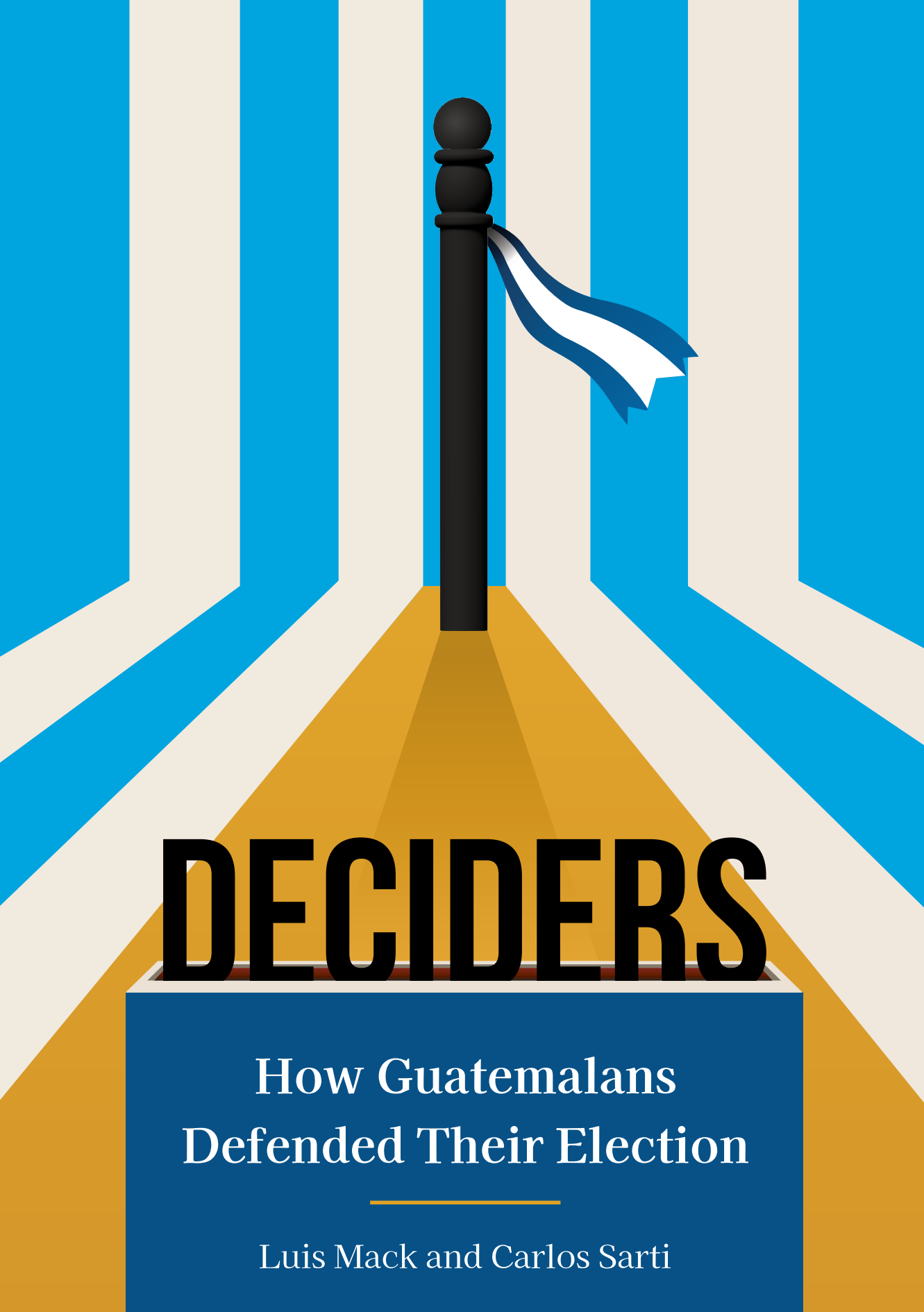


How Guatemalans Defended Their Election

Luis Mack and Carlos Sarti

DECIDERS

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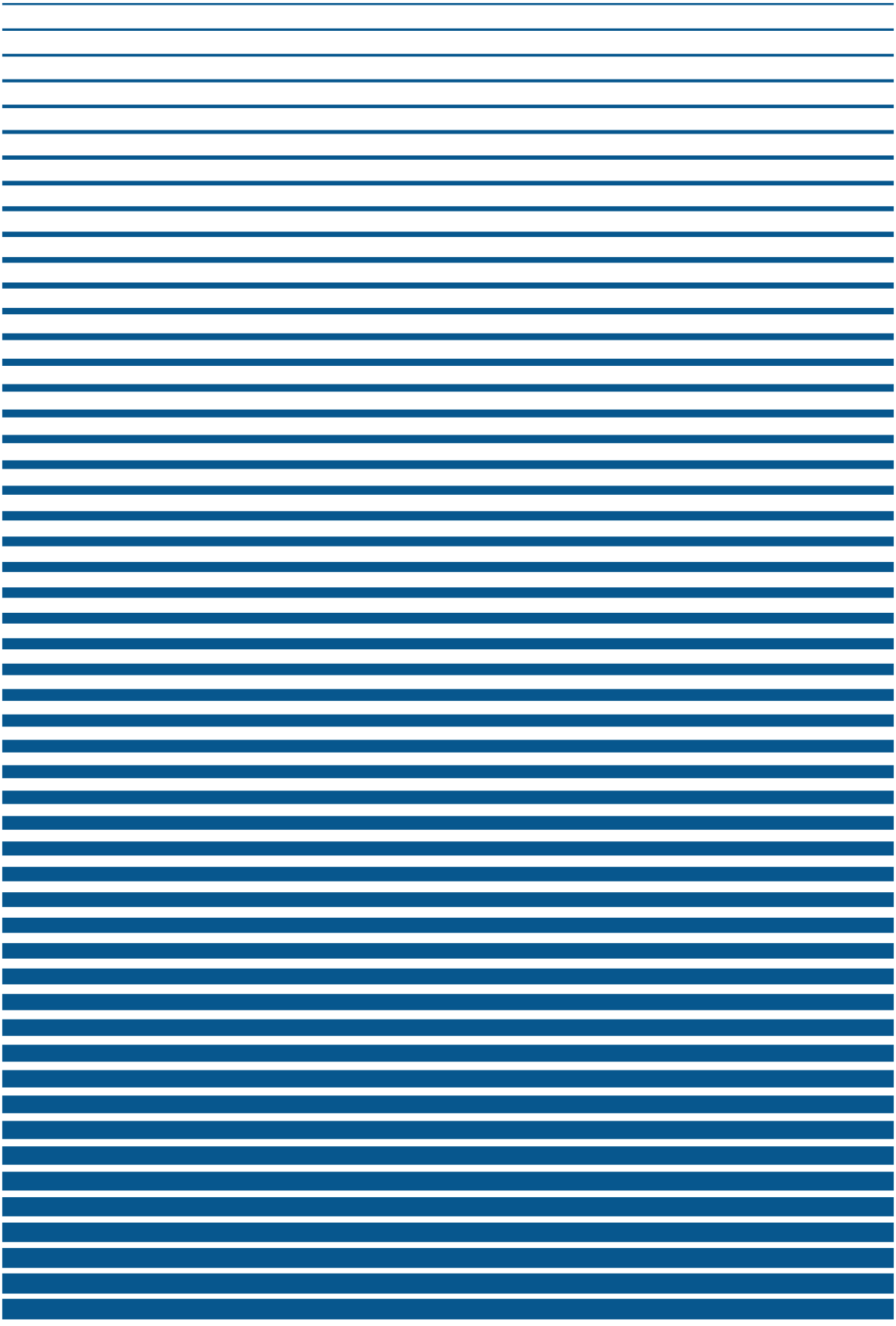


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INTRODUCTION

This research analyzes how the Guatemalan people organized civil resistance to protect the 2023 presidential election results. This is a qualitative analysis rather than a history of Guatemala's political process—a broader focus that would require considerably greater analytical and theoretical effort.

The research methodology was based primarily on interviews with civil society members who actively participated in the nonviolent civic mobilizations of 2023. Specifically, interviews were conducted with two members of the Movimiento Semilla party (one woman and one man), three leaders of the Indigenous movement (two women and one former Indigenous mayor), and one member of the religious sector who contributed to the resistance kitchen. This information was corroborated by an extensive review of secondary literature. In the appendix, we provide a non-exhaustive list of some of the analyzed and interpreted sources of information.

The document is structured as follows: The first part presents a historical overview of conflict in Guatemala. This is followed by an analysis of the 2023 electoral context that gave rise to the nonviolent campaigns during that process. Next, the civil resistance process is analyzed, identifying the main factors that contributed to the success of this nonviolent campaign, the key actors involved, and the duration and stages of development of the civil resistance campaign. Finally, the document presents reflections on nonviolent action in Guatemala, along with some general conclusions and a closing reflection.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: ELITISM, RACISM, AND AUTHORITARIAN INSTITUTIONS

To understand the nonviolent mobilizations in defense of democracy in Guatemala in 2023, it is necessary to outline some general characteristics of the country's sociopolitical reality. To do so, it must be said that what characterizes the politics of this Central American country is the intersection of elitism, racism, and authoritarian institutions (Casaús Arzú 2018). Furthermore, state institutions are extremely corrupt, as noted by the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG, in its Spanish initials), which indicated that corrupt groups and networks[1] linked to criminal, business, police, and military elements of the Guatemalan society have infiltrated state institutions. This has distorted democracy, elections, and political parties, and has allowed corrupt actors to use democratic institutions to advance their own interests (CICIG 2019a).

The CICIG report describes how the Guatemalan political system has guaranteed impunity for elites and consolidated a systematic exclusion of the majority. The processes of political capture of state and government institutions by corporate groups (both old and new) have prevented the proper functioning of democracy, the rule of law, and the strengthening of the common good. These corporate groups have benefited from the state budget and used the structures of government and other branches of power to serve their own interests (Waxenecker 2021). This mechanism has also involved the use of laws and courts of justice, which have legitimized the actions of corrupt groups (CICIG 2019a).

