

# Guatemala: Reflections on the Social Movement that Led to the Resignation of the President and Vice President in 2015

Rafael Cuevas-Molina

Instituto de Estudios Latinoamericanos

Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica

Recibido: 25/10/2015 Aceptado: 12/12/2015 / <http://dx.doi.org/10.15359/tdna.32-59.5>

## Abstract

The #RenunciaYa movement, Spanish for “Resign Now,” that led to the resignation of the president and vice president of Guatemala, is similar in many ways to movements in other parts of Latin America and the world. However, as with all social movements, it also has a series of defining characteristics that derive from historical and cultural factors, and from the country’s recent socio-political dynamic. Two other factors are taken into account when analyzing the movement: an external factor that is the United States of America, with important geostrategic interests in the region, and the self-interested participation of people and groups of the Guatemalan bourgeoisie.

**Key words:** Guatemala; Guatemalan social movement; Otto Perez-Molina; corruption, Temas de Nuestra América.

## Resumen

El movimiento #RenunciaYa, que llevó a la renuncia del presidente y vicepresidente de Guatemala, en setiembre de 2015, es similar en muchos aspectos a los movimientos de otras partes de América Latina y el mundo. Sin embargo, como todo lo movimiento social, también tiene una serie de características definitorias que se derivan de factores históricos y culturales y de la reciente dinámica socio-política del país. Otros dos factores se toman en cuenta al analizar el movimiento son un factor externo: la presencia de los Estados Unidos de América con intereses geoestratégicos importantes en la región, y la participación interesada de personas y grupos de la burguesía guatemalteca.

**Palabras clave:** Guatemala, movimientos sociales guatemaltecos, Otto Pérez-Molina, corrupción, Temas de Nuestra América.



## Historical Facts

The country of Guatemala has a tumultuous political history; 36 years of civil war undoubtedly attest to that fact. It is a polarized society in every sense. The roots of this situation can be traced back to the colonial period, when Guatemala was the political and administrative center of Central America, something that did not happen by chance: it had a work force and a source of wealth in a region with few precious mineral and metal deposits.

The subjection and exploitation of the work force made up primarily of natives gave rise to the organization of a society that was highly stratified, polarized, vertical, and racist; a society that did not change with independence and that has prolonged its characteristics with only slight modernizations from the Republican Period up to today.

One such modernization was in the form of access to economic and political power by the *Ladino* people, a social group that emerged from the colonial *Casta* system, and within which groups were formed that created wealth under the State system as of the second half of the 19th century and that, throughout the 20th century, extended their domain.

These *Ladino* groups were authors of the ambiguous and contradictory Guatemalan “national identity” which claims for itself the “glorious” Mayan past that was embodied in the sanctuary cities build between the 2<sup>nd</sup>. century BCE and the 15<sup>th</sup>. century CE, and denies their current descendents and those who attempt to differentiate and distance themselves.

They were also the architects of the modern Guatemalan State, a system with the Army as one of its central axis, without which its dominance would be unthinkable given the weak basis of consensus with sectors marginalized by political and economic power, especially indigenous peoples.

The economic and political *Ladino* elite reached areas of consensus and ideological legitimization, especially among their equals, who characterize themselves as the Guatemalans, as bearers of the positive attributes that all nationalism attributes to its bearers. The traits of those who do not fit in with these attributes, including their actions (of any nature), are seen as traits, attributes, and actions of lesser importance, worthy only of being ignored and scorned.



## The Guatemalan Social Movement Has Not Been Dormant

Resistance and uprising against the current state of affairs has been constant throughout the history of Guatemala. Different indigenous groups at different moments in history have come into direct confrontation with the power of the *Ladino* State or with rich *Ladino latifundistas*<sup>1</sup> and businessmen.

The repeated cry of this resistance and uprising has been oppression, never the pursuit of a consensus. The rich *Ladino* people and the *Ladino* State have not changed one iota in this sense throughout history, with the only exception, perhaps, of the period between 1944 and 1954, when a *Ladino* group with a progressive ideology came into political power.

