

Guatemala Election Watch #19, August 18, 2023

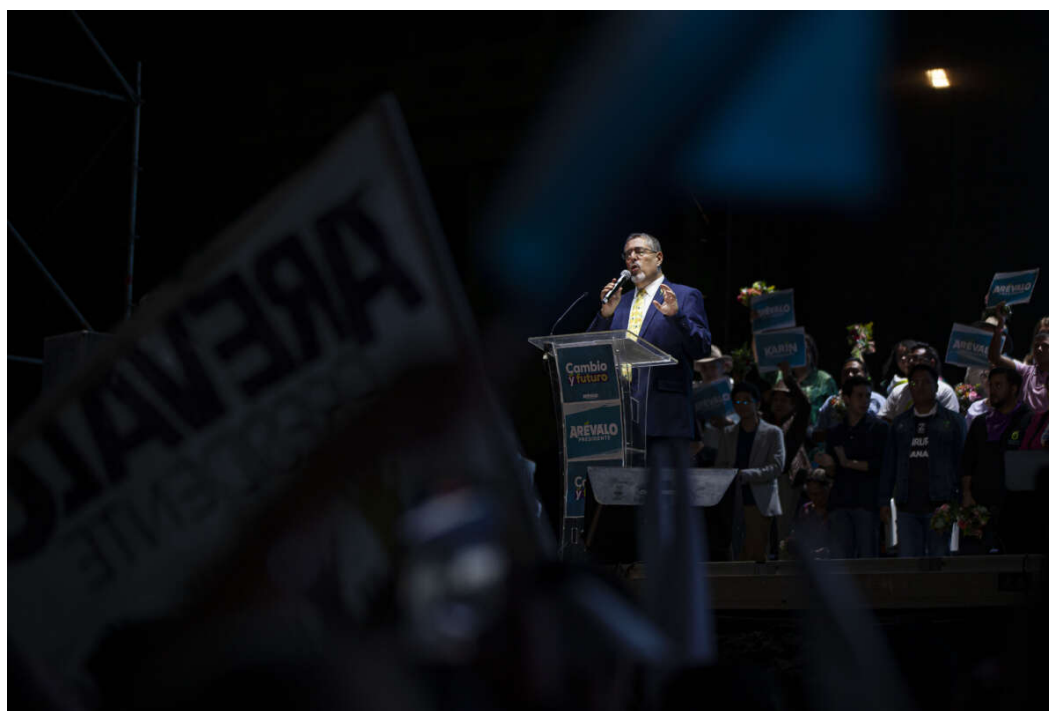
TRUTHOUT article

US, Canada-Backed Guatemalan Elites Threaten Coup Amid Opposition Party Runoff

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

By [Grahame Russell](#) & [Michael Bakal](#), TRUTHOUT, August 17, 2023

<https://truthout.org/articles/us-canada-backed-guatemalan-elites-threaten-coup-amid-opposition-party-runoff/>



Presidential candidate Bernardo Arevalo and running mate Karin Herrera (not seen) hold the closing campaign of Movimiento Semilla ahead of the general election, at the central square in Guatemala City, Guatemala, on August 16, 2023. LUIS VARGAS / ANADOLU AGENCY VIA GETTY IMAGES

Guatemala has received an unusual amount of international media attention in recent months, thanks to its historic elections as well as brazen elite efforts to overturn them.

On June 25, to the shock of most Guatemalans and international observers, opposition party Movimiento Semilla (“seed movement”) finished second place in first-round elections,

forcing a runoff against the establishment Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza party, known as UNE, headed by Sandra Torres, a longtime political operative who was [arrested](#) in 2015 in connection with allegations of illegal campaign financing. This is the first time in recent history that an opposition party has mounted a serious challenge to Guatemala's deeply encrusted military and economic elite.

In response to the first round's surprise results, the "[Covenant of the Corrupt](#)" — an alliance of corrupt judges, prosecutors and politicians, and economic and military elites who run the country — has been carrying out January 6-like attacks on the Semilla party and the electoral process itself.

