

Rights Action
August 9, 2023

Guatemala Election Watch #16 – August 9, 2023

Guatemalan memories of October 1944 and The Spring

Article by Miguel Angel Sandoval

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/guatemalan-memories-of-october-1944-and-the-spring>

11 days to August 20th run-off vote

Rights Action shares this reflection by Miguel Angel Sandoval about all that might have been, over the past 70 years in Guatemala, ... all that might begin to be again, if the Semilla Party is allowed to even participate in the August 20 runoff Presidential election, and then wins as they are expected to.



“Since 1951, we have been waiting for you”

A gentleman in Chiquimula holds sign, referring to the last time Guatemala actually had democratic elections. In 1951, President Arbenz won the elections. The previous President, Juan Jose Arevalo, handed power over to Arbenz. Juan Jose Arevalo is the father of Bernardo Arevalo, presidential candidate of the Semilla Party that is favored to win the August 20 runoff vote.

Photo: Prensa Comunitaria

Rights Action reiterates the challenge for the US and Canada, to finally begin to assume responsibility for the actions of our governments, companies, banks and investors, when they violently intervene in the affairs of other countries, so as to put into power and help keep in power repressive, autocratic regimes that –simply put– favor our economic and political interests.

For almost 70 years, the majority population of Guatemalans (with Indigenous people making up over 50% of the total population) have suffered the consequences of violence and repression, evictions and loss of home and lands, exploitation and inter-generational poverty, and decades of forced migrancy.

It is never too soon for the US and Canada – our governments, companies, banks and investors - to stop doing the wrong thing, and to finally start doing what our governments claim to do: promote and defend democracy and the rule of law, respect the autonomy of other countries, respect Mother Earth and the environment, promote and defend human rights and an economic development model that benefits all people.

October and the Spring in Memory

By Miguel Ángel Sandoval

August 6, 2023

<https://prensacomunitaria.org/2023/08/octubre-y-la-primavera-en-la-memoria/>

One of the greatest gains of what happens after 25J [Ed.: June 25, 2023, first round of Presidential election voting], from the social point of view, is the recovery of one of the many historical threads, which had been lost in an unprecedented way, under the weight of methodical campaigns, sometimes stronger, sometimes less, to disappear, nonetheless, the legacy of the October Revolution, which had finally been transformed over the years into a holiday and a way to boost domestic tourism, with the famous bridges for public employees.

Therefore, the process of 1944-54 had in fact been buried.

Of course, there was at another level, a continuous effort to disappear the traces of that historical process, perhaps the most important modern social process, it can be said that it is the most relevant of the twentieth century.

They are the ten years of spring in the country of eternal tyranny, as Luis Cardoza y Aragón said, when referring to that decade of the governments of Juan José Arévalo and Jacobo Árbenz, the latter overthrown by the invasion of 1954.

For example, in school history textbooks, this process disappeared gradually and insensibly, but the fact is that it was no longer studied, no longer remembered.

Today we know that the threads of social, collective memory persist in spite of everything and that an event, in this case a choice, can contribute to trigger it.

With the invasion/coup of 1954, the best efforts to make a better, free, democratic and modern country were truncated. And with that defeat in 1954, the foundations were laid for what later in the 60s, became the internal war in our country that ended, after countless sacrifices, with the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996.

All this is found in the threads of memory that now, at least in part, resurface in broad sectors of Guatemalan society, which now reveals itself as possessing a tenacious memory.

It is evident that for this resurgence of memory other factors contribute, and one of them is that the presidential candidate of Semilla, Bernardo Arévalo, is the son of President Juan José Arévalo Bermejo (1945-1951) who, until 25J, slept in obscurity and out of the immediate memory of the people, especially of the new generations. And it was then that a combination of the denunciation against corruption, the citizens' weariness with the authoritarian drift of the country, and the rescue of the memory of Juan José Arévalo, a good president, came together.

With the 25J, an emblematic cry was reborn, which seemed forgotten, buried, and it is the cry that today is heard throughout the country: long live Arevalo!

