

Guatemala Election Watch #9 – July 24, 2023

Electoral coup d'état in Guatemala: A democracy and rule of law challenge for United States and Canada

By Grahame Russell, July 24, 2023

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/electoral-coup-detat-in-guatemala>

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Will the Guatemalan people be allowed to vote for a government that is actually democratic for the first time since 1954?

Or will the US and Canada stand back and watch as long-time “democratic ally” – the repressive, aptly-named ‘Covenant of the Corrupt’ government – carries out sustained attacks on the electoral process and the Semilla Party?

These are questions Americans and Canadians must face in the lead-up to Guatemala’s August 20th runoff Presidential elections.

Guatemala has received increased international media attention in recent weeks. The “Covenant of the Corrupt”—an alliance of corrupt judges, prosecutors, politicians, and economic and military elites who run the country—has been carrying out brazen, ‘Jan.6/Trump-like’ attacks on the democratic aspirations of the Guatemalan people, targeting the electoral process itself and the Semilla Party that is favored to win the August 20 vote.

On June 25th, to the shock of most Guatemalans, international observers and indeed the Covenant of the Corrupt, the opposition-party named *Movimiento Semilla* (“seed movement”) finished 2nd place in first-round elections, forcing a runoff against the establishment UNE Party.

The Semilla Party emerged out of a 2015 wave of anti-corruption protests that ousted the US and Canadian-backed President Otto Perez Molina and Vice-President Roxana Baldetti, accused of operating a corruption crime ring that stole \$120,000,000 in public funds. Perez Molina, a former army General, is also alleged to be a war criminal for massacres, assassinations and forced disappearances committed by US-backed military regimes in the 1970s, 80s and early 90s.

The Semilla Party and its leader, Bernardo Arevalo, have made the eradication of corruption a centerpiece of their campaign.

Electoral coup d'état, in plain sight

In response to the June 25th success of the Semilla Party, Guatemalan elites began a “lawfare” assault, using its network of corrupt prosecutors to file trumped up charges against the Semilla Party and the electoral process. Guatemalans have taken to the streets across the country in defense of their right to vote.

The “lawfare” assault continues today unabated. Repression or targeted attacks against Semilla members cannot be ruled out as August 20 approaches. (For up-to-date information about the on-going ‘electoral coup’ attempt, see links at bottom.)

While media attention has rightly focused on attacks on the electoral process and the Semilla Party, overlooked is the fact that these events are as much about democracy and rule of law in the US and Canada, as they are about Guatemala.

Life in Guatemala under Covenant of the Corrupt regimes

Since 1995, I have worked as the director of the US and Canada-based not-for-profit organization, Rights Action. I have witnessed first-hand systematic human rights violations, political violence and killings carried out by successive Covenant of the Corrupt governments. I have watched as these governments weaponized the administration of justice, taking over and using the courts, Public Prosecutor’s office and police to threaten, jail, force into exile, or assassinate indigenous and non-indigenous land defenders, and hundreds of judges, prosecutors and lawyers, journalists and media owners.

More often than not, these acts have been carried out with the full knowledge of the US and Canadian governments, as documented in *TESTIMONIO Canadian Mining in the Aftermath of Genocides in Guatemala* (Between The Lines, 2021, <https://btlbooks.com/book/testimonio>), that I co-edited with UNBC Professor Catherine Nolin.

Over the past 10 years, the North American media has reported on the plight of millions of forced migrants desperately trying to cross Mexico and get into the US. A disproportionately high number of these refugees and forced migrants are fleeing Guatemala. Many have fled from land, environment and human rights defense struggles Rights Action supports, having suffered evictions and violence at the hands of successive Covenant of the Corrupt governments in partnership with transnational companies in the sectors of mining, hydro-electric dams and the ‘for-export’ production of African palm, sugar cane, bananas and coffee.

Yet, in the face of this, the US and Canadian governments (and companies) have consistently prioritized their political and economic and political interests over basic issues of democracy, human rights, the rule of law and the guaranteeing of a basic minimum standard of decent living conditions for a majority of Guatemalans.

