

Guatemala

Ethnicity in Guatemala

Power relations

Guatemala's society and its political history are characterized by the dominant ladino-indigenous ethno-political cleavage (¹²⁹³, 152-3; ¹²⁹⁴, 111), basically a "division between Indians and non-Indians" (¹²⁹⁵, 6). The term "Ladinos" has come to encompass all of Guatemala's non-indigenous people (¹²⁹⁶; ¹²⁹⁷, 84, 104, 132).

The great majority of Guatemala's indigenous population belongs to the Maya group. There are about twenty different Maya language groups, of which the four largest – K'ichee', Mam, Kaqchikel, and Q'eqchii' – make up almost 80% of the total Maya-speaking population (¹²⁹⁸, 13). They do not constitute a politically unified ethnic bloc (see e.g. ¹²⁹⁹, 18). Yet, because they were discriminated as Maya (independent of any linguistic differences) and because in the last 30 years there has been a strong national pan-Mayan political movement (¹³⁰⁰, 158; ¹³⁰¹; ¹³⁰², 279; ¹³⁰³, ¹³⁰⁴), invoking a common "base Maya culture on a macrocultural level" (¹³⁰⁵, 17), the group is coded here as one single politically relevant ethnic category. (Note also that a national-level indigenous identity already began to emerge from 1944 on (Adams 1990).)

Population figures are highly disputed and range from about 40% of indigenous people to 60%. This analysis relies on Foster (¹³⁰⁶, 275) for an intermediate figure, which nevertheless acknowledges the demographic majority position of the indigenous people.

Calculating the relative size of the Maya group: From the 52% of indigenous people, specified in this source, we first need to subtract the 0.3% of people who identify as Xinca, a small indigenous group outside of the Maya language category. (According to the ¹³⁰⁷, the non-Maya indigenous population makes up 0.2% of the country's population. However, the same source gives an estimate of 59.4% for Ladinos and Europeans, while the present coding (which follows ¹³⁰⁸) puts them at 48%. Thus, the figure of 0.2% was multiplied by the corresponding factor to arrive at an estimate of 0.3% for the Xinca in Guatemala.) Secondly, 0.2% of Garífuna were subtracted from this number of 52%. (The relative size of the Garífuna is based on absolute population figures by Ethnologue.) This leaves us with a remaining relative size of 51.5% of the Maya group.

Ladinos (in reality, a small "white" elite) have controlled the state for all of Guatemala's history (¹³⁰⁹, 153-4; ¹³¹⁰, 18; ¹³¹¹, 279).

¹²⁹³ [Adams, 1990]

¹²⁹⁴ [Azpuru, 1999]

¹²⁹⁵ [Smith, 1990b]

¹²⁹⁶ [Smith, 1990b]

¹²⁹⁷ [Taracena et al., 2009]

¹²⁹⁸ [Warren, 1998]

¹²⁹⁹ [Smith, 1990b]

¹³⁰⁰ [Adams, 1990]

¹³⁰¹ [Fischer Brown, 1996]

¹³⁰² [Smith, 1990a]

¹³⁰⁶ [Foster, 2000]

¹³⁰⁷ [?]

¹³⁰⁸ [Foster, 2000]

¹³⁰⁹ [Adams, 1990]

¹³¹⁰ [Smith, 1990b]

¹³¹¹ [Smith, 1990a]

Whereas the immediate post-independence years were still dominated by a small white criollo elite – descendants of the Hispanic conquerors –, the so-called Liberal Revolution of 1871 represented the rise of the ladino group, originally the people of mixed European and Amerindian descent, to political power. It was their nation-building project that introduced the sharp ethnic dichotomy between a broad category of ladinos – now understood as the non-indigenous Guatemalans – and the indigenous people, which we still find today (¹³¹²; ¹³¹³). Under the new rulers, the state continued to be an instrument of the thin economic elite, especially the owners of the large coffee plantations. While Guatemala's liberal ideologues envisioned the cultural assimilation and national integration of the indigenous people, the actual policies implemented promoted ethnic segregation in the education sector, the labor market and the military, and the exclusion from citizenship. The economic success of the coffee elites was directly based on these policies of ethnic discrimination, as without a flourishing mining sector, the expropriation of communal indigenous lands and the forced recruitment of indigenous labor constituted the main sources of wealth (¹³¹⁴, ¹³¹⁵, ¹³¹⁶).

