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ACCOUNTABILITY AMIDST FRAGILITY, CONFLICT, AND VIOLENCE: LEARNING FROM RECENT CASES

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Youth-Led Anti-Corruption Movement in Post-Conflict Guatemala: ‘Weaving the Future’?

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Abstract This article examines youth-led anti-corruption protests in Guatemala in 2015, which contributed to the resignation of the president and vice-president. It outlines three key factors that were part of the initial success of the *#RenunciaYa* social media campaign, and the subsequent struggle towards political and structural reforms. First, it can be regarded as part of a much longer history of rights-led civic engagement and protest. Second, while social media proved indispensable for mobilising civic action, it was insufficient to reach beyond urban-based youth activists. Third, the removal of the president and vice-president was possible not only because of public pressure generated by anti-corruption youth activists, but also because of the longer-term work of two Attorney Generals and the International Commission Against Impunity in highlighting the fight against corruption within the national political agenda. Finally, the article argues that civic participation after conflict requires at least one generation to spring.

Keywords: anti-corruption, youth movements, post-conflict, Guatemala, social media, indigenous movements, social movements.

1 Introduction

This article examines the recent case of youth-led anti-corruption protests in Guatemala in 2015, which resulted in the resignation of the president and vice-president. Initially under the banner of the hashtag *#RenunciaYa*, this social media campaign first galvanised protests in Guatemala City before spreading to the country’s other major urban centres. It culminated in a national strike on 27 August 2015, and the then president and vice-president of Guatemala resigned in the face of public pressure and calls for their removal. In spite of evolving from a campaign that targeted individual politicians (*#RenunciaYa*) to one that began to grapple with the breadth and depth of corruption within state institutions (*#JusticiaYa*), momentum for systemic change proved difficult to sustain.

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This case study outlines three key factors that contributed both to the initial success of the campaign, and to the subsequent struggle to push for broader political and structural reforms.

First, it is necessary to understand the recent wave of youth-led anti corruption movements in Guatemala as part of a much longer history of rights-led civic engagement and protest. This recent wave of protests was borne out of an initial period of post-conflict political activism that was both distinct from, and nevertheless later connected to, the waves of indigenous and peasant activism that defined Guatemala's civil war period.

The youth leaders responsible for *#RenunciaYa* were born towards the very end of, or just after, the intensely violent civil conflict that embroiled Guatemala for over 30 years. These young leaders did not have direct experience with the types of violent repression, sanction, and reprisal that were common outcomes for civic protest in their parents' and grandparents' generation. As a result of this 'generation gap', as well as their initial failure to take into account long-standing indigenous and rural peasant movements, the youth-led anti-corruption movement was initially short-sighted in its quest for political change. Although indigenous and peasant movements participated in many of the protests initiated by the youth-led anti-corruption movement, their historical demands were not integrated into the *#RenunciaYa* agenda.

Second, while social media proved indispensable as a platform for communication to mobilise civic action, it was not sufficient to reach beyond urban-based youth activists. Ultimately, it was the interplay of social and traditional media that brought other groups – small business, indigenous rights organisations, and older generations – into the fold of the anti-corruption movement.

Third, the removal of the president and vice-president was possible not only because of public pressure generated by anti-corruption youth activists, but also because of the longer-term work of the Attorney General and the support of the International Commission Against Impunity. This set of actors helped to bring the fight against corruption front and centre in the national political agenda, communicating the results of their investigations through frequent press conferences and traditional media outlets.

This case study explores these factors in turn and argues that the post-conflict period extends to a long time after the war ends. For the Guatemalan case, the protests occurred almost 20 years after the end of the war, in which a new post-conflict generation was able to undertake peaceful anti-corruption protests. In such contexts, it is necessary to bridge both generation gaps and civic demand 'gaps' to generate the necessary coalitions for judicial, electoral, and political reforms on the scale that Guatemala now requires.

2 History of the conflict and aftermath in Guatemala

2.1 Period of conflict: 1960–96²

From 1960 to 1996, Guatemala experienced one of the most violent twentieth-century armed conflicts in the Americas. In a report published in 1999, Guatemala's Historical Clarification Commission (Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico, or CEH) estimated that some 200,000 people had been either executed or disappeared, while the numbers of orphaned children reached upwards of 150,000 (CEH 1999). The massacres and destruction of rural villages gave rise to massive waves of internal forced displacement and exile (Sanford 2004). During the period of most intense conflict (1981–83) some 1.5 million Guatemalans were displaced. In total, one quarter of all Guatemalans were directly impacted by political violence, whether in the form of state-sanctioned assassinations, kidnappings, forced displacement, or disappearance (CEH 1999).