Covenant of the Corrupt governments and economic elites interpret their partnerships with and silence of the US, Canada, and much of the international community, as carte-blanche to continue to act with impunity. For decades they have used elections to provide a veneer of democracy, while working behind the scenes to ensure their power and wealth remain unchallenged.

From ‘democratic spring’ to a long cold winter

Semilla Party leaders and supporters call their movement the “second spring,” in reference to a 10-year period (1944-1954) of Guatemalan history known as the democratic spring – *la primavera*. This period began with the 1945 election of the country’s first truly democratic President, Juan Jose Arevalo, and the 1950 election of his successor, President Jacobo Arbenz.

Both administrations made significant investments in public health and education, expanded voter rights, and fought for worker protections, land reform and began

the long overdue process of beginning to recognize the rights and historic land claims of indigenous, mainly Mayan peoples.



I lived through the democratic SPRING. I want to live it again.

Source: @festivalesgt

This democratic spring was brought to a violent end in 1954 by a US-orchestrated coup that ousted the government of President Arbenz and returned power to the traditional economic, military and political elites who had ruled during the US-backed dictatorship of General Jorge Ubico Castaneda, 1931-1944. These elites are precursors to today's Covenant of the Corrupt governments.



“Glorious Victory”, by Diego Rivera

1954 US coup that ousted the government of Arbenz. Foreground: CIA director Allen Dulles shakes hand of coup “leader” (selected by the US) Colonel Castillo Armas. Allen’s hand rests on bomb with face of US President Dwight Eisenhower. Behind Allen, brother John Foster Dulles, head of State Department, and John Peurifoy, Ambassador to Guatemala, hand cash to Guatemalan military commanders. A Catholic priest officiates over slaughter of Mayan and other poor Guatemalans. Exploited workers carry United Fruit Company bananas.

Canada, that refused to establish diplomatic relations with Guatemala during the 10 years of democratic spring, finally established formal diplomatic relations in 1961.

It is not lost on Guatemalan voters that today’s Semilla Party candidate, Bernardo Arévalo, is the son of Juan Jose Arevalo. The Covenant of the Corrupt elites are determined to stop the possibility of truly democratic government coming to power, and a second “President Arévalo” at the helm.

This brings us back to the role of the US and Canada. Ever since the 1954 coup, the US, Canada and transnational companies have maintained full economic, political and military relations with 69 years of repressive, corrupt governments, invariably turning a blind eye to systemic exploitation, repression, corruption and impunity.

As the Guatemalan people mobilize across the country in defense of their electoral process, the US and Canadian people must also mobilize, and demand

that our political leaders do what they claim they always do: support and demand respect for democracy.

Let the Guatemala people decide, for the first time since the democratic spring of 1944-1954, who they want to be their President.

Grahame is director of Rights Action (www.rightsaction.org). Thanks to Michael Bakal (www.vocesymanos.org/) for help with this article.

Follow twitter feeds of Festivales Solidarios (@festivalesgt) and Prensa Comunitaria (@PrensaComunitaria). Read Prensa Comunitaria's daily news (<https://prensacomunitaria.org/>). Read Rights Action's "Guatemala Election Watch" alerts (www.rightsaction.org/emails).

Get involved/ Act

Rights Action calls for Americans and Canadians to share this information widely (including media outlets), and your Senators, Members of Congress and Parliamentarian. Urge them to make public statements and bring all pressures to bear on the Guatemalan authorities to ensure that the electoral process proceeds transparently and peacefully to the August 20 run-off vote, and that the Semilla Party is allowed to participate fully with no further attacks of any kind.

- U.S. Senate: <https://www.senate.gov/senators/contact>
- U.S. House: <https://www.house.gov/representatives/find-your-representative>
- Canadian Parliament: <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Parliamentarians/en/members>

As the regime continues with its "lawfare", it would be wrong to rule out the use of Covenant of the Corrupt repression against the public and/or targeted attacks against members of the Semilla Party.