¹³¹² [Smith, 1990b]

¹³¹³ [Taracena et al., 2009]

The first time period specified in this coding – from 1946 to 1954 – refers to the short period of political and social liberalization under reformist presidents Juan José Arévalo and Jacobo Árbenz starting in 1944 (Guatemala's 10-year "democratic spring"). During their rule, citizenship was universalized and more liberal and progressive state policies were pursued, e.g. a land reform and the abolition of forced labor, from which the indigenous people living in the rural areas certainly benefited the most. The reforms significantly increased indigenous political participation at the local level (where they took over many political posts, like town mayors) and in general fostered indigenous collective organization (Dr. Ricardo Sáenz de Tejada, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, personal communication, August 4, 2014; see also ¹³¹⁷). At the national level, these socio-political reforms did not change the de-facto subordination of indigenous people within Guatemalan society (¹³¹⁸). Indeed, an ongoing ladino fear of Indian uprisings was omnipresent (Adams 1990). The status of the Maya within Guatemala's society during this period of social reform is well expressed in the following press editorials (quoted in ¹³¹⁹), which mirror the mentality of that time: "The Guatemalan does not want to be Indian, and wishes his nation were not" (El Imparcial, January 10, 1945). "Our Indian - we are assured - is by nature lazy, ..." (El Imparcial, February 12, 1945). "Because of this, our Indians must be westernized or destroyed; but we should not keep them in their entrenched static state because we will then be only a country for tourism; of curiosities; a kind of zoo for the entertainment of tourists; but never a nation" (La Hora, February 19-20, 1945). Nevertheless, the clear rupture with the past regarding the country's citizenship regime and the possibility of free and open indigenous (i.e. Maya) mobilization in the countryside warrants a coding of the Maya group as "powerless" (as opposed

¹³¹⁷ [Adams, 2011]

¹³¹⁸ [Adams, 2011]

¹³¹⁹ [Adams, 2011]

to "discriminated") in this period. The CIA-instigated coup d'état in 1954 ended the short reformist interlude and marked the beginning of the army's rise to Guatemala's most powerful political (and social) institution.

From this point on, and until 1995, the political status of the Maya is most appropriately described as the victims of deliberate and targeted political discrimination – and often of violent oppression – by the Guatemalan state and the ladino population (¹³²⁰; ¹³²¹, 111; ¹³²², 432-3; ¹³²³, 385, 395-6; ¹³²⁴, 187; ¹³²⁵, 319, 322; ¹³²⁶, 2-3). As Brockett (¹³²⁷, 264) put it from an explicitly comparative perspective: As a contemporary manifestation of historical racism, "[t]he people most likely to be victims of state terrorism in Central America in recent decades have been the Indians of Guatemala's western highlands." Central-America historian Dunkerley (¹³²⁸, 432-3), too, points at Guatemala's exceptionality within the Central American region regarding the issue of the indigenous population: "..., their specific oppression as Indians underlies a singularity in the form of domination (...) with regard to the rest of Central America." The year 1955 is the most appropriate year for the period change as the coup triggered a "de-facto recession in the dynamics of [Maya] political participation" (including a recapturing of local power by ladinos) (Dr. Ricardo Sáenz de Tejada, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, personal communication, August 4, 2014), which would eventually lead to a systematic repression of all autonomous Maya political organization by the ruling military.

