

Stories of inclusion and change



NACIONAL DEMOCRATA



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Personal testimonies, voices of Guatemala

Voices of Guatemala: Stories of inclusion and change

S ince the Guatemalan elections concluded in October 2015, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) has held conversations with local partner organizations and observers from the Electoral Watch (*Mirador Electoral*) consortium to better understand their experiences as well as their hopes for their communities and country. Over a series of articles, we will share their stories as a snapshot of the diverse experiences within the organizations and networks.

The online version, also available in Spanish and several Mayan languages, can be found at the following link: https://www. demworks.org/section/voices-guatemala

In addition, Mirador Electoral member organizations and NDI participated in eval-



Observers from R'enoj fill out their forms on election day. Photo credit: RENOJ.

uations to assess the performance and impact of the Mirador Electoral election observation coalition. During this evaluation, the groups took into consideration the influence that the political environment had on their observation projects, including the citizen protests and political crisis that characterized the 2015 electoral process.

The results of these evaluations offer empirical evidence that support the testimonies of the people who participated in the Mirador Electoral observations. For this reason, in addition to presenting the personal stories of various observers and organizational leadership, NDI has included text boxes that highlight the most relevant results of the Mirador Electoral initiatives.¹

¹ Mirador Electoral and NDI participated in two evaluations: an internal evaluation led by NDI and an external evaluation conducted by the Just Governance Group. The results highlighted in the text boxes are from the Just Governance Group's final evaluation report. They have been edited for brevity and clarity and are reinforced by the results of the internal evaluation.

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About Mirador Electoral

Mirador Electoral is an election observation coalition comprised of civil society organizations that specialize in different topics, including media monitoring, transparency, quick counts, political and electoral processes, electoral and democratic integrity, electoral conflict and violence, and the political participation of women, indigenous peoples, and youth. The coalition was established in 2003 and focuses on research, analysis, discussion and communication of electoral and democratic processes. In 2015, the coalition's objective was to promote and strengthen citizen participation as well as the credibility of the electoral process and the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (*Tribunal Supremo Electoral*, TSE). The group's motto is "We are your eyes, Guatemala" (*Somos tus ojos Guatemala*).

<u>Citizen Action</u> (<i>Acción Ciudadana</i> , AC)	AC conducted a long-term observation in 20 municipalities through the "More Inclusion, Less Violence" program that focused on mitiga- ting electoral violence and monitoring illicit campaign financing. AC organized a quick count on election day to detect and deter irre- gularities, promote voter confidence and participation, and comment on the overall quality of the election process. AC also coordinated with other Mirador members to develop a strategy to communicate observation findings.
NGO Coordination and Cooperatives, (Coordinación de ONG y Cooperativa de Guatemala, CONGCOOP)	CONGCOOP worked with DEMOS to deploy a network of long-term observers to 52 municipalities to observe the pre-election environ- ment.
Central American Institute for the Study of Social Demo- cracy, (Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios para la Democracia Social, DEMOS)	DEMOS worked with CONGCOOP to deploy a network of observers to 52 municipalities to observe the pre-election environment. DEMOS conducted focus groups before the election monitoring activities begin to help identify the issues of greatest concerns to citizens that the monitoring groups should focus on during the pre-election observation.
Association for Development, Organization and Sociocultural Studies (Asociación Desarrollo, Organización, Servicios y Estudios Socioculturales, DOSES)	DOSES drew from DEMOS' focus groups to conduct a national public opinion survey using a random sample of the population to evaluate political culture, electoral institutions, political parties and political participation. The survey helped quantify and rank the level of pu- blic concern related to the issues identified in the focus groups. DO- SES conducted media monitoring to measure the volume and tone of reporting that candidates and parties receive in print and electronic media as well as in opinion polls.

Mirador Electoral Member Organizations

Central American Institute for Political Studies (Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Políticos, INCEP)	INCEP coordinated the monitoring of political parties' and candida- tes' policy platforms, which was supported by CONGCOOP, DEMOS, CODEFEM, RENOJ and Guatecívica. These monitoring efforts included analyzing parties' and candidates' policy proposals, the transparency of the voter registration process and mechanisms to ensure fairness, non-discrimination and transparency in the electoral process.
Collective Association for the Defense of Women's Rights in Guatemala (Asociación Colectiva para la Defensa de los Derechos de las Mujeres en Guatemala, CODEFEM)	CODEFEM monitored the performance of election authorities and candidates, particularly the transparency of the voter registration process and joint efforts by the TSE and National Civil Registry (RE- NAP) to register women, and to monitor gender inclusion in the po- litical process.
<u>Guatecívica</u>	Guatecívica monitored the performance of election authorities and candidates, particularly the transparency of the voter registration process and joint efforts by the TSE and RENAP to register youth.
PROPAZ Foundation (Fundación PROPAZ)	 PROPAZ analyzed information on incidents of political coercion, in- timidation and violence. PROPAZ analyzed if particular groups were disproportionately affected and published the findings as part of Mi- rador Electoral's regular reports and public statements. PROPAZ coordinated with CODEFEM and RENOJ to monitor electoral violence against indigenous people and women in two target muni-
	cipalities.
National Network for Mayan Youth (Red Nacional de Organizaciones de Jóvenes Mayas, RENOJ)	RENOJ provided a multicultural focus to the observation by promo- ting the participation of indigenous communities in domestic mo- nitoring activities and analyzing the level of inclusion of and discri- mination against indigenous peoples within departmental electoral commissions and political parties.

