

Meet Thelma Cabrera, the Indigenous Leader Barred from Guatemala's Presidential Election

Democracy Now interview, March 3, 2023

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/indigenous-leader-barred-from-guatemala-election>



Guatemalan presidential candidate Thelma Cabrera, left.
@ Plaza Publica, June 10, 2019

Elections again, and still no democracy in Guatemala

“Guatemala is a corrupt state, coopted by criminals. They fear not Thelma, but the people who are putting forward proposals for structural change in Guatemala.”

“Indigenous peoples are a menace to the ‘pact of the corrupt ones’, because we propose a project for the nation: a popular pluri-national assembly in the context we’re experiencing [of] assassinations, imprisonment and the looting of our wealth in Guatemala. We are proposing a constitutional assembly, and they are fearful of us.”

“We are causing panic to the ‘pact of the corrupt ones’, which is an alliance between the political sector and the economic sector. They’ve looted the country for decades, indeed for centuries. It’s in their interest to maintain the status quo, the situation as is, with three structural problems: inequality, discrimination/racism, and corruption.”

**69 years of Guatemalan ‘pact of the corrupt ones’
Backed by US, Canada & “international community”**

Since the U.S. back coup in 1954, that ousted Guatemala’s last actually democratic government, the U.S.-led “international community” (including Canada, E.U., global banks, investors and companies) have maintained fully beneficial relations with 69 years of ‘pact of the corrupt ones’ governments, calling them “democratic allies”.

**Meet Thelma Cabrera, the Indigenous Leader Barred from Running in
Guatemala’s Presidential Election**

Democracy Now, March 3, 2023

Watch/Listen: https://www.democracynow.org/2023/3/3/guatemala_thelma_cabrera

Amy Goodman:

The Guatemalan Constitutional Court Thursday ruled against presidential candidate Thelma Cabrera and her running mate, exiled human rights ombudsman Jordán Rodas, upholding a February decision by Guatemala’s Supreme Electoral Tribunal to block them from the ballot.

Cabrera and Rodas are members of the leftist political party, the Movement for the Liberation of the Peoples-MLP, which grew out of the Indigenous-led farmers’ rights organization CODECA. Across Guatemala, thousands have taken to the streets in protest, demanding that Cabrera and Rodas be allowed to participate in June’s election.

Thelma Cabrera is a Maya Mam environmental and human rights defender, who also ran for president in 2019, receiving an unprecedented wave of support. She got about 10% of the vote.

Rodas served as human rights prosecutor in Guatemala from 2017 until last year, when he was forced to flee for allying himself with anti-corruption efforts.

While they are being banned from participating in the election, the Guatemalan Constitutional Court has confirmed the presidential candidacy of the conservative Zury Ríos. She's the daughter of the dead former U.S.-backed military dictator Efraín Ríos Montt, who rose to power after a coup in 1982. Ríos Montt was convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity 10 years ago.

Zury Ríos had been prohibited from running in 2019 due to a constitutional measure that doesn't allow figures who came to power by coup, or their blood relatives, to run for president.

Cabrera and Rodas took their fight to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in Washington, D.C., last month. They also traveled to New York, where Democracy Now! spoke with them. I began by asking Thelma Cabrera for her response to being blocked from the election.

Thelma Cabrera: [translated] The response as Indigenous people is that this ratifies what we've always denounced, that Guatemala is a corrupt state that's been coopted by criminals. This is now reflected in violating our right to participate in this presidential election.

They fear not Thelma, but the people, the people who organized and are putting forward their proposals for structural change in Guatemala.

Pacto de corruptos / Pact of the corrupt ones

Amy Goodman: In 2019, you got 10% of the vote, more than any Indigenous person in Guatemalan history. Ultimately, the president, Giammattei, got 14. You got 10. Talk about what you represent to the pactos de corruptos, which people should understand around the world, what's called the "pact of the corrupt," that is taking you off the ballot.

Thelma Cabrera: [translated] Through the election fraud that took place [in 2019], supposedly we came in fourth place. But we, the peoples, understand that we did better — first or second place. But in the face of this electoral fraud, that's the place that they said we came in.

