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A coup d'état in slow motion

No matter how optimistic one may want to be, the real struggle for a better and less corrupt Guatemala will only begin with Arévalo's inauguration

The significance of an event often only becomes apparent at a later stage. It seems that precisely such a historic moment is taking place in Guatemala right now: for over 80 days, Guatemalans have been standing up to a coalition of corrupt politicians and economic powers to show that they are sick of being ruled by these structures. The message to those in power is clear: the people will not allow their elections to be stolen.

In this June's presidential election, voters surprised the traditional powers with their decision to make, the outsider candidate, Bernardo Arévalo their future head of government. Since then, the old powers have been fighting tooth and nail against the people's decision. For fear of losing its previous privileges and power, the *Ministerio Público*, or the Public Prosecutor's Office, is doing everything it can to prevent Bernardo Arévalo from taking office, as he has declared war on corruption. The country is one of the 30 most corrupt countries in the world and is in the top five in Latin America.

The *Miniterio Público* has been taking all legal steps for months to retroactively annul the election — so far, the procedure has not been successful and has resulted in anger amongst the population, as well as criticism from abroad. Arévalo himself is speaking of a 'slow-motion *coup d'état'* and is asking the people to continue taking to the streets in the name of democracy. Even the clear confirmation of the election results by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) and the election observers from the European Union has not stopped the *Ministerio Público*.

The birth of a nationwide resistance

At the end of September, members of the Public Prosecutor's Office broke into the TSE in the name of 'saving democracy' and confiscated the files of the presidential election results. This is when the mood of the people finally turned. On 2 October, indigenous communities in the

Totonicapán region began to rebel against this action. They demanded the resignation of the corrupt key figures responsible for the confiscation: the head of the Special Prosecutor's Office against Impunity, Rafael Curruchiche, the director of the *Ministerio Público*, Consuelo Porras, and the judge responsible, Fredy Orellana. This resistance quickly grew into a nationwide movement that was joined not only by the rural population and the working class but also by people from the capital. And still, nobody expected that this action would go on until the end of the year — and maybe even longer.

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The condition of the state institutions, in which corruption has become so deeply entrenched, is a cause for concern. In recent months, bought-off judges have repeatedly ruled against Arévalo and his supporters in the name of the 'pact of the corrupt'. The *Semilla* movement, which brought Arévalo the presidency, has not only been stigmatised, but the party has also been denied legal personality. Members are being prosecuted.

At the end of November, the *Ministerio Público* raided at least 30 homes of *Semilla* members and supporters, six were arrested and convicted of several offenses in a questionable trial with a judge who was even classified as highly corrupt by the US. And that's not all: the *Ministerio Público* has announced the prosecution of the *Semilla* movement and requested that the immunity of the future president and his vice-presidents be lifted. This has already been the fate of several TSE members. A clear sign of how the *Ministerio Público* is slowly eroding democracy.

An indigenous uprising for democracy

The indigenous movement is particularly committed to the resistance: they have been defending the country's future for almost three months without interruption. Despite their dwindling energy and resources, they are holding out day and night in protest camps in the capital, far away from their families. They take turns in a rotating protest shift system, organising marches and rallies, they travel abroad, seeking support and demanding sanctions from institutions such as the Organization of American States, the United Nations and the European Union. After many parts of Guatemalan society have returned to their daily lives, the indigenous people continue to fight and support the president-elect, knowing that corruption keeps them in poverty. Not only that — they fight because they are tired of their territories being invaded, the

environment and its resources being violated, and their culture being disrespected.

The indigenous movement is also driven by historical trauma: not only from European colonisation but also from the terrible years following the coup in the 1950s, the dictatorship and genocide, the consequences of which the indigenous Mayan people still feel today. This explains their perseverance. In this sense, Arévalo is their best option.

Nevertheless, it is essential to view the indigenous uprising with nuance: they do not explicitly endorse a specific party or candidate. Their aim is to defend democracy and aspire to a harmonious life without plunderers in their homeland.

What is clear, however, is that the pact of the corrupt will make it as challenging as possible for the new head of state.

Some might say it is a popular uprising like the one in 2015, when several high-ranking politicians were denounced for corruption. This time, however, many things are different, which speaks in favour of a historic moment: the resistance is exclusively organised and sustained by indigenous communities, highly coordinated and resolute in their refusal to give up. Various sectors of society are collaborating, in support of their elected president. Additionally, a significant portion of the international community has publicly aligned with the people, even imposing sanctions.

Hence, it is difficult to imagine that Arévalo will not assume office in mid-January; the headwinds are too strong. What is clear, however, is that the pact of the corrupt will make it as challenging as possible for the new head of state. In a move favouring the old powers, the government has already tailored the budget for the upcoming year by generously allocating funds and projects to the Public Prosecutor's Office and its sympathetic economic sectors. This budget was swiftly approved in an almost-clandestine operation, despite objections from *Semilla* representatives.

No matter how optimistic one may want to be, the real struggle for a better and less corrupt Guatemala will only truly begin with Arévalo's inauguration, and he should not forget those who have stood up for him throughout these past months.



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