

Guatemala Election Watch #46

Guatemala's Presidential Inauguration Is A Big Deal

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/guatemalas-presidential-inauguration-is-a-big-deal>

Not only is true that “[t]he CIA-orchestrated coup of 1954 was disguised as a fight against communism but fundamentally aimed to protect U.S. economic interests in the region”, as Ilan Palacios writes below, but the U.S. -backed genocides and scorched earth massacres of the 1970s and 80s, and the past 30 years of U.S., Canadian and E.U. support for military-backed, ‘covenant of the corrupt’ governments (always called “democratic allies”) was aimed at protecting the same interests of global corporations and investors.

Of this, we wrote extensively in [TESTIMONIO-Canadian Mining in the Aftermath of Genocides in Guatemala](#).

There are many challenges facing the incoming government, both from the traditional ‘covenant of the corrupt’ elites, and also from the U.S., Canadian and E.U. governments and global business and investor interests ...

But for now, all respect and thanks to the strength, courage and dignity of the majority Guatemalan population (over half of whom are Mayan), still fighting, 80 years later, for real democracy and serious economic, political, social and legal transformation of their country

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

The History That Makes Guatemala's Presidential Inauguration a Very Big Deal

By Ilan Palacios Avineri, Time Magazine, January 12., 2024

<https://time.com/6551712/guatemala-inauguration-arevalo/>



Supporters of Bernardo Arevalo celebrate during the presidential elections in Guatemala City on Aug. 20, 2023. (Luis Echeverria—Bloomberg via Getty Image)

On Jan. 14, 2024, Guatemala stands on the cusp of a momentous event as Bernardo Arévalo, son of the former president Juan José Arévalo, will take office. This day is not merely the beginning of a new administration; it's a rekindling of the revolutionary flame that once sought to transform Guatemala from a feudal autocracy to a more inclusive, social democracy.

To grasp the importance of Bernardo's inauguration, we must first understand the Ten Years of Spring (1944-1954), a vital but frequently ignored era when his father, Juan José Arévalo Sr., became Guatemala's first democratically-elected president.

This decade established the bedrock of Guatemalan democracy and molded the country's ambitions. Later governments tried to suppress its memory, wary of a revolutionary revival. Recognizing this period is key to appreciating the deep symbolism of Bernardo Arévalo's impending term.

Ousting U.S. backed Ubico dictatorship

Calls for change began in the 1940s after decades of relentless oppression under General Jorge Ubico's dictatorship and his predecessors. In October 1944, a diverse coalition of university students, teachers, and military officers in Guatemala City initiated widespread protests against

Ubico's repressive policies. These protests, supported by the broader public, were a crucial step towards dismantling the dictatorship.

Meanwhile, in rural regions, especially on the Atlantic coast, Afro-Guatemalan, Maya, West-Indian, and Ladino peasants and workers intensified the movement. They sought labor and constitutional rights and a role in a government that had long excluded them. This alliance between urban intellectuals and rural workers symbolized the nation's collective aspiration for a more democratic and inclusive society.

Arévalo Sr., a doctor of sociology, emerged as a leader to meet the moment. The academic swept into power after winning an unprecedented majority in Guatemala's first truly free election. His victory represented the populace's overwhelming endorsement for a new vision of governance.

President Arevalo Sr.: reforms and empowerment

As president, Arévalo Sr. introduced a "spirited socialism," aiming to empower the average Guatemalan and advance democratic principles. He introduced several progressive social reforms, focusing on labor rights, education, and healthcare. For example, he passed a comprehensive Labor Code in 1947 that granted workers in cities the right to unionize, collective bargaining, and protections against arbitrary dismissal. These policies represented, in many ways, a radical break from the feudal and repressive society under Ubico.

Nonetheless, Arévalo's tenure was far from smooth. Even though many Guatemalans supported his agenda, he overcame 29 coup attempts, primarily from conservative and military sectors opposed to his agenda. Concurrently, some on the left, particularly students, criticized Arévalo for refraining from pursuing more radical reforms to erode the power of the country's landed elite and for equating the danger posed to democracy by fascism and communism.

Land reform and U.S.-orchestrated 1954 coup

Arévalo's policies, along with those of his successor Jacobo Árbenz, also threatened U.S. business interests. Particularly impactful was Árbenz's land reform bill, which directly challenged foreign landholdings. This, coupled with the Cold War era's fear of spreading communism, provided the U.S. with a pretext for intervention in Guatemala.