The specific acts of corruption by the government of former president Otto Pérez Molina (2012–2015) and the actions of the Public Prosecutor's Office (at that time with autonomy from corrupt political power) led a wide variety of social, political, and economic actors to join nonviolent protest rejecting governmental corruption. These actions unleashed intense demonstrations between April 25 and September 1, 2015, which resulted in Pérez Molina's resignation and early departure from power (Contreras & Escobar 2015). The Public Prosecutor's Office, together with CICIG experts, presented and documented a customs corruption case known as "La Línea" (Orozco 2015). That report directly implicated the then-president and vice president of the republic, Otto Pérez Molina and Roxana Baldetti, as co-perpetrators of acts of corruption.

Pérez Molina's resignation boosted public morale, and citizens developed a sense that a genuine moral and institutional transformation was underway, as noted in a report by the National Democratic Institute (Rodas Núñez et al. 2017). Unfortunately, faced with greater public scrutiny over corruption,

1. For example, the Illegal Bodies and Clandestine Security Apparatuses (CIACS, in its Spanish initials).

the subsequent government of Jimmy Morales (2016–2020) did not renew CICIG's mandate in Guatemala, and that international body ceased its operations in 2019. This process was termed a "closing of democratic spaces" (CIVICUS 2024) because, in addition to CICIG's expulsion, participatory public space was restricted and there was a gradual return to the old authoritarian and corrupt practices that caused further deterioration of institutions and political processes in Guatemala, particularly during the presidency of Alejandro Giammattei (2020–2024).

In Guatemala, there was a much clearer trend toward the deterioration of civic space as the government took steps to undermine the rule of law and reverse anti-corruption efforts of recent years. Authorities gradually undermined judicial independence and adopted restrictive legislation. Over the past three years, the government of Alejandro Giammattei systematically carried out abusive prosecutions of peace and justice defenders, justice operators, and journalists, in an effort to silence critics and those who had sought to combat political corruption. Human rights have faced increasing attacks, while institutional spaces for monitoring their situation and ensuring their protection were weakened. The rise of authoritarianism is particularly concerning in light of the country's upcoming general elections in June 2023 (CIVICUS 2023, 32).

The significant closing of democratic spaces was reflected in: (1) the dispersal of civic demonstrations, (2) the persecution of human rights defenders, and (3) the judicial resolution of political conflicts to block democratic decisions and eliminate political debate (UDEFEGUA 2024). This did not prevent civil society from maintaining other levels of communication and coordination. This, in turn, is an indicator of the historical rootedness and depth of the civic networks that were activated through social media, an important tool of nonviolent resistance against government abuses during this critical historical period.

It should be noted that Guatemala's system and Law on Political Parties hinder the participation of independent political parties, mainly due to the way the Electoral Law structures the requirements and resources for forming new political parties: an excessive number of requirements combined with a complete absence of pre-electoral funding, which creates very high barriers to entry for new players. Furthermore, the lack of control over electoral financing allows only certain economically powerful actors, many of them illicit, to determine which candidates have a genuine chance of winning elections. Iván Velázquez, Commissioner Against Impunity in Guatemala, described the absence of adequate electoral financing as "the original sin" of Guatemalan democracy (Rafael 2017). As a result, the main political parties have controlled the legislative branch, limiting the actions of

the Executive (Yagenova 2019; CICIG–ASIES–IDEA 2019).

Authoritarianism, structural racism, and state capture have direct implications for the 2023 political crisis, as they drastically shaped the institutional and political environment surrounding the nonviolent demonstrations of 2023, as we will elaborate on later.

THE 2023 CRISIS

The 2023 crisis began because those in power were unwilling to relinquish it. Before the elections, they prevented popular candidates from running. Then, after the first round, they attempted to invalidate the results. When Arévalo won the second round, they tried to prevent him from taking office.

In the early stages of the electoral campaigns, the elites once again resorted to co-opted institutions to disqualify two important candidates from the electoral race and who were against the regime: indigenous leader Thelma Cabrera and Roberto Arzú, a scion of the establishment who, nevertheless, had "antagonized the traditional private sector" (Schwartz & Isaacs 2023). However, the most brazen episode involved businessman and radical populist Carlos Pineda. On May 2, Pineda, who based his campaign primarily on TikTok and promised to lead an "electoral revolution" (García 2023), catapulted to the top of the polls. Three days later, an administrative court reopened an investigation to determine whether Pineda's party had violated Guatemala's complex electoral code. Pineda's candidacy was rejected on May 26, 31 days before the elections (García 2023).

The political crisis of 2023 was imminent when traditional political parties, the government, the Public Prosecutor's Office, and certain business leaders and members of the military refused to recognize the electoral victory of Bernardo Arévalo, the presidential candidate of the Semilla party. This was a new party that advocated for greater democracy and combating corruption. They managed to overcome systemic barriers to electoral participation, demonstrating the possibility of modifying the authoritarian and elitist elements of the Guatemalan political system (Mack 2023; Padilla 2023).

Political opposition to Bernardo Arévalo's electoral victory was led by a coalition of corruption networks, popularly known as the "pacto de corruptos" (corruption pact), a concept coined by those fighting against impunity and corruption between 2015 and 2019 (Batres 2019; Velásquez 2022). The purpose of this pact was, and remains, to perpetuate impunity and maintain control over state entities, which involved the criminalization of its opponents, including justice officials, journalists, and civil society leaders.

In the context of the 2023 political crisis, its primary objective was to delegitimize the election results and annul Bernardo Arévalo's victory. To that end, several actions were taken: First, following the first-round results—which gave the victory to Arévalo and Sandra Torres (Former First Lady of Guatemala), from the party National Unity of Hope (UNE, in its Spanish initials), allowing both to advance to the second round—an attempt was made to annul the elections based on alleged irregularities in the Semilla party's electoral registration (Prensa Comunitaria 2024b). This legal and institutional conspiracy was made possible by the support of Judge Fredy Orellana, who, in collusion with the Public Prosecutor's

Office, sought to delegitimize the elections, citizen vote, and the autonomy of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE, in its Spanish initials). The traditional political parties, most of which operate according to the logic of the corruption pact (López 2019; Prensa Comunitaria 2024a), supported this conspiracy, with nine of those parties jointly requesting the annulment of the elections.

A recount of votes was conducted, but no fraud could be proven, leading to a runoff election, which Arévalo won with 61% of the vote, compared to 39% obtained by the other candidate. However, the UNE party did not accept these results, and the Public Prosecutor's Office, with police support, raided the TSE on September 30, 2023, a raid that lasted 20 hours (Publinews 2023a). Public prosecutors seized the ballot boxes, confiscated more than 125,000 files documenting the elections and the official tallies that recorded the electoral results. During the process, TSE president Blanca Alfaro was assaulted (Loarca 2023) when she resisted the action. This deepened the widespread fear among Guatemalans that the elections would be annulled. In this regard, an Indigenous mayor stated:

> When the Public Prosecutor's Office entered to extract the ballot boxes of the Guatemalans, that's when we thought: the current Government, at that time (of 2023), wants to impose a government according to what they have planned (Interview with Indigenous Mayor 2025).[1]

These actions, along with the numerous criminalization[2] practices against opponents and human rights defenders, and the increasing authoritarian measures taken by the Public Prosecutor's Office, sparked popular anger and gave rise to the nonviolent citizen resistance movement in 2023 (Coronado 2023). The nonviolent campaign sought to demonstrate the illegitimacy of the Public Prosecutor's actions, which were perceived directly as a profound threat by many citizens (BBC 2023):

> People were very clear that they were not defending Semilla (the political party), the peri-urban areas, or the rural areas; what they were defending was a democratic process (Interview with a community leader and member of Semilla 2025).

Indeed, those defending the election results sought not only the legitimate recognition of Bernardo Arévalo's electoral victory, but also to halt the attempt to close democratic spaces and establish

1. The interviews cited were conducted to prepare this report and were granted under the principle of anonymity, especially in a context in which the criminal investigation body, the Public Ministry, continues to criminalize leaders who participated in the protests.
2. For more information regarding the criminalization process see: **https://prensacomunitaria.org/2022/08/agresiones-contra-defensores-de-derechos-humanos-crecen-exponencialmente-en-el-gobierno-de-giammattei/**.

total corrupt control of state institutions (Hurtado 2024). Furthermore, they sought to initiate a process that would allow for the gradual elimination of the authoritarian restrictions with which the transition to democracy had been designed, and to grant legitimacy to nonviolent civic participation. The testimony of an Indigenous leader from Sololá is eloquent in this regard:

> We weren't against the president taking office, but we didn't want that coup d'état, which has already sacrificed so many lives, and we can't take it anymore, we don't want any more. That's the impact we wanted to prevent (Interview with an Indigenous community leader from Sololá 2023).

THE PEOPLE RESIST

The nonviolent demonstrations of 2023 were a form of political participation that emerged from civil society and expressed itself through collective actions in public spaces: streets, plazas, highways, and in front of state institutions (including the courts, the Public Prosecutor's Office, Congress, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal).

The movement was characterized by its nonviolence, with clear objectives: respect for the election results and the resignation of Attorney General Porras; democratic forms and mechanisms for decision-making; and an internal organization that allowed the participation of a wide range of political, social and civic actors, both urban and rural, from the business and productive sectors, as well as religious actors.

Nonviolent actions were the tools that allowed them to resist, express disagreements, make demands, exert pressure, and generate change, as was later reflected in numerous reports by national and international digital media outlets (see Appendix).

The civic movement of 2023, like many social movements in other countries, assumed an oversight role with respect to state and governmental actions. From this position, it challenged political power, raised demands, and defended them through mobilization. It served as a necessary counterweight to halt or displace regressive political actions. In this way, the nonviolent pro-democracy movement became an **active conjunctural political subject** of resistance and defense of democracy, the rule of law, and the electoral results.

The 2023 civic movement draws on the memory of several experiences from the 2015 process. Various actors, including Indigenous organizations, youth, students, women, neighborhood civic organizations, representatives of cantonal market vendors, and others, participated in the 2015 protests, and their experience and involvement shaped the processes of 2023. According to an Oxfam report (2024), the young people who participated in the 2015 process still believed in change and were therefore active participants in the 2023 protests, driven by the hope of a transformation that would prevent the attempted coup.