The last big confrontation of this kind occurred during the second half of the 20th century and has come to be known today as the “internal armed conflict”. Although this conflict was not exclusively between the *Ladino* and indigenous peoples, given the fact that the contradiction between these two large social groups taints the entire

Guatemalan social body, it was significantly expressed in it.

Later, after 1996, when the peace treaty was signed between the *guerilla* armed forces and the Guatemalan government, the contradiction between the *Ladino* and indigenous peoples, with all of its contemporary forms of expression, has continued to manifest itself intensely. Indigenous farmers have continued to claim access to the land amassed by the *Ladino latifundistas*; they have protested and opposed the marginalization to which they have been subject in terms of water usage, which is now commercialized; they radically and massively oppose mining operations, which not only displace them from their homes, but also contaminate the environment and disrupt their daily life; they protest, oppose and denounce the cultural discrimination to which they are subject.

Collective protests have been constant and the leaders of such protests are persecuted, tried, jailed, and assassinated. On October 4, 2012, for example, in Totonicapán (“the indigenous town of 48 communities”), a protest was held against rising electricity prices that cost eight people their lives due to

1 Owners of large estates



the repression exerted by combined security forces.

This is clearly not the only indigenous uprising in recent times. On August 1, 2014, *La Nación de Guatemala* newspaper reported that “in order to stop the mobilization of the peoples’ resistance and weaken protests, the Public Prosecutor has filed a request with different courts for 285 arrest warrants against leaders from 8 different departments of the country” (<http://www.lanacion.com.gt/represion-contra-el-movimiento-social/>). In the same article, the newspaper wrote that the indigenous people denounced the capture of 60 community leaders.

There have also been other relevant cases, such as the recent resistance of the La Puya community, located in the northwest section of the Department of Guatemala, against the establishment of a mining project proposed by Exploraciones Mineras de Guatemala, S.A. (EXMINGUA), a subsidiary of the Canadian multinational corporation Radius Gold Inc., which intended to mine for gold. In this case, the key problem centered on the subject of water in an area in which the country’s Dry Corridor begins, and that, as we well know, is used in enormous quantities in these types

of mining operations. The area known as the Guatemalan Dry Corridor has been severely hit by the effects of climate change. Here, the prolonged droughts have intensified child malnutrition, which is without equal in Latin America, and death by starvation, among other evils.

The La Puya resistance movement has been systematically repressed, as have other indigenous social movements. The *Prensa Libre* newspaper reported one of the most recent episodes on October 5, 2015: “Approximately 300 officers of the National Civil Police force (PNC) arrived in the early hours of Tuesday morning at the town of La Puya in San Jose del Golfo. According to inhabitants, the police presence complied with an eviction notice whose objective was to pave the way for El Tambor mine.” (<http://www.prensalibre.com/guatemala/comunitario/tension-en-la-puya-por-posible-desalojo-de-manifestantes>)

These are nothing less than important examples of what constitutes a permanent mobilization of the Guatemalan masses, a mobilization that continues to be classified as dangerous by the State, which has not hesitated to respond with violence.



It is, however, a movement that seems to have a different agenda to that which inspired and set in motion the middle class citizen movement that arose and developed primarily in the capital city and, occasionally, in a few other cities around the country, between mid-April and the end of August of 2015, and that led to the resignation of the country's president and vice president, accused of corruption.

This urban anticorruption movement has frequently been described as an "awakening" of the Guatemalan citizens, who have emerged from the lethargy they have been under whether due to apathy, laziness, or disinterest. However, as we have seen above, this comparison is totally false, given that Guatemalans have been in a permanent state of mobilization, but that mobilization has been repressed without a second thought, and has been branded as subversive.

