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From issue: **Natural Resource Extraction in Latin America** (Winter 2013)

### ■ AQ FEATURE

# Repression, Resistance, and Indigenous Rights in Guatemala

BY [Anita Isaacs](#) and [Rachel Schwartz](#)

## Can centuries of exploitation be reversed?

The imposing statue of Anastasio Tzul, the nineteenth-century Guatemalan Indigenous intellectual and resistance leader, has presided over the tree-lined square in the town of Totonicapán in western Guatemala for as long as anyone can remember. But on a recent visit, it stood in mourning. Tzul, gripping the wooden cane carried by traditional Mayan authorities, was shrouded in a cape of black cloth, and the Guatemalan flag behind him was replaced with a sheet of black plastic, flying at half-staff. Scraps of paper carrying words of remembrance, of sorrow and fury, were haphazardly taped to the statue's base, and passersby—men and women, young and old—circled the figure reading each of the hand-scrawled messages. Although they said little, their faces made their feelings clear: pain, stoicism and defiance.

We visited the community in October and met people who were still in shock over the death of six of the town's residents in an October 4, 2012, clash with the national army at the Alaska passage of the Pan-American Highway.

On the day of the clash, some 5,000 unarmed peasants had set up roadblocks to protest a series of recent government actions: a hike in electricity prices; proposed educational reforms that added two years of schooling for those studying to become teachers; and stipulated constitutional changes that they say fail to recognize Indigenous cultural rights. In response, a convoy of 89 soldiers—comprising 77 members of a citizen security team equipped with anti-riot gear and 12 armed troops charged with their protection—traveled from Guatemala City to the site of the roadblock.

The convoy ignored repeated police requests that it retreat.

Soon after it arrived, violence broke out. The commander in charge, Colonel Juan Chiroy, hastily fled in an army pickup truck, accompanied by one of the military vehicles. Left to their own devices, the remaining soldiers shot at the protestors, who later set fire to the soldiers' vehicle. The siege lasted two and a half hours.

Eyewitnesses pointed out bullet holes in windows, standing up against them to show how the broken panes measured up to their chests or heads.

### **The Legacy of Economic and Political Exclusion**

The confrontation was a cruel reminder of the profound economic, social and political exclusion suffered by Guatemala's Indigenous peoples, which the country's leadership has not only ignored, but frequently exacerbated, since the signing of peace accords in December 1996.

Guatemala's long civil conflict was marked by the dispossession and displacement of Indigenous communities. Peace did not stop this pattern. Over the past decade, Guatemala's sustained economic expansion, marked by an increasing focus on mining gold and silver and harnessing hydroelectric power, has been accompanied by the continued impoverishment and exploitation of Indigenous peoples.

Mining royalties are growing at an annual rate of 10 percent, but Indigenous villages in regions directly affected by extractive industries do not share in the benefits. Instead, they bear the serious environmental and health costs stemming from the diversion of water sources and the contamination of rivers. The resulting dislocation of Indigenous farmers aggravates longstanding conflicts over land titling and tenure that remain unsettled, despite repeated government pledges to resolve the disputes.



Community leaders from Totonicapán welcome human rights activists in Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán in October 2012. Photo: Moises Castillo/AP



Guatemala's profound economic inequality is borne out by statistics. The country currently ranks as the second most unequal in Latin America and the Caribbean, surpassed only by Haiti. The wealthiest 10 percent of Guatemalans earn 47.5 percent of national income, while less than 20 percent is allocated to the poorest 60 percent. Indigenous Guatemalans, who represent the majority of the country's population, account for an estimated 80 percent of Guatemala's poor.

Roughly one-quarter of them live in conditions of extreme poverty.

Despite the rapid construction of hydroelectric projects, roughly 3,500 rural Indigenous communities, home to about 700,000 people, have no electricity. Shockingly, three of the four departments with the lowest rates of coverage—the predominantly Indigenous Baja Verapaz, Alta Verapaz and Quiché—are in the same northwestern region where the Chixoy River, home to the dam that generates one-third of all electrical power consumed in Guatemala, is located.

Given the startling levels of poverty and inequality, the wave of protests should, therefore, have surprised no one. The eyewitnesses with whom we spoke at the Alaska passage are among those Indigenous Guatemalans fortunate enough to have electricity. “But how can we be expected to pay the rates we are being charged?” one asked, “when we earn so little, and we each have only one light bulb in our home?” Pointing to a string of streetlights hanging along a rickety wire near the entrance to their compound, he added, “Only one of those lights ever works, and we still have to pay for them. It's just not fair.”