While the conflict's original combatants were limited to members of the Guatemalan military and several leftist guerrilla groups, under the umbrella of Cold War politics, the conflict soon expanded to include labour unions, 'leftist' intellectuals, human rights defenders, and unarmed indigenous populations accused of supporting or sympathising with guerrilla groups (Grandin 2004). State repression targeted civil society leaders of all stripes that appeared insufficiently 'anti-communist', as well as civic spaces considered rife with leftist thinkers (e.g. the national university). By the early 1980s, as part of the state's counter-insurgency strategy, arbitrary executions of students and professors reached their peak and continued throughout the decade (Kobrak 1999). In the late 1980s, state-sanctioned killings shifted from targeting 'leaders' to targeting membership of grass-roots organisations as the government sought to destroy any perceived resistance from social and political organisations (CEH 2000).

Although the civil conflict impacted all age groups, much of the violence and repression was aimed at those Guatemalans between 16 and 45 years of age (CEH 1999). In this sense, by attacking the nation's youth, the heads of young families, and adults in their prime, the repressive regime struck at the heart of Guatemala's human capital and severely hampered any potential for alternative forms of leadership. The Guatemalan state inflicted violence and repression during this period both through legal channels and institutions, as well as through the use of paramilitary and clandestine groups. Over the course of three decades of conflict, these clandestine groups managed to embed themselves within, and co-opt structures of the state (*Insight Crime* 2017). Ultimately, this co-optation created the grounds on which widespread corruption could take root. As described below, removing and fighting these clandestine structures, understood as organisations or groups who keep their affiliations and activities secret to avoid legal persecution, became part of the peace agreement.

2.2 Peace Accords in the era of neoliberal policies

Following several years of intense negotiation between the guerrilla movements and government, the Peace Accords were signed at the end

of 1996. These accords recognised the historical exclusion of indigenous populations and included specific policies and targets related to public investment, accomplished via taxation reforms and other progressive policies (Cabanas 2008). Somewhat paradoxically, these progressive Peace Accords were secured at the same time that the Guatemalan state was aggressively implementing neoliberal policies, such as the signing of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). Guatemala's president at this time – Alvaro Arzú – who signed the Peace Accords represented the traditional economic elite. Beyond signing CAFTA and agreeing to structural adjustment reforms, Arzú went several steps further in the privatisation of public assets, the enforced reduction of government salaries, and the termination of 15 per cent of public sector contracts. Many public workers were offered yearly contracts without pension benefits. These policies resulted in increased unemployment and the concomitant expansion of the informal economy. Not surprisingly, poverty indices and cost of living increased. By the end of the Arzú presidency in 1999, real-wage value had degraded to the point that it was equivalent to wage values in 1983 (Perla 2004).

However, while these neoliberal policies were put into place, the Peace Accords included specific targets for increased social spending, particularly in the health and education sectors. The Arzú government pursued these aims through social fund structures which rapidly became instruments of political control and sites of corruption. While spending increased via the social funds, the indicators for social development continued to lag far behind neighbouring Central American countries (Perla 2004). In sum, few of the Peace Accords' policies and structural reforms were implemented and indigenous populations continued to face social exclusion (Center for Economic and Social Rights and Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Fiscales 2009). As corruption within state structures and social funds grew, there was little outcry or civic action by non-indigenous groups. The fear of reprisal engendered by three decades of civil conflict had left its mark (Flores *et al.* 2009). While organised indigenous groups continued to mobilise on the long-standing issues of land rights and war reparations, the majority of the non-indigenous urban middle class did not support these protests (Bastos and Brett 2010).

3 The rise of anti-corruption on the national agenda

Corruption has long been viewed as an intrinsic part of the Guatemalan state (Andrés 2016). Beyond the violence and population displacement that defined the latter half of the twentieth century in Guatemala, there is a much longer history of impunity for the country's political and economic elites. However, this situation began to shift in 2015 when a very capable Attorney General, in collaboration with a UN panel of investigators (the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG in Spanish)), used a press conference to present evidence that the then vice-president was involved in a sophisticated ring that stole public resources in several custom ports. Everyone knew that corruption existed; however, they had never been presented with

all the details and evidence, leaving no space for doubt. The Attorney General's team used modern investigative forensic techniques that showed the money trail and phone recordings between ring members that included the vice-president as one of the leaders. The phone records and paper trails also involved the then president. The capacity to use such methods (new to the public) was provided by the CICIG.

