Rights Action
October 20, 2023
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Guatemala Election Watch, Alert #38

Who is Guatemalan President-elect Bernardo Arevalo?

https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/who-is-guatemalan-president-elect-bernardo-arevalo

Day 19 of nationwide protests against corrupt government officials trying to overturn August 20, 2023 election results

- Below: Los Angeles Time article by Leila Miller

Since June 26, 2023, the repressive Pacto de Corruptos ('Covenant of the Corrupt') government of Guatemala –longtime "democratic allie" of U.S., Canada, E.U., World Bank and transnational corporations– has been trying to block or overthrow the 2023 election results.

This LA Times article profiles President-elect Bernardo Arevalo of the Semilla Party that the Guatemalan elites are desperately try to block from taking office on January 14, 2024.

In response to the 'death by a 1000 cuts' attacks on the election results, Guatemalan citizens – led by the Indigenous peoples – initiated (October 2) nationwide protests demanding resignations of the government officials leading the illegal efforts to block the elections.

2 months, 24 days until Jan.14, 2024 transfer of power
Stay tuned … This is not over

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Guatemalans have taken to the streets. All they want: For their president-elect to take office

By Leila Miller, Oct. 18, 2023
https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-10-18/this-president-elects-first-task-make-it-to-office-and-save-democracy

President-elect Bernardo Arévalo greets supporters during a protest rally last month in front of the Supreme Court of Justice in Guatemala City. (Daniel Hernandez-Salazar / For The Times)

GUATEMALA CITY — Before Guatemala's presidential election, candidate Bernardo Arévalo didn't think he had much of a chance. "Don't worry," he told his wife. "It'll be over and we'll have time for ourselves again."

cArévalo, whose center-left party had coaxed him into running, had never had strong political aspirations and was polling badly. A former diplomat and peacemaking expert, he was already talking with prospective employers about postelection jobs.

But the bookish 65-year-old who campaigned on rooting out corruption had vastly underestimated his appeal. He finished second in the June vote, forcing a runoff two months later that he won in a landslide.

Now, in a country crippled by violence, poverty, the legacy of civil war and declining faith in the government, Arévalo may be Guatemala's best hope for democracy. But first the reluctant politician has to take office.

A demonstrator confronts riot police during a strike in Guatemala City earlier this month to support President-elect Bernardo Arévalo. (Santiago Billy / Associated Press)

The president-elect faces what's widely seen as a government effort to overturn his victory. Supporters have mobilized to protect Arévalo, and a nationwide strike led by indigenous associations has paralyzed the country.

With three months until inauguration day, nothing is certain.

Arévalo's name has long carried much weight in Guatemala, thanks to his father.

After a 1944 revolution overthrew a dictatorship, Juan José Arévalo returned from Argentina, where he'd been working as a humanities professor, and became Guatemala's first democratically elected president. His support for labor rights and social welfare spending and his willingness to criticize wealthy landowners made the elder Arévalo "something of a radical," Miles Culpepper, a Latin America historian at UC Berkeley, said in an email.

But democracy didn't last. Arévalo's successor was overthrown in 1954 in a CIA-backed military coup that gave rise to Guatemala's 36-year civil war, in which security forces massacred indigenous communities suspected of collaborating with leftist guerrillas and more than 200,000 people were killed.

Bernardo Arévalo, the fourth of five siblings, was born in 1958 in Montevideo, Uruguay. His family lived in exile during Guatemala's military governments, which feared his father's popularity. Arévalo spent his childhood in Venezuela, Mexico and Chile as his father moved for work as a professor and gathered support for a second presidential run — an attempt ultimately thwarted by another military coup to prevent elections.

In the early 1970s, when he was no longer considered a political threat, the elder Arévalo moved his family to Guatemala City.

The political education of Bernardo Arévalo, then 15, was about to be ratcheted up.
Arévalo often listened as friends of his father talked politics over tea. But Juan José Arévalo warned his son that "politics is very hard on a politician's family." After all, he had been unable to return to the country from exile for his mother's funeral.

In an interview in his office in Guatemala City, the president-elect said his father encouraged him to "do in your life what you want," but emphasized discipline, frequently handing his son a book when he asked a question to "encourage us to find our own answers on any subject." There were no curfews — but there were expectations to be home on time.

Guatemala's President-elect Bernardo Arévalo was "one of the serious ones" in high school, according to a former classmate. (Daniel Hernandez-Salazar / For The Times)

“I imagine I must have been a very boring child, because I was always very conscious of my responsibility,” Arévalo said.

