

# 70 YEARS: REMEMBERING THE U.S. COUP AGAINST ÁRBENZ



On June 27, 1954, a *coup d'état* deposed the democratically elected *Soldado del Pueblo* (Soldier of the People): President Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán. He was the face of Guatemala's democratic revolution, which began in 1944. The agrarian reform of 1952, redistributing unused land to landless Indigenous peasants, impacted the United Fruit Company (UFCO), the largest land owner in Guatemala, and U.S. foreign policy, as Cold War tensions grew. Collaborating with Guatemalan fascists, they plunged Guatemala into decades of U.S. backed dictatorships. On its 70th anniversary, we invite you to reflect with us on this counter-revolutionary event and what it might mean for Guatemala and the world today.



## DID YOU KNOW? OPERATIONS PBFORTUNE AND PBSUCCESS

Authorized by Presidents Truman and Eisenhower in response to UFCO lobbying, these covert CIA operations overthrew Árbenz. They enacted "broad scale psychological warfare and paramilitary actions" to destabilize Guatemala domestically; promoted the image of Árbenz as a communist in the media and at international forums; collaborated with Latin American dictators to isolate Guatemala diplomatically; and supplied weapons and cash, via Nicaragua and Honduras, to the Guatemalan fascist, Carlos Castillo Armas, who executed the *coup* and became the first military dictator after Árbenz was deposed.



# A MOMENT OF LIGHT AND HOPE

Reflections by Rafael Coy Chocooj, Maya Q'eqchi'  
*Copal AA La Esperanza*

“There is a lot of information that grandfathers and grandmothers try to transmit to us as youth. My late grandfather told me that for them, the 10 years of spring were a moment of light and hope. Before that, there was a strong exploitation of the people, mainly by the landlords. During the 10 years, with the agrarian reform, the grandparents say that they received small plots of land.

[After the *coup*], during the time of Castillo Armas, landlords took those lands back. My grandfather said that the subjugation, persecution, and repression was much harsher after that. The counter-revolution caused much more inequality and poverty, which we still live with today, [and] in some territories in Guatemala, leaders are persecuted and arrested simply for defending the earth.

In Copal AA, we have faced attempts by the army to invade our community, to create conflicts among the people, and to do violence. But even our small level of organization helps us a lot. It is very important that we continue united in struggle, and that international accompaniment continues so what happens in Guatemala is known.”



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## DID YOU KNOW? COPAL AA LA ESPERANZA

Located in Cobán, Alta Verapaz, this community is part of ACODET (The Association of Communities for the Development and Defense of the Land and Natural Resources) whom NISGUA accompanies. CopalAA implements community agreements for a respectful relationship with the earth, such as prohibiting agrochemicals, and they prioritize youth in every process.



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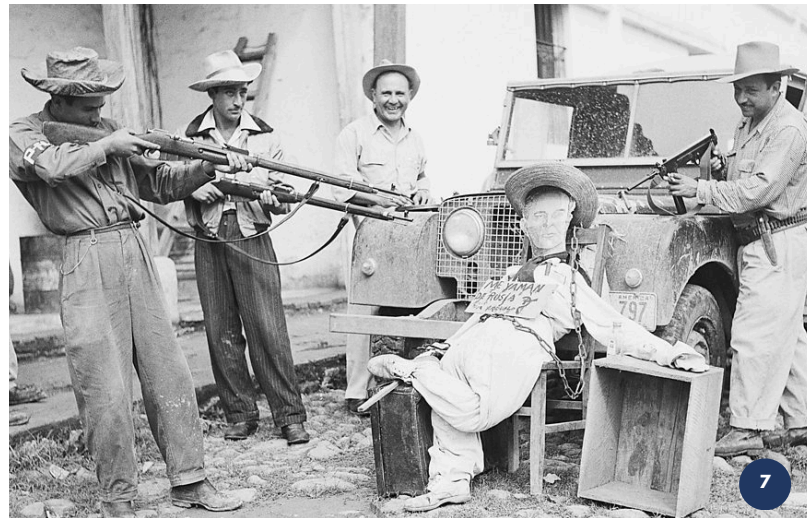


# ¡QUE VIVA LA REVOLUCIÓN DE OCTUBRE, QUE VIVA GUATEMALA!

EXCERPTS FROM ÁRBENZ'S RESIGNATION SPEECH, JULY 27, 1954

On June 18, 1954, CIA-backed Carlos Castillo Armas and his militia invaded Guatemala. Temporarily repelled, the U.S. expedited aircraft bombers for Armas. The murder of civilians spread fear and frictions across the country. The U.S. embassy exploited these rifts to turn allies against the President, and on June 27, Árbenz delivered his resignation speech over the radio.