- Mirador Electoral conducted its observation in accordance with international standards for domestic electoral observation. These include impartiality, transparency, collegial relations with actors in the electoral process, confidence-building, preparedness to manage incidents, and the release of public reports and announcements.
- In addition, a key characteristic of the observation was its focus on inclusion, incorporating specific indicators and mechanisms to take into account the political participation of traditionally excluded sectors such as women, youth and indigenous peoples. Reports containing quantitative data were presented on each of these sectors of the population.

Mirador Electoral contributed to transparency in the electoral process and implemented activities that were consistent with the objective of increasing participation of youth, women and indigenous peoples in the election of national and municipal authorities, which confirms the contributions of Mirador Electoral to the development a culture of electoral observation in Guatemala.

Personal testimonies, voices of Guatemala

About NDI

The National Democratic Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide by working with political parties, civic groups, parliaments, and other organizations and individuals to strengthen civic and political organizations, safeguard elections, promote citizen engagement, and improve openness and accountability in government.

NDI has worked in Guatemala since the 1999 elections, opening a permanent office in 2007. The mission of NDI in Guatemala is to strengthen electoral and political institutions and support them to increase social inclusion and political participation. NDI places particular emphasis on the political participation of politically marginalized populations, including women, indigenous peoples and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) communities. NDI conducts its work in partnership with political parties, government institutions, and civil society organizations. The main areas of NDI support include:

- Institutionalizing the political party system.
- Increasing the political participation of women, indigenous peoples and LGBTI communities.
- Providing technical assistance on citizen election observation.
- Improving citizen security at the municipal, national and regional level.
- Strengthening the political system and providing technical assistance to Congress.
- Strengthening public integrity, transparency, and anti-corruption standards.

NDI and Mirador Electoral designed project activities that fell into three phases of the electoral process (pre-election, election day, and post-election) with responsibilities for each Mirador Electoral organization in each phase. Within this framework, and according to the project objective, each organization developed its own strategy to help safeguard the integrity of the electoral process 2015 technical with assistance from NDI.

 NDI played a coordination and facilitation role within the Mirador Electoral coalition.
 NDI facilitated coordination between organizational staff in a role similar to that of a technical secretariat or a permanent coordinating committee.



A Maya ceremony during the launch of the electoral observation effort "More Inclusion, Less Violence" in Nebaj, Quiche, Guatemala. Photo credit: NDI.

Personal testimonies, voices of Guatemala



Volunteers from the DEMOS network participate in a rally in front of Congress at the beginning of the election observation. Photo credit: DEMOS.

Welcome to Voices from Guatemala By Sara Barker

Since the Guatemalan elections concluded in October 2015, NDI has held conversations with local partner organizations and election observers to better understand their experiences, as well as their hopes for their communities and the country. In order to highlight their voices, we will post a series of blogs documenting stories of inclusion and change -- the people behind the headlines working to build a strong democracy in Guatemala.

These stories will touch on the importance of civic observation in the context of volatile political environments as well • The observation conducted by Mirador Electoral is widely recognized in Guatemala as a fundamental element of the electoral process. The informants consulted agreed that in future elections the country needs an election observation process similar to the one conducted by Mirador Electoral in 2015 and other elections.

as how the observation efforts were important for the individual observers, their organizations and their communities.

People involved in the election observation -- observation network members and members of the mostly rural communities in which the observation was conducted -- believe that their actions contributed to improving transparency and strengthening democracy in their country, and, as a result, feel empowered to continue working towards lasting change.

• It is evident that Mirador Electoral is recognized in Guatemala as a widely consulted reference on election related issues, as confirmed by local media, authorities, and other actors in the electoral process. 2015 was a historic year for Guatemala. A series of scandals revealing entrenched corruption sparked unprecedented public protests that lasted for more than six months. By September, citizens had forced the resignation of nearly the entire cabinet and the arrests of the president, vice-president and several heads of state agencies. The protests, and subsequent arrests of senior government officials, sent a

strong message that the country was ready for change and that government corruption would not be met with silence by the public.

As with previous elections, NDI partnered with Electoral Watch (Mirador Electoral), a local consortium of nine observation organizations, to observe the 2015 elections. These observation efforts were particularly critical to the integrity of the elections within the context of the country's political crisis, which could have seen tensions erupt into violence. They also provided opportunities for effective and inclusive citizen participation, allowing citizens from all backgrounds to express their desire to improve the country's politics by serving as watchdogs for democracy and ensuring that their individual needs and collective voices were heard.

• The evaluation confirmed that the program implemented by NDI and Mirador Electoral was relevant at the national and municipal level, particularly in the context of the exclusion of marginalized populations, institutional weaknesses, distrust, and the risk of violence and conflict that characterized the 2015 electoral process.

e mayo de 2015



• An observer shares observation information with local authorities. Photo credit: AC.