## Two Guatemalas

It would seem that not only do two types of citizen movements exist, but also two countries that mutually ignore each other: (1) one rural, primarily indigenous, that denounces the establishment of transnational corporations that

strip the farmers from their lands, contaminate the environment, and take control of natural resources; that fights for the right to farm the land in the Latin American country with the highest level of inequality in land ownership; and (2) another urban, "pluri-class" in nature, although mainly of the *Ladino* middle class, that organizes and stays alive through social networks, cares primarily about the subject of corruption, and is not repressed in any way; that has the consent of the media and that, furthermore, has the support of the United States Embassy in the country.

Two types of social movements. Two agendas. Different social topics. Two Guatemalas.

We feel it is important to emphasize these differences for two reasons: firstly, it demonstrates the nature of Guatemalan social education, which stems from its historical origins and makes it difficult to combine agendas, interests, and forms of organization and common work between the two Guatemalas, both rural and urban, which is almost the same as saying the indigenous and the *Ladino*; and, secondly, it shows how, in the urban-*Ladino* society, the *Ladino* State has defined common sense, which we can call



the “*Ladino* common sense,” which encompasses different groups, stratum, and social classes who systematically identify themselves, exclusively, as Guatemalans, ignoring or undervaluing what is happening in what we can call “the indigenous world” or, in general terms, the country’s rural areas.

### **The Movement of Guatemalan *Indignados*<sup>2</sup> against Corruption**

Having established the above parameters, we would like to add a few more that specifically characterize the urban anticorruption movement that arose and developed between May and August of 2015.

One of the first characteristics worth noting is its *contemporary nature*. By that we simply mean that the movement is “in tone” with other similar movements in other parts of the world. To that regard, we can deduce that the social topic that drives the movement not only has knowledge of these other social movements, but also has the tools to imitate and emulate them. It is a modern, “globalized” social group, with sufficient income to buy and utilize technological gadgets such as computers and smartphones.

Furthermore, we can deduce that, in one way or another, it has certain aspects (materials, policies, ideologies) in common with these other movements that serve as sustenance, as base material, to such movements.

These are the so-called “new social movements,” which differ in many ways from the old social movements that were joined primarily by labor unions and political parties. These new movements have more immediate demands, shy away from political parties, are organized horizontally, without the old vertical structure that had at the apex secretaries, central committees, and executive administrations, and disband easily once their demands have been met or when the movement loses steam, given that they do not seek, as the older movements did, to rise to power over the State, but rather to pressure for a certain outcome.

Lastly, it is important to mention the defining role played by new communication technologies in the creation of these movements, particularly the so-called Internet 2.0, which, for approximately the last ten years, has revolutionized social communication.

---

2 Literally, indignant



These new social movements respond, therefore, to timely motivations that are felt, in one way or another, by an extensive community that, without the individual members necessarily knowing each other, comes together to pressure for a resolution to a situation they feel should be changed.

We will not attempt to typologize these movements, but we will say that some are short-lived while others last longer, a factor that has to do entirely with the subject that motivates the people to mobilize. The environment, for example, a central problem of our era that will only get worse in the future, incites widespread movements.

In Guatemala, a short-lived social movement arose between May and August of 2015, despite the fact that, in the context of Guatemala, a four-month mobilization, with its ups and downs, constitutes a complete novelty. The central focus was to protest the corruption of the country's top executive figures, Vice President Roxana Baldetti and President Otto Perez Molina.

Such was the motive behind the mobilizations and the *#RenunciaYa* slogan. In such a widespread social movement, soon other random, additional or secondary slogans

appeared; none of which had a greater mobilizing effect, however, as was shown after the resignation of the accused parties.

The main slogan alluded to the population's indignation against those who, thinking themselves to be clever, cheated and scammed Guatemalan citizens to get rich, all the while claiming to fight corruption.

The structural causes, complementary actions, and other officials who were implicated but not detected and, as a result, not denounced, did not interest more than a few small groups who had greater political knowledge than the majority. These more knowledgeable groups participated with their own agenda, but when it was not taken up by the movement, felt frustrated.