A distinctive feature of the 2023 nonviolent civic mobilizations was the participation of Indigenous organizations, whose organizational and mobilization capacity was key to the gradual articulation of the nonviolent movement's structure around the leadership of the ancestral authorities (Bercanza 2023). The culture and experience of 500 years of resistance forged solidarity and formed the basis of the nonviolent demonstrations that lasted 106 days on the streets and highways across the country, as well as in the sit-in held in front of the Public Prosecutor's Office headquarters in defense of democracy and the elections. An Indigenous leader and mayor stated in this regard:

> It was difficult, but one of the pieces of advice our grandfather

> left us was: as long as it's a service, if it is done wholeheartedly, things fall into place [...]. This struggle was not mine alone; it belonged to the community, because my family and I hold the conviction to keep fighting for our people (Interview with an Indigenous woman leader 2025).

> I feel there's a logic we carry from our territory, from our parents, and we already know how to manage things. It was our own initiative to come. We took turns by sector, and when it was our sector's turn, we asked for economic support, without imposing anything. We collected the money for the committee and gave it to the people who were due to come, because food had to be assured (Interview with an Indigenous mayor from Sololá 2025).

The demand to annul the second-round elections (August 2023) led more organizations to join the nonviolent pro-democracy movement, which fostered intersectoral coordination among the various participating sectors. "It didn't happen overnight. It had been community work built up over time" (Interview with an Indigenous woman leader 2025).

The articulation of actors was catalyzed by the leadership of Luis Pacheco, a community leader elected president of the community organization of the 48 Cantones of Totonicapán[1] in 2022. He played a key role in the mobilizations through his resolute political will, his direct and sustained presence at the demonstrations, and his high level of organizational and internal management capacity (from the community level to the urban spaces of struggle), which allowed him to mobilize diverse sectors of Guatemala.

> Thank God, at the end of 2022 Luis Pacheco was elected. We made contact and in January 2023, thank God, Luis Pacheco was very approachable. I remember that Mrs. Alida Vicente came to me and said we were fighting for the same goal. In the end, we managed to unite seven communities who had been following the Public Prosecutor's Office actions since Attorney General Consuelo Porras was reappointed. That's where all began. We went out to demonstrate, but it was a public march in the capital with the 48 Cantones. Also, at that time, San Cristóbal de Totonicapán had also joined, if I'm not mistaken. We also joined with the Ixil people, and we had been

1. Guatemalan state territoriality is organized around departments and municipalities, but Indigenous peoples use their own form of organization: the 48 Cantones constitute a form of communal governance native to the department of Totonicapán, structured to defend shared natural resources such as water and forests.

> monitoring all the actions of the corruption pact (Interview with an Indigenous mayor 2025).

> We managed to unite at the level of Indigenous communities. It wasn't possible to unite with everyone, but thank God we were able to unite with the 48 Cantones, who are also one of the great forces here in Guatemala. They have always fought back, always struggled, defending rights, demanding the rights of peoples (Interview with an Indigenous woman leader from Sololá 2025).

This basic unit was joined by other social, economic, and political actors, who joined both because of the example of coordination and struggle demonstrated by the Indigenous peoples, and because of the widespread conviction that the Public Prosecutor's Office's actions constituted a clear threat to democracy and to the country:

> There was an extraordinary capacity to organize, to coordinate, and to find common ground. Here, everyone left their egos at the entrance and agreed on the two or three specific points they were defending (Interview with an Indigenous leader 2025).

> To maintain the blockade points, shifts became rotational. Some people remained during the morning, and these were usually women. Then in the afternoons, after the workday, men would joined the ongoing collective struggle (Interview with a young student leader and Semilla militant 2025).

The organizational system of Indigenous peoples enabled the participation of countless individuals and actors from organized civil society, as well as private citizens who spontaneously carried out nonviolent resistance actions. The nonviolent civic protest began through individual calls from various sectors, and later became more coordinated through social networks of ancestral Indigenous authorities, social organizations, and identity-based collective organizations (women's groups, students, youth, LGBTQ+ groups, among others). This mechanism had also been used in the 2015 demonstrations.

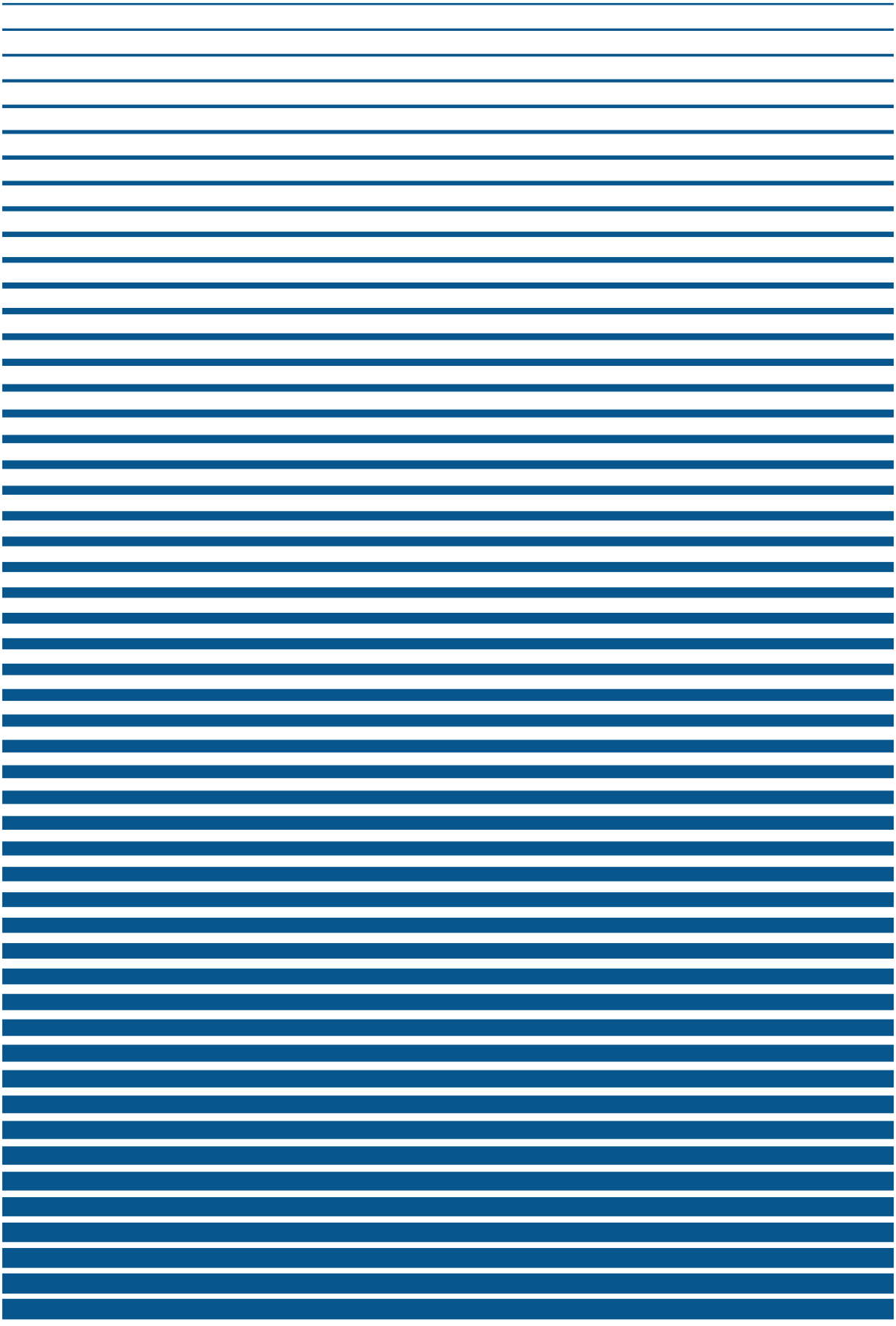
The democratic mechanisms for decision-making allowed for the minority participation of political actors, the business and productive sector, as well as inter-religious actors. There was participation from Semilla party militants and from other alternative political structures such as the People's Liberation Movement (MLP, in its Spanish initials).[2] Although the mobilizing demands aligned with

2. A left-wing political party that promotes the creation of a plurinational state.

Semilla's interest in reaching the presidency and maintaining its status as a party, its role in this process was more that of an ally than a leader, as one activist noted: "Semilla had nothing to do with organizing this, rather, these peaceful demonstrations were organized by citizens" (Interview with a community leader and Semilla party member 2025).

Religious actors were fundamental to the 2023 nonviolent campaign. Organizations such as the Conference of Guatemalan Religious Leaders (CONFREGUA, in its Spanish initials), as well as the Sentinels for the Dignity of the State network, among other religious actors, contributed to supporting and legitimizing the citizen movement. The role of Cardinal Álvaro Ramazzini is also worth mentioning, as we will note further ahead.

Paradoxically, the actions of the corruption pact provoked something unthinkable: the awakening of a sleeping giant—the Guatemalan citizenry. In this sense, the 2023 demonstrations were the most complete expression of a society that mobilized in the face of what it considered a very serious threat. It was a response to the circumstances, but one based on the organizational structure and community roots that had been built through the logic of permanent, everyday resistance against an exclusionary, racist, and authoritarian political and economic regime.



FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO THE SUCCESS OF THE MOVEMENT

There are several factors that contributed to the success of the resistance movement in Guatemala.

Experiential learning.

The historical accumulation of experiences, defeats, victories, consequences, and commitments from various sectors that in the past sought forms of democratic resistance against authoritarianism and elitism, or what Roncken (2020) calls "experiential learning." In this sense, the mobilization emerged not only as a response to a specific problem, but also as a product of the historical accumulation of struggle and political advocacy by Guatemalan society. This is reflected by the president of the 48 Cantones, Edin Zapeta, in an interview with the outlet Agencia Ocote in February 2024:

> The movement's capacity to articulate its demands precisely, maintain internal cohesion, and execute noncooperation tactics in a disciplined manner was fundamental to its success (Longo 2024).

Indigenous leadership.

The ancestral authorities of Indigenous peoples were the leaders of the civic movement. Drawing on a process of hundreds of years of resistance in defense of their identity and their own forms of organization, Indigenous peoples have been taking on responsibilities as Guatemalan citizens without renouncing their own ethno-cultural demands.

