

Portrait of a courageous Indigenous land and rights defender in Guatemala

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/a-courageous-indigenous-land-rights-defender>

Trying to use the corrupted electoral system to resist the illegal, violent incursions of global mining companies onto Q'eqchi' territories

"I decided to participate in these elections to defend our hills, to defend the little that the mining companies have left us."

Olga Che



Olga Che, center, in El Estor, May 16, 2023, meeting with visiting UNBC-Rights Action educational delegation.

Rights Action honors Olga Che, a Maya Q'eqchi' land and rights defender in El Estor, Guatemala. For years, she has been a member of the "Gremial" (Artisanal

Fisherpeople's Guild) and Ancestral Council of Q'eqchi' People. Like most Q'eqchi' land and rights defenders, she has suffered greatly for her defense of land and rights, suffering at the hands of global (Canadian and Swiss) mining companies partnered with Guatemala's repressive "covenant of the corrupt" governments.

It is highly unlikely she can win these local elections in El Estor, in the corrupted electoral system, and ... she fights on!

Olga Ché: From Q'eqchi' resistance movements, to the municipal government office of El Estor

By Elias Oxom, June 8, 2023

<https://prensacomunitaria.org/2023/06/olga-che-de-la-resistencia-qeqchi-al-gobierno-municipal-de-el-estor/>

"I decided to participate in these elections to defend our hills, to defend what little the mining companies have left us because those who currently govern do not represent us - they respond to the interests of the powerful who come to plunder our natural resources."

Olga Ché

Olga Marina Ché Ponce was born in El Estor, Izabal, in 1983. Her father is Pedro Ché and her mother is Silvia Susana Ponce. She is an activist, housewife and has supported her husband, Benancio Quinich, in the laying of trammel nets for artisanal fishing for 27 years.

She is the mother of seven children and in these elections she is on the slate to run for the municipal government as first councilor, for the Movement for the Liberation of the Peoples (MLP).

In 2013, she began her participation in the Artisanal Fisherpeople's Guild of El Estor, with the intention of documenting and denouncing the contamination of Lake Izabal. In the Guild, she holds the position of treasurer, since 2017.

In 2020, she was elected to be part of the Ancestral Council of Q'eqchi' People of El Estor. Before that, she had participated for three years in the collective of survivors of the Internal Armed Conflict.

She grew up in poverty and, because of these living conditions, did not finish primary school. During her childhood, she missed the presence of her father, who was disappeared by the Guatemalan army in the 1980s, during the military regime General Efraín Ríos Montt. Her father was a catechist in the Catholic Church.

Olga explains that the reasons for defending Lake Izabal were because the mining companies CGN and Pronico, subsidiaries of the Swiss transnational company Solway Investment Group, were contaminating it. They were also destroying the hills and crops. In 2017, they found the water of Lake Izabal stained red, which worried them because it is through fishing that they obtain the daily sustenance for the family.

It was at that moment when the authorities and the company began to criminalize those who protested the environmental harms and defended the natural resources.

"Mining never brought benefits for the general population. It has violated our human rights. This company wants to exterminate our mountains. How are we from El Estor going to survive? What are we going to drink? If they continue destroying our mountains we will be left without our rivers. What will the lives of our children and grandchildren be like? Mining has only brought imprisonment, our persecution and criminalization, it has come to divide our people," said the Mayan Q'eqchi' activist.

Reasons for her participation in the election

Ché said that since the emergence of the Gremial de Pescadores she began her participation in the defense of natural resources, and with the same spirit she does it now for the upcoming elections. "Our human rights as peoples are not respected because of racism and discrimination. Those who have governed us have never listened to us, they have never taken us into account. Those who currently govern do not represent us, they respond to the interests of the powerful who come to plunder our natural resources," said Ché.

If she were to occupy the mayor's office, she said that she would defend the natural resources and the interests of the El Estor people. "I decided to participate in these elections to defend our hills, to defend the little that the mining companies have left us."

When they authorize forced evictions of communities, the emergency decrees are endorsed by the municipal and national governments, but when our communities arrive to request support they are never attended to. This is what motivated me to participate in these elections," she said.

She says that the MLP was born from communities struggle, from the defense of the territory and natural resources, from the defense of rights, that is why she decided to participate with the MLP. It is a political party that represents the indigenous peoples.

For the Q'eqchi' leader, the participation of women in politics is almost null. "We have never been taken into account. Men always want to be the majority, if we are lucky we only have one representative in each space, but they do need us to vote for them," she said.

A work plan focused on minorities and the defense of natural resources

The work plan proposed by Olga Ché is based on the abandonment in which many communities find themselves, who are also fighting to recover their ancestral lands.

Ché said that currently these people do not have the possibility of receiving community development projects because they do not have the legal certainty of the lands where they live and, that what has happened is that successive governments have carried out a series of evictions over the past years.

"For us, they are the ones who most need support in health and education, who need support so that they can achieve legal title to their lands, support to defend their natural resources. "We will not authorize licenses to exploit our natural resources. We will never make decisions without consulting the people, we will consult with the people before authorizing any megaproject," he said.

She would give more priority to young people and women, because families do not have the support of the State. For example, they do not have scholarship programs for the most needy, she added.

"Nothing can stop us. We have suffered the abuses of our rulers. I have experienced it firsthand. We have fought without being in public office, we have defended the interests of our people," he noted.

On the exclusion of Thelma Cabrera from the race

For Olga, the exclusion of Thelma Cabrera [presidential candidate for the MLP] demonstrates the electoral fraud that some sectors are carrying out. They realized that Cabrera represents the interests of the poor, that is why they excluded her from the electoral contest.

"They know that she would become president to benefit the majority of the population. They were scared what would happen if the MLP came to power. Just as they have done to us poor people, we have our comrades criminalized and imprisoned and exiled for defending our natural resources", concluded the community activist.

The MLP municipal slate in El Estor is headed by Professor Abelino Chub Caal as candidate for mayor. Abelino was imprisoned for 2 years and 2 months, criminalized for defending the land and territory in El Estor, Izabal. Olga Ché is running for councilor I and Guillermo Sam is running for councilor II.

As a campaign strategy they are betting on visiting the most abandoned communities in the municipality of El Estor and those most affected by extractivism. "We do not have publicity in the corporate radio and television outlets nor in the social networks because we are doing our campaign with our own resources. We have not received financing from anyone as traditional parties do", stated Olga Ché.

<https://rightsaction.org/election-archives>

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