The stakes of the upcoming August 20 election could not be higher for the democratic aspirations of the Guatemalan people, as they attempt to cast off the yoke of more than seven decades of repressive rule. The outcome will also likely lead to a tectonic shift in power dynamics throughout the region, either re-entrenching oligarchic rule, or opening a new space for participatory democracy.

The Semilla party emerged out of a largely urban-based, 2015 wave of anti-corruption protests that ousted the United States- and Canadian-backed President Otto Pérez Molina and Vice President Roxana Baldetti, who were [convicted](#) of operating a crime ring that stole millions of dollars in public funds. Pérez Molina, a former army general, is also an [alleged war criminal](#) implicated in massacres of Maya communities, assassinations and forced disappearances committed by U.S.-backed military regimes in the 1970s, '80s and early '90s.

The Semilla party and its leader, the former diplomat and current Congressperson Bernardo Arévalo, have made the eradication of such corruption a centerpiece of their social democratic campaign. According to its publicly accessible [policy platform](#), by rooting out corruption and reinvesting in public institutions, the Semilla movement aims to build a national system of free, universal health care; strengthen K-12 education; support agroecology and small-scale farming; expand access to credit and jobs programs; and encourage the democratic participation of long-marginalized sectors of Guatemalan society.

Electoral Coup in Plain Sight

In response to the June 25 success of the Semilla party, Guatemalan elites began a "lawfare" assault, using its network of corrupt prosecutors to [file trumped-up charges](#) against Semilla and the electoral process itself. Guatemalans have taken to the streets across the country in defense of their right to vote.

The assault began even before first round voting, when the Indigenous Maya-Mam social movement leader Thelma Cabrera was [blocked](#) from participating in national elections on the entirely spurious grounds that there was an "[anomaly](#)" in the paperwork of her running mate, the former human rights ombudsman Jordán Rodas. The "lawfare" assault continues unabated,

and in lead up to August 20, repression against the public and targeted attacks against Semilla members cannot be ruled out.

While media attention has rightly focused on attacks on the electoral process and the Semilla party, the press and other observers continue to largely overlook the fact that these events are as much about democracy and rule of law in the U.S. and Canada as they are about Guatemala.

Guatemala Under the “Covenant of the Corrupt”

Since 1995, I, coauthor Grahame Russell, have worked as the director of the U.S. and Canada-based nonprofit organization, [Rights Action](#), which works as a grassroots funder of human rights and environmental defense organizations in Central America and to carry out education and activism in the Global North in solidarity with these struggles.

I have witnessed firsthand systematic human rights violations, political violence and killings carried out by successive Covenant of the Corrupt administrations in Guatemala. I have watched as these governments weaponized the administration of justice, taking over and using the courts, public prosecutors’ offices and police to threaten, jail, force into exile or assassinate Indigenous and non-Indigenous Land Defenders, as well as 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 U.S. and Canadian governments, as documented in the book [TESTIMONIO Canadian Mining in the Aftermath of Genocides in Guatemala](#), that I, Russell, co-edited with University of Northern British Columbia 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 U.S. A disproportionately high number of these refugees and forced migrants are fleeing Guatemala. Many have fled from their homelands as a [direct result](#) of violence and evictions due to land, environment and human rights defense struggles, which are rarely reported on in the international press.

Successive Covenant of the Corrupt Guatemalan administrations, in partnership with transnational companies in the sectors of mining; hydroelectric dams; and the export-oriented production of African palm, sugar cane, bananas and coffee, have carried out evictions of and violence against the predominantly Maya communities “in the way” of these extractive projects.

Yet, in the face of this, U.S. and Canadian governments, companies and investors have consistently prioritized their political and economic interests over basic issues of human rights and the environment, democracy and the rule of law. Their policy, in effect, has been to keep Guatemala [open for business and transnational investment](#) even as the most fundamental social rights to health, education and a livable environment fall to shambles.

