

Authoritarian Democracy, Extractive Development, and Indigenous Political and Environmental Imaginaries in Guatemala

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The consolidation of state power in Guatemala by an alliance of corrupt authoritarians in the wake of massive anti-corruption uprisings in 2015 intensifies the crisis of legitimacy in neoliberal democracy and the antagonism between Indigenous communities and extractive industries. The alliance's dominance of elections, despite the group's illegitimacy and the unpopularity of its agenda, reveals the roots of corruption in the violent and exclusionary nature of electoral democracy operating in poor and Indigenous communities, where extractive development converges with violence and corruption, and exacerbates legacies of colonial dispossession through the privatization and pollution of natural commons, especially water systems.¹ By dismantling the vestiges of democratic institutions and expanding extractivism, the authoritarian consolidation deepens foundational contradictions in Guatemalan democracy, collides with expanding Indigenous political and environmental imaginaries, and adds urgency to alliances for a plurinational state and decolonial development.

Corrupt Democracy

On May 19, 2021, leading anti-corruption attorneys Juan Francisco Solorzano Foppa and Aníbal Arguello were picked up by a car with unmarked plates and charged with criminal conspiracy, and capture orders were issued for over a dozen outspoken critics of corruption.

In addition, the Q'uiiche' philosopher Arnulfo Oxlaj was also detained days after publicly denouncing an army massacre in Chiul, Cunén, in 1988, of which he is the lone survivor. The previous week, the Guatemalan Congress had passed a law empowering the government to audit and dissolve NGOs without restriction, a major blow to the freedom of association. On July 23, the attorney general Consuelo Porras fired Juan Francisco Sandoval, director of the Special Prosecutor's Office against Impunity (FECI), causing him to flee to the United States, sparking international condemnation, and leading several Indigenous governments to call for a national strike.

These deeds were the handiwork of an alliance derisively known as the Pacto de Corruptos, emboldened by their dismantling in 2019 of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), which was established to investigate and prosecute entrenched criminal networks. As the armed conflict waned, and officially ended in 1996, elites teamed up with former military officers, many of the latter with training from the US, to form criminal networks to traffic drugs, weapons, and people, launder money, and to capture and defraud the state (Gutiérrez 2016). They flood political campaigns with illicit funds and bribe and threaten politicians, judges, and bureaucrats. CICIG was exposing these networks and prosecuting some of the most powerful and dangerous people in

¹ My research has examined Mayan experiences of democracy since the 1980s, and more recently I have collaborated with Indigenous organizations and NGOs who oppose extractive development in favor of food sovereignty, Buen Vivir, and water autonomy through the Water Network of Guatemala (REDAGUA).

the country, most notably the former president and ex-general Otto Pérez Molina. In 2021, elected officials are using their legal authority to subvert the law, undermine state institutions, protect criminal networks, criminalize dissent, and narrow the already-limited scope of democracy in the name of protecting it.

The current situation is a sharp contrast to 2015, when CICIG seemed to be winning the battle against corruption. That year, it revealed that Otto Pérez Molina, then president, and the vice president Roxana Baldetti Elías were captains in a massive corruption network, a finding that launched a historic uprising that removed them from office and sent them to jail. The 2015 elections went forward despite the protestors' insistence that electoral reforms to prohibit illicit financing, among other demands, must happen first. Their concerns were borne out by the presidency of Jimmy Morales, the comedian who ran as an anticorruption outsider while secretly backed by corrupt networks who used his puppet presidency to halt the momentum of 2015. When Morales too was implicated in illegal campaign financing, he railed against CICIG and ultimately dismantled the commission, with tacit support from the Trump administration amid cheerleading from the US Republican senator Marco Rubio, who temporarily suspended US funding. Morales then helped fix the 2019 elections. Thelma Aldana, the widely beloved CICIG prosecutor, was leading in the polls when phony corruption charges prevented her from registering her candidacy and forced her into exile.