The observation networks were designed to increase the inclusion of citizens who have not had sufficient opportunities for political and civic engagement. Low levels of political participation and under representation of marginalized groups, including women, indigenous peoples and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) community, exacerbates the fragility of Guatemala's democratic institutions, which are already under stress from high levels of crime, violence, corruption and impunity.

At its heart, the observation initiative was made up of dedicated individuals who believed that they could make a difference. Although many worked alone or in

pairs in their communities, together they formed a network of thousands of volunteers across the country. They belong to organizations and communities that are working towards a brighter future.

The dedication of these observers and community organizations is extraordinary and inspiring. Over this series of blog posts, we will share their stories, providing a snapshot of their diverse experiences.

• Mirador Electoral made the appropriate decision to maintain observation activities despite the conditions of uncertainty surrounding the 2015 electoral process.

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Milvia Roxana Lopez (third from the left) speaks during a training for citizen electoral observers. Photo credit: AC.

Not Just Observation, Guatemala Election Monitoring Opens Doors to Dialogue and Civic Education

By Austin Robles

t 25 years old, Milvia Roxana López, an indigenous woman, may be diminutive in size but she exudes a confidence that demands she be heard. As an observer who monitored electoral violence, Milvia met with leaders from her town and surrounding communities to document acts of electoral violence -- not an easy topic to broach in country that has one of the highest homicide rates in the world.

"For me, self-confidence was key," declared Milvia, referring to her role as an election observer. "To many people, it's not the same when a woman says something as when a man says something. I don't know where I got the strength, but I did it." The information published by Mirador Electoral was useful for different institutional and civil society actors involved in the electoral process. The publication of the observation results helped deter or limit the electoral behavior of actors who could damage the integrity of the electoral process and its results at the national and municipal levels.

NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

Based in Colotenango in Guatemala's mountainous western highlands, Milvia and another observer traveled to remote communities to meet with advisory councils made up of local leaders that were convened to verify observation information. Interviewing these leaders on a regular basis, Milvia documented incidents of electoral violence. Milvia then shared her findings with the local organization that supported her, the Center for Studies and Documentation of the Western Border of Guatemala (CEDFOG), which in turn shared the data from all of its observers with a national umbrella organization, Citizen Action (AC).

This process continued weekly for four months in advance of, during, and after the September 2015 general election and the October run-off. In total, 140 observers met with more than 1,300 community members in 340 communities across 20 municipalities to document electoral violence and campaign spending. AC compiled and shared the data with electoral authorities and law enforcement officials to take appropriate action to address potential violations of campaign finance law or acts of violence. Milvia and her fellow observers' community work, therefore, had a national reach.

• The decline of serious electoral offenses reported by the Human Rights Ombudsman (*Procuraduría de Derechos Humanos*, PDH) and the increased willingness of the public to report such violations are examples of the election observation's impact. Violence is a sensitive issue, which leaders rarely discuss openly. Although Guatemala's 36-year internal conflict ended with the 1996 Peace Accords, it left the country deeply divided, and those who might wish to speak out continue to fear reprisals. Milvia and her observation partner had to spend time earning the trust of community members. Beyond collecting election data, observers engaged in civic education by providing information to, and respond to questions from, citizens regarding the electoral process to help citizens better understand their rights.

The approach worked, and over time Milvia noted that more people were speaking up during council meetings, even daring to voice concern about violence in their communities. This was especially true of women who had been hesitant to participate in something that they perceived as too political. Milvia was particularly proud that women in her community are starting to insist that they have the right to participate politically.

Nationally, the elections saw historically high levels of participation. The elections were also some of the least violent since the country's transition to democracy in 1985, which many credit in part to intense public scrutiny, such as the domestic long-term observation efforts, in the lead up to election-day.

In Colotenango, Milvia reflected this sentiment, stating that she felt that her efforts, and those other fellow observers, helped make the elections safer for people to participate. She delighted in the opportunity to branch out to new communities, which is an important step in breaking down the country's divisions.

"The most rewarding part of the experience was being able to visit new communities and understand different realities," Milvia said with a large, genuine smile. "It was my first time in many of these communities and it was very fulfilling to be able to meet people and share this experience with them."

Personal testimonies, voices of Guatemala



A Mayan ceremony during the launch of electoral observation "More Inclusion, Less Violence" in Nebaj, Quiche, Guatemala. Photo credit: NDL

Andigenous Axil Momen Take a Stand Against Gender-Based Violence in Guatemala

By Sara Barker

The Network of Ixiles Women is based in Nebaj, which is located in a remote valley in the Ixil area of the department of Quiché, Guatemala -- a region that is predominately Maya-Ixil. The organization was one of 13 local groups that partnered with Citizen Action (AC) to observe electoral violence and campaign spending across 20 municipalities.

We recently spoke with the organization's coordinator, Juana Baca, as well as two observers, Paula

Ramírez and Andrés Saquic, about their experience participating in the "More Inclusion, Less Violence" electoral observation network.