The CICIG (the *Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala*) had been formed in 2006 following the Peace Accords, in which an international independent panel of experts was created to build the technical capacity of the Public Prosecutor's Office for investigation of illegal groups using state institutions to commit crime (Weld 2016). In addition to the transfer of knowledge and skills, the CICIG was also expected to support the public prosecutor in the litigation of cases in the Guatemalan courts, recommend policy reforms that strengthened the judiciary system, and close legal loopholes. Most CICIG members are non-Guatemalan and have diplomatic immunity; the organisation itself is funded by the international community (and not dependent on state funds). By the terms of the Peace Accords and the creation of CICIG, state representatives cannot interfere in these investigations or any other aspects of the CICIG mandate.

The UN panel began its work in 2006. Although the CICIG investigated a range of important cases, it did not initially tackle the mafia structures embedded in the state apparatus. This began to change in 2013, when a newly appointed Attorney General and the new Commissioner of CICIG (a Colombian judge experienced in investigating paramilitary crime) teamed up to bring cases of organised corruption that involved judges, congress members, the traditional economic oligarchy, and the elected president and vice-president. Through its work, the CICIG began to uncover the nested relationships of corruption embedded within the Guatemalan state, which extended to all branches of government and included members of the economic elite that had bribed their way into political power.

The independent role of the Attorney General was crucial for the investigation and uncovering of cases of institutional corruption. Although Thelma Aldana – General Prosecutor 2014–18 – played a key role in exposing corruption and laying the groundwork for the 2015 anti-corruption protests, it was her predecessor – Claudia Paz y Paz (2010–14) who set the precedent for independent action. As Attorney General, Claudia Paz y Paz adopted the strategy of setting performance targets to tackle corruption and inaction inside the Public Ministry. These targets provided the rationale for the removal of those personnel not performing their public duties to a sufficient standard, and the hiring of new, more committed, personnel (Sas 2011). Through the investigation process, the Attorney General kept focus on victim's rights and prosecuted lead perpetrators of the violence and repression that defined the civil conflict period. The most important case came in 2013, when the public prosecutor and the courts successfully convicted former

General and Head of State, Efraín Ríos Montt, of genocide charges (Gagne 2016).

By investigating and bringing to trial high-ranking military personnel for genocide, Claudia Paz y Paz set the precedent that the public prosecutor can be independent (*El Mundo* 2013). Many analysts state that the tenure of Claudia Paz y Paz as the first truly independent public prosecutor, set the conditions for Thelma Aldana to advance in her role (Gagne 2016). In an interview in 2016, Claudia Paz y Paz reflected:

I think that the genocide trial and other important trials that were brought before the courts during my time as attorney general, were cases that have strengthened the Public Ministry as a judicial body. There are courageous officials, judges who have presented cases as important as the genocide case, and this strengthening permitted other cases to be presented that before were unthinkable (*ibid.*).

When these two groups joined forces – CICIG and the Attorney General's office – it became possible to take corruption charges up to the highest level of public office. Using modern investigative forensic techniques to unearth paper trails and phone recordings, and then hosting a press conference to make this evidence public, the Attorney General and CICIG provided proof of the full extent of institutional and political corruption for the first time.

4 Urban youth-led anti-corruption mobilisation

The exposure of the full extent and reach of corruption led by the CICIG and the Attorney General struck a chord with a section of youth. Gabriel Wer, who along with three of his friends initiated the 2015 protests by posting an invitation on Facebook to demonstrate in the Central Plaza, recalls that neither he nor his friends had ever attended a social protest before, but they were outraged at the corruption of the political elite and galvanised into action. In order to get people to attend, they had to explain that it was a peaceful protest, non-partisan and non-ideological, demanding the resignation of the vice-president and then of the president (Wer 2016). Youth indignation and mobilisation ran counter to decades of political apathy on the part of the urban middle classes (Luhnow 2015). Furthermore, these were young people who came from a social milieu where the control of politics, education, the judiciary, and banking had long been in the hands of their elders (Aitkenhead Castillo 2017). For them to erupt in rage and galvanise large numbers of urban youth to protest what was effectively a corrupted 'status quo' was seen as radical by both the national and international press.

