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From Inherited Peace to Promised Democracy: Lessons from Guatemala's 2023 Democratic Transition

Arnoldo Gálvez, Interpeace

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This series is edited by Dr Jean-Marc Rickli, Head of Global and Emerging Risks.

About the author

Arnoldo Gálvez is a journalist, published author, and Communication Advisor for Interpeace, where he has worked since 2010.

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Key points

- **Resilience as a driver of social and political transformation:** In 2023, collective mobilisation in Guatemala successfully reversed an attempted judicial coup orchestrated by a political-criminal elite. This demonstrated how a society's resilient capacities can transform entrenched power structures rooted in exclusion and injustice, preventing violence and building lasting peace through peaceful and sustainable action.
- **Historical legacy as an ethical, institutional and organisational foundation for the defence of democracy:** The 1985 democratisation process, the 1996 Peace Accords, the pursuit of justice for historical human rights violations and the anti-corruption movement collectively empowered Guatemalan citizens to resist authoritarian regression. These milestones illustrate how cumulative democratic gains can be reactivated to safeguard the popular will and drive long-term structural transformation.
- **The prominence of historically marginalised voices in redefining national politics:** The leadership of Indigenous authorities and the active participation of Guatemalan youth in the 2023 mobilisations and electoral process underscored these groups' agency, organisational capacity, and political acumen. Their community-based, intergenerational approach linked long-standing struggles against exclusion with contemporary demands for transparency and democracy, illustrating how inclusion reinforces the legitimacy and sustainability of positive social change.
- **The strategic role of the international community in supporting local resilience:** Coordinated actions by the international community amplified domestic resistance without undermining the agency of the social movement and Guatemalan sovereignty. This response highlighted the importance of multilevel coordination to consolidate democratic progress in response to authoritarian threats.
- **Dialogue as a cornerstone for building trust and sustainable peace:** The dialogue-driven approach helped to de-escalate the 2023 crisis and transformed the defence of democracy into an opportunity for structural change.

Introduction and historical background

In 2023, Guatemala faced one of the most serious political crises in its recent history. An attempted judicial coup, orchestrated by a political-criminal elite led by Attorney General Consuelo Porras and the Attorney General's Office, sought to annul the results of the 25 June general elections, in which Bernardo Arévalo, the candidate of the Semilla Movement, was elected president. This effort to subvert the popular will – through illegal manoeuvres such as the manipulation of electoral records and the persecution of Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) officials – provoked an unprecedented response: a massive mobilisation led by Indigenous communities, accompanied by youth and civil society organisations, and strategically supported by the international community. The process culminated on 14 January 2024 with Arévalo's inauguration, marking not only the rescue of Guatemalan democracy, but also a milestone in the country's long history of resistance and social transformation.

The return to democracy in 1985 and the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords – after four decades of military dictatorships, and an internal armed conflict that left 200,000 people dead, 45,000 disappeared and one million displaced[1] – represented a new beginning for Guatemalan society. The Peace Accords not only ended the armed conflict, but also outlined an ambitious agenda for structural transformation: Indigenous inclusion, judicial reform, strengthening of the rule of law, and demilitarisation.[2] Yet the implementation of the reforms stemming from the Peace Accords faced decisive obstacles. The 1999 constitutional referendum, which was marked by apathy, disinformation, misinformation, and manipulation by conservative sectors that viewed the peace agenda as an existential threat, resulted in over 80% abstention and the victory of the "no" vote. This left the transformative promise of the accords without a legal foundation. In addition, those responsible for implementing the accords – the political parties controlling the executive and Congress – had very limited participation in their negotiation and did not consider themselves bound by the commitments undertaken, instead instrumentalising the peace agenda for short-term political machinations and contributing to the consolidation of a kleptocratic regime. Many of the institutions created under the peace framework became targets for political-criminal networks, including remnants of the recently dismantled counterinsurgency apparatus, thereby hollowing out the transformative objectives originally envisioned in the Peace Accords. In this context, poverty, exclusion and weakened institutions persisted, allowing corruption networks to remain entrenched within the state.