Although the Network of Ixiles Women focuses on promoting women's civic participation and providing support to victims of violence, it saw an inherent link between its principal work and a role in monitoring the elections. "The focus of the organization is on collectivity," Juana said. "We focus on working with survivors of gender-based violence. This violence extends to politics, and we wanted to address this in our community. We saw this project as complementing the work of our organization." • The information collected in the focus groups demonstrates that citizens not directly involved in the Mirador Electoral observations were interested in finding out how to become involved and viewed the observers as reliable, prestigious, and worthy of admiration and recognition.

NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

Violence against women is an entrenched problem in Guatemala, which has one of the highest rates of femicide in the world. In addition to focusing on electoral violence generally, the observation included a specific focus on gender-based electoral violence. The AC observation was part of NDI's "Votes without Violence" program that aims to support citizen election observers to monitor and mitigate violence against women during elections -- a major barrier to women's political participation.

Electoral violence against women is found in public as well as private spaces, and can range from physical confrontations or sexual assault to discrimination, harassment and psychological abuse. It discourages women from being or becoming politically active and undermines democratic processes. For example, in Guatemala, women have been forced to participate in political party rallies, or threatened with the loss of social benefits administered by elected officials if they do not register with a certain party or pledge to vote for a particular candidate.

While both men and women can experience political violence, women are often more vulnerable to and impacted by attacks, especially if they are the ones receiving the social benefits. "Politicians have used social programs to perpetuate violence against women and women are conditioned to think that this is normal," said Juana.

The Network of Ixiles Women decided to conduct its observations in communities within Nebaj and Cotzal that have experienced high levels of electoral conflict in the past. The group understood that its observers faced risks such as confrontations and intimidation from party militants. Despite the risks, observers believed that their presence could serve to prevent violence, and provide a voice for victims whose rights are violated.

"Our interest in being observers came from seeing the violence and division that goes on in communities during the electoral period," Paula and Andrés agreed. "As observers, we wanted to help reduce violence."



In addition to observing gender-based violence, the project also sought to include women as meaningful participants. Of the 140 observers in AC's network, 54 percent were women -- well above global averages for election observation networks and reflective of the observation's inclusive approach. In addition, 30 percent of the nationwide network was indigenous. Within predominantly indigenous communities, such as Nebaj and Cotzal, 100 percent of the observers were indigenous.

Members of the Ixiles Women's Network. Photo credit: NDI.

Personal testimonies, voices of Guatemala

Many of the observers had a leadership role within their organizations and saw their profiles raised within their communities as a result of the observation. They were approached for advice as knowledgeable political leaders. Having observers who were representative of the communities they monitored was important to gaining trust and encouraging all citizens to speak out.

 The presence and actions of the observers, as well as the support of the population, hindered the influence and ability of those who engage in political corruption to commit atypical or illegal actions.

Both Paula and Andrés agreed that serving as observer aug-

mented their leadership within their community. "The women trusted us and felt comfortable asking us how to respond to situations that they knew were not acceptable. And we were able to support them," they concurred.

This type of inclusive and trust-based observation is crucial in a country like Guatemala, in which a history of violence has resulted in a legacy of fear and silence. The country's 36-year internal conflict left approximately 200,000 people killed or missing, a majority of whom were indigenous people. Guatemalan women, and especially Mayan women, were targeted and suffered horrific violence as a result of the conflict. Although 1996 peace accords ended the internal conflict, the country has not overcome the conflict's violent legacy. The Ixil communities were and continue to be particularly impacted by this violence. There is also still a legacy of impunity from the law and of exclusion of women and indigenous peoples from political participation.

While many issues have yet to be solved, historic public protests in 2015 and recent legal cases demonstrate the extent of citizen discontent with systemic corruption and impunity and provide hope that those who perpetrated violence will be held responsible. In January 2016, 14 ex-military officers were detained over charges of crimes against humanity. And in February, a high profile trial found two former military officers guilty of charges of sexual slavery of indigenous women, marking the first successful prosecution for sexual violence committed during the conflict.

Speaking out in this context takes courage, and the Network of Ixiles Women embodies this courage. "You need to understand violence as individual acts," said Juana. "Women are vulnerable in politics. We need more spaces to share information so that women understand what is political violence and what is gender-based violence and that neither are acceptable."

Personal testimonies, voices of Guatemala



Louis and his colleagues during a training for election observers in the central region of Guatemala. Photo credit: AC.

Election Observers Promote Tolerance and Transparency in Guatemalan Communities

By Sara Barker

Louis Enrique Borrayo Hernandez is a young Guatemalan man who learned about the election observation through Association Ixim, the local organization that supported Citizen Action's (AC) observation in the department of Sacatepéquez, just outside of Guatemala's capital.

We recently spoke with Louis, as well as his colleague Theylor (who preferred that we not use his full name), about why they decided to join the AC network as long-term observers. Their answer was clear: "we wanted to make a difference in our community and our country," they both agreed.

