

The Disarticulated Movement:  
Barriers to Maya Mobilization in Post-Conflict Guatemala

Manuel Vogt

**Abstract**

*Over the last decades, indigenous movements have propelled the political empowerment of historically marginalized groups in Latin America. However, in Guatemala, after its reawakening during the peace process, the Maya struggle for ethnic equality has reached an impasse. On the basis of field research consisting of dozens of elite interviews, this paper analyzes the patterns of and obstacles to Maya mobilization in present-day Guatemala. It combines movement-internal and external factors to an overarching theoretical argument about indigenous movements' capacity to construct strong collective voices. In the Guatemalan case, organizational sectorization, the lack of elite consensus on key substantive issues, and unclear alliance strategies compromise the effectiveness of horizontal voice among Maya organizations. These problems are exacerbated by the lasting effects of the country's unique history of violence and state strategies of divide and rule, preventing the emergence of a strong vertical voice capable of challenging the Guatemalan state.*

## **Introduction**

On 12 October 2011, hundreds of Maya demonstrators led by several social organizations, marched through Guatemala's capital, using the formerly called "Día de la Raza" (Columbus Day) to demand an end to forced land evictions and to natural resource exploitation in indigenous territories. The struggle of Guatemala's Maya population for social and political justice forms part of a region-wide wave of indigenous mobilization that has resulted in far-reaching political gains for these historically marginalized groups (Lucero 2008; Madrid 2012; Stavenhagen 1992; Van Cott 2005; Yashar 2005).

Due to the 36-year civil war characterized by genocidal state violence, this indigenous mobilization emerged later in Guatemala than in other countries.<sup>1</sup> Only with the political opening of the early 1990s, the opportunity structures for social movements (Tarrow 1998; Tilly 2004) turned favorable, and an array of Maya organizations (re-)emerged, exerting strong political protagonism during the peace process (Azpuru 1999; Hale 2006; Jonas 2000; Warren 1998). Nevertheless, the country's underlying power structures have remained unaltered, and the stark ethnic inequalities persist.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the political weight of these organizations has diminished considerably in the last decade (Bastos and Brett 2010a; Hale 2006). Hence, the question arises: To what extent have movement-internal weaknesses halted the struggle for indigenous rights in Guatemala?

According to theories of collective action (Olson 1965), large, diverse social groups face more difficulties in organizing politically than small ones. In the context of indigenous political mobilization, then, one could argue that large indigenous groups may produce more, and more heterogeneous, actors involved in collective action processes, which should complicate coordination. Indeed, in the case of Guatemala, scholars have

associated Maya political fragmentation in part with the high social heterogeneity that characterizes the group (Smith 1990a; Warren 1998). However, the same diversity of indigenous actors can be found in other countries, most notably Bolivia and Ecuador where, under comparable ethno-demographic conditions, two of the most powerful indigenous movements have emerged.<sup>3</sup> As Lucero (2008) shows, strong collective indigenous voices were constructed in these countries despite considerable regional, linguistic, religious, and ideological divisions. Hence, the crucial empirical question is why in some instances disparate indigenous actors are able to construct powerful collective voices, whereas in others (including present-day Guatemala) they remain disarticulated. To provide solid answers to this question, we need to analyze, for specific cases, the precise causal mechanisms leading to either outcome.

This study argues that national-level Maya mobilization in Guatemala is crippled by a weakness of what O'Donnell (1986) has called “horizontal voice”: the ability to construct a collective political identity and agenda, making the emergence of a strong vertical voice possible. Drawing on dozens of interviews with leaders of Maya organizations, members of the *ladino* political elite, and outside experts, carried out during a 3-months field research in the country, the study identifies both movement-internal and external barriers to horizontal voice, which distinguish the Guatemalan case from more successful cases of indigenous mobilization in the region.

The next section elaborates the theoretical argument. After a brief description of the historical context and the study's research design, the empirical analysis shows, first, how organizational sectorization, the lack of elite consensus on key substantive issues, and unclear alliance strategies compromise the effectiveness of horizontal voice among Maya organizations. Yet, as subsequently emphasized, these problems are also exacer-

bated by the lasting effects of the country's unique history of violence, which has divided and atomized the Maya population, severely restricting the opportunities for horizontal voice.

### **Indigenous Movements in Latin America: Constructing the Voice of the Marginalized**

Latin America's societies are characterized by a race-based system of ethno-classes in which the subjugated indigenous groups, along with the imported African slaves (and their free or enslaved descendants), have been politically, economically, and culturally marginalized ever since the colonial conquest (del Valle Escalante 2009; Pitt-Rivers 1994; Stavenhagen 1992; Wade 2010). Although the discriminating electoral laws of the past have given way to a formal system of universal political rights, the extremely unequal distribution of economic and social resources systematically disadvantages these groups in the political arena, even in countries where they compose a demographic majority (Enloe 1978; Madrid 2005, 2012). Since the 1970s, however, indigenous (and to a lesser extent African-descendant) groups have embarked on a sustained process of collective mobilization, making powerful claims for either autonomous control over their own territories or for equal participation at the level of the central state (Lucero 2008; Madrid 2012; Sieder 2002; Van Cott 2000; Yashar 2005).<sup>4</sup>

To explain the emergence of indigenous movements scholars have often followed a structuralist approach based on the classical literature on political opportunity structures and social movement strength (Tarrow 1998; Tilly 2004). They have emphasized the importance of favorable structural and political-institutional conditions (Birbir 2004; Van Cott 2003, 2005; Yashar 2005), the availability of trans-ethnic alliances with white or

*mestizo* sectors of society and their organizations (Madrid 2012; Rappaport 2005), the increased access of indigenous elites to higher education and transnational communication networks which have sharpened group consciousness (Stavenhagen 1992; Wade 2010, 114), and international legal regimes such as the ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples or the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Sawyer and Gomez 2012). As Brysk (1996) has pointed out, indigenous groups can often draw upon the support of inter- and nongovernmental organizations that defend their interests vis-à-vis state governments based on these internationally codified group rights.