Indigenous peoples, we are a menace to the pact of the corrupt ones, because what we propose is a project for the nation: a popular pluri-national assembly in the face of the whole context that we're experiencing, a context marked by assassinations, imprisonment and the looting of our wealth in Guatemala.

Constitutional pluri-national assembly / New project for the nation

So, what we are proposing is a constitutional assembly, and that they are fearful of us, the peoples governing ourselves.

I'd like to add something. This shows that they're punishing us as a people, prohibiting our rights to political participation. Persecution is not new. From 2018 to date, there have been 26 assassinations of human rights defenders, of those of us who defend our territories and the Mother Earth. So the best way to punish us is to forbid our participation.

But we're not after candidacies. We are promoting a whole project for the nation. Our struggle will continue even after the elections. And that is why we're continuing along the path that we've chosen thus far.

Amy Goodman: Jordán Rodas, can you respond to both of you being banned from the Guatemalan presidential elections this year?

Jordán Rodas: [translated] Well, we are causing panic to the pact of the corrupt ones, which is an alliance between the political sector and the economic sector. They've looted the country for decades, indeed for centuries, perhaps. It's in their interest to maintain the status quo, the situation as is, with three structural problems: inequality, discrimination/racism, and corruption.

So, the strength of the MLP, headed up by Thelma Cabrera, supplemented with what Jordán Rodas can contribute, with an experience based on defending human rights — and I aspired to be the director of the University of San Carlos, has caused them panic. They know that we're the only real option for change.

Everything else is just continuing with the same thing, just changing the face of a puppet. It might be a woman, it might be a man, but not like us. We know what the real problems are, and we are going to propose real solutions.

Amy Goodman: Why did you go into exile? You joined so many advocates, judges, lawyers, who have left Guatemala. Why did you leave?

Government persecution against judges, prosecutors, lawyers

Jordán Rodas: [translated] Many of us who played a role in favor of the struggle against impunity and corruption have had to leave. In my case, as human rights ombudsman, the week after I assumed office in August 2017, former President Jimmy Morales declared Iván Velásquez persona non grata and ordered his expulsion. He was then the commissioner of CICIG [International anti-corruption, anti-impunity commission, investigating war crimes and organized crime in Guatemala]. Today he's defense minister of the Petro administration in Colombia.

I brought an amparo action that stopped that arbitrary action by the president.

Then he wanted to end CICIG before its time. It was getting into sensitive matters. Its investigations were reaching high-level political and economic figures in the Guatemalan state. And so CICIG was an obstacle for the continuation of impunity.

And that is why many judges and other judicial officers had to leave. This was not just backsliding. This was revenge against those who had impacted their interests.

Zury Rios, daughter of genocidal general, candidate for president

Amy Goodman: Thelma Cabrera, the leading candidate for president right now is Zury Ríos. Zury Ríos is the daughter of president, former general, Ríos Montt, who was found guilty of genocide against the Mayan people, your people, in the northwest highlands of Guatemala. She insists there was no genocide. Can you talk about this? And talk about this history.

Thelma Cabrera: [translated] That also ratifies the attitude of a failed state. It shows that the electoral tribunal is corrupted. It's been coopted by criminals, because this background, being the daughter of one who carried out a genocide, tells the people very much and this shows that the system itself, through its laws, is violating the rights that we have as a people.

That is an expression of racism and discrimination against us, the peoples. And that tells us that gives the people a lesson that the power of the powerful resides

in the different institutions of the state. It's not that they enjoy support, but rather it is power that has been structured in, and operates in, the institutions. So, we, as a people, tell our brothers and sisters that that is the result of the failed and corrupted state.

And the same ones are violating rights and bringing an end to the little bit of democracy that exists in Guatemala. [...]

We are following the rules of the system in terms of registering our candidacy. But they exclude us. So it's quite clear in whose hands power, and who it is who is serving these interests.

Amy Goodman: Can you talk about the role of the United States then in supporting the military dictator, for example, General Ríos Montt, the deaths of some 200,000 Guatemalans, and what that has wrought today, decades later? I'd like to ask both of you that question, beginning with Thelma.

