

Guatemala's new president Arévalo thanks Washington and the military for securing his inauguration

Andrea Lobo
16 January 2024

At nearly 1 a.m. on Monday, Bernardo Arévalo was sworn in as president of Guatemala, following months of efforts by dominant sections of the Guatemalan capitalist oligarchy to overturn his election.

An avalanche of legal cases alleging electoral fraud, illegal financing and other irregularities had failed to produce evidence against Arévalo or his party, the Semilla Movement. However, a judge still suspended the party's legal status in November.

On Sunday, the inauguration of Congress was scheduled at 8 a.m., and its Board of Directors had to be selected before the ceremony to swear in the president, which was scheduled at 2 p.m. The constitutional deadline for both was at midnight.

That morning, the Constitutional Court ratified the suspension of Semilla, and the Credentials Commission composed of outgoing legislators delayed the proceedings for 9 hours. Fearing that a coup was in progress, hundreds of supporters confronted anti-riot police outside Congress, while scuffles broke out inside between legislators.

Having warned of a "coup attempt" for months, Arévalo refused to call for a popular mobilization on Sunday and limited his appeals to "congresspeople" to fulfill their "responsibilities."

Into the evening, with the conflict successfully contained to backroom negotiations, Semilla not only succeeded in getting the opposition-led Congress to recognize its legislative faction but its leading member Samuel Pérez Álvarez was selected as the president of the legislature.

The conspirators, backed by the outgoing Alejandro Giammattei administration and some sections of the American ruling class (the *Wall Street Journal* promoted their claims), had wielded their control over the state to block the accession of Semilla. Led by the Prosecutor's Office, they carried out raids of the electoral court, party offices and homes of leaders, hijacked the original ballots, issued death threats, deployed fascist gangs, and even

arrested the interior minister for failing to use deadly force against demonstrations in October.

In this context, only guarantees to remain in control of certain levers of power and to overlook at least some corruption schemes could have produced the temporary stand-down on Sunday night.

It is certain that, while the details remain secret, concerns over democratic rights, the millions of children going hungry, and the interests of the working class played no role in these talks.

The occasion was nonetheless exploited by the US and other delegations to claim that they had stayed up all night to safeguard democracy in Guatemala. After selfies with US officials, Arévalo declared in his inaugural speech, "The support of the democratic nations of the world has been crucial in allowing us to be here today."

Without any sleep, Arévalo and his vice president Karin Herrera then attended an even more meaningful inauguration as commander in chief of the armed forces. In an unprecedented decision since the end of the civil war, Arévalo held the ceremony in a place open to civilians, the Constitution Square, to present the military as a democratic force close to the "people."

There, he praised "the attitude displayed by you and your commanders in this gloomy period,"—i.e., not joining the efforts to overturn the election. "I would like to emphasize that you, as an institution, will play an active and essential role" in his government, he added.

Far from representing "democracy," Arévalo and Semilla are direct, bought-and-paid-for puppets of US imperialism, with their direct boss, USAID chief Samantha Power, leading the US delegation to the inauguration.

Beyond threats of economic sanctions, the Biden administration imposed visa restrictions on more than 300 Guatemalan officials and business leaders, including 108 of the 160 members of Congress who had voted to strip four justices of the electoral tribunal of their immunity as part of

efforts to overturn the election.

Semilla has no mass support in the working class. Only a quarter of the electorate voted for Arévalo, and demonstrations in his defense were dominated by student youth, the pseudo-left and some indigenous groups.

Semilla was a lobbyist firm turned into a political party in 2017 after consultations in Washington, as acknowledged by its own leaders. Its role was to become a political arm of the International Commission against Impunity (CICIG), a US-sponsored body that used select corruption cases to pressure the ruling class into line. Despite countless declassified cables throughout the past decades showing how Washington ignored and even encouraged impunity for human rights abuses and corruption in the state, the CICIG was launched above all to halt the growing economic influence of China.

However, the local oligarchy kicked out the CICIG in 2019, and now fear a renewal of corruption cases under Semilla.

For his part, Arévalo has demanded sanctions on Russia in support of the US-NATO war in Ukraine and vowed that Guatemala will remain one of the handful of countries that still recognizes Taiwan.

But his ties to Israel overshadow all other bona fides in the eyes of US imperialism, particularly because they demonstrate his hostility to democratic rights and the oppressed.

As the WSWS has explained, the US-Israeli genocide in Palestine is part of a global counterrevolution of the imperialist powers to redivide and recolonize the world. Arévalo, the supposed icon of democracy, avoided the topic until making a recent call to the “international community” to play a more proactive role.

Arévalo is the son of the country’s first elected president, Juan José Arévalo (1945-1951), who remained within the left nationalist government of his successor Jacobo Arbenz when it was overthrown in a CIA-orchestrated military coup in 1954. A series of military-civilian dictatorships followed, crushing opposition from below to protect the interests of US capitalists and their local partners.

In 1977, the Jimmy Carter administration felt compelled to end military aid to Guatemala due to widespread reports of human rights abuses, but Israel soon picked up where their US patrons left off, providing millions in weapons, building a munitions factory and military-intelligence school and becoming the key trainers and advisers of the Guatemalan military.

Earlier that year, the military dictator Kjell Laugerud García had named Juan José Arévalo ambassador to Israel, where he oversaw the first agreements of military assistance and numerous high-level meetings between officials.

Dictator Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-84) would grant him a lifetime pension for his services.

In 1978, Bernardo Arévalo joined his father and entered the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he learned Hebrew. Soon after, he began his diplomatic career as consul and then minister counselor at the Guatemalan embassy in Israel, between 1984-88, when the dictator Óscar Mejía Víctores, the minister of defense under Ríos Montt, continued the fascist onslaught, torturing and massacring thousands of leftists and the Mayan population. During this period, prisoners were being dropped on the Pacific Ocean from IAI-201 Aravas planes supplied by Israel.

This Israeli assistance took place in a framework of “agricultural resettlement” schemes that displaced over 1 million Guatemalans, mostly from indigenous communities, and oversaw the killing of 200,000 Mayans. Col. Eduardo Wohlers, director of the program known as “Beans and Bullets” under Ríos Montt, described “Israel’s current role” as “an interlocking mosaic of assistance programs—weapons to help the Guatemalan Army crush the opposition and lay waste to the countryside, security and intelligence advice to control the population and agrarian development models to construct on the ashes of the highlands.”

Cables show that the US State Department was aware of the “well-founded allegation of a large-scale killing of Indian men, women and children in a remote area by the Guatemalan army” when the Reagan administration sought “a major breakthrough in our relations with Guatemala by approving military cash sales” under Ríos Montt at the height of the genocide.

In 1986, civilian president Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo was installed to give the appearance of democratic reform and a transition to “peace,” which the Reagan administration and US Congress used to give more military aid while the fascist terror continued. Arévalo continued moving up the diplomatic ranks over the next decade.

A “peace accord” was signed in 1996, which turned the remaining Stalinist and Maoist guerrilla leaderships into bourgeois legislators, who proceeded to endorse different factions of the bourgeois establishment parties—all connected in different degrees to the military—including the right-wing National Unity of Hope (UNE) and Semilla.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)