

# A Life of Struggle for Land and Community in Guatemala

January 30, 2023



Isabel Solís has spent decades participating in struggles for freedom and in defense of life and communal land in Guatemala.

A Maya Sakapultek and K'iche' woman, she was born in the early 1970s, just over a decade into Guatemala's 36-year-long internal armed conflict. The war in Guatemala included the massacre and disappearance of members of guerilla movements and the organized left and led to the commission of genocide against Maya peoples by the army.

It is in this context that Solís remembers the political activism of her father as part of her childhood in a rural town. His activism was partly focused on searching for and freeing young people who had been kidnapped by the Guatemalan Army. "I remember when my father would come home, and he'd say, 'They won't give us back the boys, I offered my life for theirs, and even so, they won't let them go,'" she told me during an interview in June.

One of the events that marked her childhood was the massacre of more than 15 adolescents, among them her 13-year-old cousin.

She recalls how soldiers had sent a message telling all families to gather at the Catholic Church and to leave the doors of their houses open. Her father and her brothers went to the meeting at the church. Isabel stayed home, together with her mother, her aunt (the mother of the 13-year-old, who had previously been kidnapped by the army), and her younger brothers. They began to hear gunshots. That was when the massacre of the 15 youths took place. Her cousin was one of the dead.

"From then on, the kidnappings of women, of men, and especially of young people didn't stop, and my father and two of my brothers were kidnapped," she remembers. Back then, in order to leave their community, villagers had to request permission from the army. Her father and one of her

brothers were kidnapped after starting the paperwork to leave.

After her two brothers and her father were disappeared by soldiers and members of the Civil Defense Patrol, Solís became a teacher. She began to have more contact with social struggles, popular organizations, and movements, partly due to her mother's role searching for her disappeared brothers and father.

Solís began to organize with the Campesino Unity Committee (CUC) in the late 1980s, helping to build the organization. Later, she helped to co-found the National Indigenous and Campesino Coordinating Committee (CONIC), motivated by the struggles of other youth to reclaim their land. She collaborated with CONIC until 2003.

Since then, she has worked throughout Guatemala, providing direct support to activists, most of them Mayan people who have been criminalized or who are political prisoners.

We spoke as we returned to Guatemala City after attending a hearing in the trial of Eduardo Bin, a Maya Q'eqchi' man criminalized because of his organizing work in the department of Izabal, in eastern Guatemala.

Our conversation ranged from the current political moment in Guatemala to the difficulties of achieving peace without the return of lands to Indigenous people, as well as the difficulties associated with, and potential alternatives to, the current system of government.

It was a long, painful, and insightful interview, which has been translated and edited for clarity and length.

**Dawn Marie Paley:** *To start, I'd wanted to ask you how we can begin to understand the impact the internal conflict in Guatemala had on communal life?*

**Isabel Solís:** It had a big impact. I remember before, there was community; there was a lot of collective activity, for example, when it was sowing time, everything was collective, entire families, or branches of families, would unite to do everything, including building houses.

All of that was destroyed. Now, there is less collective work, now it is done for wages. The practice of mutual aid changed. Now there are fewer families who practice mutual aid, which means that I will go work for you, and later you will work for me. That was destroyed, and there began to be a lot of divisions between branches of the same family. Those divisions impacted the most intimate family bonds. That has continued to today, trust is broken, compared to what it was like before the war.

**DMP:** *Could you tell me about the process through which you began to become involved in social organizations?*

**IS:** Well, I think I followed in my mother's footsteps a bit, because ever since my brothers and father were kidnapped, my mother began to struggle. She said, "I have to find them, I have to find them, and I'll continue until I find them."

Initially she became part of the Mutual Support Group (GAM), and she would take me to their demonstrations. I learned from them, from rural women who occupied the capitol building and who occupied congress, in the middle of the armed conflict.

Later, I also supported the activities of the National Coordination of Guatemalan Widows (CONAVIGUA). By then I was a teacher, so I could help with education, and that's how I became involved. I was 20 years old.

