

Despite Protests, Guatemalan Elections Return the Military to Power

Category: Electoral Politics

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Karl Marx once wrote, quoting Hegel, that history repeats itself, but he added “first as tragedy, and then as farce.” And history has repeated itself in Guatemala following voting in the second round of the country’s 2015 presidential election. Despite protests against corruption, Jimmy Morales, a former comedian who is backed by the same military forces that backed disgraced ex-president Otto Pérez Molina, easily won the presidency by a wide margin following the second round of voting October 25.

Morales’ election comes after the nearly 24 weeks of protests in the Guatemalan Constitutional Plaza against corruption. Tens of thousands gathered here to demand the resignation of Pérez Molina, a former military general, following revelations of massive corruption in his administration. On September 3, just days before the elections, Pérez Molina resigned. All these events greatly influenced people’s decisions to go to vote, and on September 6, Jimmy Morales, a political outsider and former comedian, came in first, and Sandra Torres, the former first lady, in second.

Protesters had hoped that for once they were participating in actual change for their country, but in the end, they got more of the same.

The revelations of widespread corruption, protests, and elections have exposed deep-seated frustration within Guatemalan society with the state of their country, and society. Furthermore, there is an understanding that this election wasn’t going to change anything. Many voters who I spoke with on Election Day stated that they were only voting because they wanted the right to protest later. For many in Guatemala’s indigenous communities, none of the candidates represent them as indigenous persons.

The demonstrations against corruption brought together a diverse group of people to demand an end to corruption and impunity. Many organizations and community associations, such as the United Campesino Committee (CUC) and Committee for Campesino Development (CODECA), which have been important part of the historic mobilization and organization of communities in the defense of territory, played an important part of mobilizing in the protests. These historic organizations were supported by mobilization of students from the National University of San Carlos, and by indigenous authorities such as the 48 Cantones of Totonicapán.

Yet despite these social organizations, much of the support for the protests came from people who are unaligned or unassociated with any organization. They were inspired by a sense of indignation

with the corruption of the administration of Pérez Molina, and joined the movement. Many times this was done in spite of their feelings about the other groups who were participating. One woman during the elections explained that she was voting so that she had the right to protest, but went on to complain about the “devil children” from the National University.

The administration of Pérez Molina represented a rallying point for people from middle classes to link with the poor and indigenous to challenge the inequalities in the country. For many who joined the protests, the realization of the massive levels of corruption, and the enrichment of their leaders through the corruption, represented the final straw after years of faltering public institutions. Many people who turned out to the part stated that they were joining the protests due to the fact that their leaders were enriching themselves while children died of hunger, and because hospitals lack medicine. They were hoping for the actual possibility of change in their country - it is this that led for many to refer to the movement as the “Guatemalan Spring.”

But the protests opened the door for the victory of a candidate with troubling connections. In the end, Guatemalans received more of the same with Morales’ victory, and his victory represents the doubling down of the power of the Guatemalan military’s full return to politics.

The Return of the Internal Armed Conflict

The accusations and charges against OPM that were raised by CICIG just weeks before the beginning of the campaign, and the subsequent movement against corruption together formed the perfect opening for Jimmy Morales’ campaign, and his success as the frontrunner on election day.

“My candidacy is just part of the anti-corruption movement,” Morales told the rightwing outlet Breitbart. “I’m not a career politician. I am not a traditional politician, but I am a citizen who has tried to prepare to confront a corrupt political class that steals money from the state with impunity.”

Frontrunner Jimmy Morales had painted himself as a political outsider, who is concerned with state of the Guatemalan political structure. But behind the scenes lies on of Guatemala’s political powers; Morales has become the latest face of the Guatemalan military.

Support for Morales has poured in from the various elements of the military. Across Guatemala former members of the Civilian Defense Patrols, death squads formed by the military in communities during the 1980’s to combat the Marxist insurgency, have expressed their support for the comedian, turned politician. Support has also come in from former military officials such as Byron Lima, a former Captain, who is currently serving a prison term for the 1998 assassination of Bishop Juan Jose Gerardi.

The Morales campaign has attempted to downplay the presence of former military leaders in the party. The candidate told the Guatemalan digital magazine, Diaro Digital, “I believe that there is not a single party that can say that it does not have military among its affiliates or within its organization.” But despite this, connections between the FCN-Nación and the Guatemalan military run deep.

The FCN-Nación party was founded in 2004 by retired generals Luis Felipe Miranda Trejo and José Luis Quilo Ayuso of the Association of Military Veterans of Guatemala because of the perceived disrespect for the military following a confrontation between families of the disappeared and military officials on Guatemala’s Day of the Military. Reportedly, both are no longer involved in the party, but Quilo Ayuso has contributed financially to the 2015 campaign.

Morales is also not quite the political novice that he paints himself as. According to the campaign, he has studied and prepared for his political run since 2004. In 2011, he attempted to run for Mayor of

the municipality of Mixco, near Guatemala City, but lost to Otto Pérez Leal, the son of Otto Pérez Molina. In 2012, Ex-Colonel Edgar Justino Ovalle Maldonado, who was a member of FCN's executive committee, approached Morales about joining the party. Ovalle Maldonado also ran for a congressional seat during the 2015 election, and won.

