

Elections But No Democracy In Guatemala, Again

By Grahame Russell, 23 October 2015

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These presidential elections will just serve to keep in place unjust, violent societal structures.

While Guatemalans will vote for their next president on Sunday, for the majority of the impoverished citizens and the ruling minority elites, the result is already known – little will change. Guatemala will remain an exploitative, racist and repressive country where national and international economic, political and military interests operate with impunity and corruption.

On Sept. 18, 2015, as political parties were campaigning across Guatemala, Rigoberto Lima Choc, a Mayan Q'eqchi' primary school teacher and municipal councilor-elect in Sayaxche, Peten, was assassinated. Rigoberto was at the forefront of a community and environmental defense struggle related to REPSA (Reforestadora de Palmas del Petén, S.A.), a company producing African palm for export to global “green energy” markets.

REPSA contaminated a 100-mile stretch of the La Pasión river in June 2015 by releasing African palm waste products into the river. In response to community and environmental defense activism, a judge ordered the suspension of REPSA's operation. In retaliation, Rigoberto was assassinated, and other community leaders kidnapped.

One month later, Alex Reynoso, a community and environmental defender working against the harmful silver mining interests of Tahoe Resources, was shot (for a second time) along with two other men. Alex remains in stable condition in a hospital, recovering from the bullet that entered his back. In April 2014, Alex was the victim of a first assassination attempt that left him seriously injured. That day his 16-year-old daughter Topacio was with him. She was shot and killed.

No justice has been done for these crimes related to the interests of global corporations. But this is expected in Guatemala, where impunity is the norm for over 98 percent of all violent crimes, let alone for politically motivated crimes and human rights violations.

The Bloody Norm

Generation after generation, exploitation and impoverishment of a majority of Guatemalans remain the norm.

Societal violence and State repression remain the norm.

Corruption and impunity remain the norm.

Operating in this context, foreign investments, including from the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, continue unabated. Global corporations (mining, oil and gas, textiles, agriculture, etc.) operate unencumbered across the country, contributing to and benefiting from the very same exploitation and repression, corruption and impunity.

An Empty Election

While there are some important differences between the two candidates in Sunday's election, it is a misrepresentation of Guatemala's history and current situation to suggest these elections will bring about any serious reforms and justice. Rather, these elections serve to further entrench the unjust national and global status quo.

A Vote For Genocide Deniers and Continued Impunity

Leading the polls - as if any form of legitimate polling can be done in a country of chronic and widespread poverty, lack of education, racism, corruption and impunity - is Jimmy Morales. Morales is a well-known comedian who now represents the National Convergence Front (FCN-Nación), a political party founded and backed by former military officers. It is an open secret that Morales and his military backers have strong links to former general Efraín Ríos Montt,

found guilty in May 2013 of the crime of genocide, and to the former president, former general, now jailed-on-corruption-charges Otto Perez Molina.

A majority of ranking officers in the Guatemalan army deny that genocide was committed during the 1970s and 80s during the worst years of the U.S.-backed repression.

Their candidate, Morales, also denies this.

A Small Window Of Hope

Second in the polls is Sandra Torres of the National Unity of Hope party (UNE) which she co-founded in 2002. Torres was the first lady during the 2008-2012 presidency of her then husband Alvaro Colom.

I prefer a Torres victory because I hope her government, like that of her ex-husband, will not perpetuate the lies and outright predominance of the genocide-deniers in Guatemalan society. I hope that her government, like that of her ex-husband, would empower, in whatever small ways, those sectors of society – including the Attorney General's office and the U.N.-linked International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, or CCIIG, to continue to work and struggle for truth, memory and justice for the human rights violations, war crimes and genocide of the past.

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Though impunity and corruption were again solidified under the 2012-2015 presidency of general Otto Perez Molina, it must be recognized Colom during his presidency named Claudia Paz y Paz Attorney General of the country and he openly supported the investigative work of the CICIG. As a result of Claudia Paz y Paz's leadership and CICIG collaboration, former general Rios Montt was found guilty of the crime of genocide in May 2013. This is a singular, extraordinary achievement, even though by that time General Otto Perez Molina had assumed the presidency, replaced Claudia Paz y Paz, and the military-linked, corrupted Constitutional Court partially overturned the genocide trial guilty verdict.

Elections Do Not Make Democracy

Even if Torres wins, though the polls suggest Morales will smile and chuckle his way to the presidential palace, the real winners of these undemocratic elections will be, yet again, the Guatemalan economic, political, and military elites, though to what degree depends on whether Morales or Torres gets in. The other real winners, as always, will be global corporations, investors and the development banks.

Elections, at best, are a tool to serve as a check and balance on power and power-abuse in a healthy democratic society. Guatemala is not a healthy democratic society - in any sense of the word. Power accumulation and abuse are the norm, dating back centuries. These presidential elections will just serve to keep in place unjust, violent societal structures.

There no satisfaction writing these words. The simple fact is that the winds of change that have flowed – albeit in a complicated and varying manner – across Latin America at the government and state levels over the past 20 years or so have not yet arrived in Guatemala.

Unfortunately, there is little hope in the near future that the existing power structures in Guatemala, deeply intertwined with their global political, military and business partners, actually want real democracy to grow and flourish.

Contrasted with that reality, there are many amazing people and community organizations yearning and struggling courageously for truth and justice and for real, democratic transformation of the society and State. People like Rigoberto Lima and Alex Reynoso.

This is where real hope and dignity reside in Guatemala. These are the people and organizations that need and merit all recognition and support.

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