The CIA-orchestrated coup of 1954, led by Castillo Armas, was disguised as a fight against communism but fundamentally aimed to protect U.S. economic interests in the region.

The abrupt end of the revolution plunged Guatemala into an extended period of authoritarian rule and civil strife. In the years that followed, hope for democratic restoration faded. Successive right-wing governments rolled back social programs initiated by Arévalo. The armed forces and police cracked down on demonstrations calling for the return of democracy. Amid this repression, a group of renegade soldiers formed MR-13, Guatemala's inaugural guerrilla group. By 1960, Guatemala plunged into an all-out civil war.

Democratic aspirations were snuffed out entirely by the late 1970s. In 1978, Guatemalan soldiers violently suppressed peaceful protests by Q'eqchi' peasants in Panzós. The military massacred dozens of people. By 1982, the armed conflict reached its bloody nadir. Between 1982 and 1983, the Guatemalan military killed roughly 80,000 civilians, including a [genocide](#) against the Ixil Mayas.

[Rights Action edit: Numerous studies carried out in 1990s and 2000s concluded that well over 200,000 Guatemalan civilians (a majority being Mayan) were killed and slaughtered in the genocides and “scorched earth” massacres, over 45,000 more were “disappeared”, and some 1,000,000 were forcibly displaced from their homes and communities.]

Such violence did not subside until the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996. This agreement between guerrilla insurgents and the Guatemalan government brought a formal end to the armed conflict. The accords established a truth commission to investigate wartime atrocities. They also acknowledged the disproportionate impact of the conflict on Indigenous populations. They even gestured to issues of land tenure, labor, education, and health care, policy areas Arévalo had sought to address a half century earlier.

“Peace Accords” ... and no change

Despite that, Arévalo’s vision for a more democratic and progressive Guatemala did not materialize during the “post-peace” period. In fact, economic disparities deepened, particularly among poor Maya and Ladino populations. Women faced violence at rates as high as during the war. Political corruption remained entrenched, leading to widespread disillusionment with the democratic process.

Even still, Guatemalans preserved memories of Arévalo’s rule and the Ten Years of Spring during which a more peaceful and democratic future had seemed possible. On Oct. 20, 2017, thousands took to the streets of Guatemala City to celebrate Guatemala’s Revolution. Union members and students wore shirts and raised banners bearing the names of both Arévalo and Árbenz.

Over the past year, Bernardo Arévalo has tapped into these popular sentiments. His party, the Seed Movement (Partido Semilla), deliberately evoked the imagery of the Ten Years of Spring, and his campaign emphasized the values of democracy, justice, and progressive reform.

And yet, Arévalo Jr. faces similar challenges today as his father did decades ago. Since his victory in August, reactionary elements have sought to prevent his ascension to the presidency. Sandra Torres, his rival for the presidency, refused to concede the election. The Electoral Tribunal [attempted to annul](#) the results. Congress refused to recognize 23 lawmakers from the Seed Movement elected alongside the president. And the Attorney General’s Office, led by Consuelo Porras, has actively sought to prevent his rise to power.

Nevertheless, Arévalo benefits from the same groundswell of popular support as his father did 80 years ago. Guatemalans [have undertaken a massive national strike](#) in protest of attempts to meddle in the transfer of power. In recent months, thousands of Mayas have traveled hundreds of kilometers to the capital of Guatemala City to call for Porras' resignation and Arévalo's inauguration.

Amid this outpouring of support, Arévalo Jr. vowed to complete the Revolution. Standing alongside the son of Jacobo Árbenz on Revolution Day, he echoed their calls: "May the 1944 Revolution live forever in our hearts and in our memories...the new government is with you and for you!"

That's why Arévalo Jr.'s inauguration is more than a political transition. It's a testament to a nation's enduring hope to revive its revolutionary past and to shape a better future, thanks to the work of Guatemalans who have yearned for decades to have a voice in their government.

(Ilan Palacios Avineri is a Ph.D. Candidate in History at the University of Texas at Austin.)

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Guatemala Election Watch alerts: www.rightsaction.org/emails

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- GHRC (Guatemalan Human Rights Commission): www.ghrc-usa.org; <https://twitter.com/GHRCUSA>
- Breaking the Silence: www.breakingthesilenceblog.com, https://twitter.com/BTS_MG
- NISGUA (Network in Solidarity with People of Guatemala): www.nisgua.org; https://twitter.com/NISGUA_Guate

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