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A group of people march in the street. Some wear masks. One holds a sign saying "Fuera Cor

Supporters of presidential candidate Bernardo Arévalo of the Seed Movement party protest in Guatemala City, Guatemala, July 13, 2023, outside the Guatemala Attorney General's office to demand respect to the results of the Guatemala first round of presidential elections. (OSV News photo/Cristina Chiquin, Reuters)



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Mexico City — July 19, 2023

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Guatemala's bishops have demanded runoff elections occur as scheduled -- a call coming amid protests over attempts by anti-corruption prosecutors to disqualify a party threatening the country's status quo.

The Guatemalan bishops' conference has issued a pair of statements, calling for results of the June 25 election "to be respected," with the two candidates who received the most votes facing off in the Aug. 20 runoff.

One of the candidates, Bernardo Arévalo of the Seed Movement (Semilla) party, who ran on an anti-corruption platform, unexpectedly advanced to the runoff, while some 17% of voters annulled their ballots in a sign of widespread discontent with the process and popular candidates being disqualified from the contest.

"The people of Guatemala have responded by voting and with the expectation that the electoral calendar will be brought to a successful conclusion. We demand that the result of the elections for president and vice president be respected and that the

second round be held on August 20," the bishops said in a July 13 statement.

"We support the confidence that Guatemala continues to have in the possibility of purifying and strengthening the democratic system and we invite everyone to remain firm in prayer and common solidarity," the bishops wrote.

The statement came a day after the electoral tribunal certified results from the June 25 election, in which former first lady Sandra Torres of the National Unity of Hope (Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza) party advanced to the runoff with 15.8.1% of the vote, followed by Arévalo with 11.7%.

But shortly before the tribunal's decision, the country's anti-corruption prosecutor, Rafael Curruchiche, announced on social media that a court had suspended the Seed Movement's registration -- making it ineligible for the runoff. He cited supposedly falsified signatures in the Seed Movement's 2019 registration.

The anti-corruption prosecutor's office raided the electoral tribunal the next morning. However, the country's constitutional court intervened, granting the Seed Movement a preliminary injunction against its suspension.

"They seek at all costs that Bernardo Arévalo has no chance of being able to form a government," Nery Rodenas, director of the Archdiocese of Guatemala City's human rights center, told OSV News.

Unlike the Seed Movement, he said, "most of the parties are committed to corruption, or have engaged in some kind of negotiations to maintain this system, the status quo."

The legal shenanigans and government attempts at electoral interference once again drew attention to Guatemala's democratic backsliding in recent years.

Guatemala was previously heralded as an anti-corruption bright spot in Latin America, ousting a president and vice president in 2015 over a corruption scandal known as La Línea.

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But the country's elites -- branded the "pact of corrupt people" by critics -- subsequently undermined institutions combating impunity and corruption, according

to analysts.

"The 'pacto de corruptos' is like a chimera of factions within the political, economic and military elites that work on a transactional basis," said Tiziano Breda, analyst with the Istituto Affari Internazionali.

"Businesses fund political campaigns in exchange for procurements, but they also pay for lobbies to veneer the democratic backsliding that, through the appointment of corrupt judges and prosecutors, ensures impunity for all misdeeds, ranging from embezzlement to civil war crimes," he said.

At least 50 anti-corruption prosecutors, journalists, and human rights defenders have been forced to flee the country, according to Rodenas.

A veteran journalist, José Rubén Zamora, whose investigations revealed graft in the government of President Alejandro Giammattei, was charged and convicted of money laundering, being imprisoned since July 31, 2022. Several prominent presidential candidates were also disqualified prior to the election.

Arévalo barely garnered support in pre-election polls. But he surprised the country on election day.

"Semilla's (Seed Movement) outstanding performance was the unintended consequence of economic and political elites' attempt to rig the game … by excluding candidates polling well," Breda said.

"(People) quietly voted for what became the best anti-system option," he added.

Torres, who won the most votes in the first round, is participating in a runoff for the third time. She divorced her husband, the late former president Álvaro Colom, to be eligible for an unsuccessful attempt at replacing him in 2011.

Rodenas said she polls well in rural regions, where an anti-hunger program she oversaw reached the poorest and most neglected parts of Guatemala -- but drew accusations of using government assistance to build a patronage group.

He gave Arévalo a good shot at winning due to Torres' abiding unpopularity with urban and conservative voters, and the people annulling their votes -- who "favor something that could represent change" -- embracing his candidacy.