The testimonies of young people who mobilised reflect the generational change between their parents who lived through the political violence and repressive years, and themselves, who grew up after the Peace Accords were signed, wanted to become civically active, but have never seen or experienced a civic protest. Donald Urizar, one of the leaders of

the civic movement in Quetzaltenango explains it in this way: ‘For our parents – who lived the armed conflict – we were creating social unrest and were risking being repressed by authorities. For the young people, attending the peaceful protests was a chance to hang out in the park and take selfies’. However, the level of awareness changed little by little with every Saturday, through the publication of open letters and continued communication through social media; the participating youth became more engaged with the mobilisation and the demands (Urizar 2016: 67).

On Saturday 25 April 2015, over 35,000 people attended the first of these anti-corruption protests in Guatemala City’s Central Plaza. Gabriel and his group made no claim of leadership. The crowd whooped and shouted, whistled and drummed. They held up signs denouncing corruption and demanding the resignation of the vice-president. Soon, news of the protests in the capital reached Guatemala’s other cities, resulting in follow-on protests in the central plazas of five other cities. The novelty of youth-led protests, on the heels of several decades of youth apathy, was such that TV channels clamoured to transmit the action live. The extensive coverage no doubt contributed to an ever-growing number of people joining the protests.

The civic protests continued for over 20 Saturdays in Guatemala’s main urban plazas, each time beginning at three in the afternoon. As reported in the press, the protests that followed on from that initial gathering evolved into something multigenerational, and brought to the streets people from a range of class, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. A young activist from Quetzaltenango – the second largest urban centre in Guatemala – recalls that the civic protest was the next step from cyber-activism:

We forced ourselves to go out to the streets. However, we had never done it before, we had no idea about the logistics involved in having thousands of people walking together on the streets, the permits from authorities we needed to file, the logistics to close the traffic, the sound system, etc. (Urizar 2016: 67).

The 2015 protests became a civic celebration, sparked initially by young people’s anger and indignation over government corruption.

Indigenous and rural peasant movements, that is, those civic groups with roots in the early years of the Guatemalan civil conflict, were absent from the first wave of urban protests. However, by the third Saturday, these groups began to join in. Nora Chamalé, a national indigenous rights leader, explained the early reticence to join the youth-led urban anti-corruption protests: ‘We wanted the youth and the newly mobilised to understand that this corruption isn’t new, and this corruption is the same that led to many of the injustices and abuses that peasants and indigenous people mobilise against’ (Chamalé 2016: 129). It was Daniel Pascual, she recalled, a prominent figure in the indigenous rights movement, who convinced his peers that this outburst of urban,

middle-class protest represented something new and galvanising. The Saturday protests marked the beginning of a shift in awareness among those with positions of greater privilege that the Guatemalan state was corrupt, and that through joining forces with the historic factions of rural indigenous and peasants' movements, they could become a national force for change.

After more than ten Saturdays of civic protests in urban plazas throughout Guatemala, the vice-president resigned but the president remained in power, refusing to step down. There began to be calls for a national strike, a tactic that represented a return to strategies of past indigenous and peasant movements (Gutiérrez 2015). This call for a national strike gathered support among the Facebook and Twitter-following urban youth. Furthermore, the idea spread to small businesses within the food industry, which employs mostly young people, and then beyond. The date, 27 August 2015, was declared.

On that day, over 250,000 people gathered in Guatemala City's Central Plaza, while tens of thousands more mobilised in urban plazas in Guatemala's smaller cities. By the time of the national strike, there were estimates that over 1 million Guatemalans had participated in the anti-corruption protests. The initial wave of activism had grown to include not only the traditional 'protest' sector within the national universities, but also youth from private universities, religious institutions, indigenous and peasant movements, and ordinary citizens who had never once before raised their voice in protest (Ixchú 2016). The strike paralysed the capital and many other cities for at least 12 hours.

Surveys conducted after the fact suggested that the civic mobilisations were not driven by a single political ideology, but that participants ranged from across the political spectrum (Mendoza 2017). These mobilisations marked a tectonic shift in Guatemalan public life, as one young activist explained, given the country's long established 'culture of fear and silence' which – since the days of Spanish colonisation – 'have been part of structural social relations in Guatemala' (Ixchú 2016: 31).

5 The benefits and limitations of social media and cyber-activism

As we saw in the previous section, the anti-corruption mobilisations were first catalysed via social media channels, namely Facebook and Twitter. As with youth-led political mobilisations in other corners of the world, the communication tools offered by social media enabled the viral recruitment of others to their anti-corruption cause. With the help of sharp imagery and a clever hashtag, *#RenunciaYa* captured attention and quickly snowballed so that within a few hours of the initial call for protest, some 10,000 people had confirmed their participation (Wer 2016).

