

Rights Action
September 5, 2016

“Pressure for change in Guatemala is coming not from the political class but from newly defiant poor people, mainly Indians. Their emerging power, not the president’s resignation, is the big news from Guatemala.”

For 20 years, Rights Action has been directly funding and working with community organizations of poor, mainly indigenous people in Guatemala. Thank-you for your trust in and support for this work.

For as long as it takes, we will continue to fund and work with grassroots, community based organizations – one struggle at a time – as they seek justice for the harms and violations caused by their repressive government, by the governments of the U.S. and Canada, and by national and international business interests; and as they implement their own community controlled development projects, human rights and environmental defense projects.

- What to do: See below

A New Guatemala Slowly Emerges

By Stephen Kinzer, Boston Globe, September 4, 2015

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2015/09/04/new-guatemala-slowly-emerges/Yvwdj5vWKio140KreU0wqK/story.html>

Few countries have suffered as much as Guatemala. The resignation of President Otto Perez Molina on Thursday, followed by his arrest on corruption charges, seems like just the latest episode in the long cascade of crimes, coups, revolutions, interventions, and massacres that shape Guatemalan history. In fact, it reflects something new. Political and social consciousness is rising dramatically in long-traumatized Guatemala.

For generations Guatemala was terrorized into silence. Slowly the grip of the old elite is slipping. A new generation of Guatemalans, many from the indigenous majority, has used social media and modern organizing tools to push back against power and history.

The president’s resignation does not portend quick change for Guatemala. Political life has become deeply corrupted. Street gangs are powerful and murder rates are astronomical. Large numbers live in deep poverty. The land-holding elite fiercely resists change. This month’s presidential election offers a depressingly unappealing set of candidates, so the fall of one bad leader is unlikely to lead to the rise of someone substantially better.

In one important way, however, Guatemala is changing. Ordinary people, mainly Indians, have organized, lost their fear, and begun demanding reforms. This is remarkable in a country where, for decades, death was the likely fate of all who protested.

Guatemala was horrifically brutalized by Spanish conquerors. It became a nation dominated by a handful of rich landowners who continued oppressing the Indian majority. Early in the 20th century, the Boston-based United Fruit Company became the country's most powerful force. After democracy emerged in 1944, Guatemala's congress passed a land reform law that required United Fruit to sell its unused property for distribution to landless peasants. The company appealed to Washington, and in 1954 President Dwight Eisenhower authorized a coup in which the elected government was deposed.

After the coup, social conflicts erupted into a 36-year civil war that cost 200,000 lives — more than were killed in political violence in all the rest of Latin America during that period. Labor leaders, student activists, and others who spoke out were routinely either killed by death squads or tortured to death on military bases.

Most weaponry and political support for this campaign came from the United States. When Congress cut off military aid in the 1980s to protest the Guatemalan regime's brutality, President Ronald Reagan arranged for Israel to fill the gap. During the most intense period of civil war, Guatemalan soldiers dropped into Indian villages on Israeli-made Arava transports and did their killing with Uzi and Galil rifles.

The war ended with a negotiated settlement in 1996. Slowly, Guatemalans began emerging from their cocoon of silence. Among the most eager protesters were thousands of Indians who had spent war years living in refugee camps across the border in Mexico. New organizations began to spring up — the kind that could not possibly have survived in the murderous old days. Their first nationwide campaign, against an American mining company, gave them a taste of their own power.

Guatemala's indigenous movement was further energized in 2012 when a former president, General Efraín Ríos Montt, became the first former head of state to be tried for genocide in his home country. Most victims of his scorched-earth campaigns had been Indians, and Indian communities around the country intently followed his trial. Ríos Montt was convicted, and though a judge later ordered a new trial, the sight of a former president in the defendant's dock thrilled many Guatemalans.

Not satisfied with bringing a former president to justice, Guatemalans took aim against their current one. After an international team of prosecutors documented government corruption, people took to the streets. Week after week, tens of thousands of protesters filled the plaza in front of the presidential palace. President Pérez Molina's resignation was their victory.

Guatemalans are edging back toward the democracy they enjoyed for ten years before the CIA coup of 1954. Pressure for change is coming not from the political class but from newly defiant poor people, mainly Indians. Their emerging power, not the president's resignation, is the big news from Guatemala.

[Stephen Kinzer is a visiting fellow at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University. Follow him on Twitter [@stephenkinzer](https://twitter.com/stephenkinzer).]

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To support community organizations working for locally-controlled development, the environment, human rights, real democracy and the rule of law in Honduras and Guatemala, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

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- Stock donations: info@rightsaction.org

Just Say No To: 'International Business and Investments, Repression, Corruption and Impunity As Usual'

"For decades, the international community, including other governments, the mining industry, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, have been comfortably doing profitable business in Guatemala with repressive, corrupted governments headed by the likes of former General Efraim Rios Montt, found guilty of the crime of genocide in 2013, and currently by former General, now President Otto Perez Molina, facing impeachment for overseeing a \$120 million import tax organized crime ring.

"As courageous Guatemalans take to the streets and demand justice for these corrupt, repressive leaders, and demand serious reform to how their country operates, who will hold to account the "international community" that for decades has maintained military, political and economic relations with Guatemala's elite sectors, participating in and benefitting from the corruption and impunity?" (Grahame Russell, Rights Action)

Send, and keep on sending copies of this information, and your own letters, to your own elected politicians (MPs, Congresspersons, Senators), to your media, and to your own pension and investment funds, asking: Why our governments, companies and investment firms do nothing about the poverty, repression and violence, and environmental and health harms associated with North American businesses, while benefiting from these economic, military and political relations?

Get Informed / Get Involved

- Speakers: Invite us to give presentations about these issues
- Educational Delegation: Join an educational delegation seminar to Guatemala and Honduras to learn more about these issues and struggles
- Daily News: www.democracynow.org / www.upsidedownworld.org / <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/index.html> / www.rabble.ca /
- Recommended Reading: "This Changes Everything: Capitalism versus The Climate", by Naomi Klein; "Open Veins of Latin America", by Eduardo Galeano; "A People's History of the United States", by Howard Zinn

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