For Louis and Theylor, who are gay men, political participation in Guatemala can be especially challenging. Guatemala has not passed sufficient legislation protecting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) communities from violence and discrimination, including guaranteeing full access to public services. Although some government agencies are taking steps to reduce barriers to full civic participation, Louis and Theylor see the need to continue reducing discrimination as part of a larger process of giving a voice to all Guatemalans, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

• Information gathered in the focus groups highlighted that, as a result of Mirador Electoral activities before and during the elections, citizens' fear of a flawed electoral process was reduced and credibility and trust increased, helping improve participation.

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The observation efforts included a strong focus on improving social inclusion so Association Ixim made an effort to recruit observers that identified as LGBTI. Louis is the director of an LGBTI anti-discrimination organization called "Breaking the Silence" in the municipality of San Lucas, where he and his colleague conducted their observation.

Louis's specific task was to monitor political party campaign spending in his community and others nearby. Like electoral violence monitors, campaign spending monitors completed weekly rounds of observation that helped AC project political party' expenses by attending meetings and rallies, and interviewing community members.

"This observation was important because people felt listened to," stated Louis. "People want to report what is happening in their communities, but in the past there haven't been the channels to do so. This observation changed that."

While Louis and his fellow observers in the AC network noted that it was hard to precisely track campaign spending because political parties are often hesitant to disclose financial information, they believe that the observation set an important precedent. This was the first time in many rural communities that the actions of political parties and candidates were being observed and reported. By the end of the observation, the parties knew that citizens were watching them and could hold them accountable for illegal spending. "We knew that parties didn't respect campaign finance limits, but the observation helped us better understand how much they were spending past the limits," affirmed Louis.

Nationally, the findings of electoral authorities confirmed Louis's statements, showing that many -though not all -- political parties had violated campaign spending limits and were sanctioned accordingly. Those sanctions should increase significantly once reforms to the Law on Elections and Political Parties recently passed by the Guatemalan Congress go into effect.





Louis and his colleagues during a training for election observers in the central region of Guatemala. Photo credit: Rompiendo el Silencio.

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Louis and Theylor noted that this observation was an important first beyond conducting a long-term observation on electoral violence and campaign spending at the local level for the first time. For them personally, the most important first was including members of LGBTI communities in the observation project and talking about LGBTI rights with more than 1,300 people across the country.

When the project started, observers held introductory meetings with leaders in the communities where they would monitor campaign spending and electoral violence. In addition to

Mirador Electoral provided evidence on the actions of political parties that were not in compliance with provisions of the Law on Elections and Political Parties (LEPP) related to campaign financing, including electoral advertising in the form of televised infomercials.

discussing these two issues, which were the main focus of the observation, they also talked about social inclusion and the importance of combating discrimination and stigmatization based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Given that Louis and Theylor personally face prejudice on a daily basis, they were gratified by the opportunity they were provided as observers to talk about and deepen people's understanding of LGBTI rights. Promoting discussions of these issues in different communities is an important first step to breaking down stereotypes and ending discrimination.

Louis and Theylor understand that change takes time, but they hope that as citizens and politicians become more aware of sexual and gender diversity and that members of LGBTI communities have the same legal rights as any other citizen, that there will be more opportunities for them to participate in politics. Louis was told by one woman that if he hadn't talked to them about inclusion issues, the community members still wouldn't understand what it means to identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex. "Now they do, and that is the only way that things will ever change," he concluded.

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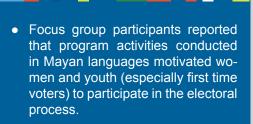


Mayan youth practice their communication skills. Photo credit: DEMOS.

The Amportance of Mayan Languages in Constructing a Democratic Society in Guatemala

By Sandra Xoquic

Equal participation of citizens in politics is essential for strengthening democracy. Citizen participation must be inclusive, representative and intercultural. One of the foundations of democracy is respect for human rights, which includes recognition of individual and collective rights of indigenous peoples. And one of these collective rights lies precisely in the use of indigenous languages. This is especially true in Guatemala, where indigenous peoples represent a large and diverse, but frequently marginalized, population.



Article 16 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which has been ratified by Guatemala, affirms that "indigenous peoples have the right to establish their own media in their own languages and to have access to all forms of non-indigenous media without discrimination."

Mirador Electoral provided specific information to state institutions such as the Attorney General's Office (Ministerio Publico) and the TSE to support their decisionmaking processes. Mirador Electoral held coordination meetings with the TSE before and after elections. The quick count report shared with the TSE served to increase confidence in the electoral results and improve the decisionmaking ability of the magistrates.

In Guatemala, despite the fact that according to some estimates the majority of the population is indigenous (the official census in 2011 estimates at least 40 percent), the Guatemalan government has failed to guarantee services to Mayan peoples in their own language. This is one of the reasons why many indigenous languages are in danger of disappearing, which would mean the extinction of an important cultural and ancestral legacy.

Public services such as education and health, as well as economic transactions and many social relations, at the national level in Guatemala are only available in Spanish. This is ultimately a form of linguistic discrimination.

