

Elections But No Democracy In Guatemala

by Grahame Russell, Rights Action, October 2003

On November 9, 2003, Guatemalans will vote for their next government. Yet, these elections may well serve to further entrench the undemocratic political system, where the rule of law is porous and impunity is the norm. Though widespread massacres and genocide are not now occurring, as in the 1980s, Guatemala is still characterized by exploitation and poverty, racial discrimination, repression (including assassinations, torture, disappearances, etc) and impunity, all of which are proof of the absence of real democracy and rule of law.

In the pre-election context, international and national election observer missions are busy at work and wealthy, northern governments are commenting on the gravity of the situation. But few are asking a series of important questions about what democracy is actually about.

Over 3,000,000 Guatemalans survive on less than US\$1/ day, and over 50% of the population on less US\$2/ day. Yet, democracy and election observers are not discussing how endemic poverty undermines and can even negate the very possibility of democratic participation. Claiming that all Guatemalans have an equal right to vote borders on being meaningless, and is dismissive of what poverty is and how harsh are the lives of families and communities entrenched in conditions of survival and exploitation.

There is, in Guatemala, an on-going debate about the possible mandate of CICIACS. The creation of CICIACS is a recognition that impunity is deeply entrenched in Guatemala and that the peace process, that since 1996 has been heavily monitored by the United Nations and a host of international and national human rights groups, has failed to make a dent in impunity. Yet, governments, the media and election observers are not even discussing how impunity (ie, the lack of ability and political will of the formal political and legal systems to sanction and put an end to on-going repression and other forms of power abuse) undermines and negates the fundamental premises on which democracy is built.

Equally un-discussed is the role played by a host of global actors. The roots of Guatemala's impunity, racism, exploitation and repression go back through centuries of European imperialist racism and exploitation, through the subsequent and on-going dominance of United States economic and military interventions, and through on-going global economic inequality and exploitation.

Throughout Guatemala's history, global actors (companies and banks, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, the US government and military, other governments, etc.) have had beneficial partnerships with economic, political and military power holders inside Guatemala. But for the 1944-1954 period, power in Guatemala has never come from democratic processes and relations with the people. Power comes from the multiple relations that the national power-holders maintain amongst themselves and with the range of global actors.

Attracting considerable critical attention today, inside the country and out, is the fact that former General Rios Montt is running for the presidency. Rios Montt oversaw a most brutal period of repression in the 1980s, and stands accused of genocide in Guatemalan courts. Yet, rhetoric aside, the international community maintains today, as in the past, beneficial political, military and economic relations with the dominant sectors of Guatemala, including the ruling FRG party controlled by Rios Montt. The US government continues to provide military aid, weaponry and training to Guatemalan soldiers and security forces. The Canadian government invited the government of Guatemala, controlled by Rios Montt, to the 2001 Summit of the Americas (a meeting of the "34 democratic governments of the Americas" to promote the "Free" Trade Area of the Americas). The Canadian nickel giant INCO is again open for business in eastern Guatemala, as it was during the years of genocide. The World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, partners of the Guatemalan regimes of the past (including spear-heading the Chixoy Dam project, 1975-1985, that resulted in the massacres of over 444 people in the Maya-Achi village of Rio Negro), are partnered today with the Guatemalan government and business interests.

The holding of elections and the accompanying narrowly contrived discussion of democracy have become almost a charade, that plays itself out once every four years. The elections are a trap. The poor and repressed majority of Guatemala

does not need elections that will, in effect, legitimize repression and impunity, exploitation and poverty, and corruption. They need real democracy, wherein all power relations and dealings, inside Guatemala and also globally, are controlled and balanced, and where elections and the administration of justice are used to regulate and hold accountable these relations of power.

Instead of sending election observers to Guatemala once every four years, the national and global human rights movement should, on an on-going basis, report on and denounce how exploitation and poverty, and repression and impunity continue to negate the very possibility of democracy.

Northern human rights groups have a particular responsibility to report on and denounce how northern power holders contribute, through a myriad of political, military and economic dealings with Guatemala power-holders, to on-going exploitation, repression, impunity and a lack of democracy in Guatemala.

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