Of course, one is tempted to reflect on what is called historical memory, the strength of the founding events in a country, which remain in the social imaginary, sometimes as a daily occurrence or sometimes in drawers of the social unconscious that return when one least imagines it and thus, one can think of the omnipresent threads of the memory of a people or a society.

In recent years, several events have resulted in reflections on historical memory. Some are linked to the history of our country, others are linked to processes that occurred in other countries.

The first has to do with an event that had remained in the deep memory of the people of Totonicapán. On the occasion of the bicentennial of the country's independence, there was a moment that brought to the memory of a few, the history of the indigenous uprising of Totonicapán, in 1820 and that prior to the celebration of the country's independence, had commemorated the bicentennial.

A conceptual artist's idea set the tone. Seeing in a museum the chair that Atanasio occupied during the days when he was the leader of the Totonicapán revolt, he proposed to take the chair from the museum to the town of origin, in a caravan from the capital to Toto. The COVID pandemic did the rest. There was no event.

However, it would seem that when one reads the act of independence of the creoles, there is a part that says that the same was done so that others would do it, there is a clear allusion to the uprising of Totonicapán, that the idea of an artist, around the chair, which the indigenous hero had occupied, allowed to appreciate the value of the symbols in the memory.

Another event takes place in Spain and is about those who disappeared during the civil war (1936-1939) and Franco's regime (Francisco Franco died in 1975). In the film "El Silencio de los Otros", by Almodóvar, elderly people, the children or grandchildren of those murdered in the years 36-39, revive in a documentary film, the memory of their missing relatives, after at least half a century that the subject seemed to be completely forgotten.

But the memory returns and recovers fundamental data of the life of a country. In this case, it is the memory of the civil war and of those who disappeared in the Spanish civil war.

Only a couple examples of the memory recovered in other facts and events, but in the present case, it is the recovery of the most important features of the process

of the October [1944] revolution, unleashed or triggered by the electoral triumph of a young party, Semilla, with a candidate Bernardo, son of President Arevalo.

In this regard there are some indispensable reflections. One of them has to do with the legacy of the October Revolution. While it is true that today the cry of Viva Arevalo is heard throughout the country, perhaps it is appropriate to emphasize, for the sake of the new generations, that during the government of Juan Jose Arevalo, several institutions were introduced into the national life that to date are the main legacies of that democratic revolution.

One of them is the Labor Code, which in the years since then, and particularly after the counterrevolutionary invasion of 1954, has been systematically attacked in order to eliminate it.

They are the systematic attacks with cyclical peaks, which have tried, among other attempts, to repeal it, to reform it beyond recognition, and in general, to disrespect it. And it must be said, it is the neo-liberal thinking that has crept in everywhere, that has tried in every way, that has made every effort to circumvent the labor code. That is why one of the greatest expectations among many, is the unrestricted respect for the labor code, which integrates the most deeply felt labor rights, among which: living wages, union rights, organization, etcetera.

The other great achievement is social security. The IGSS, founded in that revolution, and in both cases the labor code and social security, as the most relevant legacies of President Juan José Arévalo. In the case of the IGSS, the attempts to privatize it, to defund it, to use it as political loot, are widely known. But with a fixed idea: to disassociate it from the October revolution. In the same line of thought as with the labor code. In the less serious case, the labor code is remembered, but it is "decaffeinated", that is to say, all relation with the October revolution is removed.

The democratic spring of the 10 years of revolutionary governments, initiated with Arévalo and concluding with the 1954 coup-invasion against President Jacobo Árbenz, orchestrated, directed and financed by the US government, during the barbaric years of the Cold War.

Many more things are found in the legacy of the democratic spring: education with the normal and federation type schools, rediscovered sovereignty, agrarian reform, political liberties, the flourishing of culture (creation of the Ballet, symphony, etc.), many more things, among which, the right of women to vote in the election of Arévalo. These are the facts of the governments that for ten years made us as a country dream and, of course, made our parents and grandparents dream.

Since 25J, however, we have been witnessing the attempt to retrace the steps we have taken and take them up again, to project them, to build a better country. We are sure to find ourselves in these efforts with the renewed cry of ¡Viva Arévalo!

Rights Action calls for Americans and Canadians to share this information widely (including media outlets), and to contact 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.

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

More information

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

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