CHAPTER TWO
THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

In this chapter we present a historical discussion of the democratic transition in Guatemala, analysing the relationship between civil actors and the process of democratic transition. Of central concern here is how the specific mechanisms and norms of civil inclusion instituted through the peace process, such as the National Reconciliation Commission (La Comisión Nacional de Reconciliación, CNR), established in 1989, and the Civil Society Assembly (Asamblea de la Sociedad Civil, ASC) set up in 1994, permitted civil society participation in the democratisation process and impacted upon the social movements themselves.

Background

Democratisation in Guatemala was composed of two distinct, though inter-related processes. First, the political transition, which began in 1982 and ended in 1985 with national presidential and legislative elections and a Constituent Assembly that led to a new Constitution and the transfer of power from direct military government to elected civilian rule in January 1986. This first moment brought with it neither the consolidation of the rule of law, nor adherence by the State to international human rights standards protecting minimal human rights guarantees. Rather, this first process represented a military strategy to guarantee institutional survival in a context of economic crisis and political pariah status in the international arena. Second, between the late 1980s and early 1990s, an internationally sponsored peace process began between the government and military and the guerrilla army, the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG), which included an institutionalised role for civil society organisations. The peace process, which analysts such as Jonas have described as representing the political terrain upon which competing sectoral agendas for peace were fought out (2000: 44), can be divided into two phases: indirect negotiations (1987–1990) and direct negotiations (1991–1996), as Azpuru (1999) has stated.
Both the political transition and the peace process were initiated before the end of the internal armed conflict between the military and the URNG. Within these dual processes, elite state, political, military and private sector actors and the URNG interacted with each other and with non-elite civil actors through formal political mechanisms and channels in pursuit of their sectoral interests. However, and significantly, civil actors also attempted to influence the national agenda for peace through informal political means, essentially through the practice of symbolic politics and by linking with transnational advocacy networks to extend and strengthen their national struggles.

Viewed in comparative perspective, Guatemala’s process of democratisation is distinct from other Latin American transitions. Civil society did not take part in the political transition or the initial period of liberalisation, both of which were elite-driven. Contrary to the processes of political transition that took place, for example, in Argentina and Chile, civil society organisation did not occur until the late 1980s, after democratisation had begun and a nominal civilian government had been in place for several years. The lack of participation by civil actors in the political transition, which was only challenged with the emergence of popular organisations after 1987, meant that the norms of political engagement under which elite and oppositional actors interacted remained unstable until the early 1990s, when developments within the continent-wide popular movement, the increasing momentum of the regional peace plan, Esquipulas II, and the broad social consensus articulated in reaction to the attempted auto-golpe by Jorge Serrano in 1993 presented political opportunities that contributed to the stabilisation of the rules of the game.

The most salient factor that led to a closer alignment of sectoral norms of political engagement, however, was the initiation of the peace process after the beginning of 1994. The development of the peace process and the instruments that resulted from it and its effects on civil society, political society and the state shaped popular repertoires of protest and the political forms that civil actors utilised in pursuit of their goals. This culminated in a closer relationship between organised civil society, political society and the state, leading, in some cases, to a shift in the strategies of social movements, or at worst a decline in popular mobilisation.