The peace agreements signed between 1991 and 1996, following 36 years of civil war in the country, created conditions for greater organization and participation of Indigenous peoples in public life. As part of this process, they participated in the 2015 civic movement. Through an internal process of reflection, they assumed the responsibility of advocating for the defense of democracy and its mechanisms at the national level. This meant that the Indigenous movement and its leadership decided not only to act as local actors, but to become national political actors and participate in the national struggle for democracy, thanks to their capacity for mobilization and their resistance in defense of their existence, which has been threatened by a racist, authoritarian, and unresponsive state.

In the Guatemalan case, the remarkable participation of Indigenous peoples and their authorities allowed the principles of the Indigenous worldview, which seeks social harmony and balance, to be integrated with the nonviolent strategies and tactics used in the protest (Garrido et al. 2024). For example, the use of the staffs of authority, a symbol of ancestral authority, expresses civic recognition of Indigenous leadership. In this regard, the association COMUNICARTE produced the documentary "Las varas de la dignidad" (Staffs of Authority) (Comunicarte 2024), a tribute to the importance of Indigenous authorities in the nonviolent demonstrations of 2023.

This moral–strategic synergy created a powerful force that acted continuously throughout the nonviolent process, demonstrating that nonviolent action is not passive, but rather a potent form of active resistance capable of shifting public opinion and political dynamics.

One movement, two forms of participation.

The mobilization was sustained through the coordination of two forms of citizen participation: on one hand, the grassroots organizations of Indigenous communities, and on the other, those of numerous civil society organizations, including student groups, human rights organizations, urban collectives, neighborhood committees, trade defense groups, leaders of local markets, and representatives of religious organizations, among others, as demonstrated in various journalistic reports (Gordillo 2023; Patzan 2023; C. Pérez & Sánchez 2023).

Around this organized multisectoral confluence there was also the spontaneous participation and mobilization of unorganized citizens, who took advantage of the blockades and the sit-in to express their civic rejection of the attempted coup d'état (Del Águila 2023), as confirmed by the research of Grupo Foco, which concludes the following:

> The mobilizations involved both old and new political actors: traditional organizations with years of experience participated alongside organizations without a clear political agenda that mobilized unexpectedly this time, as well as new emerging actors and private individuals (FOCO 2024).

Resilience and tactical innovation.

The call for an "indefinite national strike" by the 48 Cantones at the end of September 2023 was the first call for nonviolent resistance (Oliva 2023). At that moment, it was expected to be short-lived. In numerous interviews, various leaders expressed that the planning was for a few days or even weeks, but it extended far longer (Testimony of two of the Indigenous women leaders interviewed, as well as the Plaza Pública report "They Defended Democracy for 106 Days" by Liliana Villatoro, January 17, 2024).

> We had packed clothes for three days. I remember that people did us a favor: as soon as we arrived in the capital, we received support from all the city residents, who told us, "Thank God you stood up. We know perfectly well what's happening in there, but we can't speak out because they take it very personally against you. Thank God you dared." And we began to receive encouragement, and that motivated us to keep fighting (Interview with an Indigenous mayor 2025).

PARTICIPANTS IN THE 2023 DEMONSTRATIONS

Key actors of the pro-democracy nonviolent movement were members of Indigenous peoples and their authorities, urban neighborhood movements, primarily from La Verbena neighborhood, which played a significant role in the blockades of access routes to the capital, social leaders such as the neighborhood organizations of Betania (Woltke 2023), market vendor organizations such as La Terminal, students, Catholic Church authorities, women's organizations, academics, and social support networks. The digital outlet Prensa Comunitaria (2023) published an account of the main actions and actors that participated in this process, highlighting the unity that existed among all the actors mentioned, a characteristic that contributed to the achievement of the proposed goals.

Actors opposed to the pro-democracy movement: members of the government, the Public Prosecutor's Office, Congress, the Supreme Court of Justice, the Constitutional Court, conservative social sectors aligned with traditional political parties, some evangelical churches, and some business chambers.

Actors who supported and showed solidarity with the demonstrators: unorganized citizen groups; passersby, elderly people, housewives, students, and others.

Neutral actors: conservative-leaning citizens, the majority of the population, business sectors, and some media outlets that did not erode the public image of the nonviolent resistance movement.

PARTICIPANTS

It is worth recalling that the support of capital city residents can be key to the success of nonviolent struggle when these take place in the capital, as it is the political center of the country (Garrido 2022). However, the corruption pact held firm, and some sectors began to express discontent because the strike was affecting their economic interests and mobility. By October 9, Indigenous movements, joined by dozens of other organizations and thousands of Guatemalans, were blocking major highways in more than 140 locations across the country. At its peak, demonstrators had established blockades in each of Guatemala's 22 departments and in at least 92, or around 27%, of the country's 340 municipalities (Meléndez Sánchez & Gamboa 2023).[1] Faced with the risk of social delegitimization due to the prolongation of the strike, the movement changed its strategy: from an indefinite nationwide strike to concentrating the main protest effort as a permanent sit-in and citizen siege around the Public Prosecutor's Office (Coyoy 2023), given that this institution was the coordinating body of the coup strategy.

This strategic shift allowed the movement to concentrate efforts and focus nonviolent civil resistance, while minimizing the risks of its social delegitimization, since it no longer obstructed daily mobility and economic activity. This demonstrated to society the consistency and cohesion of the resistance movement, generating greater sympathy and recognition, which was expressed in various forms of support—food, logistical assistance, and citizen accommodation at the road blockades and at the encampment around the Public Prosecutor's Office—allowing the movement to sustain its nonviolent resistance actions for more than three months.

This course of action can be understood as a noncooperation tactic aimed at reducing the opponents' power by depriving them of the human resources necessary to carry out their work (Sharp 2011). The siege was maintained for 106 days, day and night, as demonstrators took turns preventing officials from the Public Prosecutor's Office from entering and demanding the resignation of Attorney General Consuelo Porras and her main collaborators (Barrientos et al. 2023; Pérez & Sánchez 2023), primarily, Rafael Curruchiche, head of the Special Prosecutor's Office Against Impunity (FECI, in its Spanish Initials). The siege prevented officials of the Public Prosecutor's Office from reaching their workplaces, thereby paralyzing the institution's administrative functions.

The occupation of the area surrounding the Public Prosecutor's Office not only involved the physical presence of demonstrators, but also a space for convergence, information sharing, and coordination. Diverse individuals and organizations continuously took the floor to encourage

1. Our data comes from the Guatemalan Ministry of Communications and includes only roads managed by the central government, which means the actual number of blockades is likely much higher.

commitment and resistance to the coup attempt. The primary responsibility for maintaining the siege fell on seven Indigenous communities, who took daily turns to sustain it throughout the week, demonstrating the movement's solid organization, cohesion, and resilience.

Women's leadership.

Both the citizen mobilization and the maintenance of the sit-in in the Gerona neighborhood made evident the strategic role of women in the demonstrations (Berganza 2023). Their determination and courage contributed to preventing the movement from waning or dispersing. Among the concrete expressions of women's agency was the so-called "Resistance Kitchen,"[2] which enabled the preparation and distribution of food that sustained the citizen sit-in (Pérez 2023). In this regard, the leadership of Indigenous women mayors and leaders deserves particular mention:

> In the Gerona kitchen, my colleagues from Sololá would call me to let me know that the mayors were coming, how many were on their way, and to make sure the kitchen was ready. So I would check what kind of food was available for the mayors and inform them what would be served that week. With the colleagues from there, we would discuss what was going to be provided so that they could send provisions for the authorities, for security reasons. Each week I had to have the exact count of how many were coming from Sololá in order to deliver food (Interview with an Indigenous woman leader from Sololá 2025).

> Here I also received the support of other women, who showed solidarity and offered their help. At first it wasn't planned. Initially we said, "maybe we will go to the city, we will be there, the food and transportation will be arranged in a certain way, previously agreed upon." But suddenly those days stretched on and on. So in that measure I also participated here in front of the Public Prosecutor's Office, and I was able to see that many organizations were involved, there was a great deal of support, there were alliances, some providing food, others drinks, and so on (Interview with an Indigenous woman leader 2025).

Another form of women's participation was the organizing that women did in the territory. There is something

2. This practice of nonviolent resistance, widely known in Latin America, occurred for the first time in Guatemala.

> that goes unspoken: the other front that remained guarding the home and the territory was made up of the mothers and wives of the community mayors, people who were not visible, but without whom the movement could not have been sustained for so long (Interview with an Indigenous woman leader from Sololá 2025).

Use of popular symbols and playful demonstrations.

The 2023 demonstrations were an opportunity for artistic and playful expression by citizens, which contributed to the unity and cohesion of the civil resistance movement and encouraged more people to join the road blockades during the first stage of the mobilization. For example, a video of a demonstrator dresses as a traffic cone—used to signal traffic on the streets—was used to call for new demonstrations and became a symbol of nonviolent resistance.[3]

In particular, "Tonelito" was an urban symbol of resistance that resonated deeply (Radio 949 2023). On the night of October 10, 2023, at one of the blockade points located at the Guarda market in the capital, a moment was captured in which a young man carried what became known as the "walking barrel" (Gamboa 2023). The next day, on Petapa Avenue, two young persons began dancing with a traffic cone belonging to the Municipal Transit Police (PMT, in its Spanish initials) as it was removed, shouting "Tomorrow at 6" (M. Álvares 2023). That was the beginning of this symbol of citizen resistance: the images from the video went viral and soon became one of the most iconic images of the blockades in Guatemala, to the point that illustrator Kevin Morales created an icon based on it, while another user developed a video game inspired by the story. In addition, various playful and artistic expressions emerged, including dances, music, ball games, and garbage collection (RUDA 2023b).

Good coordination and effective communication channels.

The 2023 mobilizations were effective due to the constant coordination and communication among various civil society actors. Communication conducted primarily through social media platforms such as Signal, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok was complemented by statements and reports disseminated by independent media outlets such as *Noficción*, *Prensa Comunitaria*, *Quorum*, *Plaza Pública*, among other notable outlets. According to a movement leader:

> WhatsApp groups were created, communication was immediate, and the coordination for distributing food was carried

3. For illustrations of the street cone see: **https://emisorasunidas.com/2023/10/11/cilindro-vial-protestas-guatemala/**.