Covenant of the Corrupt elites and their supporters have come to understand the U.S. and Canada's seemingly unwavering support and enthusiasm to "do business" under virtually any human rights or environmental conditions as granting them carte-blanche to carry out horrendous violations 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. Now, that contemptible status quo may be starting to shift.

From "Democratic Spring" to Long Winter

Semilla party leaders and supporters call their movement the "second spring," in reference to the 10-year period from 1944 to 1954 known as Guatemala's "democratic spring" — [la primavera](#). This period began with the 1945 election of the country's first truly democratic president, Juan Jose Arévalo, and the 1950 election of his successor, President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman.

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 respond to demands from Indigenous, mainly Mayan peoples to recognize their rights and historic land claims.

The democratic spring was brought to a violent end in 1954 by a [U.S.-orchestrated coup](#) that ousted the government of President Arbenz Guzman and returned power to the traditional economic, military and political elites who had ruled during the U.S.-backed dictatorship of Gen. Jorge Ubico Castaneda, from 1931-1944. These elites rapidly reversed Arbenz's land reform efforts, protecting the interest of the United Fruit Company, which held enormous influence over the Dwight Eisenhower's Central Intelligence Agency and State Department. These elites are precursors to Guatemala's current Covenant of the Corrupt.



“Glorious Victory,” by Diego Rivera, depicting the 1954 U.S. coup that ousted the government of President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman. In the foreground, Central Intelligence Agency Director Allen Dulles shakes hand of U.S.-selected coup “leader” Col. Castillo Armas. Dulles’s hand rests on bomb with face of President Dwight Eisenhower. Behind Dulles, his brother, State Department head John Foster Dulles, and Ambassador to Guatemala John Peurifoy, 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.[WIKIMEDIA COMMONS](#)

It is not lost on Guatemalan voters that today’s Semilla party candidate, Bernardo Arévalo, is the son of former President Jose Arévalo. As the younger Arévalo has vowed to carry out his father’s legacy, Covenant of the Corrupt elites are determined to stop the possibility of truly democratic government coming to power, with a second President Arévalo at the helm.



A couple holds a sign at a protest in Guatemala reading, “I lived through the democratic SPRING. I want to live it again.”COURTESY OF FESTIVALES SOLIDARIOS

This brings us back to the role of the U.S. and Canada. In the aftermath of the 1954 coup, the U.S., Canada and transnational companies have maintained full economic, political and military relations with Guatemala, with 69 years of repressive, corrupt governments invariably turning the other cheek from systemic exploitation, repression, corruption and impunity. After refusing to establish diplomatic relations with Guatemala during the 10-year democratic spring, Canada finally established formal [diplomatic relations](#) with Guatemala in 1961. Similarly, U.S. financial assistance to Guatemala dramatically [increased](#) once the coup was executed, and the transition from democracy back to dictatorship was complete.

As the Guatemalan people continue to mobilize across the country in defense of their electoral process, people in the U.S. and Canada must mobilize alongside them and demand that our political leaders do what they claim: support and demand respect for democracy. They must let the Guatemala people decide, for the first time since the democratic spring of 1944-1954, who they want to be their president.

Get involved/ Act

It is impossible to keep up with the breadth of attacks being carried out, daily, by the Guatemalan Covenant of the Corrupt regime, and their allies, on the electoral process and against the Semilla Party.

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.

- 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>

More information

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

Movimiento Semilla party

www.movimientosemilla.gt

Facebook: MovimientoSemilla

Twitter: @semillagt

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- Prensa Comunitaria's daily news: <https://prensacomunitaria.org/>

Tax-Deductible Donations (Canada & U.S.)

To support land and environmental defenders, and democracy, human rights and justice struggles in Honduras and Guatemala, make check to "Rights Action" and mail to:

- US: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887
- Canada: (**New Address**) Box 82858, RPO Cabbagetown, Toronto, ON, M5A 3Y2

Credit-card donations: <https://rightsaction.org/donate/>

Direct deposits, write to: info@rightsaction.org

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