One of the problems faced by those who had greater knowledge of the ultimate causes behind the acts of corruption was that they were identified with "politics" or with political parties, something that, as we have stated before, is rejected *ad portas* by these new social movements, which only see the original source of the social problems: incompetence, mediocrity, corruption, and opportunism.



## The Protagonism of the Middle Class

The urban *Ladino* middle class was the main protagonist behind the movement and was also leader of a similar movement during the presidency of Alvaro Colom, when Attorney Rodrigo Rosenberg accused him in a video released after his death of being the cause of his assassination. This movement was much less widespread than the movement we are analyzing today, but it also led the president to within a hair's breadth of resigning. This was, therefore, the second movement of Guatemalan *indignados* who rose up expressly against the presidential figure in less than six years.

The driving force within the middle class is young “apolitical” *Ladino* professionals who, similar to the rest of their generation, are immersed in telematic social networks. In interviews given by these young professionals, they mention how unplanned their actions were and their surprise at seeing the response of their fellow citizens at the demonstrations they organized.

Afterwards, one such professional explained that there was more than one mobilizing slogan, but that detailed studies of behavior on

social networks had demonstrated which was more widely accepted and, therefore, had a greater capacity to mobilize.

Although the *Ladino* middle class was the primary driving force behind the movement, other sectors and social classes joined in. Over time, groups of farmers, city workers, indigenous peoples, and members of the Guatemalan ruling class also joined in. At one point, and in certain demonstrations, the ambassador of the United States of America even participated.

The participation of a few distinguished members of the ruling class and of the American ambassador raised suspicion that the movement was being manipulated in favor of illegitimate interests. It was suspected, on the one hand, that the demonstrations were merely a smokescreen to divert attention toward a specific group of wrongdoers, while shielding others, specifically, those who greased the hands of the shameless deeply-rooted at Customs. The group of opportunists captained by Perez Molina and Baldetti, for example, is known as *La Línea*, Spanish for “The Line,” while those who remained hidden and were never revealed are known as *La Línea 2*.



On the other hand, it was suspected that American interests were the true promoters of the demonstrations. It has been argued that the United States has important geostrategic interests in Central America (their back yard and the first line of their strategic defense), and that the presence of shamelessly corrupt officials at the head of the State did not work in their favor.

### American Participation

Both ideas are plausible and should not be dismissed, but at present there are not enough elements to clearly identify whether the movement was manipulated, although other similar movements throughout Latin America, Europe, and even Africa have been. In Ukraine, for example, the role played by the United States and the European Union behind the so-called Euromaidan movement, which toppled President Viktor Yanukovich who was elected as a result of the Orange Revolution, is clear. Therefore, given that Central America is considered a “hot zone,” where American interests are present on a permanent and, at times (as seen during the eighties and, specifically in Guatemala, during the fifties) a radical basis; the “American factor” should be taken into account when

characterizing the Guatemalan #RenunciaYa movement.

To that regard, it is important to mention the statements made by Thomas Shannon, Counselor of the United States Department of State, who was invited by the Casa de America organization in Madrid, Spain, to discuss American foreign policy in Central America, during which revealing statements were made on the strategic role that Washington assigns to controlling the isthmus in terms of its need for hemispheric dominance. Firstly, Shannon cited the three pillars on which the United States focuses in the Central American region: national security, economic development—through a free trade agreement and now with the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle—and illegal immigration (especially by children who, forced into economic exile by the neoliberal capitalism of our countries, set out alone in search of the American dream).

The real reasons, however, fall into the category of geopolitics and, specifically, seek to reinforce American control and safeguard its southern border: “*We chose to approach Central America in the same way that we chose to approach Colombia when we were developing*



*Plan Colombia*,” stated the diplomat during the conference, alluding with an unfortunate reference considering the outcome of the Colombian initiative to understandings and agreements made with the political and government leaders of each country on the subject of security.