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In the years that followed, Guatemala maintained a formally democratic system that in practice was captured by private and criminal interests. The state proved incapable of providing basic services, addressing inequality or guaranteeing security. Nevertheless, civil society organisations and social movements continued to view the Peace Accords as a horizon of possibility, convinced that democracy and political peace constituted the minimal infrastructure necessary for positive social, economic, and political change. Despite widespread frustration, peace and democracy – however fragile – were seen as preferable to political violence and authoritarian rule.

Throughout the two decades after the signing of the Peace Accords, civic organisations and independent media denounced corruption and the progressive hijacking of public institutions. At the same time, a determined fight against impunity emerged: victims of human rights violations committed during the armed conflict brought their cases before national courts. Despite the justice system's fragility, Guatemala achieved landmark prosecutions for crimes against humanity. In 2013, it became the first country in the world to

try a genocide case in its own national courts. This trial broke the historical inertia of impunity and restored public trust in the achievement of justice as a tangible possibility.

In 2007, following years of advocacy by civil society and a moment of political lucidity, the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) was established – a hybrid mechanism between the United Nations (UN) and the Guatemalan state, designed to investigate criminal networks embedded in public institutions. The CICIG's origins can be traced back to the Peace Accords, particularly the 1994 Comprehensive Agreement on Human Rights, which committed the state to dismantling illegal bodies and clandestine security apparatuses – structures inherited from the counterinsurgency war that continued to operate within the state in peacetime. For years, civil society and human rights organisations pressured the government to establish an independent investigative body, recognising that the state lacked the capacity to purge itself. This led to a request for UN assistance and, ultimately, to the CICIG's creation.[3]

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The CICIG's mandate was to investigate corruption networks, support the Attorney General's Office in prosecutions and propose reforms to strengthen the rule of law. Over 12 years, it dismantled 72 criminal structures, prosecuted 680 individuals – including 200 public officials – and advanced significant judicial reforms.[4] Its most consequential moment came in 2015, when the "La Línea" investigation uncovered a customs fraud network operating from within the presidency. The revelations sparked massive protests across the country that united citizens from diverse sectors, all demanding an end to corruption and impunity. The demonstrations led to the resignation of President Otto Pérez Molina and represented an unprecedented civic awakening. The CICIG not only exposed systemic corruption, but also provided citizens with a structural understanding of the links among corruption, social injustice, the absence of public services and insecurity, transforming anti-corruption into a unifying national agenda.

However, between 2018 and 2023, the pendulum swung back. The termination of the agreement with the UN, the refusal to renew the CICIG's mandate in 2019 under President Jimmy Morales, and the subsequent co-optation of the judiciary during Alejandro Giammattei's administration consolidated a *pacto de corruptos* (pact of the corrupt) – a network of political and economic actors determined to restore impunity. Those implicated in CICIG investigations worked systematically to prevent any repetition of such accountability, with democracy, civic participation, independent justice and freedom of expression becoming obstacles to the continuity of corrupt enterprises. As a result, Guatemala experienced a profound authoritarian regression. The justice system was weaponised to persecute former prosecutors, judges, journalists and activists who had fought corruption. Social protest was criminalised, and public funds were diverted to manipulate the electoral process by disqualifying independent candidates, financing those aligned with the "pact of the corrupt", and sustaining a clientelist machinery fueled by corruption. The 2023 elections seemed destined to become a mere formality, consolidating authoritarianism under a superficial democratic façade.

The election of Bernardo Arévalo represented a decisive rejection of the kleptocratic system that had perpetuated one of the highest rates of poverty and inequality[5] in the hemisphere. The Semilla Movement, born out of the 2015 protests and formally established in 2017 as a centre-left party, channelled civic discontent into a pro-democracy and anti-corruption platform. Its campaign, grounded in authenticity and a strategic use of social media, resonated particularly with the youth and urban sectors, challenging entrenched clientelism financed by corruption.