The Pacto's electoral dominance, despite its illegitimacy and the unpopularity of its agenda, signals profound contradictions not only in the operation of Guatemalan democracy but also in its foundations. For many Indigenous critics, democracy and dictatorship are not opposites, but different faces of a predatory state. The army established an authoritarian strain of democracy in Indigenous communities alongside genocidal violence as part of an intensive counterinsurgency. Extreme state violence in the early 1980s terrorized Mayan communities and shredded the social fabric, destroying autonomous organizing and the

rural economy. In the following years, alongside continued violence and military occupation, an array of development programs aimed to promote anti-communist historical narratives, a docile version of Indigenous identity, and market outlooks and livelihoods, and thereby reformat rural politics into limited spaces of electoral democracy (Copeland 2019a). Recognition of Indigenous identity in the 1996 peace accords was welded to free market macroeconomic policies—privatization, free trade, austerity, and resource extraction—to the exclusion of the core historic demands of rural communities for far-reaching land reform, social democracy, and autonomy. These policies make poverty and inequality worse and ravage rural ecosystems.

Even after the 1996 peace accords, land rights activists and territory and water defenders face criminalization, repression, and states of exception invoked to defend democracy and the rule of law. Recent attacks on prominent anti-corruption activists are noteworthy because they have targeted members of the ladino middle class. They also signal an abandonment of the limited institutional trappings of democracy established by the accords. The Pacto espouses anti-communism, genocide denial, and amnesty for military commanders accused of war crimes.

The rot at the top of Guatemalan democracy compounds and reinforces the violence and structural exclusions that produce it. In poor communities, electoral democracy is a divisive process through which villagers form alliances with parties they despise to compete with their neighbors for vital resources made scarce by land theft, privatization, and state abandonment. Corrupt parties capitalize on poverty, insecurity, and pessimism to coerce votes, then use state power to constrict already limited democratic spaces, rob public coffers, repress dissent, and illegally finance campaigns. Elite factions spend narco money to vie for votes in a system that rewards the unscrupulous.

This vicious circle was only partially interrupted by CICIG, which did not directly challenge the violent exclusions of democracy but introduced a potential for the investigation and prosecution

of the powerful that was anathema to such an unequal society. Impartial application of the law is unacceptable to elites long accustomed to using the state to expand their fortunes and vanquish their class enemies. But corruption prosecution is no substitute for political force. CICIG's true power was that by showing how criminal networks operated, it produced a crisis of legitimacy fueled by disgust that facilitated the ascendance of the Social and Popular Assembly (Asamblea Social y Popular, ASP), a broad, multisector alliance whose leaders credibly located the scourge of corruption in foundational exclusions, positioned the historic demands of Indigenous peoples and peasant movements, and called for a Constitutional Assembly to create a plurinational state.

The aim of the Pacto is to break the back of these alliances and intensify attacks on land rights movements, grassroots opposition to extractive industries, Indigenous authorities, human rights groups, independent journalists, legal aid, and allied NGOs. They also want to dismantle the entities that investigate corruption and the institutional and legal frameworks for prosecuting war criminals, and that protect human and Indigenous rights, regulate industry, and allow independent organizations to operate. In doing so, they will further alienate rural communities who are united in opposition to extractive industries, as well as progressive sectors of the urban middle class. Such alienations potentially strengthen alliances that could transform the colonial foundations of Guatemalan democracy and the neoliberal development paradigm.

The Defense of Territory

The boom in extractive industries—hydroelectric dams, logging operations, and sugar cane and African palm monocultures—since around 2005 in response to rising demand for energy and materials are a pillar of the US and World Bank's vision for poverty reduction. They have met with strident opposition in Guatemalan Indigenous communities who are directly affected by their environmental footprint and see little benefit (Pietilainen and Otero 2019). Local critics denounce the lack of free, prior, and informed consent and decry the impact of extractivism

on territories and subsistence livelihoods. These movements, collectively known as the defense of territory (DT), span hundreds of communities and constitute a significant rearticulation of Indigenous political and community identity (Bastos and de Leon 2015; Dary et al. 2018). Communities draw on indigenous rights protections and employ nonviolent tactics—notably community consultations based in International Labor Organization Treaty 169 and direct action—to defend their territories from what many see as new colonial invasion (Batz 2018).