The use of social media continued to be of critical importance in the build-up to the national strike on 27 August. Through social media campaigns, the *#RenunciaYa* group encouraged small businesses to declare allegiance to the anti-corruption cause. Bolstered by

15 additional organisations that took on formal roles as ‘co-organisers’, the campaign grew in strength to the point that it was able to generate a citizen boycott of those food, retail, and service businesses that refused to join the strike. With pressure building, several large international food chains switched allegiance and announced their support of the national strike on 26 August. By the morning of 27 August, the organised private sector was left with no option but to announce its support (Solís 2016).

A few days after the strike, Parliament voted to remove the president’s immunity. This removal and the social pressure resulted in the president announcing his resignation. He was immediately taken into custody to face accusations of leading a corruption ring that operated via the government customs agency. His resignation was widely celebrated and the Saturday mobilisations came to an immediate halt. While social media had enabled the rapid spread of the Saturday protests and engendered citizen outrage, the youth-led anti-corruption movement had no staying power. In the aftermath of the resignations, the protesters celebrated a job well done. However, as analysts have argued since, the newly mobilised urban youth did not have any in-depth knowledge of the historical precedent of state capture by paralegal crime. Given the depoliticisation of the Guatemalan population at large following so many years of political repression and state-sanctioned violence, this new wave of protesters did not have the necessary experience or contextual understanding to identify the corrupt practices of the president and vice-president as part of a larger system, and saw the resignations as ‘mission accomplished’ (Cuevas-Molina 2016; Morales 2016).

6 The beginning of a movement aware of history and continuous civic action

Despite the abrupt conclusion of the Saturday protests, some elements of the urban youth anti-corruption movement remained committed to ongoing civic action. They have since come to understand that real change will require greater participation in political parties, through campaigns for elected representatives that uphold the anti-corruption mission, and through sustained calls for government accountability (DiálogosGT 2017). Subsequently, the group *#RenunciaYa*, who created the original Facebook event transformed themselves into *#JusticiaYa*, now an active organisation of urban youth with affiliates in urban centres beyond the capital.

In light of having learned the limitations of targeting individually corrupt actors, versus seeking change at a systemic level, these organisations have since implemented a dynamic learning exchange with historical indigenous and peasant movements that they call ‘weaving the future’. This ‘weaving the future’ involves pulling together the threads of past civic protest together with contemporary calls for judicial, legislative, and political reforms. Gabriel Wer, now a leader of *#JusticiaYa* explains:

In the year 2015, we concentrated our demands on the resignation of the president and vice-president. When the calls to continue the pressure further to implement structural reform came about, we lost it – we did not have enough information and knowledge to act strategically (Morales 2016).

Through 'weaving the future' they have greater knowledge on the historical roots of the causes of corruption and the structural reforms that will be required to unpick and dismantle the rot within state institutions (Morales 2016). For example, in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala's second city, what began as #*RenunciaYa* has now become a formal civil society organisation that monitors public budgets and holds to account the municipal authorities (Urizar 2016). The organisation continues using social media as a mobilising strategy: 'By using social media in an adequate manner, we have been able to inform and make other young people aware, who are now very active in supporting civil society organisations' (*ibid.*: 73).

One key aspect of 'weaving the future' has been the awareness-raising of urban, middle-class youth to the historic demands of indigenous and peasants' rights movements. During the civic protests, particularly in urban areas beyond the capital, indigenous youth played a crucial role. Whereas the urban, middle-class youth who initiated #*RenunciaYa* constituted a newly politicised population, indigenous youth such as student leader Lucia Ixchiú who was 24 during the 2015 protests, represented a multigenerational cohort of social mobilisation and political struggle (Ixchiú 2016: 32). Indigenous rights leaders, who within their own communities have passed down knowledge of past repression, violence, and strategic mechanisms for claiming rights, now talk of urban youth as an 'awakened' group who can contribute to their 'historical struggle' (Silva 2016: 48).