Thelma Cabrera: [translated] Well, in this case, for example, when there are foreign companies that are also operating in Guatemala, for example, 'I Squared'. I'm not sure how to pronounce it in English. But this is a company, a business for electricity distribution, that ended up in the hands of a U.S. company. And this also led communities to demand nationalization of the electricity utilities in Guatemala. They also suffered sabotages and repression, where there was complicity of the government of Guatemala, and transnational companies are central in the U.S.

Jordán Rodas: [translated] I think it's important to have historical memory. The government of the United States has played a very unfortunate role at certain times. For example, it backed the counterrevolution in 1954 that put an end to a decade of a democratic spring.

Subsequently, they trained members of the military who were carrying out genocide and scorched-earth policies in Guatemala and other countries of Latin America.

And now we see certain nuances. The United States was also important for supporting the CICIG, the Commission Against Impunity and Corruption. But then the Guatemalan government was very skillful. They sought to ingratiate themselves with Trump. They changed the location of the Guatemalan Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem — one of the few governments to do so. And it signed an agreement to be a third country, a third safe country [for forced migrants and refugees], which is not safe for us.

The United States has given a lot of political oxygen over the years to the governments of Guatemala. And today, they have finally understood that corruption causes migration. They have begun to impose some sanctions — the Magnitsky list, the Engel list. But I think that they should act more quickly to sanction corrupt actors linked to the central government and the economic powers. Otherwise, the same problems are going to continue, for corruption is also a cause of migration.

Presidential platform: Movement for Liberation of the Peoples-MLP

Amy Goodman: Thelma Cabrera, talk about your presidential platform, what you are calling for in Guatemala.

Thelma Cabrera: [translated] Our presidential platform demands are the demands of the people. It's not a personal thing. It's a collective struggle that has been designed from our communities from being dispossessed of all of our wealth ever since the 1954 coup d'état, ending the 10 years of democratic spring in Guatemala.

As result of that, we have suffered eviction of Indigenous communities from places where the communities have historically lived. And now the communities, well, we don't even have anywhere to live. Single-crop agriculture has expanded and ended up causing diseases, for example, as a result of a single-crop agriculture.

So, within the government plan that we put forward, which is the proposal to have a constitutional assembly, fighting for our rights as human beings, and at the same time respecting the rights of Mother Earth — in other words, life in balance with Mother Earth and nature.

We are also proposing that we build a pluri-national state in which the different Indigenous peoples are present with our delegates. And that will not just be used as a political banner. We need to have representation of the peoples with self-government. We need to have a political constitution drafted by the peoples. The idea is to defend life.

And let me round out my answer. In the face of the situation of evictions, there's greater migration. And greater migration leads to greater disintegration of families. And for those who are in Guatemala, as well, it represents attack on our health.

There is major malnutrition, even though Guatemala is a territory, a country filled with wealth. But that wealth is poorly distributed. It's in just a few hands. And that is why we, the peoples, are the ones who suffer the consequences. And that is why we were right to propose a project for the nation, a constitutional assembly to address all of the needs that we have as a country.

So, when we stood up to say we are human rights defenders, then they label us as terrorists, criminals, thieves. And that is why we had to propose this project of a nation, saying we are not just rowdy ones, we're not criminals. We love life. We know how to make proposals. It's just that they're afraid of us.

Amy Goodman: So, what happens when you go back to Guatemala now? They have ruled you are not a presidential candidate. Do you accept this?

Thelma Cabrera: [translated] Well, the thing is that we are getting stronger every day. They might be shutting the doors to us in these elections, but our aim is not just elections. Our struggle is getting stronger. We have showed that we have followed all the legal procedures. We are peace-loving peoples. And we respect the laws and procedures for participation. But despite that, they prohibit our participation. But we get stronger and stronger, because our aim is not just to participate in elections. We want to go beyond that, proposing a project for the nation with structural changes, fighting corruption. Corruption is there because there are structural problems. It's a sign of the structural problems.

And so we say we have identified the illness, but we have the medicine, which is our proposal. And we're going to be strengthening our proposal, showing that we,

too, know how to denounce the situation internationally and that we are able to follow the procedures. This is the path that we're following now.

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