

August 17th - August 22nd, 2023

Ciudad de Guatemala,
Santa Cruz Chinautla & San Marcos

PROTECTING GUATEMALA'S "NEW SPRING"

A Report From The Root Causes Initiative
International Delegation to Accompany Faith
and Civil Leaders During the Second Round of
Presidential Elections in Guatemala

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ROOT CAUSES INITIATIVE

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ABOUT THE DELEGATION

The Root Causes Initiative, at the invitation of His Eminence Cardinal Alvaro Ramazzini and its Guatemalan partners, organized a delegation of faith leaders from the United States, Mexico and Honduras to accompany the people of Guatemala in their struggle for democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

From August 17 to August 22, the delegation accompanied local community members and religious and civic leaders to better understand

the social and political landscape; visited polling stations in areas of Guatemala City and in the Department of San Marcos to get a sense of whether the elections were being conducted in a fair and transparent manner; and processed our experience and election results with our pro-democracy partners. In addition, national delegates registered as observers before the Supreme Electoral Tribunal observed polling stations to ensure ballots were cast freely and according to the Guatemalan electoral law.

WHAT WE OBSERVED AND HEARD

As a result of our observation and accompaniment, we can conclude that:

1. For the first time in decades, an election generated profound hope among the people, which was present in every conversation we held in the communities we visited.

However, community leaders also feared attempts of violent events during election day, although the first round developed in relative calm with very few episodes of violence.¹ Many considered that communities were tense in the expectation of who would win the election, while many others

expressed concerns over the elites instigating violence during the election to alter the turnout. Furthermore, some expressed concerns over “acarreamientos,” a practice by which mayors and party leaders charter buses and pick-up trucks to take voters from distant rural areas to polling stations in exchange for them voting for the specific party taking them to the voting centers.

In general, Guatemalan citizens we met were aware that an Arévalo victory would not completely change the system, but it would represent a first step toward achieving the significant structural changes needed within Guatemalan society. Among the most relevant

¹ Organization of American States, OEA presenta recomendaciones de cara a la segunda vuelta presidencial en Guatemala y anuncia que observará la jornada electoral de agosto (June 27th, 2023), <https://www.oas.org/fpdb/press/INFORME-PRELIMINAR---Mision-Electoral-OEA-en-Guatemala-1ra-vuelta-.pdf>.

structural barriers communities mentioned were corruption, lack of economic opportunities and extreme inequality, lack of access to quality education and healthcare, and narco violence (in the rural areas). Communities also expressed that, given the deep resistance to change within the ruling elite, the grassroots base would need to continue to push for changes from below, even after an Arévalo Semilla Party victory.

TESTIMONY

A parishioner in Santa Anita Parish in Chinautla shared her experience of serving as a local election monitor for the Semilla Movement. Monitors for the well-resourced UNE party ridiculed her for not having her lunch provided by the party. Her response reflected the hope and loyalty that Semilla has generated within a few short months, along with her own commitment to a new future for Guatemala: "I don't belong to a party. I belong to my country." (No tengo partido, tengo país.)

2. Among other actors, such as young people, the faith communities of Guatemala, through political formation and forceful public statements, have been key to defending a transparent electoral process and voters' active, responsible participation.

Faith communities, including the Catholic, Evangelical, and other faith communities we met, demonstrated a well-developed and balanced understanding of the role of faith within civic life. Many did so thanks to a robust sociopolitical, spiritual and theological formation. For instance,

the Catholic parishes we visited had developed conscientious voting campaigns for more than 18 years, helping parishioners understand their role in public life as Catholics and their duty to express their will freely through their vote. In addition, many communities we met relied on the materials the Costa Rican Ecumenic Research Department had prepared on these issues.

3. The run-off election between the Movimiento Semilla led by Bernardo Arévalo, and Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE), led by Sandra Torres, was conducted peacefully and in an atmosphere of relative calm.

Voters were able to enter and leave voting centers and cast their votes quickly. We didn't see crowds or lines in voting centers, which were half-empty at certain times of the day. We did see families voting together, often coming from cities afar to cast their ballots in their official residences according to their national IDs.

Polling stations were organized systematically, with clear signs indicating where they were, which population needed to vote there, and where their ballots needed to be cast. In addition, the diverse polling stations we visited counted on volunteers to help guide citizens.

Community leaders of one town we visited reported some "acarreamientos," yet of minor importance and volume.