The political pressures created by these movements have yielded tangible political benefits to Latin America's indigenous groups, in terms of collective rights (Becker 2011, 57-9, 142-6; Sieder 2002; Van Cott 2000), access to land and (bilingual) education (Madrid 2012, 176; Pallares 2007; Van Cott 2000; Yashar 2005), recognition of indigenous languages (Becker 2011, 146-9; Van Cott 2000), and control of local spaces of political power (Lucero 2008; Madrid 2012, 176-7; Ospina, Santillana, and Arboleda 2008; Van Cott 2001). As scholars have pointed out, strong and autonomous pressure groups are indispensable for the protection of the interests of underprivileged sectors of society (Edwards 2004, 80-2; Rueschemeyer 2004, 86-7). In the words of Jenkins (1995), social movements can assume the role of representing the underrepresented and thereby countering entrenched oligarchies.

Indigenous movements in Latin America have often used tactics of contestation and protest to advance their interests vis-à-vis state governments. Yet, they have also relied on strategies of targeted lobbying vis-à-vis state institutions, both in Guatemala (Azpuru 1999; Hale 2006; Jonas 2000), and elsewhere in the region (Becker 2011; Rousseau 2011; Van Cott 2000, 2001). Often, pressure from the street has compelled governments

to negotiate. The literature on political interest groups (see e.g. Baumgartner and Leech 1998; Binderkrantz 2005) usually refers to these patterns of contestation and negotiation as indirect vs. direct advocacy or, as Beyers (2004) calls it, voice vs. access.

Nevertheless, despite – or oftentimes precisely because of – their success, these movements have also experienced severe internal divisions in the process of their interaction with the state. While regional and linguistic differences within countries have posed obstacles to national unification (see especially Lucero 2008), internal fissures have also emerged along religious and politico-ideological lines, often linked to power struggles between different organizations and leaders (Becker 2011; Lucero 2008; Lucero and García 2007).<sup>5</sup> Additionally, according to Hale (2004, 2006), regimes of neoliberal multiculturalism have divided the movements by distinguishing between “good” (i.e. compliant) and “bad” indigenous leaders, and co-opting the former into the state structures.

Certainly, “access” – i.e. political influence – is difficult to achieve without a strong voice. Indigenous people in Ecuador, for example, were able to form a powerful movement that combined the demands of different ethnic groups (including *mestizos*) and, thus, became a very influential political actor in the country (Becker 2011; Gerlach 2003; Selverston-Scher 2001). Importantly, Lucero (2008) shows that indigenous movements can achieve great political power despite internal divisions as long as strong, representative collective voices exist. These voices are both a political and a cultural product as the very identity of the group needs to be constructed before meaningful political claims can be made (Lucero 2008; Lucero and García 2007; Vermeersch 2006). Hence, besides the external opportunity structures, movement-internal processes and strategies of constructing a political identity and collective voice must also be regarded as determining factors for successful mobilization (cp. Vermeersch 2006, 41).

Guillermo O'Donnell (1986) has referred to these processes as “horizontal voice”, which he distinguishes from “vertical voice” that is directed to the rulers.<sup>6</sup> Specifically concerned with the collective action of social groups in repressive regimes, O'Donnell describes horizontal voice as the mechanism through which individuals form a collective political identity and determine the common “ideal and/or material interests, the pursuit of which supposedly will guide [their] collective action” (O'Donnell 1986, 251). Whether in its “direct” (e.g. a street protest) or “indirect” form (when individuals claim to speak for a particular group), strong vertical voice rests upon the ability of group members and leaders to reach a consensus about what political interests are pursued in whose name (O'Donnell 1986, 252). Hence, from this point of view, effective horizontal voice is a prerequisite for social movements' political influence vis-à-vis the state.

The present study argues that the relative weakness of Maya mobilization in Guatemala is due to a weakness of horizontal voice that emanates from both movement-internal and external factors, which distinguish the Guatemalan case from more successful cases of indigenous mobilization in the region. On the one hand, horizontal voice is undermined by the consequences of past and ongoing state violence, the extent of which is unmatched in Latin America. But on the other hand, as this study shows, there are also important movement-internal factors compromising the effectiveness of horizontal voice. In contrast to the powerful indigenous movements in Bolivia and Ecuador, Maya political mobilization at the national level is characterized by a high degree of organizational sectorization, a lack of elite convergence on key substantive issues, and fundamental disagreements over the choice of political alliances.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, the collective vertical voice of Guatemala's Maya population – its ability to make political claims *as Maya* – is weaker than that of the indigenous groups in these other countries.