> out through this social network (Interview with an Indigenous mayor 2025).

The coordination was successful because it drew, on one hand, on the prior experience of the leaderships of various organizations and actors that had participated in the 2015 protests, such as the Alliance for Reforms, the Citizens' Assembly Against Corruption and Impunity, Visible Guatemala, the National Convergence of Resistance (CNR, in its Spanish initials), among other civil society dialogue bodies, as well as Catholic Church bodies such as the Conference of Guatemalan Religious Leaders(CONFREGUA, in its Spanish initials) and the inter-religious body "Sentinels for the Dignity of the State." The multisectoral coordination deepened the synergy among all these organizations, enabling a graduated leadership structure that demonstrated a strong capacity for strategic cohesion around a common objective: defending democracy against regressive and authoritarian threats, as the specialized literature on nonviolent action as a strategy of struggle has illustrated (Garrido et al. 2024; López Martínez 2005; Nepstad 2011).

Maintaining nonviolent discipline in a complex environment.

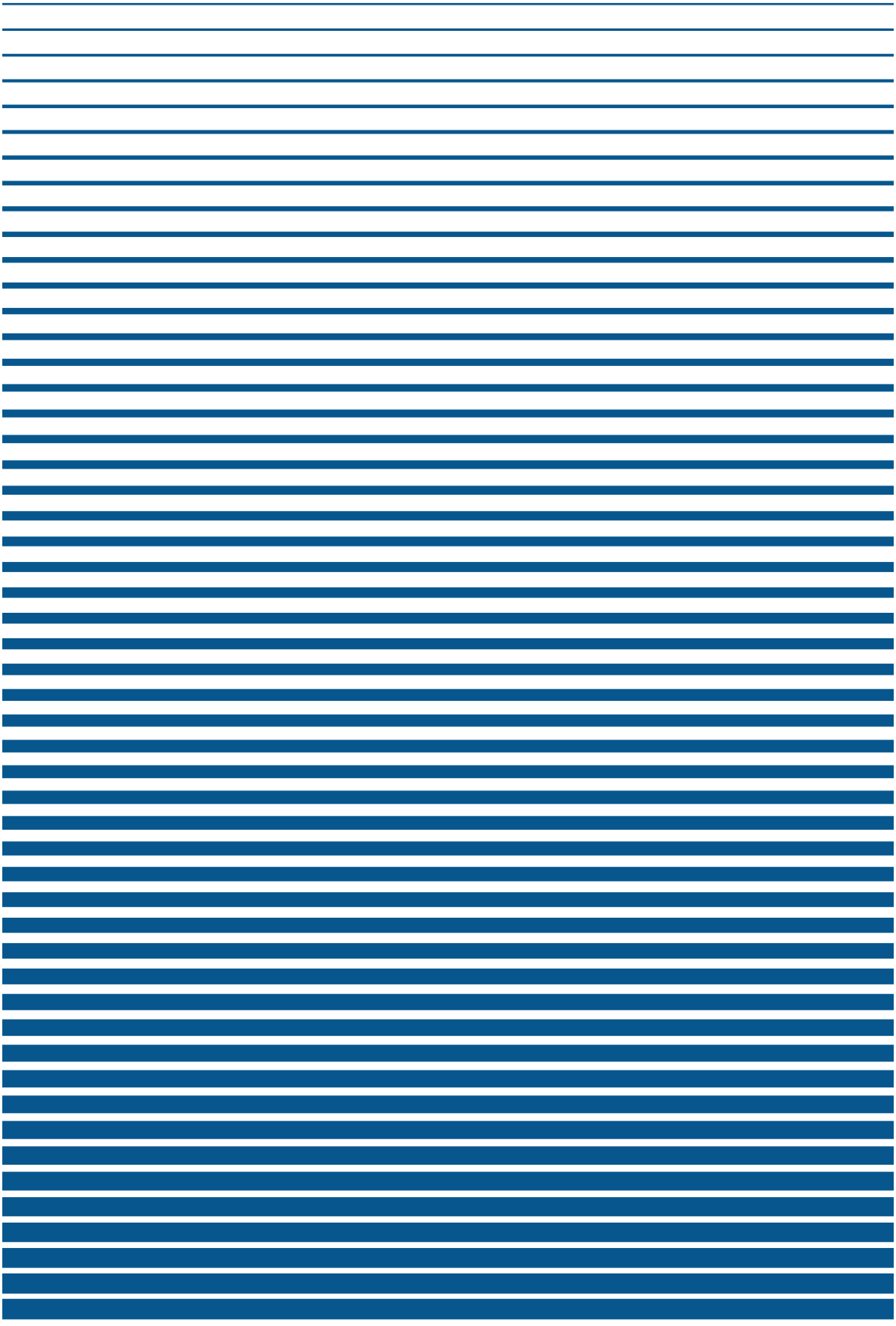
The main challenge facing the 2023 movement was maintaining nonviolent discipline in the face of institutional and internal aggression, given the multiplicity of participating actors and collectives with a wide variety of organizational forms and goals.

Contributing to this was the fact that the coordinating strategic core (Indigenous and civil society organizations) had experience organizing nonviolent struggle, which meant that discipline was relatively easy to maintain across the various blockade points. However, there were more spontaneous and conjunctural actors who lacked both the same motivation and strategic capacity, and in some cases violence got out of hand, as was documented during the demonstration of October 9, 2023, in the city's central plaza, when infiltrated individuals carried out acts of vandalism in front of cameras and security forces (RUDA 2023a). According to a reliable source, those who caused the disturbances on the night of October 9 were infiltrators. The National Civil Police (PNC, in its Spanish initials) itself acknowledged on its social media, though its subsequently deleted the posts "on orders from above," as confirmed by a source within the institution (Montepeque 2023).

The actions of the infiltrators, also referred to as *agent provocateurs* in the civil resistance literature (Chase 2021), were exploited by detractors of the movement to portray it as violent, a characterization that was never central to the mobilizations. This went so far that then-President Giammattei threatened the use of force in a message broadcast on a national address, rebroadcast by *CNN en Español* on October 10:

> These people are not peaceful demonstrators and, paradoxically, they are the ones demonstrating in favor of peace and democracy. They are shock groups that were previously organized and trained, and we will be requesting the appropriate arrest warrants so that justice is applied through due process, because we have already identified many of them (CNN 2023).

This was certainly not the only incident involving infiltrators, as was detected on at least one further occasion (Barreno 2023). The strategy of using *agent provocateurs* to generate violent disturbances was employed by the regime in an attempt to justify repression against the civil resistance movement and delegitimize it. However, it failed to discredit the movement, which by that point enjoyed strong public support.



ACTIONS OF THE NATIONAL CIVIL POLICE

Despite the fact that President Giammattei and the government were strong opponents of the nonviolent resistance movement (CNN 2023; Lebeau et al. 2019; C. Pérez 2023), the general conduct of the police was largely non-repressive. There were verbal confrontations between police officers and demonstrators at some road blockade points. However, at most of them dialogue between police and demonstrators prevailed.

For its part, the government never officially ordered the violent dispersion of the demonstrations; its strategy was instead oriented toward discrediting and delegitimizing the demonstrators, intimidating them with the threat of force, pursuing movement leaders, and applying other forms of pressure on demonstrators.

In this context, the resignation of the then-Minister of the Interior, General Napoleón Barrientos, took place. His argument was that he was unwilling to violently repress the demonstrations, which suggests that an order to repress likely did exist, but did not have the support needed to be carried out. In this regard, the former minister declared to the press:

> I felt the obligation to clear the blockades because there were people who needed ambulances and the economy was suffering too great an impact, but we also assessed that breaking them up should not involve violence, because that would have generated a far greater social explosion and perhaps today we would not be living under a democratic system (Prensa Comunitaria 2025b).

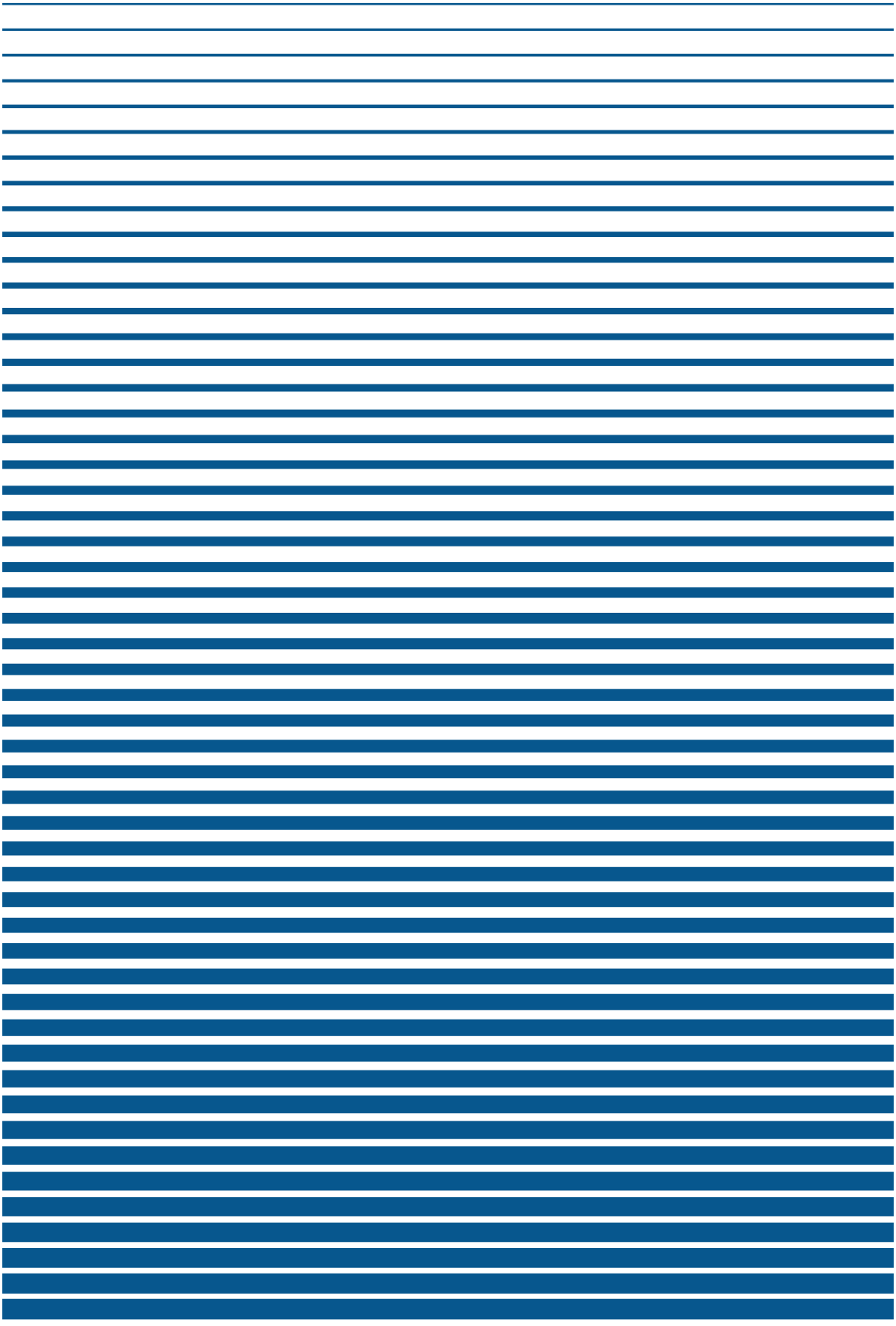
This stance earned former minister Barrientos the title "Soldier of Democracy" (N. Álvarez 2023) in a radio interview given during those difficult days.