**DMP:** *In 1996, the Peace Accords were signed in Guatemala. Did that change the context of struggle?*

**IS:** Yes, it did. There was a group that analyzed the Peace Accords and all of its terms. One of the issues that was of concern to us was the issue of land and Indigenous people. The proposal was to use the market to solve it, of which we were very critical.

We said that the Peace Accords didn't address our problems and that protests—involving struggles for the land and to recover land—would continue. We didn't stop. I remember one of the key cases then was a community that was recovering [the lands called] Pampas del Horizonte, in the department of Quezaltenango. That was the motor of the struggle for land at that moment.

I was in Guatemala City's Central Park when the final act of the Peace Accords took place. I traveled from my community, we even brought tamales, and we sat and ate there, and everybody was very hopeful and happy. But we didn't agree with the logic with regards to the issue of land, while many organizations did agree to that logic. And they would say to us, "You are screwing up the Peace Accords." They practically blamed us for the lack of compliance with the accords.

I think that that became clearer when extractive projects began to appear in rural areas, first in the department of San Marcos and later in other regions.

The communities that were impacted began to resist extractive projects. However, the organizations were convinced by the Peace Accords, and they began to administer crumbs [little development projects] to quiet groups within the communities, or they just talked and talked as resistance grew in the territories. Repression took place in the places where there was resistance. It is similar to what's happening now, but it wasn't as visible then.

For me, the Peace Accords were a trap, a way of taking away our power and calming things down so capital could be invested into resource extraction.

They take the land away and poverty goes up. That is the key issue, and the proposal for how to deal with that issue was through the market. Why should I buy back land that was stolen from me? The Peace Accords needed to respond to historic dispossession by returning land to Indigenous communities.

There was a time during which the number of soldiers was reduced, but the soldiers became police and began to work as security guards on many private properties, especially in the Izabal region. I mention that region because that's where I was most active in that period.

The Peace Accords mention Indigenous communities in a very superficial way. They mention the recognition of language, the recognition of our traditional clothing, which is interesting and all, but I can't live on air, speaking my language, or wearing my traditional clothing. Communities must be respected in their entirety.

**DMP:** *How many years did that sensation of speaking to the void with regards to social organizations last?*

**IS:** I think that the national organizations, and especially those that were aligned with the Peace Accords, those that believed in peace, began to participate in resistance after around 2012.

After 2004, in the whole Verapaz region and part of Izabal, the communities began the struggle to recover their lands, and a very important movement of communities against mining started to take shape.

In 2005, I was working as a researcher again. I was part of a group of researchers, and we looked at the land reoccupations, and we realized that when communities were evicted from their ancestral lands there was no news coverage. Nobody talked about it.

But the evictions were something that was known in the region, and communities began to organize themselves against the violent evictions. The *campesino* organizations still weren't responding, in fact, they ignored the resistance. Some of them did intervene and they pushed market solutions, while the communities demanded the return of land that had been taken from them or which was under threat of theft.

**DMP:** *You were involved in CUC and CONIC, both of which are very important organizations. You decided to leave both. I wanted to ask you about how you perceive the power that these organizations had in a given moment, and what they are like today?*

**IS:** I think there have been different moments. There have even been different organizations, and each one had its moment of importance. In my way of seeing, I would even dare to say that when organizations become really big and important, they can be maintained through time, but they are weakened when they set their principles and initial demands aside and they begin to participate in party politics. That's when they begin to lose their power, and some even disappear.

For example, there was an organization called CERJ [Council of Ethnic Identities Runujel Junam] that was very interesting, but after its leader became a candidate for a party, over time the organization went dark.

That also happened with other *campesino* and women's organizations: They had an important and interesting trajectory and then got involved with a party and began to be diluted and disappeared or ended up just as a group of people sustaining the name of the organization or carrying out projects. Which is to say, they become NGOs.

I've got two readings of that. One is that it could be that for most of the members of the organization, the problems they are dealing with could not be solved by participating in the state. I could be right about that, or not, we'd have to look deeper. The other is around the concentration of leadership, leaving one person to make decisions. When that leader leaves for another space, everything is weakened.

Regarding political participation via parties, after the Peace Accords, there was an interesting experience among the organizations with the New Nation Alliance [ANN], which was interesting for a while, for about four years. There were a significant number of congresspeople on the left. But I couldn't tell you what they did to benefit the communities.