4. Arévalo's victory, in which he captured 2.3 million votes, is indisputable. He received almost 60% of the votes cast and registered almost one million more votes than his opponent. Votes were counted in

less than three hours and updated on the Electoral Supreme Tribunal webpage every three minutes. The speed and transparency of the process increased people's confidence in the results, later certified in the vote review per department.²

TESTIMONY

María is a historical defender of land rights and was an official civil society observer during the August 20th election day. Talking to María after she finished her duties that day, she highlighted how proud she felt about the Guatemalan people. "We have dignity," she said in tears while recalling all the efforts made to defend free and transparent elections and ensure respect for people's will. "We usually say that history crosses us, just as passive subjects, but today we're making history," she commented after knowing that Arévalo's party had won by a landslide.

Guatemalan society very explicitly expressed its desire for political and economic change in favor of a government that tackles corruption, promotes basic democratic principles such as the separation of powers, and designs and implements welfare policies that especially support the most disadvantaged. Guatemalans expressed their jubilation in public squares, roads, and streets in every city of the country, including the cities we visited in Guatemala City and the Department of San Marcos, on the night of the elections on August 20th.

5. The fear that Guatemala's corrupt political, economic and military elite will go against the will of the people is real. By the time of writing this report, the losing candidate and her party had not conceded defeat but started diverse legal challenges against the voting count mechanisms. This comes despite the recognition of the president-elect by the current president of Guatemala and other international leaders. Apart from congratulating the President-elect, the international community sent a clear message affirming the legitimacy of the elections and calling on the ruling elite in Guatemala to respect the will of the people and forgo any additional efforts to disrupt the peaceful transfer of power.

However, social movement leaders have also highlighted the likelihood that the Movimiento Semilla will face baseless criminal cases and that the president and elected deputies will be the targets of harassment, including death threats until they are sworn in. During the days after the elections, evidence supporting these concerns quickly appeared. For that reason, the Movimiento Semilla asked the Interamerican Court of Human Rights (IACHR) for protection. In its resolution on August 24th, the IACHR granted protection to the President- and Vice-president-elect under the seriously proven allegations that there were two plans to kill them, one with the participation of the state of Guatemala.

² Supreme Electoral Tribunal Guatemala, Juntas Electorales Departamentales concluyen audiencias de revisión de escrutinios (August 25th, 2023), <https://www.tse.org.gt/index.php/comunicacion/noticias/921-juntas-electorales-departamentales-concluyen-audiencias-de-revision-de-escrutinio>.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The international community shouldn't take for granted that President-elect Arévalo will take power at all due to physical threats to his life and legal challenges and, if he does, that he will take office under full normal conditions, such as counting on his party. The people of Guatemala are aware of this, and, consequently, we strongly recommend that:

- 1.** The United States, the Organization of American States, the European Union and other international actors continue to communicate publicly, as they have already done in their respective statements recognizing President-elect Arévalo, and in private that they are on the side of the Guatemalan people and that the election results must be respected.
- 2.** The U.S., OAS, EU and other international actors consider significant legal and financial consequences for those within the Guatemalan political, economic and criminal elite who continue to pursue the disruption of the peaceful transfer of power and the reform of legal, judicial and economic structures.

Among them, these actors should pay special attention to the role that the Guatemala Attorney General's Office and the Public Prosecutor's Office (Ministerio Público) are playing in the persecution and repression of independent judges, members of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, and other crucial actors in the electoral process.
- 3.** The international community provides continued political and economic support to the Arévalo government in its work to promote democracy, the rule of law and human rights in Guatemala.

Particularly, USAID must recalibrate its programs in Guatemala for FY2024 so they fully align with the needs of the Guatemalan people expressed in dialogues with civil society and the newly elected government.
- 4.** The U.S., Mexico and Costa Rica must engage in critical dialogue with the Arévalo administration to ensure security conditions to work toward the return of exile prosecutors, justice officials, and journalists and their families.
- 5.** International faith-based organizations must continue to support training and formation processes for the Guatemalan and Central American peoples to raise awareness on conscientious voting and highlight the importance of working across beliefs for the common good.
- 6.** The U.S. Embassy in Guatemala should monitor and document politically partisan hate speech and harassment practices within or from the religious sector to better understand divisions across and within beliefs and encourage constructive dialogues that can foster peace and democratic values.

Only with collaboration among the people, the future Arévalo administration and the accompaniment of the international community will the people of Guatemala be able to achieve a "New Spring" that will allow them to imagine a future in which they can thrive in their home communities, without being forced to migrate.