From a historical perspective, the PNC's behavior is explained by the restructuring of the institution established in the peace agreements (1996), which emphasized its civilian character, as opposed to the military: "The mission of the Guatemalan Army is defined as the defense of the country's sovereignty and the integrity of its territory; it shall not be assigned by other functions" (Fundación Propaz 2022, 141).

Following the signing of the peace agreements in 1996, new police officers were trained in this new mission and operational protocols were modified, prohibiting the indiscriminate use of force against the civilian population.

> The National Civil Police is a professional and hierarchical institution. It is the only armed police body with national jurisdiction, whose function is to protect and guarantee the exercise of the

rights and freedoms of individuals, prevent, investigate, and combat crime, and maintain public order and internal security. It conducts its actions in strict adherence to respect for human rights and under the direction of civilian authorities (Fundación Propaz 2022, 136).



DURATION AND STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT OF THE RESISTANCE CAMPAIGN

Having outlined the process, its actors, and its main characteristics, it is important to identify its phases of development:

Phase 1. The Disjointed Emergence of the Demonstrations

The first phase of the pro-democracy movement involved denunciation and the mobilization of multiple organizations and institutions nationwide, in opposition to the regime's rejection of the electoral results and in defense of the rule of law. The aim was to raise awareness about this situation in order to generate a widely shared perception of injustice and illegality, and thereby mobilize people to fight in a nonviolent manner against this threat to democracy.

In response to the denunciations, calls to action, and social demonstrations rejecting the corruption pact and the government, the Public Prosecutor's Office escalated its criminal prosecution actions and judicial proceedings, ostensibly to demonstrate electoral fraud, in order to delegitimize the electoral process. This included investigations against electoral officials, politicians, and members of electoral boards, as well as persecution of the company that developed the software used in the elections.

The Public Prosecutor's Office's actions received the public support of then-President Alejandro Giammattei in obstructing the democratic transition process (Castillo 2024), as well as the alliances he maintained in Congress. This went so far that the possibility was raised of illegally extending Giammattei's mandate or of handpicking his successor. This fostered a sense that the protests had not halted the coup attempts, and mobilized people even further.

Phase 2. First Strategic Shift: The Indefinite National Strike

This new phase arose from the conviction that the corruption pact was still actively seeking ways to alter and halt the transfer of power in the Executive branch. Under the leadership of Luis Pacheco and Héctor Chaclán, president and treasurer of the 48 Cantones de Totonicapán (Farfán 2025), the nonviolent pro-democracy movement called for an indefinite national strike on September 30, 2023, which began on October 2 of that year. The first demand of the strike was the resignation of Attorney General Consuelo Porras, who was leading the attempts to annul the elections.

The strike call was issued jointly with the Xinca parliament, the representative Indigenous organization of the Xinca people, in coordination with the Indigenous mayoralty of the department of Sololá. In this second phase, the strength and legitimacy of the nonviolent pro-democracy movement was demonstrated through multiple blockades lasting 25 days, during which its capacity for mobilization was evident (Urizar 2025). The peak of the strike was October 9, 2023 (Arellano 2023), when 146 points were paralyzed (road blockades, marches, and mass demonstrations).

The national strike limited the distribution of basic goods, leading to price increases. In addition, many merchants lost their products because they could not reach the markets to sell them, representing a high economic cost for them. These actors expressed their discontent, though this did not translate into support for the government.

In response to the strike, a smear campaign was launched, backed by traditional political parties, business sectors aligned with the government, some media and television pundits, and through social media and online platforms opposed to the movement. This campaign emphasized that the rising costs of basic necessities were a consequence of the national strike, also arguing that it represented a violation of the right to freedom of movement enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic.

To illustrate how recurrent this form of protest has been, the Center for Economic and Social Research (CIEN, in its Spanish initials) recorded 4,420 road blockades over 10 years in its study "The Right to Demonstrate Without Blockading," which represents an average of 37 demonstrations per month, with a record high in 2023, when 1,241 demonstrations took place (Monzón 2025). In fact, it was during the presidency of Alejandro Giammattei that the population protested most: 3,038 blockades were recorded between 2021 and 2023, representing 68.71% of the total for the period analyzed.[1]

Blockades have been a recurring civil resistance tactic in Guatemala. However, their use can produce negative economic and social effects, particularly on the price of the basic food basket and on citizens more broadly, which was exploited to promote smear campaigns. Public fatigue toward the blockades was therefore a real threat, as there was a risk of undermining public support for the movement. Rethinking the strategy was thus essential before popular support began to erode.

Phase 3. Second Strategic Shift: From Blockades to a Sit-In

This third phase of the movement focused on the citizen sit-in in front of the Public Prosecutor's Office. Sustaining this action required a different level of organization and commitment. On the one hand, logistical capacity was maintained to support a contingent of people who remained day and night in the vicinity of the Public Prosecutor's Office building. This required a continuous and systematic commitment to freeing volunteers from their daily obligations while ensuring they had what they needed to survive.

This commitment was primarily undertaken by seven Indigenous communities and their authorities. The communities

1. For more details on the blockades, see the publication from the Center for Economic and Social Research at the following link: **https://cien.org.gt/index.php/idd-mayo-2025-y-el-derecho-a-manifestar-sin-bloquear-analisis-de-los-ultimos-diez-anos-seguridadgt/**

of each of the seven participating groups decided to maintain the sit-in one day a week. To ensure rotation, transportation for the volunteers was guaranteed, and a resistance kitchen was established, providing shelter on the street and a constant supply of food and drinks for those who stayed overnight. Everything was done through community and citizen self-financing, as one person who supported this effort commented:

> The organization of various actors ensured that there was no shortage of food, nor of volunteers to meet the needs of the community members (Interview with a volunteer representing a religious organization 2025).

In addition to community support, many social organizations and residents of the Gerona neighborhood in the capital, located near the Public Prosecutor's Office headquarters, contributed to the maintenance of the citizen sit-in.

> There was an alliance with the Catholic Church, which was the strongest, they also opened doors with the Community Development Councils (COCODES, in its Spanish initials), committees, and community mayors. It was the religious sisters who received community support and also worked alongside everyone. This alliance was built across different sectors and organizations, some of them, such as MOLOJ and CONAMIGUA,[2] even providing physical space in their offices to receive people; they also held collections to sustain the struggle (Interview with an Indigenous woman leader 2025).

On the other hand, the encounters among Indigenous leaders deepened, as did those with various civil society actors and even religious sectors, which helped maintain the morale and determination of the participations.[3]

The support of the Catholic Church was particularly important, given the conservative and deeply religious nature of Guatemalan society. Cardinal Álvaro Ramazzini publicly demonstrated his support for the movement (Publinews 2023); likewise, various religious hierarchies also expressed their support. Among others, the Episcopal Conference of Guatemala (CEG, in its Spanish initials), the supreme authority of the Catholic Church, issued at least two statements expressing support for the movement (CEG 2023a, 2023b). The Conference of Guatemalan Religious Leaders (CONFREGUA, 2023) did the same, as did the

2. MOLOJ (in its Spanish initials) is the Political Association of Mayan Women and CONAMIGUA (in its Spanish initials) is the National Council for Migrant Assistance in Guatemala.
3. More information on religious participation can be found at this link: **https://www.publinews.gt/gt/noticias/2023/10/22/celebran-misa-resistencia-pacifica-afuera-mp-guatemala.html**.