Secondly, the Counselor defined Central America as one of the White House’s top five priority countries in terms of foreign policy, alongside Iran, Russia, China, and the Islamic State’s military. That is to say, the geographical, political, environmental, and socio-economical area that is Central America, traditionally marginal and overwhelmed by severe poverty (that affects almost half of all Central Americans) and inequality, is considered by the Department of State to be a vital issue, on the same level as its global hegemonic competitors and above relations with Cuba, Venezuela, or Brazil.

While at first glance this may seem absurd, Shannon explained it in terms of the importance of the region as a bridge that strategically connects not only North and South America, but also the Pacific and the Atlantic. *“We are entering a period in which we are using our historical presence to build a new type of Central*

*America, one that is committed to democracy, the market economy, and regional integration.”* Shannon added that they were forging a new way of looking at North America, *“[one] that does not end at the Rio Grande, but that includes Mexico and Central America. The isthmus is not just an isthmus anymore, but rather part of an integrated market and an integrated security system, within a political process that is strongly committed to democracy.”* (<http://www.casamerica.es/politica/thomas-shannon-counselor-department-state>)

It is important to mention several signs that were present prior to the citizen movements, such as the insistence of Washington that the Guatemalan State renew the request with the United Nations Organization to extend the mandate of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG in Spanish), the organization that uncovered the corruption scandal; the refusal of United States Vice President John Biden to be interviewed alongside his equivalent, Roxana Baldetti, when he visited the country in March of 2015; and, lastly, the repeated declarations of the American ambassador and his presence at street demonstrations in Guatemala City.



These signs clearly show that: 1) even before the citizens of Guatemala, the United States government knew about the investigations being carried out by the CICIG regarding the participation of high-ranking officials of the Guatemalan government in corruption networks such as the one revealed to the public in May of 2015; 2) the United States government had an interest in exposing the corruption and backed the actions that denounced it; and 3) a diplomacy of overt interference is still practiced by the United States government in Guatemala, characteristic of other times (such as *Banana Republics*), when its ambassadors acted as proconsuls of the empire.

We must further consider that with the arrival of Barak Obama to political power in the United States, a policy of “soft power” was put into place, which has had widespread practical implementation and has been described in detail by Gene Sharp, founder of the NGO Albert Einstein Institution and author of *From Dictatorship to Democracy, A Conceptual Framework for Liberation*, translated into more than 30 languages, in which he details 198 methods to overthrow a government. In Latin America, these have been put into practice in various countries

and have had positive results in Honduras and Paraguay.

Having said that and given the claims that have been made regarding the possibility that many of the social network profiles that organized and backed the movements were false, we can deduce that, in order to characterize the *#RenunciaYa* Guatemalan social movement, we must include the variable of *interference by the American government*.

We can then advance a little more in our characterization of the movement: it was a social movement of Guatemalan middle class urban *Ladinos* backed by the government of the United States of America due to their geostrategic interests in the region.

### Inter-bourgeois Struggles

Lastly, and to no degree of lesser importance, it is important to consider the presence of distinguished representatives of the Guatemalan business sector at the demonstrations as well as their public statements demanding the resignation of Perez Molina, including those of the Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial, and



Financial Associations (CACIF in Spanish). The participation of the Guatemalan business sector hints at problems between fractions of the bourgeoisie.

In this case, it would not simply be about two individuals, the former vice president and president of Guatemala, that took advantage of the exceptional conditions that controlled society by force in the past, especially during the decade of the eighties of the 20th century, to organize and strategically place themselves in a position to get rich, but rather an entire sector of society, something that is by no means quantitatively insignificant. In other words, we are talking about important levels of the Army and its minions that, taking advantage of the war that lasted for more than 30 years, transformed into a mafia-like structure that used the State system as its primary vehicle to turn a profit.

In this context, these sectors also took advantage of the military system itself to achieve not only political objectives, but also, and at times as a priority, objectives with financial outcomes. The “Scorched Earth” policy, for example, that led to the disappearance of more than 600 villages, the displacement toward Mexico of more than 250,000

people, and the mobilization of more than 1 million people inside the country, in addition to more than 40,000 missing persons and 250,000 deaths in times of internal armed conflict, sought, among other things, to control extensive territories that were rich in minerals and possibly petroleum (L. Solano: July 2007: 4). That is, the war was an instrument of accumulation by dispossession, a method of capitalist accumulation characteristic of the neoliberal times we are currently living.