In addition to extinction, when a government does not guarantee that people are provided services in their native language, there are other consequences that entrench exclusion and increase discrimination within a society. One result is that many families do not speak their first language in their own homes in an effort to prevent future generations from experiencing discrimination within society or by the system itself, which further contributes to declining use of the language. This is a social issue that is most harmful for young Mayans who gradually lose the fundamental elements of their identity and their right to express themselves as members of indigenous groups.

This is why efforts to strengthen and reclaim languages are necessary and urgent. It is necessary to recognize the fundamental role that media plays as a vital tool for younger generations in reconciling and understanding their identity. Strengthening democracy requires the democratization of words.

It is therefore fundamental that the government and public institutions, as well as the private sector, ensure the use of indigenous languages in their programs in order to comply with the Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples that is part of the peace accords signed in 1996. Compliance with the provisions of these accords is a first step towards recognizing the diversity that exists in Guatemala and in building a truly multilingual state.

The Citizen Action (Acción Ciudadana) and Electoral Watch (Mirador Electoral) observation projects were designed to be implemented in the Mayan languages spoken in predominantly indigenous municipalities. In addition, the Mirador Electoral coalition observed the treatment of indigenous citizens by electoral authorities and if those citizens faced difficulties exercising their right to vote due to language barriers. Reports from international observation missions, such as the Tikal Protocol and the Organization of American States, included recommendations on the need to improve access to voting in native languages, which were also included in the Mirador Electoral findings.

It is for these very reasons that we believe that it is necessary to publish the stories of the observers in their native languages. We recognize the importance of being able to share their experiences with members of their communities in their own language.



A member of the Mirador Electoral observation network votes. Photo credit: AC.

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Members of the DEMOS network. From left to right: Jorge Barriento, Aracsala Chang, Orlando Cun, Yesica Hernández, Fredy Sitavi, José Cuxil and Ronald Baldomiro. Photo credit: NDI.

Observation Metwork Unites to Amprove the Transparency of Guatemalan Elections

By Austin Robles

or Yesica Hernández, an observer from Quetzaltenango, playing an active role in political life in her country is a civic obligation. At just 24 years old, Yesica has worked with the Central American

Institute for the Study of Social Democracy (DEMOS) for nearly five years and already observed two elections. She sees election observation as critical to involving citizens, especially youth, in politics and holding political parties and politicians accountable to the public.

"We have to participate. If we don't, we are allowing others to decide things for us," she explained to NDI in a recent interview. "This process lets us contribute to improving our country and making the system more transparent, which helps reduce corruption."

"The observation gave me a better understanding of how the country is structured, which gave me ideas of how to improve things in the long-term," added Fredy Sitavi, a fellow observer from Chimaltenango. • Mirador Electoral activities at the municipal level created social capital for election observation. The citizens who participated as volunteer observers valued their experience with Mirador Electoral and were motivated to continue future citizen oversight activities as a result of the observation. They also maintained contact and bonds of trust and solidarity.

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NDI spoke to seven observers from across the country who volunteered with DEMOS to monitor the election process last year in a total of 52 of Guatemala's 338 municipalities. Each week, the 539 observers completed a survey to document acts of violence and their perpetrators, incidents of voter coercion and abuses of fundamental political rights.

As a member of Mirador Electoral, DEMOS compiled local findings and shared them nationally with the press to raise public awareness of deficiencies in the electoral process and identify areas of potential improvement. They also provided recommendations to the election authorities and policymakers, which could be used to reform the country's electoral laws.

DEMOS then shared the national findings with local observers in regional meetings to help them better understand the realities faced by other communities. As Orlando Cun, an observer from Sololá, explained, "I learned how to analyze the electoral situation and understand in-depth the electoral laws and their limitations. I learned to see actors who influence the political situation who are often not visible."

In addition to election activities, DEMOS works with citizens on effective communication skills, particularly around advocating for political rights, at the local level. The Mirador election observation also provided its observer network an opportunity to put these skills to use at a national level. The observers that NDI interviewed, which were a small subset of the large group of people who have worked with DEMOS on other issues, were excited to be able to be involved in the elections and utilize their communication skills.

According to DEMOS' executive director, Anabella Rivera, election observers who participated in their communication trainings were critical to the monitoring process because they were able to effectively disseminate the data and information that the volunteers were collecting. "In a country where there is a culture of silence, it is important for citizens to learn effective communication skills. Democratic communication and freedom of speech are critical to enacting political change," she said.



A young Guatemalan participates in an activity organized by civil society to reflect on the political crisis and future priorities. Photo credit: DEMOS.

Personal testimonies, voices of Guatemala

Prior to elections, DEMOS also conducted focus groups in the capitals of 20 of the country's 22 departments to gauge citizens' political attitudes. It found that most participants were unhappy with the political system and its actors, which many believed to be corrupt, and desired significant reforms. However, they also recognized that the lack of popular participation in decision-making contributed to the current system and the 2015 political crisis. Citizens reported that they would like to be more involved but largely do not know how they can participate in and impact the political system.

