

Guatemalan court threatens to invalidate election as Washington defends its preferred candidate

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During the first round of the Guatemalan presidential elections on June 25, no candidate came close to winning the support of one tenth of the electorate, 40 percent of which abstained.

The front-runners in the contest were former first lady Sandra Torres of the establishment party National Unity of Hope (UNE) with 15.8 percent of the ballots cast, and the career diplomat Bernardo Arévalo of the Semilla Movement with 11.8 percent. The two were supposed to qualify for a runoff in August.

Four right-wing candidates tailed Arévalo, who appeared in sixth place or worse in the polls. Most importantly, nearly one fourth or 1.3 million of the votes were blank or spoiled, nearly as many as those received by Torres and Arévalo combined.

On Saturday July 1, however, the Constitutional Court threatened to invalidate the election by ordering a “new election scrutiny review hearing.” Its five judges, who are all open allies of far-right incumbent President Alejandro Giammattei and his Vamos party, whose candidate came in third, ruled in favor of a lawsuit presented by several right-wing parties. These included Vamos itself and Valor, the party the fascistic candidate Zury Ríos Sosa, daughter of former dictator Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt, who was convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity for directing the mass murder of Guatemala’s indigenous Mayan peasants. These parties claim that “over one thousand ballot box records” were tampered with but have not presented corroborating evidence.

The entire election was indeed characterized by irregularities, including several top candidates rejected on spurious grounds, reports of violence, vote buying, ballots destroyed, riots, police repression with tear gas at voting places, hospitalized and missing electoral officials. Both right-wing and nominally “left-wing” parties issued challenges, as most irregularities were aimed at favoring the establishment candidates.

However, the move by the courts to invalidate the results has nothing to do with guaranteeing “the purity of the electoral process,” as the ruling claims. Instead, it sets the stage for a fascistic coup attempt to subvert the results.

On Sunday, as a few hundred demonstrators gathered to

protest the results, the Electoral Court (TSE) announced that it would suspend any ratification of the vote count, although it had already declared Torres and Arévalo winners by an unbridgeable margin.

Significantly, the organizers of the demonstration at the TSE included the fascist Foundation against Terrorism, which defends war criminals and has joined forces with Giammattei to jail and threaten “anti-corruption” journalists, judges and prosecutors, and a group led by Boris Lemos, a former military official who led an assault by veterans against Congress in October 2021 to demand a massive compensation and carried out protests against measures to contain the spread of COVID-19.

Both groups have opposed from the right the 1996 “peace accords” that formally ended the 36 years of civil war between a handful of weak petty-bourgeois nationalist guerrillas and a series of US-backed dictatorial regimes. The military, trained and armed by the US, oversaw massacres of left-wing intellectuals, workers, and youth, and the genocidal campaign against the Mayan Indians. These fascist groups calling for a return to such operations have little support outside military circles but are being mobilized by the ruling elite to intimidate popular opposition to its intrigues.

These were the seventh elections since the 1996 “peace accords,” through which US imperialism and its local partners hoped to place a thin “democratic” veil on its ruthless and corrupt vassal state as they continued their onslaught of privatizations, austerity and other policies to favor investors. The remnants of the crushed guerrillas agreed to play their part in this scheme by becoming bourgeois parties tasked with creating illusions in reforming the capitalist state.

Today, amid a worsening crisis of global capitalism, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of the war in Ukraine, growing resistance from below against unprecedented levels of inequality and geopolitical and economic pressures from US imperialism from above, the process that began in 1996 has reached a dead end.

In response to the elections, which were an unmistakable sign of generalized disaffection and social anger by the

impoverished working class, the local elite under Giammattei is moving headlong to remove these “democratic trappings” to defend its privileges.

On Sunday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken described the court ruling questioning the elections as a “grave threat to democracy with far reaching implications” and defended the statements of the Organizations of American States and the European Union validating the results.

Giammattei, who is constitutionally banned from running for re-election, and his fascist allies have responded by telling their puppet masters in Washington “don’t intervene.” This follows a visit by Giammattei to Taiwan and the launch last month of a pilot facility in Tegucigalpa where migrants will be forced to request asylum to the US. These were clear gestures to ingratiate himself with US imperialism.

But the response by the Biden administration goes beyond a hypocritical appeal to maintain a democratic veneer that can facilitate the imperialist oppression of Guatemala. The Semilla Movement and Bernardo Arévalo, who are expected to win the runoff, are being enthusiastically promoted by the *New York Times*, the Associated Press, *Foreign Policy* and other US corporate outlets. Such positive coverage is limited to politicians that promise to do the bidding of US imperialism.

Semilla was launched in 2014 as a lobbyist group composed of officials of former administrations, bureaucrats at international cooperation agencies and academics. Its two main founders were late Edelberto Torres Rivas, who was a leader of the Stalinist Guatemalan Workers Party (PGT) before becoming a consultant and UN official, and Juan Alberto Fuentes Knight, who was finance minister in the administration of Sandra Torres’s corrupt late husband, Álvaro Colom.

Arévalo himself rose through the diplomatic ranks up to vice-minister under the dictatorial regimes of the 1980s and 1990s. He has claimed to represent the legacy of his father, Juan José Arévalo, who as Guatemala’s first popularly elected President (1945-1951) began a series of bourgeois capitalist reforms, including a limited land reform and the development of social security, public education and labor regulations. His successor, Jacobo Árbenz, who continued these reforms and appointed Arévalo as a traveling ambassador, was overthrown in a CIA-orchestrated military coup in 1954.

Semilla became a political party explicitly to support the efforts of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and its corruption investigation of then President Otto Pérez Molina and Vice President Roxana Baldetti, which had triggered mass demonstrations in 2015 and the resignation of Pérez Molina. The CICIG was created by the UN in 2006 following the instructions of Washington, which financed its activities and used select cases to keep the local ruling elite aligned with the interests of US imperialism. This has included countering growing Chinese influence and attacking migrants attempting to reach the US-Mexico border.

In 2019, the CICIG, which was investigating then President

Jimmy Morales, Giammattei and numerous politicians and business figures, was driven out of the country by the oligarchy with the acquiescence of the Trump administration.

Arévalo based his campaign on promises to fight corruption, while also proposing limited increases in social spending and the buildup of the police. However, he has also sought to reassure the local elite and said that he will not bring the CICIG back to the country.

“When we have met with business figures that have some doubts, after speaking very frankly they tell us, ‘well, we feel very comfortable with your proposals,’” he said in an interview with AP last week.

Moreover, Semilla has aggressively advanced Washington’s demands that the Giammattei administration support sanctions against the Putin government over the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, which threatens to trigger a Third World War between nuclear powers.

US imperialism has been and remains the main sponsor of fascism and dictatorial forms of rule in Guatemala and Latin America as a whole. As a result of the decline of its relative economic dominance, Washington relies more today than at any other moment on the military elites whose patronage it has long cultivated to secure its hegemony in the region. As some of its most loyal representatives, Semilla and Arévalo don’t pose any alternative to imperialist oppression and the turn toward dictatorship.

Only an independent movement of the working class, opposed to all pro-capitalist and nationalist parties and institutions, can fight the immediate threat of a fascist coup and secure the democratic and social rights of all oppressed masses in Guatemala, as part of the struggle for world socialist revolution.



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