## **Guatemala: From Genocide to Discursive Inclusion**

There are about twenty different Maya language groups in Guatemala, whose collective political identity has been fostered by the pan-Mayanist movement that emerged in the 1990s (Fischer and Brown 1996; Warren 1998), by invoking a common “base Maya culture on a macrocultural level” (Montejo 2005, 17). Although constituting the demographic majority, they have been politically discriminated against and often violently oppressed by the Guatemalan state throughout the country’s history (Adams 2011; Smith 1990b; Taracena et al. 2009). 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 (or racial) dichotomy between a broad category of *ladinos* – now understood as the non-indigenous Guatemalans – and the indigenous people, which we still find today (Smith 1990a; Taracena et al. 2009).

After the overthrow of dictator Jorge Ubico in 1944 and a 10-year “democratic spring”, the military coup of 1954 ushered in more than 30 years of increasingly institutionalized military rule, backed by the economic oligarchy. Continuing racial discrimination led to the birth of the Maya movement in the 1970s, as a loose collective of politico-intellectual leaders and semi-clandestine organizations (Cojtí 2010, 102; Hale 2006, 62-5, 89-93). But the mobilization was soon crushed by the military’s “scorched earth” violence, during the heights of Guatemala’s genocidal 36-year civil war, that systematically targeted the indigenous population, considered to be the rebels’ natural support base (Ball, Kobrak, and Spirer 1999, 89-94; Falla 1994; Schirmer 1998). It was only with the

internationally accompanied peace negotiations in the early 1990s that “the Maya could finally participate openly in national politics” (Warren 2004, 149).

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 in the country (Azpuru 1999; Bastos and Camus 2003; Jonas 2000; Warren 1998). This led to the recognition of Guatemala as a multiethnic and multilingual state. It was also during this time that the *Coordinadora de Organizaciones del Pueblo Maya* (Coordinator of Organizations of the Maya People of Guatemala, COPMAGUA) was founded to unify the different Maya organizations under a common political roof. However, due to internal divisions, the organization lasted only six years (Maya leader X 2011; Maya leader XI 2011).<sup>8</sup> The defeat of the constitutional referendum in 1999 that contained various stipulations favorable to the indigenous population (Warren 2004) can be seen as a sign of the declining political strength of the movement at the turn of the century (Adams 2011, 146; Bastos and Brett 2010b).<sup>9</sup>

Today, the Maya are formally included in political processes, but often not more than rhetorically. Some prominent leaders have been appointed to governmental posts but never of major importance (Warren 2004, 174-5). During the last legislature, 2008-2011, only 17 out of 158 parliamentarians were of indigenous origin. Hence, present-day Guatemala reflects quite accurately the pattern of Hale’s (2004, 2006) “neoliberal multiculturalism”, characterized by a rhetorical endorsement of cultural rights and formal equality combined with firm resistance to substantial changes in the distribution of political and economic power (cp. also Bastos and Camus 2003).

## Research Design

The following empirical analysis is based on a 3-months field research in the country conducted from April to July 2011. I carried out 59 semi-structured interviews with leaders of Maya organizations, members of the *ladino* political elite, and outside experts, using a detailed interview schedule adapted to each target group. For reasons of confidentiality, all interview partners were ensured anonymity.

Consistent with the purpose of this study – analyzing the political influence of civil society organizations in a centralized system – the Maya organizations whose leaders were interviewed are mostly based in the country's capital.<sup>10</sup> The country's state and political elite is represented in this study by top-level bureaucrats, Congressmen, political party leaders, and the directors or chief editors of Guatemala's main traditional media outlets.<sup>11</sup> Interviewees from the state administration were chosen from those areas that were considered key areas of activity by the Maya organizations, according to their own statements (agriculture, education, energy, mining and environment, health, labor). After initial contact with the pertinent institutions, the snowball method was used to identify further relevant interviewees within each area until the interviews did not unveil any new information (cp. Tansey 2007). This resulted in a sample of 23, mostly top-level, bureaucrats, including five state ministers, who were central actors in both policy design and implementation processes in the relevant areas. In addition, six parliamentarians were interviewed who were also chosen according to their membership in specific congressional committees of interest (agriculture, human rights, indigenous peoples, education, energy and mining, food security).

The small number of interviews in each target group does not allow us to speak of a representative survey. But the non-probability sampling procedures applied here, which

targeted the relevant actors involved in the specific processes of interest, should ensure that the gathered information can adequately reproduce these processes (cp. Tansey 2007). The interview data was systematically analyzed through conventional content analysis by coding theoretical categories based on the text data (Hsieh and Shannon 2005), moving from descriptive to interpretive coding and finally identifying the relevant overarching themes in the interviews, as proposed by King and Horrocks (2010, 152-9). This information from primary sources was then triangulated with a wide array of secondary literature to arrive at robust and theoretically meaningful conclusions.

## **Analysis**

### *The Maya Agenda and Organizational Strategies*

In order to analyze the internal dynamics of Maya political mobilization in today's Guatemala, we need to identify first the agenda and mobilizational strategies of the organizations representing the group. Hence, the interviewed leaders were asked about the areas of activity of their organizations. The issue of natural resource extraction in indigenous territories was named most often and by almost all organizations. Clearly, opposition to potentially harmful economic activities – particularly mining and hydroelectric projects – has become the centerpiece of Maya mobilization in recent years. According to outside observers, this responds to very immediate, very practical concerns of the indigenous communities in the countryside (Outside expert I 2011; Outside expert II 2011; Outside expert III 2011). It also follows a general regional and global pattern (Healey 2009; Sawyer and Gomez 2012; Wade 2010, 127-8).