Anecdotal evidence from the observers interviewed for this post confirmed the focus group findings. In light of the historic context of the elections, Aracsala Chang, from the department

• The effect that Mirador Electoral had on increasing citizen confidence was much more intense and important at the municipal level. After the political crisis began in April 2015, citizens were inclined to abstain from voting as a form of protesting corruption. At the municipal level, Mirador Electoral filled a void of confidence and legitimacy.

of Guatemala, saw more people, especially youth, who wanted to become involved in the elections, and the Mirador Electoral project provided an avenue for them to start. "I learned so much about the country's ongoing problems and how youth can contribute to improving them," Aracsala said. "There are so many young people who don't have opportunities and we need to make sure that they do in the future."

Although the elections concluded in October, Yesica views political engagement as a continuous commitment, and she is convinced that last year's events will continue to inspire people to get more involved. "We need observation beyond the elections," she said. "For example, we can observe different political processes, like the appointment of judges and other appointed officials. This is starting to happen this year, which is part of the domino effect. This is part of citizens waking up."

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Anixh and her team hold a news conference on the participation of indigenous groups and the youth in the elections. Photo credit: RENOJ.

Andigenous Guatemalans Call for Meaningful Representation

By Katherine Conway

Large numbers of Guatemalan citizens are excluded from political life. Indigenous communities are among the most marginalized, as they face both institutional and cultural barriers in the country's political system. Since the 2006 electoral reforms and during the subsequent three elections, Guatemala has seen important steps forward in terms of increased political participation; however, challenges remain in translating participation into meaningful representation.

Anixh Ana María Pablo Tercero, a Maya-Q'anjob'al woman from the Cuchumatanes mountains in northeastern Guatemala, led the electoral observation efforts conducted by the National Network of Mayan Youth (RENO'J). She worked to ensure that youth and indigenous populations could participate in the electoral process. At the municipal level, the political crisis created a window of opportunity for the participation of youth, women, and indigenous peoples in the electoral process. The presence of Mirador Electoral through their local observers and the activities that they conducted before and during the elections contributed to significant changes in citizen understanding of the meaning of participation in the electoral process.



Anixh prepares to present the results of the electoral observation in a Mirador Electoral news conference. Photo credit: RENOJ

"I envision a society where participation translates to meaningful representation for everybody," she said in a recent interview.

RENO'J is a national network comprised of indigenous youth organizations. In the lead up to the 2015 elections, the network worked to defend the rights of indigenous people through trainings, research and advocacy efforts. As a member of the Mirador Electoral network, RENO'J played a critical role in gathering information on discrimination and racism targeted at indigenous communities and their exclusion from politics. RENO'J also helped the other Mirador Electoral member organizations integrate indigenous issues into their observation efforts.

This was not the first time that Anixh had been involved in electoral observation. In 2003, at 19 years old, Anixh first volunteered as an election observer with the Human Rights Ombudsman in her own municipality of San Juan Ixcoy, Huehuetenango. She remained active in electoral and political processes, coordinating 2007 "quick count" activities, which serve to statistically verify the official election results, in the department of Huehuetenango. In 2011 she was involved in the observation process led by RENO'J that focused on discrimination and racism within Mirador Electoral.

Anixh and other observers' commitment to participating in the elections has helped create a culture of electoral observation in Guatemala. Since Mirador Electoral began observing elections in 2003, nonpartisan citizen observers have become an integral part of the electoral process, serving as an independent check on the legitimacy of the electoral process and getting citizens more involved in their government. For RENO'J, participating in the Mirador Electoral observation created opportunities for more indigenous youth to take part in the political process.

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"Mirador Electoral has played a central role in shifting the population's view on the importance of election observation through engaging more citizens in the process and observations in more municipalities," said Anixh. The strength of the Mirador Electoral coalition was based on its ability to bring together the diverse civil society organizations featured in this blog series to conduct a larger and more effective observation than any individual organization could do on their own.

• The changes facilitated by Mirador Electoral extended to the involvement of family and friends through their support of observers' work and ensuring their safety. This involvement has created social capital for electoral observation that can be considered a strength in any future initiatives.

Last year's observation found that in 68 percent of the observed municipalities, voters were unable to participate in their first language. And while more than 40 percent of the

Guatemalan population is indigenous, indigenous people comprised only 17 percent of polling station staff.

"It is a challenge to include the topic of indigenous political participation in popular discourse, but through this observation we were able to provide concrete data on discrimination and help shape public opinion," said Anixh.

While Guatemala's Supreme Electoral Tribunal does not measure participation rates by indigenous communities, RENO'J and the Mirador Electoral coalition observed high levels of indigenous participation. The first round elections saw record voter turnout, with approximately 70 percent of those registered to vote showing up at the polls.

However, the high levels of participation do not translate into equal representation. Just 18, or less than 12 percent, of members of congress are indigenous. Many of Guatemala's 24 indigenous groups are not represented in congress at all.

Without significant indigenous representation, legislative initiatives that are strategic for indigenous communities have been sidelined in congress. In April 2016, reforms to the Law on Elections and Political Parties (LEPP) were approved by congress, but provisions requiring a quota for indigenous representation on political party lists did not make it into the final version of the bill despite strong support from civil society and a positive review from the Constitutional Court.