Indeed, the 1970s first saw the birth of a national Maya movement, in the form of a loose collective of politico-intellectual leaders and semi-clandestine organizations (¹³²⁹, 102; ¹³³⁰, 62-5, 89-93). But the mobilization was soon crushed by the military's "scorched earth" violence, during the heights of Guatemala's 36-year civil war, that systematically targeted the indigenous population, considered to be the rebels' natural support base (¹³³¹, 89-94; ¹³³², ¹³³³). While the war erupted within a purely classist, Cold-War framework, it soon took on an explicitly ethnic character, as the rebels recruited heavily from the indigenous population during the 1970s, and indigenous leaders in turn began to use the armed struggle for their own purposes (¹³³⁴, 21-3). The military's "scorched earth" strategy, that systematically targeted the indigenous population and indigenous leaders, was later classified as a genocide by the official Truth Commission in 1999 (Ball, Kobrak, and ¹³³⁵; ¹³³⁶; ¹³³⁷, 24; ¹³³⁸; ¹³³⁹; ¹³⁴⁰, 271-2; ¹³⁴¹). Indeed, one of the main roots of the Guatemalan civil war was precisely the total refusal of the military and the oligarchy to concede any meaningful political participation to the country's indigenous majority (¹³⁴², 395; ¹³⁴³, 265-6). A civil-patrol system was created on the village level in the indigenous countryside, replacing the old community authority systems, and hundreds of thousands of indigenous men were forcibly recruited and coerced into monitoring (or terrorizing) their villages under direct military command (¹³⁴⁴). Thus, the military came to control the in-

¹³²⁰ [Adams, 2011]

¹³²¹ [Azpuru, 1999]

¹³²² [Dunkerley, 1988]

¹³²³ [Lunsford, 2007]

¹³²⁴ [Pérez-Brignoli, 1989]

¹³²⁹ [Cojtí, 2010]

¹³³⁰ [Hale, 2006]

¹³³¹ [Ball, Kobrak Spierer, 1999]

¹³³² [Falla, 1994]

¹³³³ [Schirmer, 1998]

indigenous countryside, and in this process whole villages were erased (1345, 25-8; 1346, 390, 394; 1347, 272, 275).

Superficial democratization, i.e. the holding of elections, from 1985 on did not really change the power structure in Guatemala; the military remained the most influential political force and the violence continued, albeit on a somewhat lower level (1348, 28-9, 32; 1349, 202; 1350, 1351, 274-5). For the sake of completeness, it must be noted that the military also implemented certain development projects in indigenous areas with the goal of economically, politically and culturally integrating indigenous people into Guatemalan society (1352, 275), but in light of the evidence it is safe to say that such integration would not have been as politically equals. Rather, the project must be seen as an attempt by the state to eradicate autonomously expressed indigenous culture (1353, 278-9; see also 1354).

In 1996, the Guatemalan peace accords were finally signed, including the separate 1995 accord on indigenous rights. Warren (1355, 149) refers to the peace process, started in 1994, as the actual "transition to democracy" where "the Maya could finally participate openly in national politics". The political opening served as a catalyst for Maya mobilization. Indigenous organizations – some newly created, some emerging from their previously semi-clandestine existence – took advantage of the peace process and became one of the main political forces (1356; 1357; 1358; Warren 1998). Indigenous issues were finally put on the public political agenda and Maya leaders received much attention from the mass media (1359, 111, 117-8; 1360, 150-2, 159). The national dialogues led to the recognition of Guatemala as a multiethnic and multilingual country. However, the peace accords were non-binding in nature, to be implemented through congressional legislation and constitutional reform, and led to persistent political disputes, even within Maya organizations and communities (1361; 1362; 1363; 1364; 1365; 1366; 1367). The national referendum on indigenous rights, emanating from the accords, but extenuated considerably by the legislative process, was defeated with 47% to 53% of votes in May 1999 (with an abstention rate of 81%). Parts of the campaign against the referendum were built upon strategies to scare voters based on images of ethnic conflict and fears of a "balkanization" of the country (1368; 1369, 189-213; 1370). The defeat of the constitutional referendum can also be seen as a sign of the declining political strength of the movement at the turn of the century (1371, 146; 1372).