Access to land is still a highly relevant topic for Maya organizations but has undergone a major change of focus: from simple claims for land redistribution to a more ample

focus on what is called “integral rural development”. The latter refers to demands for an improved infrastructure with respect to health, education, housing, and transport in rural areas, and technical and financial assistance for agricultural production.

Also very important are the struggles for political and cultural rights. Political rights refer to the access of indigenous people to all institutions of state power at the national level (Congress, bureaucracy, judicial system etc.). Cultural rights include language rights but also the legal recognition of customary law and Maya traditional authorities, Maya spirituality, and control over sacred sites.

Almost all of the organizations considered in this study have some strategy of political lobbying towards state institutions. This lobbying is targeted both at the executive branch, i.e. the ministries and state secretariats, and the national parliament. Within the executive, the main targets are the State Secretariat for Agriculture, *Fondo de Tierras* (State Fund for Land), the Ministries of Agriculture, Education, Environment and Natural Resources, and Energy and Mining, and the Maya entities within the state bureaucracy.<sup>12</sup>

The strategy of popular mobilization described at the beginning – consisting of demonstrations and rallies, the blockade of roads or the occupation of public buildings – is employed in a more selective way, usually when more conventional forms of claim-making are ignored by the political system. In this sense, popular mobilization – although less widespread – has remained a suitable (and necessary) organizational strategy (cp. McNeish 2008). In addition, three fourths of the interviewed organizations have regular contact to inter- or transnational organizations and institutions (the international human rights system, foreign ambassadors, development aid agencies and churches, transnational social movements etc.) which – apart from the funding – they use to place their complaints, obtain capacity-building training, and receive support in their lobbying vis-à-vis

the state. These transnational links of indigenous organizations are common in many other countries of the region as well (Brysk 1996; Lucero 2008).

Hence, both Maya organizations' current agenda and their tactics resemble those of indigenous movements in other countries (Becker 2011, 140-1; Lucero and García 2007; Sawyer and Gomez 2012; Van Cott 2000; Wade 2010). The next two sections will expose the obstacles to their attempts of constructing an equally strong political voice capable of challenging the Guatemalan state.

### *Movement-internal Barriers to Horizontal Voice*

The case of Maya mobilization in Guatemala emphasizes the importance of these movement-internal processes, which O'Donnell (1986) summarized under the term horizontal voice, that form the basis of successful collective action. Before turning to the role of the Guatemalan state, and specifically the impact of past and ongoing state violence, I will examine the main internal contradictions affecting Maya mobilization in today's Guatemala. I argue that there are three principal factors compromising the effectiveness of Maya horizontal voice and, as a consequence, the strength of the group's vertical voice: organizational sectorization, the lack of elite convergence with regard to key substantive issues, and fundamental disagreements over the choice of political alliances.

First, many organizations work mainly in a specific thematic area: for example, bilingual education, access to land, rights of indigenous women etc. This organizational sectorization, in which each organization remains focused on its own topic, impedes the development of a common, concerted Maya political agenda (Maya leader VI 2011; Maya leader XI 2011; Party leader II 2012). In part, the sectoral character of indigenous claim-making in Guatemala is a consequence of the strong influence of the international

donors that moved into the country during and after the peace negotiations. Donor agencies' approach to democracy promotion and civil society building in developing countries usually favors professionally organized NGOs, associated with specific topics, rather than broader social movements pursuing more general political agendas (Edwards and Hulme 1996; Jad 2007; Petras 1997). As a result, the latter often become fragmented and depoliticized by the proliferation of externally funded NGOs (Petras 1997).

Due to the internationally accompanied peace process, following the devastating civil conflict, the disciplinary influence of this sectoral civil society promotion on indigenous mobilization has been more profound in Guatemala than in other Latin American countries.<sup>13</sup> In the peace negotiations, civil society participation was organized along sectoral lines (Jonas 2000, 37-54; Krznaric 1999). Also the different *comisiones paritarias* (joint commissions) of the government and Maya representatives, established in the Indigenous Accord, each dealt with a particular topic, such as, for example, education or land rights (Bastos 2010b, 10-11; Jonas 2000, 158; Krznaric 1999, 7). Hence, the sectoral approach has become deeply engrained in Maya political organization and claim-making.

Today, the funding that Maya organizations receive from outside is often tied to the execution of specific activities in a specific form defined by the donors (Maya leader III 2011; Maya leader XII 2011; Congressman III 2011; Party leader II 2012). This is described in the following statement of a Maya organization leader:

There are a lot of international donors saying: "Alright, let's launch a call for bids ["convocatoria"] for a specific topic." (...) So you participate in this bidding procedure and fulfill all the requirements, and you also present the necessary reports, the aim, and the results, and then they give you an

amount [of money]. (...) Thus, if you don't comply, they stop the program and don't give you any more funding. So that's how we work through projects and with a clear objective or an element that they want us to focus on in the area of indigenous people. (Maya leader III 2011).

Thus, although they are important allies of the Maya struggle in Guatemala overall, by accentuating organizational sectorization, the influence of international donors has also weakened the capacity of Maya organizations to articulate a common agenda of collective action.