The significance of this episode extends beyond Guatemala. In a global context where democracies are increasingly threatened by authoritarianism and corruption erodes public trust, the Guatemalan experience offers valuable lessons on how societies can transform conflict into an opportunity for sustainable democracy and peace. Taken together, these dynamics – transformative resilience grounded in Indigenous leadership, renewed civic energy driven by the youth, coherent international support and dialogue capacities – reveal that Guatemala's democratic defence in 2023 emerged not from a single actor, but from the convergence of inclusive, interdependent forces capable of reshaping political possibilities.

Social responses and resilience: Indigenous leadership, mobilisation, and the youth

The defence of democracy in Guatemala in 2023 was not the product of a single political actor or a spontaneous reaction, but the culmination of social capacities built over decades.

The defence of democracy in Guatemala in 2023 was not the product of a single political actor or a spontaneous reaction, but the culmination of social capacities built over decades. The roots of this resilience lay in the long historical process of Indigenous resistance, the struggles for memory and human rights, and the civic awakening that emerged during the anti-corruption movement of 2015. Interpeace identifies such processes as expressions of social resilience[6] – understood not merely as the ability to endure conflict, but as the capacity to transform crises into opportunities for structural change. In Guatemala, this resilience stemmed from the interaction among local actors who, in the face of authoritarian regression, activated long-standing community networks and bonds of trust forged through decades of collective organisation.

Indigenous leadership and collective agency

The mobilisation of October 2023, led by ancestral Indigenous authorities such as the 48 Cantons of Totonicapán, the Indigenous Mayor's Office of Sololá and dozens of other organised communities, was a cornerstone of Guatemala's defence of democracy. Faced with attempts by the Attorney General's Office – controlled by the corrupt political elite – to annul the election results through spurious judicial manoeuvres, Indigenous communities deployed a strategic, peaceful and territorially grounded resistance. They combined blockades at more than 20 strategic points across the country with a sustained presence outside the Attorney General's Office in Guatemala City, demanding respect for the popular will.

This leadership was not spontaneous, but the product of a long historical process of organisation and learning. The 1995 Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which formed part of the Peace Accords, recognised Guatemala's multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multicultural character. Although limited – it failed to address structural demands such as territorial autonomy or land redistribution[7] – the agreement provided symbolic legitimacy to ancestral Indigenous governance structures, strengthening their ability to articulate political demands and consolidate forms of leadership rooted in reciprocity, rotation, and service to the common good. For instance, the 48 Cantons of Totonicapán constitute a centuries-old Mayan-K'iche' institution that has resisted colonisation, state repression and structural racism while adapting to modern challenges without losing its communal essence.

Indigenous community organisations operate through ancestral authority structures where power is exercised collectively and renewed periodically through assemblies. Decisions are made by consensus, positions are rotational and unpaid, and leadership is conceived as a service to the community. Each canton or community elects representatives to form a council responsible for mediating conflicts, managing resources and engaging with state institutions.[8]

During the 2023 electoral crisis, Indigenous authorities assumed the defence of democracy as an extension of their traditional responsibility to safeguard community life.[9] Their actions were exemplary in three respects: territorial coordination, non-violence and inclusion. Firstly, their territorial coordination sustained a peaceful national strike for more than a hundred days, maintaining roadblocks and organised demonstrations across the country. Unlike many social movements, Indigenous leadership exercised careful control over the form and conduct of protest, ensuring the provision of food, medical care, and logistical support at every site. This horizontal and deeply communal model of organisation prevented co-optation, consolidated legitimacy, and earned the movement broad support among both the urban population and the international community.

The presence of Indigenous protesters in the capital – an uncommon occurrence in previous movements – transformed the national political imagination. The mobilisation was not merely institutional, but also cultural, territorial and moral, redefining Indigenous peoples as protagonists of an inclusive democratic order.

