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What does genocide conviction of Ríos Montt mean to Guatemalans abroad?

Many in the Guatemalan diaspora celebrated the historic conviction of ex-dictator Ríos Montt. But some say one conviction alone can't resolve the aftermath of the 36-year-long bloody conflict.

By Kara Andrade, Guest blogger / May 17, 2013



Guatemala's former dictator Ríos Montt wears with headphones as he listens to the verdict in his genocide trial in Guatemala City, last Friday. The Guatemalan court convicted Ríos Montt on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity, sentencing him to 80 years in prison.

Luis Soto/AP

Enlarge

• *The views expressed are the author's own.*



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From Texas last week, I tuned in to the trial of Guatemala's former-dictator Efraín Ríos Montt as he was sentenced to 80 years in prison and heaved a tearful sigh of relief.

His sentence – the maximum in Guatemala – came 12 years after the case was initially filed with the Inter-American Court in Spain. And it was long-awaited: Mr. Ríos Montt's 18 months as Guatemala's dictator, is considered the bloodiest of the country's entire civil war. His trial was the first time any domestic court has tried someone on genocide in the world.

When I called my mother in Florida to share the news she didn't miss a beat: "*Por fin ese viejo se va a la carcel, donde se merece estar.*" At last, that old man is in jail, where he deserves to be.

I wasn't the only Guatemalan-American live-streaming the trial, reading the blogs, local papers, and any new piece of information that

dictator's genocide trial

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could help me grasp what my country was going through.

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The rest of my family was doing the same from Los Angeles, Chicago, Pennsylvania, Miami, and North Carolina. And there were all the people I didn't know, who I was connecting with on Facebook from Canada, Mexico, Sweden, Amsterdam, Argentina, and other parts of the world. It seemed everyone was commenting on the Ríos Montt trial, which began in November 2012.

For many in the Guatemalan diaspora this was a David and Goliath moment, the giant dictator demolished by the humble stone of the Guatemalan court.

"I felt a rush of energy along the marimba of my spine, ending up as a cascade of tears of joy," says Martha Chavez, a Guatemalan comedian based in Toronto. "I wanted to yell, 'Champagne for the whole world, hooray!'"

Aida Morales, also in Canada, cried, too. This was the conviction of a man many long felt was most responsible for the genocide of the early 1980s.

"I was almost unwilling to believe that I was awake, rather than dreaming, it was too good to be true," says Hugo Orozco, a political exile based in New York City.

History of the conflict

The origins of Guatemala's civil war date back to the split that emerged after the United States financially backed a military coup in 1954 that overthrew leftist President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán. Mr. Guzmán's election was viewed by many Guatemalans as the first sign of democracy: The country adopted a new constitution that broadened suffrage and supported the labor and agrarian movements. He initiated land reform and sought to make United Fruit Company pay taxes on its immense holdings in Guatemala. But the victory was short-lived.

In the context of the cold war, the US saw Guzmán's moves as tainted by Cuba's communist influence.

The US supported right-wing military governments in Guatemala until 1988. A significant period of support came after Ríos Montt's brief presidency, which began in 1982 after a military coup. Some 200,000 people were killed during the Guatemalan civil war, mostly members of indigenous communities, and many point to Ríos Montt's tenure as one of the most violent periods of the 36-year internal conflict.

There were death squads, executions, forced disappearances, and torture of noncombatants. The majority of the human rights violations took place under Ríos Montt's "scorched earth" campaign that aimed to destroy-all-opponents.

During this armed conflict, many Guatemalans became political refugees, asylum seekers, or immigrants looking for economic opportunity outside of a country at war. My

family left because of the poverty in the rural areas that resulted from the conflict, and still remains.

The conflict only came to an end in 1996, with the signing of the Guatemalan Peace Accords, and Guatemala's social fabric is still shadowed by its long history of political repression and decades of violence.

Included in the Peace Accords was the acknowledgement of the rights of indigenous people to receive a full range of social services in their own languages, including legal services, public education, and health care. But disparities in economic, health, and education services still remain between indigenous and nonindigenous populations.

'Reality check'

The day of the verdict, there was a collective sigh of relief among the many Guatemalans who had long felt betrayed – by their country, their legal system, and the international community. But the court's decision to charge Montt was also a reality check: Reconciliation won't suddenly appear thanks to one conviction.

Montt is only the beginning. There is a lot of work left to be done in terms of holding people accountable for a whole host of crimes committed during the civil war. These crimes are inextricably part of the social fiber that is our country and our continuing battle with "los poderes ocultos," the hidden powers, today.

And some are not so hidden. Testimony during Montt's trial implicated current President Otto Perez Molina in similar crimes against humanity. (As standing president he has political immunity.) Mr. Perez Molina stated in an interview with CNN that while he is willing to apologize for crimes of the past, he does not believe genocide occurred in Guatemala.

The verdict itself is being challenged by Montt's attorney, Francisco Garcia Gudiel. Mr. Garcia stated he had lodged four constitutional challenges and eight protections, or *amparos*, which have not yet been ruled upon.

My personal feelings about this trial bring up the same complex emotions I feel when I think about finding my father. He was a lieutenant in Guatemala during that era: Did he play a role in the atrocities? He abandoned my mother during the war, but he still shaped who I am. Much like Guatemala, he is inseparably a part of my identity, for better or for worse.

"Nothing will ever be the same," Ms. Chavez from Toronto says. "Even if the reality is still gloomy, people now know there's the undeniable truth of the sun. And it will eventually shine."

– Kara Andrade is an Ashoka fellow working in Central America, and co-founder of HablaCentro LLC a non-profit that develops curriculum to help people in Latin America become more digitally literate and civically engaged.

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