Moreover, even between organizations working on the same issues there seems to be a division along thematic or geographical lines. The three main Maya-peasant organizations working on land rights (CUC, CONIC, CNOC), for example, have more or less defined territories of influence. Hence, they often do not appear as a unified bloc in defense of indigenous communities. Worse even, in some cases, they compete against each other over spheres of influence (Maya leader II 2011; Maya leader XII 2011; Maya leader XIII 2011). This can have tragic consequences as the events in the Polochic Valley in the department of Alta Verapaz show<sup>14</sup>, according to one Maya leader:

One wonders why it could not be stopped what happened in the Polochic valley if there is an organization there. Almost all organizations are working there. In part, it was because of these divisions. Because this organization [said]: "No, I will not support [the resistance] because this community is not in my organization. Ah, but this one, yes." There was like a territorial dis-

pute. “This one is of my organization, so I support it. That one is not my community, so I don’t support it.” (Maya leader XII 2011).

Secondly, there is a serious lack of elite consensus with regard to key issues that in other countries have become central ingredients of the agendas of successful indigenous movements – such as natural resource exploitation or the opposition to neoliberal economic policies (including US-led free trade agreements) (Becker 2011; Lucero 2008) – and that also constitute core elements of what Madrid (2012) described as indigenous populism. As a consequence, horizontal consensus-building is replaced by multiple diverging vertical voices mediating between the Maya population and the state.

Natural resource exploitation, for instance, is as contested an issue in Guatemala as in most other Latin American states. Spurred by a permissive legal environment, metal exploration in the country has increased by 1,000 per cent since 1998 (Dougherty 2011), primarily affecting the areas traditionally inhabited by indigenous people. As a consequence, indigenous communities have held more than 60 local referenda, based on the ILO Convention 169, in which about 700,000 people voted against mining activities in their territories (Duthie 2012). A recent survey published in Guatemala’s newspaper *Prensa Libre* (2014) also indicates that the majority of the country’s population is opposed to mining activities and that this percentage is higher in rural than in urban areas.

As the previous section showed, at the time of my field research, almost all organizations had at least rhetorically picked up this important concern of the local communities. However, they had picked it up rather late. As Bastos (2010a, 337-8) notes, until recently Maya national leaders were not much involved in these local struggles against mining as they were focused more on national-level political mobilization.<sup>15</sup> In a sense, this may

also reflect the urban bias that some authors have attributed to the pan-Maya movement (see e.g. Brown 1996, 169-70; Carey 2004, 85).<sup>16</sup> Second, elites now disagree over the position that Maya organizations should take on this issue. In specific cases, such as the protests against the cement plant in San Juan Sacatepéquez, local indigenous resistance has been backed by national organizations and succeeded to halt large-scale economic activity threatening the means of livelihood of indigenous people (Maya leader IV 2011).

However, achieving a common position among Maya organizations at the national level has so far proven very difficult. This was demonstrated by the diversity of reactions to the Colom government's proposed legal regulation of the popular referenda, ranging from a categorical refusal to the elaboration of an alternative legal project. Finally, the legal process was stopped by means of a constitutional complaint deposited by certain indigenous leaders and organizations. While representatives of left-leaning Maya organizations burnt effigies of other Maya leaders on Guatemala City's main plaza during a manifestation against the law, other Maya leaders criticized them for supposedly ignoring the will of the communities:

The problem is that the majority of the organizations that are very urban and usually are located in the capital have come up saying "no" to state regulation of the popular referenda. And they come up saying "no" to other proposals, they come up saying "no" to everything. I mean, you will see the same faces everywhere. So what we want as an organization is that there is a regulation – but it should be elaborated by the communities, by new faces, the communal leaders, the local leaders. (...) The leaders in the urban centers raise their voice for those who cannot do it. That's good. But it turns out that

this is not the view of the community. (...) If these leaders call themselves indigenous they should not say “no” [to state regulation of the popular referendum]. (Maya leader XI 2011).<sup>17</sup>

Hence, while the agendas of national organizations now do reflect these concerns of the communities, different organizations mediate between the Maya population and state institutions advocating different solutions, eclipsing the type of horizontal consensus-building that would give the Maya voice more power. This situation stands in stark contrast to the developments in Ecuador, for example. While the lowland groups in the Ecuadorian Amazon region can be considered pioneers in linking ecological grievances to a discourse of ethnic group survival, the highland groups soon adopted these ecological demands (Becker 2011; Gerlach 2003, 51-75; Lucero 2008). Hence, although there were also numerous political disagreements and rivalries between the different organizations, Ecuador's indigenous leaders – in contrast to Maya leaders in Guatemala – have almost always achieved a consensus regarding these key issues (see e.g. Becker 2011, 10, 184-8, 230-2). This elite convergence facilitates the organization of collective action at both the elite and grassroots levels, which in turn strengthens the movement's vertical voice.