Secondly, non-violent discipline was another defining feature of the protests. Despite provocations, police repression and attempts at criminalisation by the Attorney General's Office, the demonstrations remained peaceful. This approach was deliberate: peaceful resistance has long been a cornerstone of Indigenous political culture, contrasting with the state's historical reliance on violence.

Finally, the inclusive nature of the Indigenous movement reshaped public perceptions of political citizenship in Guatemala. Far from espousing ethnic nationalism, Indigenous authorities appealed to civic unity. The national strike brought together merchants, transport workers, students, farmers and urban professionals under a common cause: the defence of a truly democratic vote. In this convergence, Indigenous leadership served as a catalyst for a genuinely national, pluralistic and democratic movement.

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A striking and unprecedented development was the recognition by the non-Indigenous and urban sectors of the ancestral authorities' moral and political legitimacy and leadership. This raises important questions: What has been the long-term impact of more than two decades of symbols, narratives and policies affirming Indigenous identity? How has the institutional legacy of the Peace Accords – particularly the Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples – shaped social attitudes toward the "other"? In an act of overcoming historical racism, mestizo and urban populations publicly acknowledged the right and legitimacy of Indigenous communities to lead the defence of democracy. This symbolic recognition marked a profound cultural shift in the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the broader society.

Youth and new civic convergences

Guatemalan youth played an equally vital role in 2023, both at the ballot box and in the streets. More than 75% of the 24,585 polling stations were staffed by young people aged 18-35, many of whom directly confronted attempts at electoral manipulation orchestrated by the Attorney General's Office.[10] Voting patterns also reflected a generational divide: data on average age per polling station suggests that 28%[11] of Arévalo's second-round votes came from precincts dominated by young voters (aged 18-29), while Sandra Torres, the candidate of the National Unity of Hope (UNE), drew greater support from older, rural electorates.

The prominence of youth activism can be traced back to the 2015 protests, when students from public and private universities united to demand the resignation of President Otto Pérez Molina. These demonstrations, which

brought tens of thousands of people to the Plaza de la Constitución, fostered intergenerational dialogue between students, academics and activists. Out of that dialogue emerged the Semilla group – a space for reflection that evolved into the Semilla Movement, which was founded in 2017 as a centre-left party. The movement combined the experience of figures like Bernardo Arévalo – an academic with a background in peacebuilding – with the energy of young people politicised through the fight against corruption and impunity.

In 2023, Semilla's campaign leveraged digital platforms such as TikTok and Instagram – whose audiences are predominantly aged 11-24 – to reach a generation disillusioned with traditional politics. Operating with minimal resources, Semilla's messaging centred on authenticity, honesty and a critique of clientelism. This approach contrasted sharply with the multimillion-dollar conventional campaigns of traditional parties like the UNE, signalling a generational and technological shift in Guatemalan politics.

Youth engagement extended far beyond the campaign. During the post-election crisis, young people mobilised online, on university campuses, and in public spaces, organising a massive and peaceful response to the attempted judicial coup. The University of San Carlos (USAC) – a historic bastion of critical thought – had itself been captured through electoral fraud in 2022, prompting a prolonged student occupation. This experience of horizontal organisation, self-management and non-violent resistance became a laboratory for civic learning that proved invaluable in 2023. The same young people who demonstrated in the Plaza de la Constitución in 2015 and resisted at the USAC in 2022 now joined the Indigenous-led mobilisation in defence of democracy.[12]

Resilience in Guatemala [...] is a transformative force, born from centuries of Indigenous resistance and sustained by communities and citizens who have learned to survive, reorganise, and reimagine the nation in the face of adversity.

Transformative resilience

Understood as the capacity to resist, adapt, and transform adversity, resilience in this context encompasses both immediate survival strategies and processes of structural change. In 2015, Interpeace conducted the Frameworks for Assessing Resilience (FAR)[13] study to identify and strengthen these capacities through a participatory methodology that gave voice to citizens, civil society organisations, and local communities. The study highlighted how Guatemalans confront conflict and socio-economic challenges, and identified three forms of resilience: absorption, which mitigates impacts without addressing root causes; adaptation, which entails adjustments to cope with difficulties; and transformation, which seeks to change the structural conditions that perpetuate conflict.