7 Reappearance of traditional divides within the youth movement

The anti-corruption crusade led by the public prosecutor together with CICIG had almost complete support from Guatemalan society during 2015 and 2016. However, as the investigation advanced and new cases were brought to courts, the indicted went beyond corrupt politicians to include bankers, private corporations, and family members of the powerful traditional economic elite. One case involved the brother and son of newly elected president Jimmy Morales. These recent cases revealed the extent to which economic and political elites had benefited from their co-optation of the structures of the Guatemalan state. Not surprisingly, these revelations of the systemic and structural nature of corruption in Guatemala created rifts among those who had originally supported the anti-corruption agenda. In response to the spread of allegations, powerful industrial elites initiated a campaign accusing CICIG and the public prosecutor of a leftist political agenda against their affiliates (Garcia and Pellecer 2018).

Among the urban youth that had first mobilised as part of the 2015 wave of protests, new groups and movements emerged that began to use

the judiciary and courts to hold politicians and government authorities to account. At the same time, other factions of politically mobilised young people splintered off from the original cause. For example, the *#GuatemalaInmortal* movement organised to protect ‘life, liberty and private property’, directly challenging what they perceived of as a ‘leftist’ takeover of the 2015 civic protests (Urrutia 2017). Since 2017, *#GuatemalaInmortal* has used social media to protest against the CICIG Commissioner and the constitutional reforms that aimed to strengthen the judiciary, as well as voicing their support of the current president (in spite of emerging evidence of illicit funding of his electoral campaign) (E&N 2017). Other factions of the mobilised youth that first gained ground in the 2015 protests include groups that support conservative and religious agendas (e.g. anti-abortion, anti-LGBT rights, anti-gender rights). On the left, these splits led to the creation of two new political parties: *Movimiento Semilla*, identified as centre-left, and *Movimiento para Liberación de los Pueblos*, with a left-leaning, progressive, and indigenous rights agenda. What began as an urban youth-led anti-corruption movement in 2015 has now since split along divergent ideological lines (conservative, left, right, religious).

8 Conclusions

This case of the 2015 youth-led anti-corruption movement in Guatemala shows what has become possible in terms of peaceful political protests for a generation not directly touched by the violence and repression of the country’s 30-plus years of civil conflict. It is clear that the reformulation of an active citizenry, one with the genuine potential to hold political leaders to account, is a long-term process in a country scarred by war. The urban youth who initiated *#RenunciaYa* had no direct knowledge of civic protest, nor were they connected in any direct way to the rural, indigenous movements that had formed the core of rights-focused political mobilisation in the latter half of the twentieth century. Moreover, although the focus of many reports about the Guatemalan anti-corruption movement has been on the urban youth that mobilised, it is also important to note that those professionals working in the Public Prosecutor’s Office, doing the groundwork of investigation, preparing the cases and defending the cases in court are also young – most of them are less than 35 years old. This young generation of public officials had a different ethos and motivation than the previous generations that grew up during the period of political violence and conflict.

A closer reading of the case shows that the mobilisation which was successful in leading to the resignations of the president and vice-president was due to a fortunate alignment between protesters on the street (the youth) and key reformist institutions within the state (the public prosecutor and the CICIG), leading to pressure on the executive horizontally as well as vertically from below. This appears to be a variation of the ‘sandwich strategy’ in which the building of pro-accountability coalitions is needed to effect change (Fox 2015).

Further, although the collaboration between the new youth movement and the 'older' indigenous movements proved key to bringing about the national strike, as the protests matured the historic demands of indigenous and rural peasant movements (access to land, indigenous rights, and cultural identity) were not incorporated into the anti-corruption demands for government reform. Now, some of the spin-off urban youth movements have learned from the limitations of their original approach and are actively pursuing collaboration, exchanges, and alliances with long-standing indigenous and peasant groups. This suggests that while the social media strategy served to spark and steer the initial wave of outrage, there is a longer process of collective identity building, strategising, and ideological clarification that can only occur through sustained engagement and face-to-face learning exchanges.

The case also offers insights into the strengths and limitations of viral activism. While social media played a crucial role in the rapid mobilisation of urban-based youth and to spread the news of the protests across the country, it was insufficient to galvanise a common group identity or clear agenda for structural reforms. For genuine systemic change to occur, these newly mobilised young people will need to 'weave the future' together with the indigenous and peasant rights movements with longer histories of protest and political action.

Notes

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- 1 Walter Flores, Director, Center for the Study of Equity and Governance in Health Systems (CEGSS), Guatemala.
- 2 The Guatemalan conflict is amply documented in the literature. Some key references related to the arguments in this article are: Flores, Ruano and Funchal (2009), Grandin, Levenson-Estrada and Oglesby (2011), and Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH) (1999).

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