Thirdly, and related to the point before, there are profound disagreements between the different organizations over the choice of political alliances. On the one hand, the traditional leftist wing is naturally closer to leftist political parties. But even within this faction, there were disagreements during the 2011 electoral campaign about whether or not to formally support the Winaq movement, Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú's electoral vehicle which was allied with the leftist URNG (Maya leader I 2011; Maya leader II 2011; Maya leader V 2011; Maya leader VII 2011). In part, this has to do with

another unresolved contradiction of Guatemala's Maya mobilization: while organizations such as the *Comité de Unidad Campesina* (Committee for Peasant Unity, CUC) still tend to frame their struggle in classist terms, newer organizations such as the *Coordinadora Nacional Indígena y Campesina* (National Coordinator of Indians and Peasants, CONIC) follow a more ethnicist approach. As a result, the latter organization was much less hesitant to ally with the openly indigenous Winaq while the CUC was concerned about possible right-wing elements within the party (Maya leader I 2011; Maya leader V 2011).<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, we find a rather new current that intends to achieve changes not in confrontation to but in alliance with the dominant classes, emphasizing indigenous entrepreneurship and economic development as the remedies against marginalization. This faction – although not really powerful yet – has obviously more common ground with the political Right. It has also actively sought contact to the institutional representation of the country's powerful economic elite, the *Comité Coordinador de Asociaciones Agrícolas, Comerciales, Industriales y Financieras* (Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial and Financial Associations, CACIF) (Maya leader X 2011).<sup>19</sup> Finally, somewhere in between these two poles, some leaders and organizations want to replace the politics of pressure through more conventional strategies of dialogue and negotiation (Maya leader VI 2011; Maya leader IX 2011; Maya leader XI 2011). These are often leaders who occupy posts within the state apparatus and, thus, are generally more inclined to work with political parties and governments, independent of their ideological program, as long as indigenous demands can somehow be put on the agenda.

In general, leftist parties like the URNG, although their members are mostly *ladinos* (Hernández Pico 2006), advance more indigenous candidates at the national level than the traditional conservative parties (Cupil 2007). However, because of the civil war and

racist tendencies within the revolutionary movement, the relationship between indigenous organizations and the Left is more complicated in Guatemala than in other Latin American countries (Adams 2011, 139; Bastos 2010a, 320-4; Velásquez Nimatuj 2008, 97-101). Still today, remnants of hegemonic attitudes towards Maya organizations can easily be identified in the discourses of the Guatemalan Left, as reflected in the following statement by a *ladino* Congressman:

The perspective of the indigenous people lies in unifying and strengthening themselves and fighting within the political project of the Guatemalan Left. That's the perspective of the indigenous people. There is no other. (Congressman III 2011).

Hence, as a reaction to these experiences, there seems to be something of an emancipation of (at least parts of) the Maya political elite from the Left (Ajxup, Rogers, and Hurtado 2010, 183-4). Yet, this also has the effect that in contrast to Ecuador, where the Left constituted the indigenous movement's natural ally (Becker 2011, 10-11, 50), Maya organizations in today's Guatemala are more disoriented regarding political alliances. The consequent dispersion of forces represents an important barrier to the processes of horizontal voice that are necessary to form a strong collective voice able to challenge the Guatemalan state.<sup>20</sup> The poor showing of Rigoberta Menchú in the 2007 and 2011 presidential elections is a clear example of this point. While many indigenous organizations and politicians refrained from endorsing her (Maya leader V 2011; Maya leader XI 2011; Congressman I 2011; Party leader I 2011)<sup>21</sup>, by allying first with the urban middle-class *Encuentro por Guatemala* (EG) party in 2007 and subsequently with the leftist URNG in

2011, her own policies of alliances reflect the erratic relationship of today's Maya movement with electoral politics in Guatemala.

These last two factors – the lack of elite convergence and unclear alliance strategies – are also more acute in Guatemala than in other Latin American countries due to the history of state violence, the lasting effects of which are the focus of the next section.

*Violence and the Logic of Divide and Rule: State Strategies to Suppress the Maya Voice*

There is widespread fear by the dominant *ladino* class of a change in the historical racial hierarchy (Hale 2006; Warren 1998, 51, 64-6). Accordingly, Guatemalan state elites have adopted various strategies to counter Maya empowerment. By rhetorically distinguishing between “good” and “bad”, “real” and “false” indigenous representatives, state elites exploit the internal tensions described above to pit different factions against each other.<sup>22</sup> This strategy is mirrored in the following statement by a then member of government:

To begin with, these organizations are not Maya organizations. CUC, CON-IC, CNOC, CODECA, CONAVIGUA are not Maya organizations. They call themselves Maya organizations because there are about five persons who run them. But they do not represent the Maya. The real indigenous representatives are: the 48 Cantons of Totonicapán, the auxiliary mayors of Sololá and Chichicastenango, Kab'awil. These are the real and legitimate representatives. (Minister I 2011).

In the most extreme case, this can go as far as denying the authenticity of Guatemala's indigenous people as a whole, as was done by another member of government:

Because now these boys [“chicos”] say that they are Maya descendants. That is not true. That is absolutely and completely wrong. (...) The Maya lived here ten thousand years ago and disappeared five thousand years ago. (...) They are *mestizos*. *Mestizos*. It's as simple as that. (Minister II 2011).

Oftentimes, the denunciation of the “bad” leaders is embedded in a discourse of legalism, in which their demands are rejected on the basis of the constitution imposed by the army in 1985.<sup>23</sup> People or organizations questioning the legitimacy of constitutional provisions are quickly denounced as “anarchists”, “radicals”, “traitors”, “terrorists”, or “demagogues” who are not able to handle the civil liberties brought about by democracy (Congressman II 2011; Congressman IV 2011; Minister I 2011; Minister II 2011; State official I 2011; State official II 2011; State official III 2011).