Transformation – the most ambitious form of resilience – aims to overcome the state's structural weaknesses, particularly its reproduction of conflict through corruption, clientelism and abuse of power. Although in 2015 participants deemed the conditions for deep transformation to be limited, they also recognised that community organisation, social alliances and civil society networks were essential for achieving it. The civic mobilisations of 2015 and the democratic uprising of 2023 demonstrated that resilience in Guatemala is not confined to endurance – it is a transformative force, born from centuries of Indigenous resistance and sustained by communities and citizens who have learned to survive, reorganise, and reimagine the nation in the face of adversity.

The role of the international community: diplomacy, sanctions and coherence

The defence of Guatemalan democracy in 2023 cannot be understood without acknowledging the decisive role of the international community and the interaction between external and domestic actors. Diplomatic pressure, individual sanctions, electoral observation and sustained dialogue proved essential to containing authoritarian regression. The international response in Guatemala represented an exercise in diplomatic coherence and multilevel cooperation.

The actions of key international actors – the United States, European Union (EU), Organization of American States (OAS), and UN – were coordinated with domestic social mobilisation and the efforts of President-elect Bernardo Arévalo to sustain a dialogue-based process aimed at preventing violence and ensuring a peaceful transfer of power. This alignment allowed external support to reinforce the legitimacy of democratic actors without displacing their leadership.

The coherence among Washington, Brussels, and the OAS General Secretariat was instrumental in upholding the legitimacy of the electoral process.

Diplomatic pressure and sanctions: a coordinated response

The international community had identified clear signs of democratic backsliding in Guatemala since 2021. The judicial persecution of prosecutors, judges, activists, and journalists and the capture of electoral institutions prompted a wave of targeted sanctions against actors deemed to be responsible for corruption and institutional erosion. In 2023, the United States played a leading role through the Engel List, which was created in 2021 to sanction individuals involved in corruption and the obstruction of justice, and imposed visa restrictions and asset freezes on more than 300 individuals, including business leaders, legislators, judges, and political operators.[14] These measures politically isolated figures such as Attorney General Consuelo Porras and other members of the "pact of the corrupt".

Simultaneously, the OAS deployed its Electoral Observation Mission to document electoral irregularities and pressures on the independent organisation responsible for managing all aspects of the election, the TSE. The coordinated message from these institutions was unequivocal: the international community would not recognise any transfer of power resulting from anti-democratic judicial manipulation. The coherence among Washington, Brussels, and the OAS General Secretariat was instrumental in upholding the legitimacy of the electoral process and reaffirming the principle of democratic sovereignty.

The sanctions' impact was primarily political rather than economic. Sanctioned officials – magistrates, prosecutors, and politicians – became internationally isolated and publicly identified as responsible for the attempted anti-democratic movement. This weakened the outgoing regime's capacity to seek external recognition. Moreover, the sanctions served as a form of preventive diplomacy. By increasing the political cost of repression and judicial manipulation, they constrained the most aggressive moves of the "pact of the corrupt". Unlike large-scale punitive interventions, these individual sanctions preserved Guatemalan sovereignty while effectively deterring any escalation of repressive and anti-democratic machinations.

International coherence and the role of multilateral institutions

In similar crises, the absence of coordination among external actors has often undermined the effectiveness of diplomatic action. In 2023, however, there was an exceptional convergence between the United States and regional and multilateral actors such as the OAS, EU, and UN.

The OAS played a particularly significant role. Following the Attorney General Office's attempts to suspend the Semilla Movement and annul the election results, the OAS General Secretariat dispatched a high-level mission to Guatemala. Its report, released in October 2023, confirmed that an attempted coup was under way and called for respect for the electoral mandate and for dialogue among the outgoing administration, the president-elect, and community authorities.[15]

The EU complemented this effort through sustained bilateral diplomacy. European ambassadors visited protest sites and met with Indigenous authorities in a symbolic gesture that acknowledged their legitimacy and leadership. This represented a significant shift in traditional diplomacy: dialogue was no longer confined to state institutions, but extended to community authorities, who served as guarantors of democratic order. The UN, through its Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, documented abuses and the criminalisation of protesters, issuing statements that reinforced the international consensus in support of Guatemala's citizen-led movement.