As class president in his Catholic high school, he was “one of the serious ones,” said Eduardo González, a classmate and former minister of the economy. Cutting loose meant playing guitar at school with friends.

Arévalo went on to study sociology at Hebrew University in Israel, where his father served as Guatemala’s ambassador. Eventually he earned a doctorate in political sociology.

“Both of us were interested in questions of citizenship and civic conflict, civic violence, the basic question of what holds us together as human beings, what holds a society together,” said David Jacobson, a sociologist who studied with Arévalo.

At some point in the process, a career was born.

The younger Arévalo would become a vice minister of foreign relations and Guatemala’s ambassador to Spain. He then immersed himself in peacemaking, bringing together human rights groups, academics, ex-guerrillas and military officers to reshape the role of the armed forces following the 1996 peace accords that ended Guatemala’s civil war.

“Everyone had their own prejudice against the other,” he said. “The human rights people mistrusted the military, the military distrusted the guerrillas.”

Arévalo would encourage everyone to get a drink together after tense meetings, displaying a patience that he would need in his role working for Interpeace in Geneva, a nonprofit that helps war-torn countries repair themselves.

In Libya, he collaborated on efforts to train local leaders to mediate tribal conflicts. In Cyprus, he helped oversee polling to understand how to improve relations between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. And in Colombia, he worked on reenvisioning the role of local police after the 2016 peace agreement.

Arévalo always remained “extremely calm” and “would never fall into a person’s reaction,” said Renée Lariviere, Interpeace’s senior director of programs. Good practice, perhaps, for the future.

When he returned to Guatemala in 2013, Arévalo was the same polite, deliberative man his family and friends remembered. Chipi Villatoro, who had played music with Arévalo in high school, said, “Of all of us he is the only one that doesn’t use bad words.” Martín Arévalo said his brother once answered a house call so formally that the caller later asked, “who is the butler who answered?”

Arévalo's third and current wife, Lucrecia Peinado, a physician, said she was attracted to her husband's intelligence, noting that "it's very difficult to have superfluous conversations with Bernardo."

They live in Guatemala City, in a middle-class house where there are books on literature, politics, philosophy, Latin American history and more. The living room is filled with contemporary paintings, plush couches, a wine cabinet, a CD collection and two tall plants. On one wall hangs a photograph Arévalo took in a park of two statues — both men — sitting on opposite benches and looking at each other. They were "reaching across a divide," he said, "something I've dedicated a lot of time to."

Arévalo's political party, Semilla, started in 2014 as a small gathering of seasoned academics discussing what they saw as the troubled state of democracy in Guatemala. Younger members joined as a corruption scandal forced President Otto Pérez Molina to resign the following year, and they debated whether to become a political party.

Arévalo was opposed. "I thought we could have a higher level of influence if we remained a movement, if we tried to do something broader and influence the parties," he said with a laugh. "But I lost that conversation."

Semilla had a lot to talk about. In 2019, Pérez Molina's successor expelled a celebrated, United Nations-backed anti-corruption commission that had been investigating him for illegal campaign financing.

A commission report said that pervasive corruption had turned Guatemala into "a weak and absent state" and concluded that the issue went far beyond "simple" cases of corruption to include politicians and businessmen associating with criminal groups "that occupied and utilized public institutions to achieve private goals."

Indigenous protesters help block the Inter-American Highway in western Guatemala, demanding the resignation of government officials accused of trying to prevent Arévalo from taking power. (Moises Castillo / Associated Press)

Human rights groups have accused the attorney general's office of forcing independent-minded prosecutors and judges to leave the country. Its chief anti-corruption prosecutor fled in 2021 after he was fired while investigating current President Alejandro Giammattei's government.

Arévalo became a Semilla congressman in 2020, promising his wife he would serve only one term. Running for president took some persuasion from colleagues. "I don't have the hunger," he'd say.

But the family name — and his ability to transmit competence — was important to the party, and he ultimately said yes.

It was a no-frills campaign. Arévalo traveled without security and sometimes drove himself to events. The party focused on reaching voters through social media rather than paid advertising. When Semilla approached Luis von Ahn, the Guatemalan co-founder of the language-learning app Duolingo, for support, he declined; Arévalo seemed too idealistic. After the election's first round, Von Ahn donated $100,000.

Arévalo may be more progressive than much of Guatemalan society. He has called himself a spiritual person but not a religious person, saying that religion is “a construct made by people to try to get close to God,” and has pledged to prevent LGBTQ+ discrimination but not to go so far as to legalize gay marriage.

