guatemala and the impact of Evangelical political activism. The project is financed by the Norwegian Research Council. The empirical findings presented here are drawn from interviews, archival research and participatory observation during fieldwork in Guatemala City 2011-2012, unless references are specified otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> This figure is significantly lower than in the neighbouring countries of El Salvador and Honduras (34 per cent and 44 per cent, respectively).

<sup>3</sup> The average for the Latin American region is 58 per cent (*Latinobarómetro* 2011:38)

<sup>4</sup> See Aasmundsen (2012), in this volume, for a detailed description of the Pentecostal religion.

<sup>5</sup> See Sanchíz Ochoa (1998) and Cantón Delgado (1993) for discursive analyses of the relationship between the theological doctrine and political messages; García-Ruíz and Michel (2011) for arguments on the links between Evangelical religion in Guatemala today and the reshaping of identities, loyalties and networks; O'Neill (2010) on Neopentecostal churches in Guatemala and religious practice as political actions; and Garrard Burnett (1998; 2010) on the expansion of Protestantism and the religio-political rhetoric of Ríos Montt.

<sup>6</sup> See in particular Martin (1990); Sanchíz Ochoa (1998), and Stoll (1990; 1994).

<sup>7</sup> See in particular analyses by Freston (2001; 2008), Samson (2010), Smith (2005) and Steigenga (2001).

<sup>8</sup> The conservative political party *Vision con Valores* (VIVA) was founded and headed by the well-known Evangelical and ex-pastor Harold Caballeros, but is not explicitly an Evangelical party. However, the majority of the founding members and listed candidates are openly Evangelicals ([www.visionconvalores.org](http://www.visionconvalores.org)).

<sup>9</sup> What is referred to as *Te Deum* ceremonies are originally a Catholic tradition of praising God and blessing the newly inaugurated political leadership.

<sup>10</sup> These churches have from 3000 and more pews, the largest one so far, 'La Mega Frater', can accommodate 12,300 people, seated in comfortable chairs ([www.frater.org](http://www.frater.org)). However, the church *Casa de Dios* claims 20,000 visitors every Sunday (in five

sermons), and would then be the largest congregation in Guatemala today (www.cashluna.org).

<sup>11</sup> See for example the services provided by the churches *Casa de Dios* (www.cashluna.org), *La Fraternidad Cristiana* (www.frater.org), and *El Shaddai* (www.elshaddai.net).

<sup>12</sup> Observations by the author during fieldwork (2012).

<sup>13</sup> See www.fihnecguatemala.com for details.

<sup>14</sup> It is here referred particularly to the practices of clapping, cheering, crying, hugging, and presenting personal testimonies, as well as the use of emotional music.

<sup>15</sup> The total number of Evangelical churches in Guatemala is considered to be about 25,000.

<sup>16</sup> The detailed description of the structure and methods of the AEG has been obtained from interviews with its current president, Jorge Morales (31.01.12, Guatemala City).

<sup>17</sup> Translation from Spanish by the author.

<sup>18</sup> The G4 is composed of the Ombudsman for Human Rights, the head of the state University of San Carlos, the Catholic archbishop and the leader of the Evangelical Alliance.

<sup>19</sup> The two Evangelical ex-Presidents Efraín Ríos Montt and Jorge Serrano are obvious examples. Also worth mentioning are: the previous director of the national police force, Erwin Sperisen, and the ex-minister and previous mayor of Villa Nueva, Salvador Gándara, both accused of large scale corruption and other serious crimes.

<sup>20</sup> In *Formulas bíblicas para prosperar*, Pastor Jorge H. López presents his and his church's financial strategy, the 10-10-80 concept, on how one should give 10 per cent to the church, 10 per cent for personal savings, and the remaining 80 per cent for spending. This he claims is the biblical formula for success and prosperity upon which he has built his own success (López 2011; *Prensa Libre* 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Several of the churches also have cash machines in the lobby, as well as open up for direct transfer from bank accounts.

<sup>22</sup> Translation from Spanish by the author.

<sup>23</sup> In addition to her biblical references in political debates and interviews, Arzú's party also distributed the 10 commandments at party meetings stating that merely following the commandments would lead to great changes for the individual as well as for Guatemalan society (*El Periodico*, 2011a).

<sup>24</sup> "Soy un hombre temeroso de Dios y respetuoso de la ley, (...) tengo dos grandes herramientas, la Biblia porque soy temeroso de Dios y la Constitución de Guatemala porque soy un hombre de derecho" (Baldizón 2011, cited by LIDER 2011).

<sup>25</sup> This framework stands in sharp contrast to the liberation theologians' preaching of socio-political transformation (Brenneman 2012: 2010).

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