The proposed educational reforms evoke similar discontent. Although in every community we visited support for the idea of better training for teachers was widespread, it was accompanied by concerns that the cost of two additional years of schooling, the major component of the reforms, was beyond the reach of aspiring Indigenous educators. Many found it hard to believe that the proposed measure would actually improve education in rural Indigenous communities, where the fundamental challenge remains one of

access.

The growing economic and opportunity gap between the country's elites and its rural Indigenous communities is matched by a persistent disparity in political representation. Oligarchic sectors continue to control the levers of state power, while Indigenous Guatemalans remain far outside the channels of democratic participation and influence in national politics. Despite their numbers, there is no viable national political party seriously committed to advocating for Indigenous issues. Indigenous Guatemalans hold only 12 percent of congressional seats, and the single Indigenous minister in the government occupies the mainly ceremonial post of minister of culture and sport.

In striking contrast, roughly one-third of Guatemala's elected mayors are Indigenous. Vibrant social movements are also sprouting within communities, largely in response to tensions over land tenure and swelling opposition to the exploitation of natural resources without regard for local concerns or needs. This discrepancy between national and local organization and power has made mass mobilization the only viable strategy for expressing popular grievances. Although one Indigenous activist told us several years ago, "I dream that someday I will no longer have to protest," that day seems as far off as ever.

Indigenous organizations view their systemic exclusion from power as a continuation of long-standing patterns of state racism. They regard current constitutional reforms as the latest effort to denigrate traditional authorities and reject traditional social customs. For example, their leaders contend that by declaring Guatemala "one nation" rather than "one state," the constitutional reforms foreclose claims to Indigenous cultural identity and autonomy. Likewise, by removing mention of Indigenous "social" organization, the reform fails to recognize the traditional structures and authorities that govern community life. When Indigenous outrage at racial discrimination is layered with frustration at economic and political marginalization, demonstrations such as those waged by the Totoncapán peasants become a virtual tinderbox.

## Old Habits Die Hard

At the same time, the official response to Indigenous mobilization remains fixed in the *mano dura* (iron fist) policies inherited from Guatemala's internal armed conflict. After winning a hotly contested presidential election in November 2011, retired General Otto Pérez Molina vowed to complete what he began when, as chief military representative of the government, he signed the 1996 peace accords ending the armed conflict. However, during his campaign, the future president pledged to intensify the heavy-handed security policies that had plunged Guatemala into its earlier cycle of violence.

Since his inauguration, Pérez Molina has sought to fulfill that pledge. For example, he has increased the use of joint police-army patrols. He also recently announced a plan to construct three new military bases, two in the rural highland regions that bore the brunt of the state's counterinsurgency campaign. His 2013 budget projects a 22 percent increase in defense spending, while slashing resources for key institutions like the Attorney General's Office.

*Mano dura* remains the government's reflexive response to domestic trouble, and the Totoncapán massacre was not the first example. On May 1, 2012, inhabitants of Santa Cruz Barillas overran a military base following the murder of a community leader who had publicly opposed construction of a hydroelectric dam. Instead of promising a swift investigation of the killing, the president enacted a state of siege—which he justified with the unproven charge that protestors were linked to Mexican drug gangs.

Mistrust and hostility increasingly define civil-military relations in rural Guatemala. The violent

confrontation in Santa Cruz Barillas and the even bloodier clash in Totonicapán underscore the profound contempt for the army among many Indigenous Guatemalans, whose memories of brutal state repression remain raw wounds. These conflicts reinforce existing resentments and perceptions of the army as “killers,” a claim prominently spray-painted on the walls of the Ministry of Defense during our last visit to Guatemala City.

The October 4 massacre was also a demonstration of the armed forces’ inherent incapacity to guarantee domestic public security, despite the president’s campaign pledge. As an institution, the military is trained to fight external enemies. So soldiers instinctively responded to the Totonicapán protests with violent repression rather than attempting peaceful demobilization, as urged by the police.

At the same time, Guatemala’s national police, which ought to address public unrest, remains corrupt and incapable. This leaves a vacuum in public order, which has alarmed many Guatemalans and strengthened their support for military action.

The government’s initial reactions to the Totonicapán killings came as no surprise to observers. The responses, which ranged from denial of responsibility to allegations that the shootings were provoked by the protestors, are reminiscent of the rationalizations given for military human rights abuses during the civil conflict.

Government statements absolved those who fired and implicated those who were fired upon. Appearing before the international diplomatic corps, Foreign Minister Harold Caballeros diminished the significance of the killings. Caballeros contended that six deaths were “not a big deal” in a country with 16 murders a day. Human Rights Ombudsman Jorge de León simultaneously affirmed the need to “respect the right to free movement” and called for justice for those responsible—echoing claims by sectors of the economic elite to a moral equivalency between the right of passage and the sanctity of life.