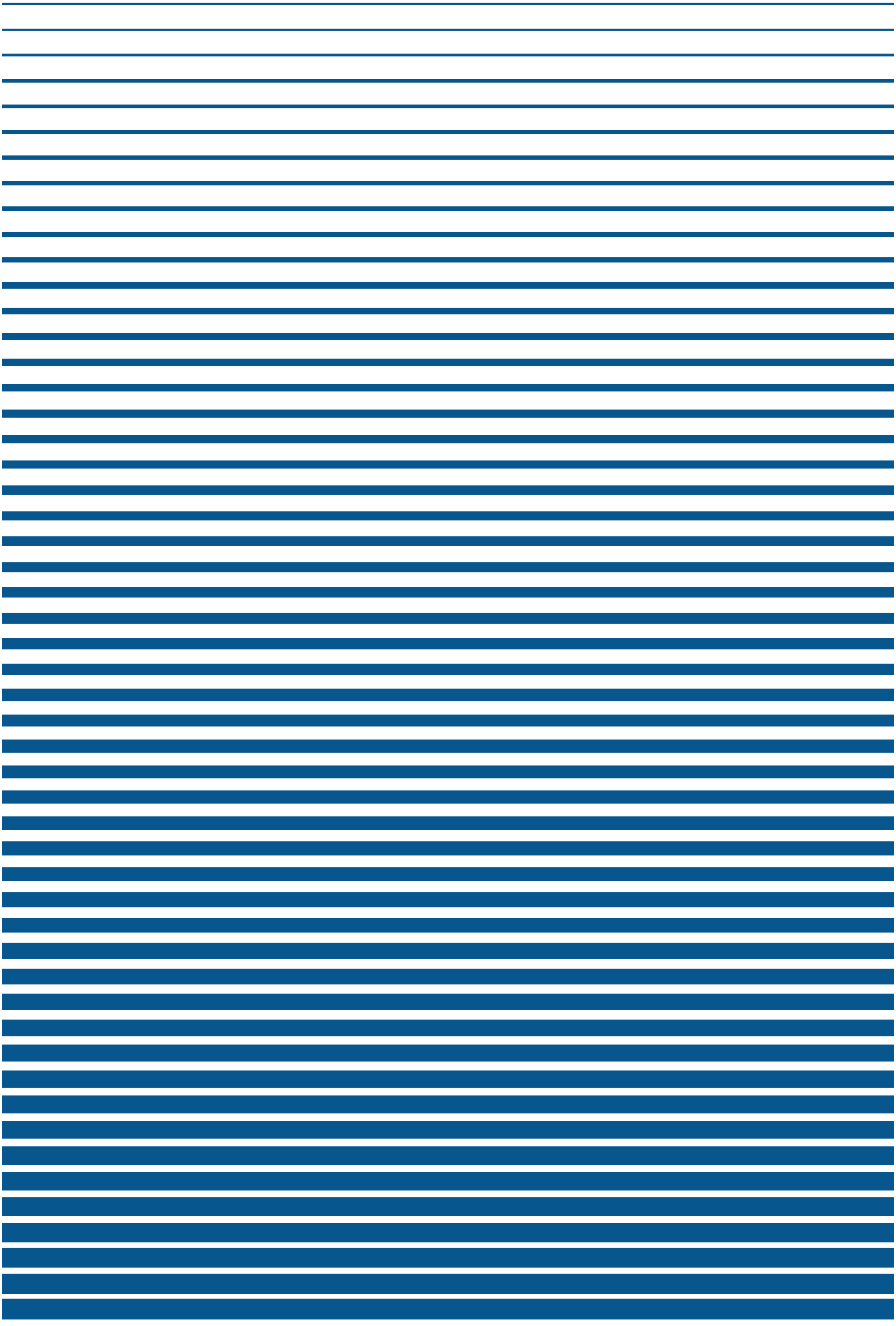
Jesuit community, which administers the Rafael Landívar University of Guatemala (Provincia CA de la Compañía de Jesús 2023; Universidad Rafael Landívar 2023).

Faced with these demonstrations, the Public Prosecutor's Office decided to carry out its work outside its offices in order to continue functioning and maintain judicial intimidation and harassment, especially against the leaders of nonviolent resistance organizations.

Phase 4. Coordination and Resistance as a Continuous Process

For the organizations that sustained the nonviolent resistance against the corruption pact, their objectives were achieved and, in the new context, it is no longer necessary to exert direct pressure on the actors who were threatening democracy and the rule of law.

Since President Arévalo's inauguration in 2024, achieved through decisive popular support and the backing of the international community, we can speak of a final phase of the nonviolent resistance campaign in response to the continued strategy of the corruption pact, which remains oriented toward destabilizing the government and, eventually, overthrowing it. It is worth noting that, at present, various organizations fighting for democracy, human rights, and the validity of a democratic rule of law are finding better conditions for their struggle against conservative forces, thanks to President Arévalo's commitment to Indigenous peoples, their authorities, and other social collectives. Spaces for outreach, dialogue, and consultation have been opened under the auspices of the Private Secretariat of the Presidency and the Presidential Commission for Conflict Management (COPREDE, in its Spanish initials).



MAIN FEATURES OF THE MOBILIZATIONS

1 The coordination of diverse social actors was an expression of the widespread rejection of the corruption pact's strategy, which sought to prevent the winner of the 2023 presidential elections from taking office.

2 Indigenous leadership and the mobilization of Indigenous peoples from rural areas to the capital was a distinctive feature of these nonviolent demonstrations. Their quantitative and qualitative presence was a key factor in the success of the 2023 nonviolent civil resistance campaign.

3 An organized movement emerged as a reaction *to* the threats to democracy described above. The nonviolent civil resistance campaign had operational cohesion, which enabled the coordination, information exchange, planning, definition of objectives and demands, and the articulation of the campaign's overall direction. On this basis, it was possible to channel a sense of indignation that captured the interest of the entire population.

4 The strategic planning of the pro-democracy movement made it possible to develop concrete nonviolent actions, such as *street demonstrations and blockades* of access to key and symbolic locations, that allowed the stated objectives to be achieved. In particular, the locations where these actions were carried out were crucial, as they enabled more sectors to join the civil resistance actions.

> These nearly 100 days of demonstrations managed to stop this coup attempt that's still ongoing—it was vital. If we hadn't coordinated, the story would be different (Interview with an Indigenous woman leader from Sololá 2025).

CONCLUSION

The 2023 pro-democracy nonviolent movement drew on the prior experiences of the participating groups and on the 2015 anti-corruption civil resistance campaign.

Four phases could be distinguished: (1) emergence, (2) expansion, (3) achievement of the main objective, and (4) accommodation and conclusion of the movement as a *decision made by the movement itself*, following the achievement of its stated objectives.

It was a successful movement because it ensured that the electoral results were respected, that Bernardo Arévalo assumed the presidency, and that the democratic system was saved from an institutional coup d'état. However, the objective of securing the resignation of the attorney general and her subordinates was not achieved, as this depended on a different balance of political forces. As a result, the corruption pact continues to operate against the government.

The choice of nonviolent action reflected a level of maturity among the participating social sectors and their commitment to respecting democratic forms of political participation, both among the citizenry in general and the sectors involved. In this sense, building on the 2015 experience, the methods of nonviolent civic struggle were consolidated within the democratic culture of Guatemalan society, as reflected, for example, in UDEFEGUA's *Manual of Nonviolent Demonstrations* of March 2015.

Along these lines, it was decisive that the Indigenous leadership and participating organizations changed their strategy by bringing the road blockade actions to an end. A shift in civil resistance tactics was needed to exert pressure on opponents without eroding citizen support for the nonviolent resistance movement.

The 2023 movement cannot be understood without what came before—the 2015 demonstrations—nor without what came after: the ongoing criminalization by the Public Prosecutor's Office of the actors who sustained the 2023 nonviolent demonstrations.

In terms of collective social experience, methods of participation, actions carried out, and cross-sectoral coordination and alliances, everything achieved in 2023 remains in collective memory. None of what was accumulated has been lost.

The research conducted indicates that the 2023 pro-democracy nonviolent social movement in Guatemala exhibited several of the characteristics that the nonviolent civil resistance literature identifies as necessary for success: unity, strategic planning, and nonviolent discipline. Beyond this, it demonstrated internal cohesion and a strong stance in the face of state arbitrariness, criminalization, and institutional obstruction.

Despite the severe challenges faced, it was demonstrated that even when state institutions are co-opted by particular interests, a well-organized civil society can exert

sufficient pressure to defend democratic outcomes by nonviolent means. Moreover, the nonviolent civil movement prevented the destabilizing attempts of infiltrators from undermining the movement's nonviolent image.

The central role of Indigenous leadership suggests that, going forward, traditional community structures can serve as powerful engines for civil resistance and the preservation of democracy. This implies a shift in focus for democratic defense, moving from mechanisms solely centered on defending democratic institutions, toward empowering and supporting civil society and Indigenous peoples, recognizing their capacity for strategic nonviolent action as a fundamental defense mechanism against authoritarian advance.

The 2023 nonviolent civil resistance campaign also illustrates that nonviolence is not only about abstaining from physical violence, but rather organizing coalitions and the execution of political pressure actions.

Final Reflection

The Guatemalan experience of the 2023 pro-democracy nonviolent campaign allows us to highlight several relevant implications.

Civil resistance theories emphasize that the success of nonviolent resistance movements depends on a complex set of elements, among which the following are stressed: unity, cohesion, the maintenance of nonviolent discipline, the intensity of commitment, planning that establishes a long-term strategy differentiated from a short-term one, and the importance of multisectoral alliances (Ackerman & Kruegler 1994; Merriman 2010; Sharp 2014; Ackerman & Merriman 2015; Chenoweth & Stephan 2011). These elements were key to achieving the main objective during the civil resistance mobilizations in Guatemala in 2023, reaffirming what the cited authors argue.

At that time, and in the long term, the 2023 nonviolent resistance campaign demonstrated the mobilization capacity of Guatemalans, a capacity that could express itself again in the future. The relative success of the 2023 nonviolent resistance campaign came from its ability to halt the coup action of the Public Prosecutor's Office and to allow Bernardo Arévalo to be inaugurated as president. However, it was evident that there was insufficient political power to force the attorney general's resignation. This points to the persistence of anti-democratic threats and the possibility of new closures of democratic spaces, which have continued and deepened during the 2024–2025 period. A political analysis of 2025, for example, would show clear signs of institutional regression alongside new forms of nonviolent resistance within existing frameworks. In 2023, a crucial battle was won and the rule of law prevailed, but the anti-democratic intent was not halted: criminal prosecution as a mechanism of demobilization continues (Protection International Mesoamérica 2022; Ramón & Rivera 2023), now directed against

some leaders of Guatemala's Indigenous peoples, key actors in the 2023 nonviolent campaign (Prensa Comunitaria 2025c). For months, Indigenous leadership has faced direct threats from the Public Prosecutor's Office, particularly through terrorism charges against Héctor Chaclan and Luis Pacheco, two key figures of that year's citizen mobilizations (Ortiz 2026).

In general, following the detailed analysis of the 2023 campaign, it can be noted that there are several open questions for future studies of nonviolent action in Guatemala, aimed at better understanding the ways in which nonviolent action is articulated as a long-term strategy of political advocacy and transformation. Given the current balance of political forces, the emergence of new threats to democracy and its institutions is foreseeable, and therefore, new phases of organized civil resistance as a social movement, employing whatever methods of struggle the new critical conjunctures may require.