Anixh believes the future of indigenous communities hinges on changes at the national level, specifically reforms that strengthen participation and representation, as well as building capacities on the community level. "I would consider running for political office as a voice for indigenous people, but only if there are conditions for true participation," she said.

Until then, Anixh will continue work through RENO'J and in her Maya Q'anjob'al community to strengthen the capacity of youth to lead initiatives and catalyze action within their own communities to prepare the next generation for leadership.

Personal testimonies, voices of Guatemala



A young Guatemalan participates in an activity organized by civil society to reflect on the political crisis and future priorities. Photo credit: DEMOS.

From Election Observation to Government Oversight: What's Next for Guatemala?

By Sara Barker

s this blog series has highlighted, the 2015 Guatemalan elections were unique in many regards. Citizen protests resulted in the resignation and arrest of the president and vice president on corruption charges. Voter turnout was the highest since the return to democracy in Guatemala. The presumptive winner, the runner-up in elections four years earlier who was leading in the polls, failed to make it to the second round. And electoral violence was lower than expected and lower than during recent electoral processes. The question then becomes, what's next for Guatemala?

NDI recently spoke with Carlos Sarti, the Director of the Propaz Foundation and a Mirador Electoral member, about what this context means for future elections, as well as for the immediate future in Guatemala.

Carlos is hopeful, but he also cautioned that underlying challenges will probably re-emerge. "The fact that the protests [in 2015] were peaceful likely encouraged non-violent responses in other spaces," Carlos said. "However, the 2019 elections will be conducted in a different political environment, one more like those prior to 2015. Local conflicts have not been resolved and those conflicts will re-emerge during the period between elections, contributing to unrest and violence around elections like we have seen in the past."



Guatemalans demand electoral reform during a protest in 2015. Photo credit: DEMOS.

Citizens were focused on the political crisis and public protests in 2015 so other challenges were temporarily sidelined. This atypical environment, along with intense public scrutiny through domestic election observation, likely contributed to less violence. Involving citizens in political and civic life and keeping them engaged between elections not only strengthens citizen observation networks for future elections but also helps reduce violence. Engaged and informed citizens are better able to respond to the root causes of violence.

Throughout the election process the Propaz Foundation analyzed information on incidents of political coercion, intimidation and violence to determine whether particular groups were disproportionately affected. It also coordinated with Collective Association for the Defense of Women's Rights in Guatemala (CODEFEM) and National Network of Mayan Youth (RENO'J) to monitor electoral violence against indigenous communities and women in two municipalities.

Carlos noted that while the high level of citizen participation during elections was positive, there needs to be greater involvement in the lead up to the 2019 elections. "When there is just election observation, there is lack of understanding of what happened beforehand," Carlos said. "It is extremely important to have citizen participation between elections so that they can understand trends and therefore better understand the context during the elections. When citizens understand the triggers of violence they will be better able to mitigate it at the local level."

The Guatemalan government is beginning to take action following last year's protest in an effort to improve transparency and combat corruption. The Guatemalan Attorney General's Office (Ministerio Publico) and the United Nations-backed International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), which were responsible for uncovering the corruption scheme that prompted the protests, have indicated that they will expand their work outside of the capital.

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In addition, the newly passed Law on Elections and Political Parties (LEPP) includes provisions allowing legal action to be taken against individuals who break campaign laws. Previously, only parties could be sanctioned and the fines were nominal. Now parties, members and candidates can be sanctioned up to US\$250,000. These legal changes and improved oversight by government bodies promises to result in greater accountability, but citizens will need to continue to play the role of watchdog for the reforms to have teeth. Miguel Ángel Gálvez, the judge presiding over hearings on the alleged corruption of former President Otto Pérez Molina highlighted this point in recent comments. "It is essential that civil society be involved in government oversight. This is an opportunity that we must seize," he said.

The stories in this series reflect the experiences of individuals and organizations that contributed to government and public oversight, and continue to work toward greater accountability in government. Each of the people highlighted in these stories, as well as the thousands of other members of the Mirador Electoral observation networks, believe deeply in the importance of doing their part to contribute to a more transparent and democratic society.

While their individual actions may feel like just "one grain of sand," each action builds on the next and contributes to a nation-wide movement of democratic change. It is through the sum of their individual actions they are able to effect long-term progress. And this change starts with the brave Guatemalans who are breaking a history of intimidation and silence to hold their government officials responsible.

Recommendations

- Organize a permanent body: Mirador Electoral should explore the feasibility of establishing a permanent election observation and citizen oversight body to improve coordination of work and organize training events, such as exchanges of experiences, methodologies and strategies, with other organizations or consortia observing elections.
- Promote social capital: Mirador Electoral should continue to build linkages between its coordinators, liaisons and volunteers. This structure can be strengthened with low-cost interventions such as systematic access to information and ongoing training sessions.
- Deepen work in municipalities: It is also important to understand that support to observers at the municipal level requires precise knowledge of the particular dynamics of each municipality. This can occur when a member organization has a presence in these territories. It is recommended that organizations based in Guatemala City make a consistent effort to adapt their activities to conform with local contexts.

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