

The Charade of Electoral Democracy Continues in Guatemala

By Grahame Russell, January 13, 2016

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The inspiring news from Guatemala is that courageous work and struggle for real democracy and respect for the rule of law and human rights continue despite the fact that on Thursday (January 14) Jimmy Morales assumes the presidency as leader of the military-backed National Convergence Front (FCN).

On inauguration day, the Guatemalan economic, political and military elites will say the right things about strengthening democracy, rule of law, etc; the international community – particularly the U.S. and Canadian governments, the global mining industry, the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank – will echo the same, even as Guatemala remains characterized by widespread violence and State repression, racism and economic exploitation of the Mayan majority, and deeply entrenched corruption and impunity.

The electoral process does not serve to strengthen democracy and the rule of law, but rather to keep in place structures of racism and exploitation, repression, corruption and impunity.

The undermining of democracy dates back to 1954 when the U.S. government conspired with the United Fruit Company and the Guatemalan elites to overthrow the only really democratic government Guatemala ever had.

A charade of democracy ensued, and continued in the 1990s after three decades of U.S.-backed repression including systematic massacres and disappearances, and genocide in Mayan regions of the country. In the 1990s, Guatemalans began to overcome their

fear and silence and participate in public discussions concerning the various peace accords - a clear indication of the yearning of the majority to reform their State institutions and society.

These aspirations were crushed by the mid-2000s. Repression carried out by the government and elites, in partnership with international economic interests, spiked in order to keep in place the unjust economic system that caters to banana, African palm and sugarcane producers; maquiladora sweatshops; and mining and hydroelectric dam building industries.

Since the misnamed “return to democracy” in the 1990s, there have been elections every four years, bringing to power governments that continue with exploitative, racist and repressive business as usual, all protected by impunity and corruption. Though there were some important democratic advances during the presidency of Alvaro Colom (2008-2012), little to nothing has really changed.

And nothing has changed with how the international community continues with business as usual, benefitting from but ignoring repression and exploitation, and the corruption and impunity that characterize most institutions of the State including the judiciary.

In the 2000s, all of the above worsened as the U.S.-led “war on drugs” – so deadly and destructive in Colombia and more recently in Mexico - spilled over into Guatemala (and Honduras and El Salvador), increasing ever more the repression and violence, corruption and impunity.

Confronted with this multi-generational reality of institutionalized violence and impunity, the numbers of people fleeing Guatemala to try and cross Mexico into the U.S. is almost as high today as during the worst years of U.S.-backed military repression in the 1970s and 1980s.

The Real Democrats

Since Guatemala's short-lived and interrupted "democratic spring" (1944-1954), courageous people, organizations and movements have been educating, organizing and advocating for real democracy and respect for the rule of law and human rights.

During decades of Cold War repression, the Guatemalan military and economic elites were not just terrorizing the population, killing and disappearing over 250,000 mainly Mayan people, and internally displacing close to 1 million - there was a design and method in the State terrorism. The elites were also targeting leaders of all stripes – opposition party members, union bosses, campesino and indigenous community leaders, honest lawyers and judges, women's leaders, etc.

The method was broad terrorization of the population and a direct attack on the human foundations of real democracy.

Yet, the people's courage and yearning for democracy and change persisted. Massive citizen participation in the framing and signing of the peace accords in the 1990s was proof of the same.

In reaction, the spike in government and corporate repression in the 2000s, especially during former President Otto Perez Molina's term, targeted people working for implementation of the peace accords and people denouncing environmental and health harms, repression and human rights violations caused by the manufacturing, agriculture and extractive industries.

This repression was, again, a direct attack on real democracy – targeting and eliminating articulate community, organization and political leaders.

Still, work and struggle persisted.

As the population witnessed how their elites abused the political and judicial institutions of the State to support the violent expansion of mining and hydroelectric dam building companies across the

country, people struggled to take democracy back, carrying out legally binding community and municipal consultations to say no neoliberal development projects such as mining.

Not surprisingly, the undemocratic elites and international community partners ignored the consultations, and pushed ahead with their exploitative, repressive economic activities.

The consultation process, ongoing and still ignored today, is proof again of the yearning for real democracy, real change.

No Justice, No Peace, No Democracy

The work for courageous work for truth, memory and justice in Guatemala is vital to any healthy, democratic society.

Starting in the early 1990s, mainly Mayan communities began demanding the exhumation of the mass graves where the military regimes had dumped the oftentimes tortured and raped remains of their massacred loved ones. Working side by side with the FAFG (Guatemalan Foundation for Forensic Anthropology), communities have since then been digging up mass graves across the country, to show and tell the truth about what happened to their loved ones, to seek justice for the war crimes, and to provide dignified burials for their loved ones.

The weak link in this equation is justice.

While the elites permitted truth telling about the massacres, disappearances and genocides, they pushed back violently against legal efforts for justice.

While a few cases, seeking justice for crimes against humanity, began to chip away at the historic impunity (ex: the March 13, 1982 Rio Negro massacre case), the case that blew the door open is the genocide case against former general Efraim Rios Montt. Even when the corrupted Constitutional Court improperly overturned much of

the May 2013 guilty decision against Rios Montt, the Mayan Ixil victim-survivors and their lawyers and supporters pushed forward.

The genocide case - respected around the world (though ignored in the boardrooms of global mining and hydroelectric dam companies operating in Guatemala that received many of their ill-gotten concessions between 1996-2004 from governments dominated by the FRG (Guatemalan Republican Front) founded and headed by Efraim Rios Montt - continues today, even as Rios Montt's lawyers use corrupted delay tactics to keep Rios Montt out of court and jail.

Civil Society Rallies Around Anti-Corruption

In 2015, a citizens' movement largely forced President Otto Perez Molina and Vice-President Roxana Baldetti to resign from office and then be arrested and jailed on corruption charges. Perez Molina and Baldetti are the leaders of a government corruption network, known as "La Linea" that stole tens of millions of dollars from public funds.

Like Rios Montt, Perez Molina is a former general, was a direct ally of the U.S. government and pentagon during the worst years of atrocities, and was a president with whom the international community maintained strong economic and political relations, while ignoring exploitation and repression, corruption and impunity.

Even as democracy-from-below movements were able to oust the corrupt president and vice president, the corrupted electoral process, still controlled by the elites, ran its course, last fall's election resulted in yet another military/elite backed president-elect, Jimmy Morales.

As President-elect Morales takes office Thursday, the work and struggle for real democracy and respect for rule of law and human rights by social movements and civil society will continue. And any democratic advances during his term will likely be in spite of the new president - and any professed support for reforms from the international community.

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Why So Many Central Americans Flee North, Decade After Decade?

The exploitation and poverty, violence and government repression, corruption and impunity of Honduras and Guatemala (and Mexico) are American and Canadian issues. The U.S. and Canadian governments, the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, and North American companies and investors (including pension funds) maintain profitable economic and military relations with the Guatemalan, Honduran (and Mexican) regimes, turning a blind eye and/or directly contributing to environmental harms, exploitation, repression, corruption and impunity that are the norm in these countries, that force so many to flee.

Keep on sending copies of this information, and your own letters, to your politicians and media, to your pension and investment funds, asking: Why our governments, companies and investment firms benefit from and turn a blind eye to the poverty, repression and violence, and environmental and health harms in Guatemala and Honduras?

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