These combined efforts prevented Guatemala's diplomatic isolation from triggering internal violence. International coherence was also evident in the alignment of messages expressing support for electoral institutions, condemnation of judicial persecution and the endorsement of dialogue as the path to resolving the crisis. This unified stance bolstered public confidence that civic mobilisation had strong support from powerful international actors.

These mediations produced minimal yet crucial agreements, including mutual recognition of the electoral results and a shared commitment to institutional solutions.

Dialogue: preventing violence while safeguarding democracy

The national strike led by Indigenous authorities generated tensions with business sectors represented by the Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial, and Financial Associations (CACIF),[16] which denounced economic losses and restrictions on free movement resulting from protesters' blockades. Indigenous leaders, however, maintained that the blockades were a legitimate act in defence of democracy and the truly democratic vote. This confrontation between community-based logic and corporate interests revealed a long-standing division in Guatemalan society. The situation had critical moments, with fears of violent intervention to dismantle the blockades – an escalation that could have plunged the country into widespread unrest.

The risk of violence was real. At times, Guatemalan society stood dangerously close to the brink. Yet the restraint of the Indigenous leadership and their openness to dialogue kept the pro-democracy movement within peaceful bounds.

The US Embassy discreetly facilitated dialogue between the CACIF and the mobilised Indigenous authorities, including the 48 Cantons of Totonicapán. These mediations produced minimal yet crucial agreements, including mutual recognition of the electoral results and a shared commitment to institutional solutions.

In this tense environment, dialogue emerged as the key tool for the de-escalation of the conflict. On 10 October 2023, Bernardo Arévalo and the Semilla Movement established the Action Table for Democracy, bringing together historically polarised actors – including the CACIF and the 48 Cantons.[17] Although not all participants signed the final communiqué – particularly some prominent members of CACIF, who also declined to denounce the attempted coup – the process yielded a minimum consensus: recognition

of the elections' validity and the gradual replacement of roadblocks with demonstrations in front of the Attorney General's Office.

As a result of these efforts, the Arévalo administration institutionalised dialogue in 2024 through the Permanent Table for Dialogue, addressing historical issues such as agrarian conflict, gender equality and youth inclusion. More than 370 participants from marginalised sectors contributed concrete policy proposals during the first months of the new government.

The memory of the Peace Accords, which facilitated negotiations among the government, insurgent groups and civil society in the 1990s, inspired this renewed commitment to dialogue. In 2023, dialogue was not a rhetorical gesture, but a functional mechanism for trust-building, conflict management and intersectoral coordination. Even in conditions of acute polarisation, it proved that inclusive dialogue can transform crises into opportunities for a new social pact that would redefine the relationship between the state and society.

In 2023, dialogue was not a rhetorical gesture, but a functional mechanism for trust-building, conflict management and intersectoral coordination.

Lessons learned: insights from Guatemala's 2023 democratic transition

Guatemala's experience in 2023 offers profound lessons for peacebuilding and the defence of democracy in contexts of institutional fragility. The country's ability to avert authoritarian regression through civic mobilisation, Indigenous leadership and dialogue demonstrates how a society's resilience can transform crises into opportunities for positive change.

The following lessons are particularly relevant to other contexts of democratic transition and fragile democracies seeking to consolidate peace and prevent democratic erosion.

Investments in local capacities for peaceful mobilisation, mediation and civic organisation are essential for enabling societies to defend democracy from within, without depending on coercive power or external intervention.

1. Collective resilience as a foundation for democratic defence

The mass mobilisation led by Indigenous authorities demonstrated that collective resilience – shaped by decades of struggle against exclusion, racism and impunity – can defeat authoritarian threats without resorting to violence. This process was not spontaneous, but built on long-accumulated capacities of organisation, solidarity and ethical leadership.