The DT is a nexus of Indigenous “cosmopolitics” (De la Cadena 2010), an amalgamation of political and environmental imaginaries united by a critique of extractivist forms of development that reduce nature to exploitable resources and inflict lasting harm on ecosystems, livelihoods, and health while threatening planetary survival. The DT further embraces a nondualistic “relational ontology” (Escobar 2019)—of reciprocity, caretaking, and kinship with nature and territory understood as alive, sentient, and inextricably connected to humans—as the basis for an alternative economic model known as *Buen Vivir*, *utzilaj k'alsemal* (living well) (Waqib' Kej 2015). The DT rejects the dominant progress narrative in favor of Indigenous futures and fulminates against the privatization of land and water commons through colonial and neocolonial enclosures. Heterogeneous its expression, the DT imaginary is ubiquitous among social movements, local resistances, radical collectives, alternative media, and NGOs, and its themes infuse the ongoing revitalization of Indigenous identity, culture, and governing structures.

DT activists promote *Buen Vivir* and work to build solidarity among local resisters to extractive industries, including agrarian movements against the predatory expansion of monocultures (Alonso-Fradejas 2017). Here, as with anti-GMO alliances, *Buen Vivir* enters a dynamic relation with food sovereignty, the political horizon of the global peasant movement *La Vía Campesina*, which centers resource access for subsistence farmers and agroecological production as an alternative

to corporate dominated free trade regimes and chemical-intensive capitalist agriculture (Patel 2009; Copeland 2019b).

Honoring the values and demands of this expansive and dynamic imaginary would require dismantling the colonial foundations of the Guatemalan economy, redistributing land to small farmers, and empowering Indigenous authorities, blurring the division between Indigenous and revolutionary politics. By prioritizing human and ecological well-being over economic growth, which they explicitly critique, these proposals could end poverty directly by reversing dominant forms of development that create scarcity by privatizing nature. An inspiration to “degrowth” scholarship, they contend that growthism does not solve poverty but rather increases inequality, drains resources from Global South countries, and destroys natural systems (Hickel 2020). Such a shift would significantly loosen the grip of corrupt political parties on rural communities.

These cosmopolitical critiques circulate widely in rural communities and find an echo with many non-Indigenous Guatemalans increasingly concerned about ecological and political futures. The resonance and transformational potential of the DT frame was evident in the 2014 uprising against the “Monsanto law” that legalized patent protection for GMO seeds, and the March for Water, Mother Earth, Territory and Life organized by the ASP in 2016.

Local resistance movements use legal resources to denounce irregularities and illegalities in environmental impact assessments, safeguards, and the awarding of licenses. Corruption is a constitutive element of extractivism and, like water, provides a link between rural and urban struggles; but extractivism as such is not illegal. The constitution grants the state sole authority over development policy, and dominant discourses equate extractivism with progress and development. Legal avenues do not fully accommodate local demands, sometimes compromise resistance movements, and are under attack. A main motivation for a Constitutional Assembly is to establish Indigenous sovereignty over development.

An Impending Collision

The Pacto sees the rising demand for renewable energy as a lucrative opportunity to secure contracts with shoddy environmental impact assessments and minimal oversight. These projects are anything but green; and renewable energy does not displace fossil fuels in a growth-fixated economy. In addition, criminal networks use their influence to repress and criminalize resistance movements and to remove safeguards, such as the right to consultation, a clear danger with the Pacto’s handpicked Constitutional Court. The Cerro Blanco gold mine, closed since 2017, was reactivated in 2021 despite local opposition, legal irregularities, and serious concerns about arsenic contamination affecting the entire Lempa River watershed, a main water system for Honduras and El Salvador; this reversal may foreshadow things to come. The acceleration of extractivism, as legal spaces for resistance close, will sharpen demands and strengthen alliances within and across borders.

As extractivism advances, the externalities and inequalities of extractive projects become ever more apparent and are compounded by global warming—the atmospheric colonization by the Global North—which has extended drought in drier regions that threatens subsistence crops. When hurricanes Eta and Iota slammed Central America in succession in November 2020, flooding ruined thousands of hectares of crops; the effect was worsened by deforestation for monocultures, which reduced soil permeability. These civilization-threatening convergences add credence and urgency to the DT.