Nevertheless, Guatemalan governments have proved to be more open towards indigenous issues since the peace accords, and some prominent Maya leaders have been appointed to governmental/administrative posts although not of major importance (1373; 1374, 174-5). The new period inserted in 1996 reflects this change by dropping the discrimination coding. Instead, present-day Guatemala falls into what Hale (1375, 1376) has termed "neoliberal multiculturalism", characterized by a rhetorical endorsement of cultural rights and formal equality combined with firm resistance to substantial changes in the dis-

¹³⁴⁸ [Ball, Kobrak Spierer, 1999]

¹³⁴⁹ [Goodwin, 2001]

¹³⁵⁰ [Jonas, 1995]

¹³⁵¹ [Smith, 1990a]

¹³⁵² [Smith, 1990a]

¹³⁵⁵ [Warren, 2004]

¹³⁵⁶ [Azpuru, 1999]

¹³⁵⁷ [Bastos Comus, 2003]

¹³⁵⁸ [Jonas, 2000]

¹³⁵⁹ [Azpuru, 1999]

¹³⁷³ [?]

¹³⁷⁴ [Warren, 2004]

¹³⁷⁵ [Hale, 2004]

¹³⁷⁶ [Hale, 2006]

tribution of political and economic power. The Maya are formally included in political processes, but often not more than rhetorically (¹³⁷⁷). Especially when important economic issues are at stake, indigenous people still suffer from acts of (violent) expropriation and state policies of repression and judicial persecution (¹³⁷⁸, 398; ¹³⁷⁹; ¹³⁸⁰, 196-204; ¹³⁸¹). This situation is appropriately captured by the power status category of "powerless". Correspondingly, the ladino Guatemalans are coded as "dominant" (instead of holding monopoly power) in this second time period.

Note that Maya group representatives do not hold effective political power above the local level (¹³⁸²; ¹³⁸³; ¹³⁸⁴, 155).

While the vast majority of historiographic, anthropological, and political science literature has been concerned with Guatemala's Maya people, the history of the small Xinca group represents an outstandingly interesting case of "ethnic revival". The Xinca people are communities with communal landholdings in the southeast of the country that in the official colonial documents were still recognized as indigenous and that, in fact, feature the physical traits of Amerindian people, but which lost most of their cultural markers (including their language) over the course of the history, due to the strong presence and penetration of the Guatemalan state and economic activities in that region. In the 1995 accord on indigenous rights, they were officially recognized as ethnic group at the instigation of the leftist guerrilla organization URNG. The URNG subsequently used the ethnic Xinca "label" strategically to create an electoral constituency for itself in that region. Since then, some people of these communities have readily taken up the ethnic bait, probably both partly out of a genuine concern with their historical roots and partly for strategic reasons. The funding available from international donors concerned with indigenous rights after the peace accords created an incentive to identify as Xinca, contributing decisively to the emergence of an albeit feeble Xinca ethno-political "movement". (The foregoing information all stems from Prof. Dalila Gaitán, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, personal communication, August 7, 2014). The first political organization representing the group was the "Consejo del Pueblo Xinca de Guatemala" (COPXIG) founded in 1994, which also participated in the peace negotiations as a part of the Guatemalan civil society. In 2002, the "Consenso por la Unidad del Pueblo Xinka de Guatemala" (CONXIG) was founded and later became the "Parlamento Xinca" (also with the support of international donors) (¹³⁸⁵). Yet, this ethno-political resurgence has also caused serious divisions within these communities themselves, as many of those who "should be" Xinca are against the ethnic re-identification (Prof. Dalila Gaitán, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, personal communication, August 7, 2014). Overall, thus, this can be considered a "borderline" case regarding political relevance, as defined here. However, since Xinca resistance against natural resource extraction in their territories has important repercussions in national politics, the group is coded here as politically

¹³⁷⁷ [Bastos Comus, 2003]

¹³⁸² [Bastos, 2010]

¹³⁸³ [?]

¹³⁸⁴ [Warren, 2004]

¹³⁸⁵ [Wikipedia, 2014]

relevant ("powerless") from 1996 on, i.e. after its official recognition in the peace accords.

