

VIII Annual Leadership for the Americas Awards Gala Keynote Remarks



Keynote by President-elect Bernardo Arévalo of the Republic of Guatemala at the Inter-American Dialogue VIII Annual Leadership for the Americas Awards Gala, 9 November 2023.

The Honorable
Bernardo Arévalo

**President-elect,
Republic of Guatemala**

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It is a pleasure to be here with you tonight, and I'm honored to have been invited to join this celebration of the "8th Annual's Leadership for the Americas Awards."

I would first like to extend my congratulations to tonight's honorees: Djamila Ribeiro of Brazil's Plural Feminisms Institute; and Mayor Jaime Pumarejo of Barranquilla, Colombia. Your invaluable work serves as inspiration for all of us who are committed to the principle and the promise of social inclusion and to the goals of equitable and sustainable development.

Tonight's themes—social inclusion and sustainable development—were central pillars of the presidential campaign that resulted in my and my running mate's election in Guatemala this past August. Once we take office on January 14, these themes will continue to be central pillars of our plan of government for Guatemala over the next four years.

Our plan of government is based on the belief that, despite Guatemala's many and longstanding challenges, a better future is within our reach. I know this belief is shared by most Guatemalans, despite years of frustration over the abuse of power and neglect of duty in government. It is a belief that was resoundingly expressed in the more-than-20-point vote margin by which I and my running mate, Karin Herrera, were elected. This reflects renewed hope, which every country needs, especially countries like Guatemala, where hope has been stifled by so many successive corrupt governments.

Unfortunately, the presidential transition period we are currently in is not a normal one. Our commitment to eliminating corruption has provoked a backlash—one that began almost immediately after the election in August. Guatemala's current government has taken unwarranted and, in most cases, unconstitutional steps to suspend our political party, to weaken Guatemala's

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supreme electoral authority (which has tried to defend democracy), and to cast doubt on the results of the election itself. This judicial persecution is based on fear among corrupt actors and networks that our efforts to fight corruption will be successful.

This political persecution is also an extension of efforts over nearly a decade now to corrupt key state institutions and government agencies, including those responsible for the administration of justice. These efforts intensified during the current administration, and they have left Guatemala without an effective separation of powers. The Public Ministry—which is in charge of criminal prosecution and is headed by the Attorney General—is subject to the President’s authority, as is much of the judiciary and most of the current Congress.

That is the bad news. But there are also positive signs. In the course of this difficult transition, we have seen some truly historic developments: this time, it has been Guatemala’s indigenous peoples who have mobilized their own communities and led a national movement to defend democracy. They brought the country to a standstill for a few weeks, demanding that the results of the elections be upheld, and that the electoral authorities be recognized as the sole institution responsible for all matters related to elections, including preserving the security of cast ballots and vote tallies.

This has been a remarkable response, and I believe it will mark a breaking point in our history. From now on, indigenous peoples and their ancestral authorities will have a voice at any national discussion on our political future. They have shown their strength and their determination to play a role that is commensurate with the 40-to-60-percent of Guatemala’s population they comprise. Their inclusion in the national discussion will in turn have a major impact on social and economic development in our country. The rightful representation of indigenous peoples will be a significant contribution to building citizenship and participatory democracy. Up to this point, dysfunctional institutions have restricted the exercise of citizenship, and the legal system has served the same purpose.

This time—as in the past—the current government did try to ignore the demands of indigenous peoples. That is why I led an effort to have them sit at the same table with representatives of business organizations. This was a virtually unprecedented step in a country that has been divided by ethnicity, discrimination, and inequality. I intend to continue this effort to bring these actors, and many other sectors in society, together to discuss critical issues and to turn this initial, unprecedented dialogue into a series of agreements that will ensure inclusive governance.

My campaign succeeded because we promised the Guatemalan people that an Arévalo administration’s highest priority would be to end the grip that corrupt and illicit networks have on power in our country. Guatemalans understand perfectly that eliminating the systemic corruption that has dominated politics and economics for more than a decade is a prerequisite for implementing the policies and initiatives we need to build a country with a stable democracy,

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social inclusion, and equitable, sustainable development.

One of my first actions will be to restore the independence of institutions that have been so badly corroded by systemic corruption—to re-establish trust in their effectiveness through respect and support for their mission. The whole state apparatus has been weakened from inside due to the growing influence of criminal and corrupt networks. I know it will not be easy to dislodge them, but we must do it; we have a clear mandate and very strong support from hundreds of thousands of citizens who voted for us. They are ready to expand into a cohesive civil society, one that brings together student organizations, workers, indigenous organizations, entrepreneurs, and citizens from different walks of life to work together to build a better country.

I know this will not be an easy undertaking. Samuel Huntington’s so-called “third wave of democracy” was a slow and difficult process, as it takes time for countries to build institutions and develop democratic practices. Today, there are global forces working against democracy. We have seen setbacks not only in Guatemala but in other countries around the world, as autocratic regimes have gained ground, and respect for human rights and civil liberties has been gradually and systematically eroded.

We see this happening with the return of repressive practices of the past, but we also see new technologies being used to intentionally generate mistrust and division. We need to be alert to the fact that social networking platforms—combined with the content creation capabilities of artificial intelligence—pose an unprecedented threat to democratic governance. To witness democracy being undermined and political stability threatened by both traditional and new means is indeed a very troubling development.

I believe it’s time to think about a fourth democratic wave. Even if that may take a while, we want to preserve democracies that are still struggling to function effectively and to stay alive. They have their own assets, stronger and cohesive civil societies that have nurtured an active citizenry, and they benefit from human rights systems at the global and regional levels, with treaties, conventions, and other instruments for the protection of civil and political rights. And they need strong, transparent, and honest state institutions, clearly bound by rule-of-law principles, responsive to the needs and aspirations of the different sectors of society, and capable of fulfilling its duties.

Today, the gates have been opened to active participation of non-governmental actors. Closing those gates would require dismantling the current international order and its replacement by another legal system. It would also require governments to renounce international human rights treaties and pull out of all the obligations their predecessors pledged to comply with.

I do not believe that civil society in Guatemala, and indeed in many other countries, would accept such a democratic retreat, with the curtailment of civil and political liberties that would entail.

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This is why I am hopeful and determined to keep my word and my commitment to stand for democratic values.

I am under no illusions about the challenges ahead. But I want to share with you the inspiration I drew during my campaign, when I saw firsthand thousands of Guatemalans who expressed their hope and their belief that Guatemala has a brighter future ahead. My country has many thousands of young people who are talented and adept, and untouched by the corruption that so many of their elders have grown used to. For every corrupt Guatemalan, there are many, many more who are honest and who care not just about their own wealth but about the welfare of their families, their communities, and their country. These old and young, in every corner of the country, have been the bearers of hope who've enabled our country to break the grip of corrupt politicians on our political system.

I am determined to empower them and work with them to do everything that can be done in the next four years to build the social, economic, political, and judicial infrastructure that Guatemala needs to build a better future. I know I can count on the millions of Guatemalans who have placed their trust in me. And I hope that as we fight for justice and democracy in Guatemala, we can count on all of you as well.

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