Investments in local capacities for peaceful mobilisation, mediation and civic organisation are essential for enabling societies to defend democracy from within, without depending on coercive power or external intervention.

2. Indigenous and community-based Leadership as legitimate political capital

Indigenous leadership, grounded in communal ethics and participatory governance, redefined Guatemalan democracy, showing that ancestral forms of organisation remain valid sources of legitimacy and power. Indigenous authorities not only halted a judicial coup, but also articulated a vision of democracy as a collective project based on reciprocity and dignity.

Democratic transitions are more sustainable when they recognise and integrate traditional and community-based governance systems as legitimate political interlocutors. These forms of leadership expand representation, deepen legitimacy and strengthen social cohesion.

3. Youth and civic renewal as engines of change

Youth participation – through the creative use of social media, civic engagement, and the rejection of patronage politics – infused Guatemalan democracy with new energy and authenticity. Semilla's campaign, which prioritised ethical messages over financial means, marked a paradigm shift in the country's political culture.

Youth-driven civic renewal can be a powerful counterweight to entrenched clientelism and corruption. Policies that foster intergenerational dialogue, civic education and digital literacy can enhance the resilience of democratic cultures.

4. International support that respects local ownership and leadership

The international community – through sanctions, election observation and mediation – amplified domestic democratic dynamics without supplanting local leadership. The US Engel List, OAS missions, and EU statements – among other actions from the diplomatic toolbox – demonstrated that external support is most effective when it respects and strengthens legitimate local leadership and ownership.

For external actors, the Guatemalan case underscores the importance of calibrated engagement combining preventive diplomacy, targeted sanctions and political accompaniment that reinforces rather than replaces domestic agency.

Post-crisis moments should therefore be leveraged to enact second-generation reforms that institutionalise the ethical and participatory gains of social mobilisation.

5. Dialogue as a mechanism for de-escalation and reform

Dialogue, inspired by the legacy of the Peace Accords, enabled convergence across divided sectors and prevented escalation into violence, laying the foundations for a more inclusive democracy. The Action Table for Democracy and the 2024 thematic dialogue forums exemplify how inclusive dialogue can generate consensus in polarised environments.

Dialogue mechanisms that are inclusive, transparent, and anchored in trust can de-escalate crises and transform moments of confrontation into platforms for long-term institutional reform.

6. Beyond resistance and mobilisation: the need for structural transformation

For other fragile contexts, Guatemala's 2023 experience underscores the importance of reinforcing societal resilience, amplifying marginalised voices and ensuring coherent international engagement that upholds local ownership. Yet these actions alone are insufficient if not accompanied by structural transformation. The 2023 crisis revealed that without judicial independence, a professional and non-partisan civil service, transparency, accountability, and sustained reductions in poverty and inequality, societies are condemned to resist repeatedly under the same fragile conditions.

Democratic defence must evolve into democratic consolidation. Sustaining progress requires long-term reforms in the areas of justice, governance and economic inclusion that transform resilience from a reactive capacity into a proactive driver of peace.

7. Towards democratic reforms

Transformative resilience demands structural reforms to consolidate the democratic gains of 2023. Reforming the justice system, guaranteeing the autonomy of Indigenous authorities, strengthening decentralisation, and promoting a fairer economy are indispensable for democracy in Guatemala – and elsewhere – to evolve from an episode of resistance into a sustained process of transformation.

Post-crisis moments should therefore be leveraged to enact second-generation reforms that institutionalise the ethical and participatory gains of social mobilisation, turning defensive victories into enduring democratic architectures.

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Building Peace Together

Geneva Centre for Security Policy
Maison de la paix
Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2D
P.O. Box 1295
1211 Geneva 1
Switzerland
Tel: + 41 22 730 96 00
Contact: www.gcsp.ch/contact
www.gcsp.ch

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Geneva Centre for Security Policy