A similar process of timid political mobilization can be observed in the case of another small minority in Guatemala: the black Garífuna group, a trans-national African-Caribbean people present in Honduras, Belize, Guatemala, and Nicaragua (with a large diaspora in the USA, especially in New York), which is also now attempting to politically constitute itself as a historical "nation" (Prof. Alfonso Arrivillaga, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, personal communication, August 5, 2014). As in the case of the Xinca, the Garífuna group's political activism has become noticeable at the national political level in Guatemala only since the 1995 accord on indigenous rights. As Hooker (¹³⁸⁶, 297, fn. 32) notes: "In Guatemala, (...) the Garifuna gained the same rights as the Maya by virtue of being included in the ethnic/indigenous group category ABSENT any demand on their part for such inclusion" (emphasis added). Today, they also mostly mobilize around the issue of the protection of their ancestral territories (in this case, mostly endangered by large-scale tourism projects). They are represented by ethno-political organizations, such as the "Organización Negra de Guatemala" (ONEGUA), "Buduru", etc., although their mobilization also has become more intimately linked to traditional religious/spiritual movements in recent years (Prof. Alfonso Arrivillaga, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, personal communication, August 5, 2014). Therefore, like the Xinca, they are coded as politically irrelevant in the first two periods and as "powerless" from 1996 on. It should be noted, however, that, just like the Xinca, the group is also a "borderline" case regarding political relevance as its mobilization at the national level is really marginal (see also e.g. ¹³⁸⁷).

¹³⁸⁶ [Hooker, 2005]

¹³⁸⁷ [?]

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Political status of ethnic groups in Guatemala

From 1946 until 1954

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Maya	0.515	POWERLESS
Ladinos	0.48	MONOPOLY
Xinca	0.003	IRRELEVANT
Garífuna	0.002	IRRELEVANT

From 1955 until 1995

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Maya	0.515	DISCRIMINATED
Ladinos	0.48	MONOPOLY
Xinca	0.003	IRRELEVANT
Garífuna	0.002	IRRELEVANT

From 1996 until 2013

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Maya	0.515	POWERLESS
Ladinos	0.48	DOMINANT
Xinca	0.003	POWERLESS
Garífuna	0.002	POWERLESS



Figure 303: Political status of ethnic groups in Guatemala during 1946-1954.



Figure 304: Political status of ethnic groups in Guatemala during 1955-1995.



Figure 305: Political status of ethnic groups in Guatemala during 1996-2013.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Guatemala

From 1946 until 2013

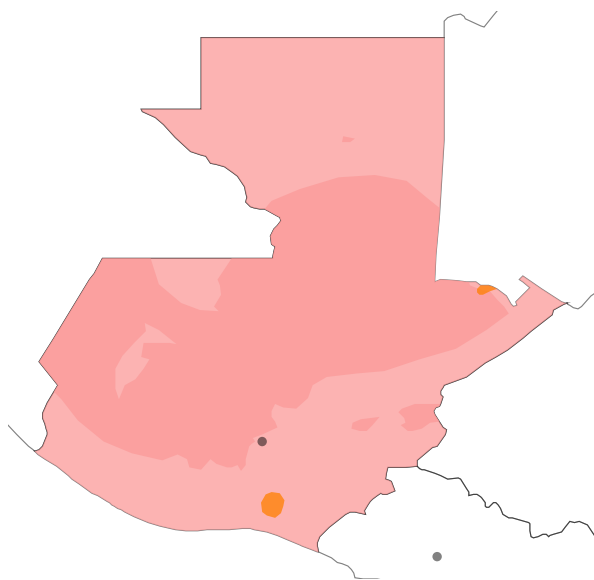


Figure 306: Map of ethnic groups in Guatemala during 1996-2013.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■ Ladinós	109 407	Statewide
■ Maya	51 294	Regional & urban
■ Xinca	331	Regionally based
■ Garífuna	83	Regionally based

Table 92: List of ethnic groups in Guatemala during 1946-2013.

Conflicts in Guatemala

Starting on 1949-07-18

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Guatemala	Military faction		1949-07-18			
Government of Guatemala	Forces of Carlos Castillo Armas	Ladinos	1954-06-18	No	No	No
Government of Guatemala	FAR I	Ladinos	1963-03-22	No	Yes, from EGIP	Split
Government of Guatemala	FAR II	Ladinos	1970-12-31	No	Yes, from EGIP	Split
Government of Guatemala	EGP	Maya	1975-05-31	Explicit	Yes	Yes
Government of Guatemala	ORPA	Maya	1979-11-30	Presumed	Yes	Yes
Government of Guatemala	URNG	Maya	1982-03-31	Presumed	Yes	Yes