The Guatemalan Military was responsible for the majority of human rights violations during Guatemala's 36-year-long internal armed conflict, which led to the deaths of over 200,000 people, majority of whom were indigenous Mayan, and the disappearance of nearly 50,000 people. The founders of the party directly participated in the genocide against the indigenous Maya people in the Guatemalan departments of Alta Verapaz and El Quiché.

Miranda Trejo was stationed at Military Base 21 in Coban as head of intelligence between 1981 and 1982. During this time hundreds of indigenous Q'eqchi Mayas were murdered and buried on the base. Ovalle Maldonado would also briefly be stationed at the Coban base in 1983. Quilo Ayuso was stationed in the Ixil Triangle between 1981 and 1982 as the head of intelligence during the time of the genocide against the Ixil people.

In a sense, it is a direct result of the movement against corruption that Morales came in first. But it is important to state that social movements are complex, and represent a diverse set of interests and goals. The movement against corruption in Guatemala is no different. There were radical elements within the movement that pointed out the inequality, and structural violence, but overwhelmingly the protests tended to be conservative in nature.

Many voters were looking for someone who was not part of the political elite, and Jimmy offered them this. During a time of crisis, Morales' campaign slogan "Not corrupt or a thief," his positioning as a political outsider, and the electorates' familiarity with his television show played to his favor.

But as many involved in Guatemala's social movements recognize, Jimmy represents more of the same. Furthermore, all these connections to the massacres and genocide are troubling to the indigenous communities that today face new attacks by the expansion of transnational capital into indigenous territory. One indigenous authority told me, "we are worried by the connections of Jimmy to the generals of the past."

Politics as Usual

Morales faced former first lady, Sandra Torres of the center-left National Unity of Hope (UNE) party in the run-off. If Morales represented the military, than Torres was the representative of the oligarchy. A report by the Guatemalan daily newspaper, La Hora, exposed that her campaign has received millions of Quetzales from business interests. Some of the financiers, such as Roberto Carlos Antonio López Roesch, who has contributed millions of Quetzales, have interests in projects such as the Santa Rita Hydroelectric project, which has been a source of violent conflicts.

She had received support across rural communities, because of the memory of the social welfare programs she formed during the administration of her ex-husband, former President Alvaro Colom. She has campaigned on continuing these programs, and has promised the expansion of similar programs. But these mild-social reforms should never overshadow the return of social conflict that emerged during the administration.

But Torres' support was unable to mobilize voters on October 25, and she was unable to win the presidency. For many, Torres represented a more direct continuation of the corruption.

The Coming Storm and Further Social Conflict

There is near consensus that Morales will be a continuation of social conflict created by the extractive industries and “development” projects. For indigenous and campesino movements, the deep connections of the Morales to the military and the oligarchy has lead many in Guatemala to be concerned about the coming administration.

“Either candidate is going to be the same as before,” said Benito Morales, a lawyer who has worked with the Guatemala’s indigenous movements. “These elections are not going to change anything for us. If anything, things are going to be worse (for the social movements.)”

The administration of Pérez Molina was marked by not just corruption, but as well for the rise of widespread social conflict over the expansion of extractive industries looking to exploit the country’s vast natural resources. These conflicts have also led to the re-militarization of indigenous communities.

“The panorama right now with the elections is nothing good,” said Morales. “There will be a continuation of violence against the communities. Though I think it will be a more aggressive campaign.”

The Seeds of a Larger Movement

It is in this environment of crisis that the movement against corruption and for structural changes can lead to the beginning of a larger movement in Guatemala for real change, or as Andrea Ixchiu, an activist and independent journalist, told me recently, “We are planting the seeds.” And it is after the elections that these seeds must sprout into the real organizing for change. And it is in this environment of continued examples of corruption that will contribute to the further growth of the movement in Guatemala, and lead to the real “Guatemalan Spring.”

The climate of protest has galvanized the left, and inspired the formation of new forms of organizing. The Popular and Social Assemblies, which brought together over 72 organizations from the spectrum of women’s groups, campesino organizations, indigenous groups, and civil society, brought together a diverse group of resistances and movements to discuss the social conflicts in the country. It is here that the formation of change begins.

The elections have brought to the forefront once again the forces of repression of the past, and threaten to unearth the darkest memories of the war. But the ‘Resign Now’ movement has brought about a renewed sense of the ability to bring about change is that these protests have undone years of fear that have gripped the Guatemalan population. As Donald Urizar, an organizer from Quetzaltenango, Guatemala’s second largest city, recently described it, “At first our parents, who grew up during the war, were contributing to the fear. They were telling us that (the government and military) were going to kill us, or going to disappear us - this is a military government. The fear was a strong. But we broke this fear that has crippled us. Right now we have the opportunity to renew our country.”

The breaking of the fear was also fostered by the lack of repression by state forces against the protesters. This fostered a sense of feeling that Guatemalan civil society could actually challenge corruption. Yet time will tell if the large protest movement re-emerges following the elections. Either way, the new administration will face a mobilized and vigilant population.

“Right now comes the real work,” said Urizar. “This was never just about Otto Pérez Molina, but rather about changing the system into something that benefits all Guatemalans.”

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