## **Signs of Change**

In a promising departure from past practice, Pérez Molina shifted course following the Totonicapán killings, vowing that the military will no longer respond to popular demonstrations. As evidence of its growing professionalization and leverage, the Attorney General’s Office conducted a swift criminal investigation that culminated in the arrests of the commanding colonel, Chiroy, and eight soldiers—all charged with the extrajudicial executions of six protestors. The Guatemalan government and its military demonstrated a commendable willingness to cooperate with the investigation, comply with its findings and permit civilian courts to try all nine suspects. As of December 2012, initial trial proceedings are under way. The presiding judge in the case has given the Attorney General’s Office permission to access the cell phone records of Colonel Chiroy for its continued investigation. However, all nine soldiers have requested that the charge of extrajudicial killing be reduced to involuntary manslaughter.

Protestors’ refusal to back down in the face of repression, along with the expanding support and mobilization of fellow Indigenous communities in the days and weeks that followed the massacre, is equally striking. On October 23, hundreds of Totonicapán community members marched from the site of the killings to the municipality’s central square, and Indigenous organizations staged solidarity protests in the rural departments of Huehuetenango, Quetzaltenango, San Marcos, Quiché, Alta Verapaz, and Chimaltenango. Indigenous communities’ resolve to stand their ground is testimony to the importance they place on addressing accumulated grievances, their impressive organization and growing social solidarity.

Almost everyone we met in Guatemala emphasized the need to prevent another Totonicapán. Much of the

talk in the capital centered on finding nonviolent mechanisms of dialogue and ensuring that justice is served. Rural Indigenous Guatemalans mostly concur and remain willing to engage in peaceful exchange. They are anxious to see whether the accused will be convicted and sentenced.

Only then might they sense that their lives and their rights matter.

At the same time, the root causes of the clash remain unaddressed. A handful of Indigenous rights advocates in Guatemala hoped that the killings and their aftermath might push Congress to approve a long-delayed rural development reform regarded as a first step in addressing the economic exclusion that has plagued Indigenous communities for centuries.

The law, which has languished in Congress for 12 years, would create a ministry of rural development, expand access to land and guarantee tenure, and promote private investment in rural areas to stimulate peasant entry into the market economy. But the skepticism voiced by the majority of Indigenous leaders proved to be justified when, in late November 2012, the legislation was shelved by the Guatemalan Congress.

There is a path forward. In the short term, it requires ensuring that the truth about what happened on October 4 becomes the consensus official narrative. The momentum gained by the professional work of the Attorney General's Office must also be sustained. Its next phase must allow for criminal trials that protect witnesses and reach verdicts that demonstrate to society that justice is real and for everyone in Guatemala.

At the same time, those with influence must finally acknowledge the rights of the majority of its population, approve legislation that attenuates inequalities, and share power by developing political practices and institutions that afford Indigenous Guatemalans genuine and sustained access. Until that happens, the black mourning cloth draped over Anastasio Tzul's statue will be a permanent reminder of Guatemala's failure to provide Indigenous communities with a real stake in the future of their country.

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Concerned Reader • a year ago

You lost my readership right from the get-go. The name of the 19th century indigenous leader was Atanasio Tsul, not Anastasio. (Am also realizing that you spelled it Anastasio in the last paragraph)... Honestly, if two writers and an editor can't catch a simple error like that, (or worse, don't even know the man's name) how are we as readers to trust that any of you know what you're talking about?

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**David Christian Newton** • a year ago

Several years ago I was driving through the Yucatan, in the State of Quintana Roo, and ran across a Mexican army patrol in Xpujil. There was a deployment of about a platoon of infantry, eating at a little thatched roof restaurant on the highway mid-way between Francisco Escarcega and Chetumal. I asked what was their mission, and he surprised me by sitting down at my table and engaging in a lengthy question and answer session about his doings and my doings...where are you from....where have you been...where did you go to university...etc.

After three hours, he had changed my destination. For years we had heard about how the fascists and the CIA were exterminating the "indigenous" people across the nearby border with Guatemala. The Captain had told me that he was the second officer at a refugee camp on the Mexican side of the border, about 13 miles from Xpujil. He also told me that he and all the soldiers there with him will tell me the same thing. The Maya coming out of the villages were not fleeing government soldiers from Guatemala. They were fleeing communists who would raid villages, shoot the caciques and their wives...rape any girl who appeared to be 10 years of age or older and then shoot any male who did not volunteer to either fight for or assist in "the liberation of Guatemala". At times they would hack up the bodies and burn the pieces, after first demanding that some of the survivors ingest pieces of their relatives and village mates.

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