- »»» *"After meditating with the clear conscience of a revolutionary, I have taken a decision of enormous transcendence for our country, in hopes of stopping the aggression and bringing peace back to Guatemala. I have determined to step down from power."*
- »»» *"In whose name do they commit these barbarities? They use the pretext of "communism." The truth is very different. The truth must be found in the financial interests of the fruit company and of North American monopolies investing all across Latin America, and in their fear that the example of Guatemala will multiply across our sibling Latin American countries. Time will prove that this is the truth."*
- »»» *"I say goodbye, dear friends, with bitter pain, but firm in my convictions. Defend that which has been so difficult to achieve. Ten years of struggle, tears, sacrifice, and democratic victories. With the satisfaction of one who believes they have completed their duty, and with faith in what lies ahead, I say to you: Long live the October Revolution! Long live Guatemala!"*



## DID YOU KNOW? ERNESTO "CHE" GUEVARA

Guatemala was the final stop on Che Guevara's journey to study and understand the brutal realities of the continent. During his 8 month visit, Guevara witnessed the country's transformation under Árbenz, and lived through the 1954 *coup*. Guevara fled to Mexico, no longer as an observer of struggles, but a committed revolutionary. In Mexico he met Fidel Castro, and in 1959 the world witnessed a victorious Cuban Revolution.

# REFLECTIONS FROM NISGUA'S FRONTLINES

## JUSTICE & ACCOUNTABILITY

The *coup* against Árbenz unleashed decades of U.S. backed dictatorships. Transitional justice cases that NISGUA accompanies today, such as the Ixil Genocide Trial against former army general Benedicto Lucas García (1978-1982), are linked to the *coup's* aftermath.

As expert witness in the trial, National Security Archives researcher, Kate Doyle, stated: "Since 1954, the United States has provided support, assistance, military training, economic funds, and various forms of aid to the Guatemalan state to pursue its anti-communist project. Although Guatemala is not a colony of the United States, it's had significant influence through the embassy, the CIA station, and defense attachés."

## DEFENSE OF LIFE & TERRITORY

Indigenous People have been dispossessed from their territories since the Spanish invasion. Árbenz' agrarian reform started to remedy that, but the *coup* returned Guatemala to the status quo. Contemporary dispossession is primarily for the construction of hydroelectric dams, mining projects, and monoculture plantations.

For Indigenous land defenders whom NISGUA accompanies, the counter-revolution of 1954 is ongoing: the economic interests of capitalists are still above the needs of people and land, and the threat of intervention always looms. But this does not demoralize them. Their connection with Mother Earth is deeper than any capitalist interest. They know that though flowers may be cut, spring will always return.



## IMAGE DESCRIPTIONS AND CREDITS

1. Mural of Árbenz with hundreds of pictures of victims of the internal armed conflict. Text reads: "Against imperialism. Long live the revolution. From Villa Nueva to Palestine, free territories." By Jero and H.I.J.O.S. Guatemala. Villa Nueva, Guatemala. June 27, 2024 (NISGUA).
2. Árbenz with peasant and revolutionary committees upon the signing into law of the Agrarian Reform (AFP News, COPREDEH, Archivo, Yahoo Noticias).
3. Carlos Castillo Armas, the CIA-backed leader of Operation PBSuccess, driving into Guatemala City after weeks of paramilitary violence. (National Archives/ati.com).
4. "Una Realidad. Ley de Reforma Agraria" (A Reality. Agrarian Reform Law) by Ismael Aroche (Museo de la Universidad de San Carlos).
5. "Gloriosa Victoria" (Glorious Victory) by Diego Rivera, depicting the 1954 *coup* (Wikipedia).
6. Árbenz delivers his resignation speech over the radio, June 27, 1954. (Credit: Unknown. Source: Snow International Website).
7. CIA-backed militias pose with Árbenz effigy holding a sign: "Russia is calling me back!" (Credit: Getty Images/BBC).
8. Ancestral Ixil Indigenous Authorities of Nebaj attend Ixil Genocide Trial in solidarity with plaintiffs. April, 2024. (NISGUA).