But experts say his victory doesn’t reflect a leftist wave in socially conservative Guatemala. Instead, “it’s a vote of exhaustion, a vote that’s anti-system; it’s not an ideological vote nor a change in the culture of Guatemalan society,” said Eduardo Núñez, director of the National Democratic Institute in Guatemala.

After Arévalo’s surprise second-place finish in the first round, his Semilla party immediately faced what independent observers say has been a series of efforts to nullify the election results. The country’s Constitutional Court ordered the results of the election’s first round suspended and reviewed after other parties claimed problems with the count despite international election monitors reporting no major issues.

Then the current chief anti-corruption prosecutor — who faces U.S. sanctions for obstructing corruption investigations — announced an investigation into Semilla on allegations that it used false signatures as part of the process to register as a political party.

After former First Lady Sandra Torres lost the August run-off by about 20 points, prosecutors said they were investigating the judges on the Supreme Electoral Tribunal for possible fraud. Authorities later confiscated voter tallies from the tribunal as its judges attempted to physically block officials from walking out with the boxes.

“These attacks come from a big fear of ‘What are they going to find? What cases of corruption are they going to discover? We’re going to lose our privileges,’” said Claudia Paz y Paz, a former Guatemalan attorney general.

The attorney general’s office has insisted it is following the law as it confronts condemnation by the United States, the European Union and the Organization of American States. It’s unclear what role is being played by President Giammattei, who has publicly supported the transition of power and has denied that a “coup” — as Arévalo calls prosecutors’ actions — is taking place.

Meanwhile, since Oct. 2, thousands of people have blocked highways and busy roads in a strike led by Indigenous associations, brandishing Guatemalan flags and signs saying “No more corruption” and “Respect my vote.” Demonstrators have pledged to continue to protest peacefully—forcing the temporary closure of large restaurant chains and leaving Guatemala City’s airport with a fuel shortage — until the attorney general resigns.

In a country suffering from underdevelopment with more than half of its residents living in poverty — which has spurred massive migration to the United States — Arévalo has promised to

expand social services without raising taxes, insisting that his initiatives will be funded by combating tax evasion and corruption.

“I’m going to make sure that my Cabinet is honest, and will ask every minister to make sure their team is honest, and they will be in charge of telling their team that each of their areas must be honest,” he said.

But he cautioned, “We’re not going to resolve everything from night to morning.”

Indigenous women use switches at a Guatemala City protest last month to strike images of officials accused of working to derail Arévalo’s presidency. (Moises Castillo / Associated Press)

One Saturday last month in a Guatemala City hotel, he met with more than 200 of the country’s mayor-elects, kicking things off with a clear message: Regardless of their political parties or whether they had supported his campaign, “all the municipalities are important.” Guatemala is at a crossroads, he said, inviting the elected officials to “leave the past and walk towards this spring.”

But the simple act of showing up hadn’t been easy for everyone.

Taking the microphone, Omar Camposeco, a 38-year-old mayor-elect from the department of Jalapa, said: “Mr. President, last night I got a call threatening that if I came here I was going to

have problems with the comptroller. But I am here because before being a mayor, I am Guatemalan, and I believe in the democracy of this country."

He ended simply: "God should be with you and all of the comrades here."

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Electoral coup d'etat: 'Death by a 1000 cuts'
It is impossible to keep up with the attacks being carried out by the 'covenant of the corrupt' government and allies on the electoral process, and against the Semilla Party – a 'death by a 1000 cuts' strategy.

Rights Action calls for Americans and Canadians to keep sharing these informations widely (including media outlets), and to contact your Senators, Members of Congress and Parliamentarian, urge them to publicly support the Semilla Party and President-elect Bernardo Arevalo and VP-elect Karin Herrera, and to support calls for the main coup plotters to resign: Attorney General Consuelo Porras, special prosecutor Rafael Curruchiche, Judge Fredy Orellana.

- U.S. Senate: https://www.senate.gov/senators/contact
- U.S. House: https://www.house.gov/representatives/find-your-representative
- Canadian Parliament: https://www.ourcommons.ca/Parliamentarians/en/members

More information

- Rights Action's "Guatemala Election Watch" alerts (www.rightsaction.org/emails)
- NISGUA (Network in Solidarity with People of Guatemala): www.nisgua.org; https://twitter.com/NISGUA_Guate
- GHRC (Guatemalan Human Rights Commission): www.ghrc-usa.org; https://twitter.com/GHRCUSA
- Breaking the Silence: www.breakingthesilenceblog.com, https://twitter.com/BTS_MG
- Festivales Solidarios @festivalesgt;
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