These groups of “new military businessmen” would have been seen as opportunists, as those who took the mandate and became the “new rich,” getting carried away by ambition and the alliances they were able to forge under the circumstances currently lived throughout Central America, including drug, weapons, and human trafficking, kidnapping and extortion, and smuggling and cooptation of large businesses associated with the State. This explains the presence and hostility of the “traditional” Guatemalan businessmen whose hands are definitely not clean, far from it, but who would have thrown up the smokescreen to divert attention from themselves and toward those who, in addition to being mobsters, made their lives uncomfortable.



## Conclusions

The Guatemalan middle class *Ladino* movement was infused with aspects associated with the composition of social classes, the nature of the State and of Guatemalan society (which has enormous socio-cultural debt from its colonial heritage), the place occupied by Guatemala in a key region for American geostrategic interests, and inter-bourgeois struggles inherited from the war period.

This was a movement with characteristics similar to others that have occurred throughout Latin America and the world, but the Guatemalan specificity gives it a certain nuance, the analysis of which allows us to strengthen our knowledge of the tensions, possibilities, and limits that pervade the processes of change that were so very necessary but that, also, were for so long delayed in the country.

Once the movement ended and, standing at the gate to a national election that will decide who will be president of the country for the next four years, the assessment of what happened could be considered positive.

Firstly, the resignation of the president and vice president due

to the pressure applied by the citizens helped raise a downtrodden social self-esteem that now feels empowered and that could eventually resurge and travel known paths in the future.

Secondly, regardless of whether the United States government and Guatemalan businessmen were behind these demonstrations, fueling them for their own interests, a climate of protest has developed in Guatemala that encompasses wide sectors of the state bureaucracy, small businessmen, students, and citizens in general, that will make them more attentive and less tolerant of the abuses of power, corruption, and intolerance that have dominated the country's political life.

Thirdly, they achieved something that has been tried in many other countries, but has failed: to rid themselves of corrupt officials that deserve to be in jail.

For all of these reasons, our assessment is a positive one, even though in the troubled waters that is the Guatemalan State, others have been caught and still others have managed to profit from the situation.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, it created a meeting space between



the urban social movements, fueled mainly by the middle class, and “the other” movements, those of farmers, indigenous people, and townspeople, which met, discussed, argued, and achieved common ground with the student movement that, in turn, achieved historic joint participation by students of the public University of San Carlos and those from the private universities.

This is significant because it has opened a path that for now may only look like a small footpath, but that will grow into a thoroughfare that has room enough for various aspects and expressions that do not unlawfully hold the power in a country that is as downtrodden and frustrated as Guatemala.

## Bibliography

Casamerica. Thomas A. Shannon, *Counselor of the Department of State*. Located at: <http://www.casamerica.es/politica/thomas-shannon-counselor-department-state>. Consulted on 10/07/2015.

La Nación de Guatemala. *Represión contra el movimiento social*. Located at: <http://www.lanacion.com.gt/represion-contra-el-movimiento-social/>. Consulted on 10/06/2015.

Prensa Libre. *Tensión en La Puya por posible desalojo de manifestantes*. Located at: <http://www.prensalibre.com/guatemala/comunitario/>

*tension-en-la-puya-por-posible-desalojo-de-manifestantes*. Consulted on 10/07/2015.

Sharp, Gene (2012). *De la dictadura a la democracia: un sistema conceptual para la liberación*. Dharana: Madrid.

Solano, Luis. “La Franja transversal del norte: neocolonización en marcha”, in Instituto de Estudios Políticos por la Democracia. *El observador –análisis alternativo sobre política y economía-*, Year 2, No. 7. Guatemala, July 2007.

