

Elections but No Democracy in Guatemala

By Grahame Russell

On November 9, 2003, Guatemalans will vote for their next government and president. Yet, these elections will probably further entrench the undemocratic political system, where the rule of law is porous and impunity is the norm. Though massacres and genocide are not now occurring, as in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, Guatemala is still characterized by exploitation and poverty, racial discrimination, repression (including assassinations, torture, disappearances, etc) and impunity, all of which are proof of the absence of democracy and rule of law.

In the pre-election context, international and national election observer missions are busy at work and northern, powerful governments are commenting on the gravity of the situation. But few are asking underlying questions about what democracy is actually about.

Over 3,000,000 Guatemalans survive on less than US\$1/ day, and over 50% of the population on less US\$2/ day. Yet there is no discussion about how this grinding, endemic poverty negates the possibility of democratic participation. Claiming that all Guatemalans have an equal right to vote is next to meaningless, and is dismissive of how harsh are the lives of people entrenched in conditions of survival and exploitation, let alone suffering on-going repression and impunity.

There is in Guatemala a debate about the mandate of CICIACS, the Commission to Investigate Illegal Bodies and Clandestine Security Apparatuses that will soon begin work. The very creation of CICIACS is a recognition that impunity is deeply entrenched in Guatemala and that the peace process, closely monitored since 1996 by the United Nations and other international and national human rights groups, has failed to make a dent in impunity. Yet, there is no debate in Guatemala about how impunity (ie, the systemic inability of the political and legal systems to sanction and put an end to repression and other forms of power abuse) undermines and negates the fundamental premises on which democracy is built.

Equally un-discussed are the connections between the lack of democracy in Guatemala and an unjust global order. The roots of Guatemala's impunity, racism, exploitation and repression go back through centuries of European imperialism (expansionism, based on racism and exploitation), through the subsequent and on-going dominance of United States economic and military interventions, and through on-going global economic inequality and exploitation. Throughout Guatemala's history, global actors (companies and banks, the World Bank, the Inter-

American Development Bank, the US government and military, other governments, etc.) have had beneficial partnerships with economic, political and military power holders inside Guatemala. But for 1944-1954, power in Guatemala has never come from democratic processes and relations with the people; it comes from the multiple economic and military relations that the national power-holders maintain amongst themselves and with the range of global actors.

Attracting considerable critical attention today is the fact that former General Rios Montt is running for the presidency. Rios Montt oversaw a most brutal period of repression in the 1980s, and stands accused of genocide in Guatemalan courts. Yet, the international community maintains today, as in the past, beneficial political, military and economic relations with the dominant sectors of Guatemala, including the ruling FRG party controlled by Rios Montt. The US government continues to provide military aid, weaponry and training to Guatemalan soldiers and security forces. The Canadian government invited the government of Guatemala, controlled by Rios Montt, to the 2001 Summit of the Americas (a meeting of the "34 democratic governments of the Americas" to promote the "Free" Trade Area of the Americas). The Canadian nickel giant INCO is again open for business in eastern Guatemala, as it was during the years of genocide. The World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, partners of the Guatemalan regimes of the past (including spear-heading the Chixoy Dam project, 1975-1985, that resulted in the massacres of over 444 people in the Maya-Achi village of Rio Negro), are partnered today with the Guatemalan government and business interests.

Elections leave the impoverished and discriminated majority between a rock and a hard place. These elections will most likely have no positive impact on repression and impunity, exploitation and poverty, and corruption, and yet, at the same time, Guatemala's majority sorely needs real democracy wherein all power relations and dealings, inside

Guatemala and also globally, are controlled and balanced, and where elections and the administration of justice are used to regulate and hold accountable these relations of power.

Instead of sending election observers to Guatemala once every four years, national and global human rights movement should, on an on-going basis, report on and denounce how exploitation and poverty, and repression and impunity negate the very possibility of democracy. Northern human rights groups have a particular responsibility to report on and denounce how northern power holders contribute, through a myriad of political, military and economic dealings with Guatemala power-holders, to on-going exploitation, repression, impunity and a lack of democracy in Guatemala.

For more information about the Guatemalan Elections, check out the [Electoral Watch Updates](#) by the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA).

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Currently, Rights Action has a team of international volunteers providing human rights accompaniment in the context of Guatemala's elections.

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- * to invite us to give public presentations on this and other related issues;
- * to come to Guatemala on fact-finding delegations to learn more about these issues;
- * to work as a human rights accompanier in Central America;