The accumulation of practical experience, as well as knowledge about nonviolence, are key aspects of successful campaigns. In this regard, Guatemala has notable precedents of Indigenous and peasant resistance that can be characterized from the perspective of nonviolent struggle (Ba Tiul 2024; Segura 2024). Likewise, an actor mapping exercise could demonstrate that Guatemalan society is a mosaic of actors in resistance who constantly articulate diverse forms of nonviolent action.

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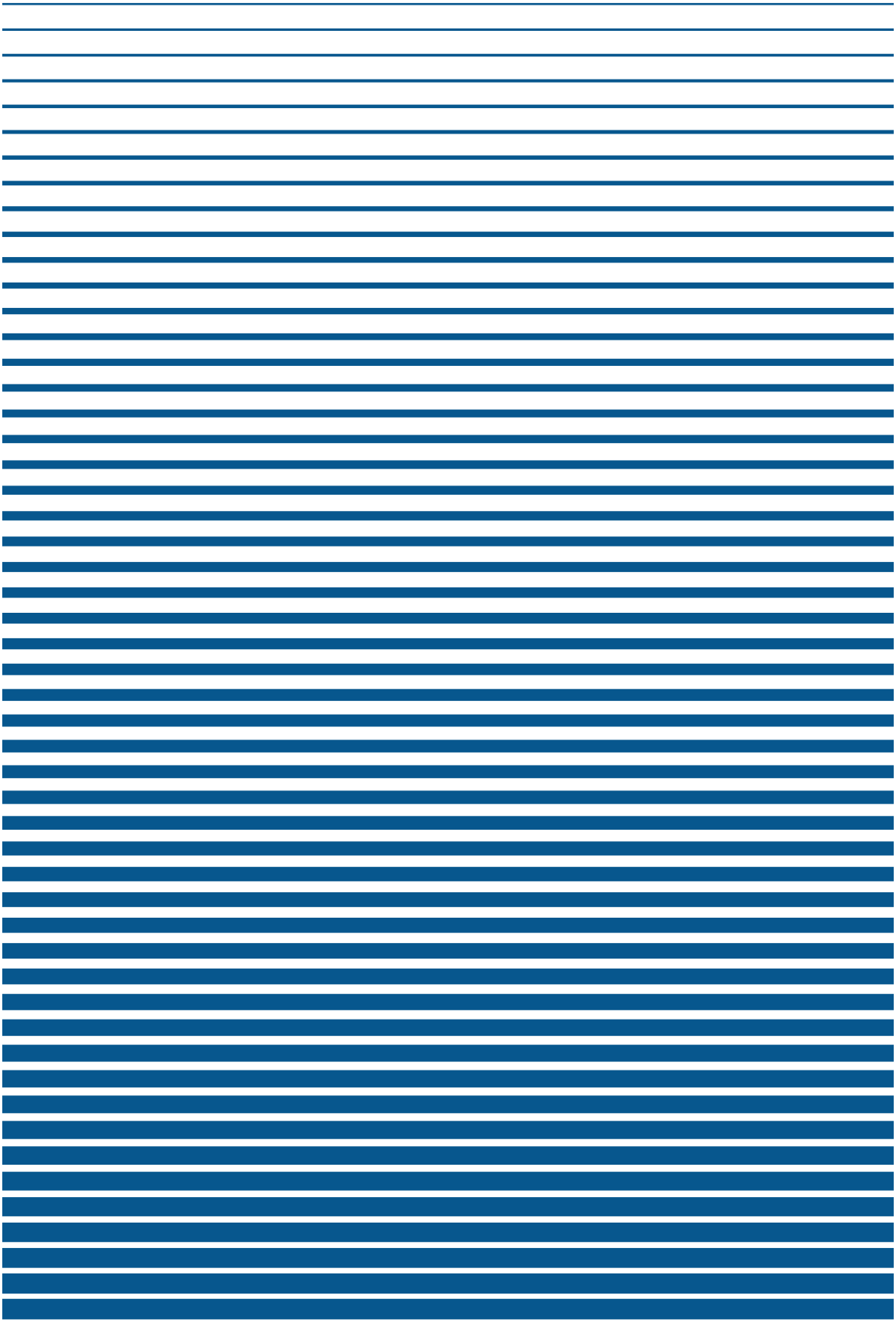
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APPENDIX

Table 1: Selected Reports and Documentaries on the 2023 Nonviolent Demonstrations

Title	Summary	Digital Outlet	Publication Date
Day of Indigenous Resistance: The Collective Political Force Fighting for Democracy	The historic day of mobilizations shows that, guided by the vision of Indigenous peoples, bridges can be built across the country to construct the present and future through peaceful means, analysts say.	Prensa Comunitaria	October 12, 2023
Dances, Games and Laughter: The Resistance of the National Strike	The #IndefiniteNationalStrike in Guatemala, which began on October 2, has adopted an unusual and surprising approach amid the peaceful demonstrations. Rather than the typical protest scenes characterized by tension and conflict, the streets have filled with games, dances, laughter, and a spirit of resistance.	RUDA	October 19, 2023
Join Us to Play Super Tonelito: Fighting for Guatemala's Democracy!	A game inspired by the protests taking place in Guatemala, in which players must fight against Consuelo Porras and her allies to defend the country's democracy.	Rosario Ruíz's Youtube Channel	October 25, 2023

Title	Summary	Digital Outlet	Publication Date
Music to Resist	Music has the capacity to educate, inspire, connect, and transform society. Through it, artists convey power messages that inspire movements and promote social awareness. For this reason, it has been used as a tool for protest and social change.	RUDA	November 7, 2023
"Tonelito" and the Symbols of Resistance	"Tonelito," the green barrel that has become ubiquitous in the national demonstrations, may seem rival, but it says a great deal about the pro-democracy protests. The piece explains why a plastic barrel became a symbol of resistance and how this resignification of objects is more common than it might appear.	Telégrafo	November 16, 2023
National Strike: Key Dates and Actions After 55 Days of Resistance	Guatemala is going through a historic moment, not only because hundreds of thousands of people have participated in the territorial mobilization, which has now extended for more than a month, but also because these demonstrations have been led by ancestral authorities.	Prensa Comunitaria	November 14, 2023

Title	Summary	Digital Outlet	Publication Date
Democracy in Guatemala is in Danger, but there is Still Hope	Political elites are attempting at all costs to prevent the inauguration of the president-elect in January 2024, but he enjoys significant support.	Open Democracy	December 15, 2023
"After the National Strike, We Indigenous Peoples are Better Organized"	Following the National Strike that began in October 2023, Edin Zapeta, the new representative of the Board of Directors of the 48 **Cantones** of Totonicapán, reflects on the impact of this citizen movement. Zapeta explains that they are not currently planning an immediate demonstration, as they believe dialogue with the newly elected authorities is necessary and perceive a willingness to engage in such dialogue within the government of Bernardo Arévalo.	Agencia Ocote	February 21, 2024
"The Staffs of Dignity"	The tireless struggle to defend the electoral vote and democracy, a feat claimed by Indigenous authorities of seven peoples since October 2, 2023, and which lasted for 106 days, was documented and brought to the big screen through the short film "The Staffs of Dignity".	Asociación COMUNICARTE	August 4, 2024

Title	Summary	Digital Outlet	Publication Date
The Day the Staffs Awakened Civic Consciousness in a Country	This October 2 marks the first anniversary of the day when Indigenous and ancestral authorities from various peoples led 106 days of mobilization against the attempted coup by the Public Prosecutor's Office, which sought to invalidate the votes cast by the population at the ballot box.	Prensa Comunitaria	October 2, 2024
Mobilizations in Defense of Democracy 2023-2024: Regional Dynamics and Emerging Actors	This document presents the general findings of the regionalization of organizational dynamics that Grupo FOCO has carried out throughout 2023 and 2024.	Foco Guatemala	October 25, 2024
Guatemala 2023: Chronicle of the Year We Recovered Our Future	The general elections of 2023 seemed destined for fraud and ended up becoming a source of hope for Guatemala.	Prensa Comunitaria /RUDA	January 12, 2025

Title	Summary	Digital Outlet	Publication Date
The People Command: The 106 Days of the National Strike	This is the story of how Indigenous peoples and their authorities decided to launch a national strike on October 2, 2023, to defend the votes cast in the election that had chosen Bernardo Arévalo as president. It tells how a movement that began in 16 locations across the country spread to more than 150 locations nationwide. The spark ignited on October 2, but it was the culmination of deliberations among Indigenous authorities and their assemblies.	Prensa Comunitaria	January 14, 2015
The Fight for Democracy: The 48 Cantones and Over 100 Days of Protests in 2023	The protests in defense of the 2023 electoral results began on October 2, and this outcry brought together different sectors to raise their voices and protect democracy.	Emisoras Unidas	April 23, 2025

Source: Compiled by the authors, 2025

THE PEOPLE WHO DECIDED

When Guatemala's outgoing government tried to overturn the results of a presidential election, ordinary citizens refused to let it stand. Deciders goes inside the 106 days of nonviolent resistance that followed, examining how road blockades, a permanent sit-in, and Indigenous ancestral authority became the tools of a movement with no single leader.

Drawing on interviews with Indigenous leaders, political organizers, and members of the resistance kitchen that sustained the movement, the report reconstructs how a fragmented citizen response evolved into a 106-day siege of the Public Prosecutor's Office, how women's leadership and playful protest symbols like the "Tonelito" barrel kept morale alive, and how nonviolent discipline held even as infiltrators, economic strain, and state intimidation tested it. It is an essential contribution to scholarship on Indigenous-led resistance, multisectoral coalition-building, and the defense of democracy against institutional capture.

"The successful defense of Guatemala's 2023 election results stands as one of the most important pro-democratic moments in Latin America's recent history... Mack and Sarti provide expert analysis and rich evidence of how citizens mobilized to counter authoritarian forces and defend the popular will, offering lessons that resonate far beyond Guatemala at a time of democratic backsliding around the world."

— Consuelo Amat, SNF Agora Institute Assistant Professor of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University

"A compelling report... [that] offers valuable lessons for pro-democracy movements worldwide. It underscores the decisive role of Indigenous and civil society organizations in mobilizing citizens through their networks, complemented by support from religious leaders... Practical guidance and key takeaways for nonviolent movements to defend democracy more successfully."

— Cécile Mouly, coordinator of the Peace and Conflict Lab (Lab-Paz), FLACSO Ecuador

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