

# *With the gun on the jet ski*

When Bernardo Arévalo won the presidential election in Guatemala last August, it was a sensation and a big surprise. Arévalo is the bearer of hope of the oppressed, poor and indigenous people. But hope does not last long. **Karin Wenger**

We have a hard time getting used to the weapons. Even in the shipyard on the Rio Dulce, where we have been preparing our sailing boat for the Pacific since the beginning of August, we see them everywhere. The rich people who store their speedboats here and come here in helicopters at the weekend for joyrides on the lake carry their pistols in holsters over their swimming trunks. Even when they get on their jet skis, they don't put their guns down. Once there is a shootout in the town and at a folk festival.

At a rodeo held in honor of a saint, the men carry their weapons like the women carry their handbags.

What kind of country is it in which a willingness to use violence is so naturally displayed? One with a violent past. Yet Guatemala's history could have been very different, as 1945 was the beginning of a brief democratic spring.

Juan José Arévalo was elected president in the country's first free elections. He promised land reforms, more social justice, an end to the semi-feudal structures and that he would make Guatemala an independent country. At the time, Guatemala was effectively a US colony under the control of the United Fruit Company. Among other things, it owned huge estates on which it planted bananas. The country was a "banana republic" in the truest sense of the word and it was to remain so. Arévalo's government was able to fend off several coup attempts, but on June 18, 1954, a small army in exile, with the help of the CIA, overthrew Arévalo's successor. Arévalo fled into exile. In Guatemala, one military dictatorship followed the next. The USA lived well with them and looked on as Guatemalan government troops murdered or disappeared an estimated 250,000 Guatemalans, most of them indigenous people, during the civil war from 1960 to 1996.

The civil war may be long over, but Guatemala is still one of the countries with the highest number of political murders. Indigenous people, human rights activists, environmental activists and journalists still have to fear for their lives if they express criticism. The 41-year-old journalist Carlos Ernesto Choc,

an indigenous member of the Maya Q'eqchi, has felt this repression first-hand since he uncovered an environmental scandal at Lake Izabal in 2017. Back then, the lake turned red, polluted by wastewater from the Fénix nickel mine.

The mine belongs to a subsidiary of the Solway Group, which is registered in Zug. When the fishermen were When the mine operators began to protest, the government sent in the police. When they killed the demonstrating fisherman Carlos Maaz, Choc was there and published the photos and the story. Since then, he has been harassed by the police and criminalized by the government and covered with libel suits. He lived underground for over a year to avoid arrest.

We meet in Rio Dulce, near his home village of El Estor on Lake Izabal. "During the military dictatorship, they instilled fear in us. They told us indigenous people: you are savages and you don't actually exist. They, the corrupt elite of our country, did not expect us to survive and defend ourselves against injustice, oppression and their exploitation of nature."

**"Pact of the corrupt" fights new president** Guatemala has around 17 million inhabitants, more than half of whom live in poverty and indigenous people are still treated as second-class citizens. Corruption is so widespread that Guatemala recently fell to 150th out of 180 countries on Transparency International's corruption index. It comes as no surprise that the powerful people in the country, who have been pulling the strings in politics, business, the judiciary, police and army for decades, are nicknamed the "Pact of the Corrupt".

When Bernardo Arévalo won the run-off election for the presidency last August, it was the members of this pact who were particularly incensed, as they now feared for their sinecures. The 64-year-old is the son of the first democratically elected president and, like his father, promises to fight corruption and establish social justice. While the Americans fought against Juan José Arévalo eighty years ago, they now welcome his son. They hope that he will create jobs and thus help the

will stop the flow of migrants to the USA. Politics is always about vested interests. The Guatemalan elite now sees these interests at risk and is therefore trying to use the judicial system to annul Arévalo's victory so that he cannot take office in January 2024.

However, the pressure from abroad and from the villages is great, and so far the political establishment has only managed to prevent Arévalo's Movimiento Semilla (Seed Movement) party from gaining a foothold with the help of the public prosecutor's office. to suspend the government. Arévalo speaks of a coup d'état that is taking place "step by step". He knows how angry the population is about it.

Since the beginning of October, indigenous people, workers, trade union leaders and those who feel deprived of their voice have been setting up roadblocks all over the country. They are demanding that the corrupt public prosecutors step down and that their hopes for more rights and justice are not nipped in the bud. The main access bridge to Rio Dulce is also closed. "We're fed up with being poor," sings one man on the bridge. "Away with the corrupt" is written in large letters on a poster.

After a few days, there is no more fruit, vegetables, flour or sugar in the supermarkets and market stalls. The ATMs are empty, as are the petrol stations. Food prices are rising. On October 16, the first demonstrator is shot dead. No one seems surprised. As if everyone had long since become accustomed to the violence. However, indigenous journalist Carlos Ernesto Choc focuses not on the violence, but on hope: "This is a historic moment. For the first time, we, the various indigenous groups, are together, The mestizos, activists and trade unions are united against the government. We have all had enough of their corrupt, discriminatory system." This is why many roadblocks remain in place for weeks and why people continue to demonstrate. "This is the only way they will finally listen to us and stop saying, that we don't exist, that our voices count for nothing. They can no longer ignore us."



Karin Wenger was Southeast Asia correspondent for Radio SRF until summer 2022. During a sabbatical, she writes for "global" about forgotten conflicts and events in the Global South. [www.karinwenger.ch](http://www.karinwenger.ch)



## On the pulse of the media.

What's going on in the media world?

What are the latest developments and trends? Who reads EDITO, knows more. EDITO observes the media scene critically - and across language barriers.

With a subscription for 69 francs, you will receive EDITO at home four times a year. And you have free access at all times to the ePaper from EDITO.

[edito.ch](http://edito.ch) | [abo@edito.ch](mailto:abo@edito.ch)



**EDITO**  
DAS SCHWEIZER MEDIENMAGAZIN  
LE MAGAZINE SUISSE DES MÉDIAS