During that period there were many people and communities seeking to grow their power, and there were regional movements that inspired other regions to create larger and better organizations. One of those was the Council of Peoples of the West [CPO], which was inspiring, but it was also weakened when it joined a party.

There's another example that's worth considering, which is the movement that was built around community consultations. There were more than 60 community consultations, and in all of them, the majority of people voted "no," which is to say, no to mining. That was an interesting movement.

There were organizations that thought that the process would automatically translate to a pool of voters, so many of the leaders sought to become candidates. And it didn't work.

That's interesting because it means the people are saying, "Yes, we are going to defend our

territory. Yes, here we are. Yes, we are going to say no to extractive projects. Yes, we are going to resist. Yes, we will give our lives if that's what it takes [or give up our freedom] because we could end up in jail." A total dedication to the territory, to the defense of life.

But when the conversation began to turn to political participation via parties, and the goal became to be part of the state, the movement and its articulation shrank.

To me, the idea of sustaining my own oppressor doesn't make sense. The state is an oppressive instrument. When the Spanish came and invaded, they pillaged the country and later built the state. The state was built to administer theft. To me, the state is not power. Their power was built on theft, and they sustain their wealth based on what they stole and continue to steal from us.

People on the left think the state itself is power. But we've seen that it's not. If we look at the experience of Bolivia, we see that the communities are still being dispossessed and robbed. But if being in the state is the same as having power, Bolivia wouldn't have dispossession, there wouldn't be evictions, there wouldn't be repression.

My thoughts on this come from what I've learned from working with the people and being part of community struggles. For example, in my community, many people are uninterested in elections, starting with my mother. She says, "I'm not going to waste my time. I'm going to work. The state doesn't give me a penny to eat; I am the one that has to give to the state."

What I'm saying is, how can we continue to sustain a structure that we have characterized as oppressive, repressive, and based on theft? And people from organizations—or people who say they are on the left—are so contradictory, because they say, "Well, we have to learn how the state is managed."

For goodness sakes!!!! How am I going to learn from something that doesn't work? How am I going to learn from the state if the only thing it has done is steal, repress, and exploit??? I've learned more from the communities and from my people.

**DMP:** *This doesn't surprise me. We're educated to believe the state has always existed, that it will always exist, and that change can only come from the state. What other forms of organization currently exist in Guatemala?*

**IS:** There isn't one general form of [communal or Indigenous] organization nationally, because the country is structured according to the interests of capital [not according to Indigenous practices]. The other forms of organization that exist are those of the Q'eqchi, Quiche, Kakchiquel, Mam, Q'anjob'al, and other communities.

These other forms of organization aren't based on repression; rather, they are about administering communal life. Gladys Tzul explains these forms in her book.\* And I ask myself: Why don't we use these forms on a national level?

One day I suggested just that, to a women's group, when everyone was talking about corruption, saying that with [ex-president] Jimmy [Morales] it didn't work, that when former President Otto Pérez Molina was removed from power, the social movement was interesting, but it didn't last. And the current president is the same.

So I said, why don't we think of another way? Why don't we go towards a communitarian model, replicating on a national level a series of councils of women and communities, and we could even reduce the number of elected officials.

If we were to replicate the community system, it would mean no one got paid, it would all be pro bono, which would also mean there wouldn't be fights within and between parties. Why did I say that?!! They told me that I was assuming people's lives were already resolved, that such a thing would be impossible. Some said it was impossible to do such work *ad honorem*.

That's when I realized that some aspire to office because they want a salary and that's why there is corruption. It's become a vicious cycle. The same speeches, and promises of solutions, every four years. That's a narrative that hides the truth or hides the inability to think about and do things in a different way.

**DMP:** *But maybe in a different space, like a community assembly, your proposal would be received differently?*

**IS:** Oh, yes, absolutely. My hope is that abstentionism keeps increasing, that gives me hope. It's a sign that society is waking up. The more people vote, the more society is asleep and hope is more distant. To date there's no value given to abstentionism, and no one wants to consider it. Instead, it is frowned upon.