As mentioned above, these phenomena are not unique to the Guatemalan case. However, here the rhetorical division into “good” and “bad” indigenous leaders has been accompanied by particularly heavy-handed state policies of repression and judicial persecution of the latter category (see e.g. Velásquez Nimatuj 2008, 196-204; Witte 2005). Importantly, these experiences of present-day repression occur against the background of the genocidal state violence during the civil war which has left the indigenous population deeply divided and atomized, living – as many authors have noted – in a climate of constant fear (Green 2013; Manz 2002; Sanford 2003). The brutal suppression of the revolutionary movement has also led to a profound pessimism among the Maya as to their abil-

ity to achieve political change through any type of autonomous collective action (Copeland 2007, 14-7). Hence, both the deep divisions and this perceived lack of political self-efficacy are a direct consequence of past and present state violence and contribute to the weakness of horizontal voice among Maya organizations in a way that is unique in Latin America.

The logic of divide and rule – the “very core of authoritarian domination” (O'Donnell 1986, 254) – is perpetuated today by Guatemala's highly clientelistic political parties, which play on precisely this sense of political impotence. Through what Copeland (2007, 17) calls “development populism”, particularly the right-wing parties attempt to control rural Maya people with promises of development funds and local positions of political power. While following a clear strategic objective, such state-led development also reflects the deeply rooted paternalism of Guatemala's *ladino* state elite, according to which indigenous communities need to be guided from outside in order to achieve progress. Let us listen again to the words of the member of government cited first, speaking about the possibility of Maya control over natural resources in their territories:

It's not the decision of a community whether or not we build a hydroelectric power plant or a mine. For we would lose our state vision and fall into chaos. (...) And these indigenous groups would not develop in the next thousand years. (...) I really believe that if self-determination is given to the indigenous groups this country ends up in chaos and ends up like an African country where they kill each other. I don't want us to turn into a guinea pig. (Minister I 2011).

Again, the history of genocidal violence and military-led assistentialist development programs during the civil war provides a particularly fertile ground for paternalist clientelism in today's Guatemala. In Ecuador, for instance, although also playing a role (Becker 2011, 85-96; Lucero 2008, 129, 179, 182; Mijeski and Beck 2011, 92-6), the effect of clientelism on indigenous mobilization has been less pronounced.<sup>24</sup> In summary, past and ongoing state violence and the clientelistic policies promoted by political parties keep Guatemala's Maya population atomized and divided and, thus, exacerbate the movement-internal contradictions described above.

## **Conclusions**

By challenging state governments through popular mobilization and targeted lobbying, indigenous movements in Latin America have achieved unprecedented political gains for the region's historically marginalized groups in the last decades. In Guatemala, the 36-year civil war characterized by genocidal violence has prevented any open expression of Maya political activism until the initiation of the peace process in the early 1990s. During these internationally accompanied peace negotiations, an array of Maya organizations (re-)emerged taking advantage of the political opening to champion indigenous rights. However, after a few years of high political protagonism, their influence declined and, especially compared to that of indigenous movements in other countries, such as Ecuador and Bolivia, has remained relatively weak.

This study has drawn on dozens of interviews with Maya leaders, members of the *ladino* political elite, and outside experts, and on an array of secondary literature to examine the patterns of and obstacles to national-level Maya mobilization in present-day Guatemala. It has argued that its relative weakness is due to a weakness of what

O'Donnell (1986) has termed horizontal voice. Various factors, both movement-internal and external, account for this. On the one hand, it is the lasting effects of precisely this unique history of violence, which divided and atomized Guatemala's Maya population, that severely undermine horizontal voice. Today, state violence is more selective and accompanied by strategies of divide and rule. But on the other hand, Maya mobilization is also hampered by divisive forces among the organizations themselves that constitute formidable barriers to effective horizontal voice. While past and present violence has certainly exacerbated these divisions, this study has identified three other crucial factors, distinguishing Maya mobilization from more successful cases of indigenous mobilization in the region: a high degree of organizational sectorization, a lack of elite convergence on key substantive issues, and fundamental disagreements over the choice of political alliances. As a consequence, Guatemala's Maya organizations have been unable to raise the kind of strong collective vertical voice characteristic for other indigenous movements in the region.

Beyond the Guatemalan case, the study confirms the importance of movement-*internal* processes and strategies of constructing a collective political voice as prerequisites for effective social mobilization besides external opportunity structures. Moreover, instead of merely pointing to the incidence of collective action problems, the study analyzes the precise mechanisms leading to the disarticulation of social mobilization in a particular case. The analysis suggests that the emergence of a vocal social movement very much depends on the ability of group members and leaders to reach a consensus about what political interests are pursued in whose name. Hence, the horizontal voice necessary to achieve this consensus forms the basis of successful political claim-making

and, ultimately, of the chances of historically marginalized groups to achieve meaningful political change.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Cp. Yashar (2005, 25, 78). For the ethnic dimension of the ruling military's violence, see Ball, Kobrak and Spirer (1999), Falla (1994), Jonas (2000, 21-4), Lunsford (2007), and Schirmer (1998).

<sup>2</sup> According to government figures from 2006, for example, poverty rate is more than twice as high among the indigenous population than among *ladinos* (Congreso de la República de Guatemala 2009, 2).

<sup>3</sup> The Bolivian lowland organization CIDOB, for example, has attained considerable political power despite representing over 30 different linguistic groups (Lucero 2008, 110).

<sup>4</sup> While earlier indigenous (or peasant) mobilization often took place within the framework of a leftist class struggle, it has taken a decidedly ethnic turn in the past decades (cp. e.g. Yashar 2005).

