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From protest to progress

Despite all the opposition and obstruction, the past half-year in Guatemala has shown that the corrupt elites are no longer in control of the country

Early in the morning of 15 January, Guatemala's new President Bernardo Arévalo went to greet the cheering crowds on *Plaza de la Constitución* — to palpable relief. The old elites had tried right to the last to prevent him from taking office; his investiture at the National Theatre, attended by guests from around the world, was even delayed by more than 10 hours as the infamous 'pact of the corrupt' used every means available in their attempt to prevent the inauguration of Congress — all to no avail.

An unexpected alliance of indigenous leaders, young urban activists and the international community ensured Guatemala is now probably the greatest hope for democracy and social justice in a region in which Nayib Bukele, the authoritarian 'rock star' of the right, has all too often hogged the international limelight.

An unexpected victory

For years, Guatemalan democracy seemed to be going steadily downhill. From 2011 on, corruption proliferated under successive right-wing presidents, and political elites were able to line their own pockets. The country has a small state that has traditionally only catered to the interests of its white economic elite; there is no social redistribution, with large parts of the population, especially the more than 41 per cent belonging to indigenous groups, being politically and socially marginalised. Accordingly, popular expectations were low ahead of the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections.

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In his election campaign, Arévalo, an experienced diplomat and son of the country's first democratically elected president, focused on corruption and on traditional social democratic issues such as better access to education, job creation and greater democratic

participation. In the first round held on 23 June 2023, he managed to finish second with almost 12 per cent of the vote, having chiefly won over younger, well-educated voters in cities. His party *Movimiento Semilla*, meanwhile, gained 23 of 180 seats, making it the third-largest group in parliament.

Even more remarkable was what happened between then and the run-off on 20 August: in the first round, approximately 17.4 per cent of voters chose the *voto nullo* option, thus actively rejecting all the candidates on the ballot paper. In the ensuing campaign, however, *Semilla* and Arévalo succeeded in persuading many of those who felt excluded by and disillusioned with the system, particularly those from indigenous communities, to believe in the possibility of a new Guatemala. The second round thus brought a landslide victory for the team Arévalo/Herrera, which gained 58 per cent of the vote, securing victory in 22 of 27 *departamentos* and even winning a 75 per cent vote share in Guatemala City.

The judiciary targets Arévalo — but the people rise up

Led by the *Ministerio Publico* (a kind of public prosecution service and justice ministry hybrid), the Guatemalan judiciary launched investigations into *Semilla* as soon as the first round of voting was over. On the day the official results were announced, 12 July 2023, its status as a political party was suspended due to alleged irregularities during its formation in 2017. Less than 24 hours later, however, this decree was declared null and void by the constitutional court and Arévalo was permitted to stand in the run-off.

These measures sparked protests against the unsackable attorney general, María Consuelo Porras, and other representatives of the 'pact of the corrupt'. The US announced sanctions against various individuals involved in this attempted 'judicial coup d'état', and the EU subsequently followed suit, while the Organisation of American States (OAS) demanded that the democratic process be respected.

The people in Guatemala had had enough of the 'pact of the corrupt' and, perhaps for the first time

After Arévalo's victory in the August run-off, the judiciary stepped up its efforts to overturn the election result, among other things by illegally raiding the premises of the Supreme Election Tribunal. On 2 October, there was

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then an entirely unexpected development: led by their traditional leaders, the '*48 cantones de Totonicapán'* in particular, indigenous Guatemalans took to the streets and blocked roads, bringing public life to a standstill. Despite having seldom benefited from Guatemala's democratic constitution themselves, and despite the fact that regions with majority indigenous populations have, for centuries, been among the poorest and most deprived in the country, they came out to protest – in organised and peaceful fashion – against the attempted coup d'état and in defence of democracy. It wasn't so much Arévalo they were supporting, but the idea of a plurinational and democratic Guatemala in which they might finally enjoy the respect and participation they deserve.

After three weeks of country-wide protests, indigenous leaders concentrated their efforts on a protest camp in front of the *Ministerio Publico*, which they only abandoned after 105 days, following Arévalo's successful inauguration. The people had enough of the 'pact of the corrupt' and, perhaps for the first time in Guatemala's history, that meant the population as a whole.

Unresolved issues

So, what happens now? Following the official handover, *Semilla* provided evidence of its new power and its negotiating skills, forging an unexpected majority in Congress comprising 93 delegates from seven parties, mostly from the centre-right; *Semilla* delegate Samuel Perez was duly elected Congress president. Just two days later, however, the constitutional court ordered a re-run of the election. With the party's suspension still not officially resolved, *Semilla* was not allowed to form a parliamentary group, and the Guatemalan constitution bars independent delegates from holding parliamentary office or sitting on parliamentary committees.

The new Congress presidency, which was constituted on 19 January, could be described as technocratic, with the 'pact of the corrupt' again excluded. The new Arévalo administration is, however, constrained by *Semilla's* unresolved status as a party and parliamentary group. And with Consuelo Porras adamant she will not resign, legal challenges to the party are likely to continue at least for the remaining two years of her term of office. *Semilla* desperately needs the solidarity of the international

community to ensure this democratic transition endures, even after Arévalo's fixed four-year term is over.

For the West, Guatemala's successful pro-democracy protests should be a reminder that viable alternatives to the Bukeles of this world continue to emerge.

Despite all the opposition and obstruction, the past half-year in Guatemala has shown first and foremost that the concept of Guatemalan democracy is not dead, that it still has its supporters. Arévalo won not just because he was backed by well-educated urban voters, but primarily because he gained the support of those sections of the populace who'd experienced exclusion, suppression and years of exploitation. With their protests, led by traditional, democratically elected leaders such as the *48 cantones de Totonicapán*, they showed that the corrupt elites and their lackies in the judiciary were no longer in control of the country.

President Arévalo and his government now need to repay those groups' faith. His first visit, on the very night of his inauguration, was to the protest camp in front of the *Ministerio Publico*, an act that went beyond mere symbolism and offered hope for a new Guatemala, one that is more participative, feels more diverse and has more women at the top — the Arévalo cabinet is gender-balanced and the majority of the 23 *Semilla* delegates are women.

For his administration to get results despite its lack of in-built parliamentary majority, however, it will need the backing of the international community. The way the US, the EU and the OAS facilitated the transition of power via sanctions and strong statements was laudable, but the success of this democratic transformation will depend not just on sanctions against corrupt members of the judiciary; it will also require countries to work proactively to ensure Guatemala sees social and economic progress. Whether the recent ending of Germany's bilateral development partnership with Guatemala in favour of a focus on the inefficient Central American Integration System (SICA) sends the right message is open to doubt.

For the West, Guatemala's successful pro-democracy protests should be a reminder that viable alternatives to the Bukeles of this world continue to emerge. It would do well to support them.

For a different perspective on this issue, read here.



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