The contestation dynamic is evident in the proliferation of grassroots organizing around water, such as the Asamblea de Pueblos Agua, Vida y Territorio (AAVT), Los Diálogos para el Agua, La Articulación para el Agua, and Maíz de Vida. Much of what I know about the DT I learned from collaborating with frontline communities and allied NGOs through La Red de Agua de Guatemala (REDAGUA), which formed in 2019 to strengthen alliances against extractive development and to democratize access to water science and build autonomous water-monitoring

capacities. These and other organizations affirm water as a collective right that should not be privatized, as essential to life, and as a sacred being that must be protected. Diverse groups draw on conceptions of water autonomy, Buen Vivir, and food sovereignty to imagine decolonial territorial futures.

The polarization taking shape between a rising Indigenous ecopolitics and the environmental nihilism of the authoritarian Pacto bears an eerie resemblance to the situation in Honduras after the 2009 coup, when corrupt actors co-opted the state to grab land and water for monoculture expansion, tourism, and hydropower. With few institutional options left, peasant and Indigenous movements recommitted to nonviolent direct action but were met with violence. Berta Cáceres was murdered in retaliation for her organization's support of resistance to a hydroelectric project.

Alliances for a Plurinational Democracy

Guatemala's corrupt elite sees opportunity in rising US demand for green energy and proposals for foreign investment to stem migration. Meanwhile, they call the bluff on renewed US criticisms and resist pressure for even moderate reform, fully aware that the US needs them as an ally to repress migration and contain popular movements which, if allowed to succeed, would limit imperial influence over the country and its resources. As US Vice President Kamala Harris's 2021 visit confirmed, the Biden administration still prefers maintaining relations with corrupt elites over permitting Guatemala to prosper as an independent democracy, whose politics might echo the anti-imperialist Indigenous socialism of the Movement Toward Socialism in Bolivia. Such a political reorientation would be the obvious solution to the migration "crisis" and more closely reflects the democratic will of most Guatemalans, were it not distorted by violence and coercive elections, yet it was studiously ignored by Harris.

The Pacto's resurgence, against a backdrop of the specter of global ecological collapse with disproportionate impacts on the countries of the Global South, could strengthen alliances for precisely these futures. The ASP was formed

during the 2015 uprisings as an effort to expand the fight against corruption that was originally led by ladino middle classes, to include Indigenous and peasant demands for land redistribution, rural development, curtailment of extractive projects, and a water law that recognizes Indigenous values and autonomy. The ASP also called for a Constitutional Assembly to create a plurinational state of equal, interrelated, and self-governing communities (ASP 2016). The ASP's momentum was derailed by the election of Jimmy Morales and its aftermath but has shown resilience in the face of divisive tendencies in movement politics. The Peasant Development Committee, CODECA, is another powerful rural movement with similar goals. The CODECA leader Thelma Cabrera, an Indigenous Mam woman, ran an impressive presidential campaign in 2019 with the Movimiento para la Liberación de los Pueblos (MLP), which gained surprising support among progressive urban ladinos. The Indigenous governments that led the call for a National Strike in 2021 share these goals and have support from the ASP and CODECA, and from many members of Guatemala's non-Indigenous middle class.

The Pacto's intolerance of even moderate spaces for democracy and their monopolization of electoral politics make a strong case that dismantling the colonial foundations of Guatemalan society are a precondition for a functional polity. Many Guatemalans expressed similar sentiments in the uprising of November 2020, sparked by the Pacto's passage of an austerity budget that cut food assistance and raised congressional salaries in the aftermath of two hurricanes in the middle of a pandemic. Protestors' anger at corruption melded with critiques of extractive industries and concerns about water and warming—key elements of an emergent counterhegemonic imaginary that simmers beneath the surface of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Building alliances across dividing lines of ethnicity, geography, and class and creating unity among progressive organizations in this critical moment holds historic potential to overcome legacies of violence, displace authoritarian democracy, and convene a Constitutional Assembly to establish a

plurinational state of coequal pueblos founded on an economic model organized around meeting human needs and preserving the web of life.

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