<sup>5</sup> This phenomenon is of course not unique to indigenous movements in Latin America. Barany (1998), for example, shows how internal divisions and leadership struggles have weakened Roma ethnic mobilization in Eastern Europe.

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing my attention to this fruitful theoretical perspective.

<sup>7</sup> Importantly, this study focuses on the national-level representation of Maya interests. It does not refer to the multiple forms of Maya political activism in specific local contexts. For some perspectives on local-level Maya activism, see e.g. Little and Smith (2009).

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<sup>8</sup> See Sieder et al. (2002, 23-4) for a concise analysis of the internal quarrels within COPMAGUA.

<sup>9</sup> The reasons for the defeat of the referendum have been analyzed in previous works (see e.g. Carey 2004; Warren 2004) and are not the subject of this study, which focuses on the current situation and the reasons why Maya mobilization has not become a more powerful political force in recent years. Nevertheless, some authors also regard the substantive and strategic disagreements among different Maya organizations and elites as one of the factors contributing to the defeat (Brett 2010, 77; Carey 2004, 74, 80). In a more general assessment of Maya mobilization, Montejo (2005, 63-5, 72-4, 84) also criticizes the movement's leadership as weak and divided. Hence, the lack of congruence within Maya mobilization efforts that the present study emphasizes is in a certain way perhaps a continuation (or exacerbation) of a previously existing phenomenon.

<sup>10</sup> Leaders of the following organizations were interviewed: CUC, CONAVIGUA, CONIC, CNOC, CNEM, *Defensoría Maya*, *Convergencia Indígena Kab'awil*, *Molaj*, *Centro Pluricultural para la Democracia*, *Consejo Nacional de Pueblos Indígenas*, *Fundación Rigoberta Menchú Tum*, *Oxlajuj Tz'ikin*.

<sup>11</sup> The media sample includes five of the most important national newspapers (*Prensa Libre*, *Nuestro Diario*, *El Periódico*, *Siglo 21*, and *La Hora*), and two national radio stations (*Radio Nacional TGW*, and *Radio Sonora*). Additionally, an interview was conducted with the director of TV Maya.

<sup>12</sup> These include the *Defensoría de la Mujer Indígena* (Ombudsman's Office for Indigenous Women), the Presidential Commission Against Discrimination and Racism in Guatemala, the *Fondo de Desarrollo Indígena Guatemalteco* (State Fund for Indigenous De-

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velopment), and the *Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala* (Academy of Maya Languages in Guatemala).

<sup>13</sup> Regarding the “NGO-ization” of the Maya movement, see, e.g., Brett (2010), and Ajxup, Rogers, and Hurtado (2010).

<sup>14</sup> In March 2011, state security forces violently evicted fourteen Maya Q’eqchi communities from their lands in the fertile Polochic valley, which they had cultivated for generations, to give way to the large-scale cultivation of sugar cane for ethanol production. The displaced families were forced to live by the side of the road (*The Guardian* 2012). To this day, they are still waiting for compensation from the Guatemalan state.

<sup>15</sup> Maya leader Demetrio Cojtí (1996, 32) already referred to the indigenous population’s right to control and use the natural resources on their ancestral territories in the mid-1990s. Yet, the issue did not become a central theme of Maya mobilization until recently.

<sup>16</sup> Bastos and Brett (2010a) also speak of a detachment of the national Maya elite from its social bases.

<sup>17</sup> A similar call for a new Maya leadership, including both urban and rural representatives and more closely connected to the local communities, was made by Montejo (2005, 72-4).

<sup>18</sup> In fact, the question what identities (class or ethnicity) are at the core of the struggle was the main reason for the split of CONIC from CUC in the early 1990s (Velásquez Nimatuj 2008, 116-34). Note that this opposition of classist and ethnicist approaches was also an important feature of the indigenous movements in Ecuador and Bolivia where it overlapped with regional (highland vs. lowland) divisions. Again, however, indigenous

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organizations in these countries were better able to bridge this divide (Becker 2011; Lucero 2008).

<sup>19</sup> This faction of current Maya leadership, which actively promotes a neoliberal model of indigenous empowerment, such as Estuardo Zapeta, is also described in del Valle Escalante's (2009) excellent analysis of the diverse types of Maya nationalisms.

<sup>20</sup> Thus, in contrast to McNeish's (2008) portrayal of the Maya movement as generally reluctant to alliances due to an essentialist understanding of Maya identity, the present study finds that the problem may rather lie in the disagreements over the *choice* of political alliances.

<sup>21</sup> See also Madrid (2012, 150-2).

<sup>22</sup> Hale (2004) uses the term "indio permitido" in this context. The so-called "good" leaders are those who agree to play by the existing rules and under close supervision by the state, while the "bad" (or "radical") leaders are those who question the system as a whole and demand more far-reaching changes.

<sup>23</sup> Guatemala's 1985 Constitution was essentially a strategic project initiated and controlled by the military rulers that legally sanctioned the injustices and (war) crimes of the past (Schirmer 1998). Note that this crude legalism is also the argumentative strategy of the conservative sector of Guatemala's media to dismiss many Maya demands (Media representative 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, however, state-orchestrated clientelism, boosted by the massive influx of state revenues due to high oil prices, and increasing repression and judicial persecution under Correa have also led to a weakening of Ecuador's strong indigenous movement in recent years (Becker 2011, 177-81, 219, 233).

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