Guatemala

Main minority and indigenous communities: K’iche’ 11 per cent, Kaqchikel 7.8 per cent, Mam 5.2 per cent, Q’eqchi’ 8.3 per cent, other Mayan, indigenous non-Mayan, Garifuna and Xinca

Main languages: Spanish (national language), 23 Mayan languages

Main religions: Christianity (Roman Catholic, Evangelical Protestants, Mayan religions (increasingly practiced as a result of the Mayan movement) Judaism

Guatemala is the most populous country in Central America. Most of the population is of indigenous or mixed Maya descent. The Maya are the only indigenous people in Central America to make up the majority of the population of a Central American republic. Mayans of different social classes can be found in all of Guatemala’s cities, although the majority live in poverty or extreme poverty and are most likely to suffer social economic political and cultural exclusion. Most of the rest of the population are ladino, a term referring to Europeans (mostly Spanish and German), mestizo or mixed race Guatemalans and Maya who have adopted a Euro-Hispanic culture.

According to official statistics, approximately 39.8 per cent are indigenous; however, according to indigenous peoples’ representatives, the true figure is closer to 60 per cent. The indigenous community in Guatemala comprises 22 different peoples, including K’iche’, Kaqchikel, Mam, Q’eqchi’ and Matan.

There are also persons of African ancestry in Guatemala who originate from three groups: Afro-mestizos, Garifuna and Afro-Caribbean Creole English-speakers.

Afro-mestizos are the largest, and most ethnically assimilated of the three communities. They are connected to Africans who were brought to Guatemala from the earliest days of the colony to provide forced labour in sugar, indigo and cochineal plantations, and the large cattle ranches of the Pacific lowlands (e.g. around the town of Amatitlan).

With the seventeenth-century decline in slave importation, much of this original black population gradually assimilated into the Guatemalan Afro-indigenous mestizo mix and formed the so-called ‘zambo’ population of colonial Guatemala.
The Garífuna are an Afro-indigenous community located on the Atlantic Coast. They are descended mainly from the African and Carib peoples of the island of St Vincent in the Lesser Antilles who were exiled to Roatán Island in Honduras by the British in 1796 and subsequently spread to other countries (LINK see Honduras). The Garífuna arrived shortly after Guatemalan independence in 1823 and were joined on the coast by other free blacks.

During the first half of the twentieth century a small English-speaking Afro-Caribbean community also developed in Guatemala, consisting of economic migrants from Jamaica and Belize who came in search of employment opportunities in the railroad and banana industries.

The Guatemalan government of the time placed immigration restrictions on black newcomers, limiting their stay in the country to two-year intervals, nevertheless, over the decades they continued to migrate making the Caribbean ‘lowlands’ the most Afro-Guatemalan region in the country.

The three most important Afro-Guatemalan settlements along the Caribbean coast are Livingston (a Garífuna settlement), Puerto Barrios and Santa Tomás. All three towns have important Garífuna and/or Afro-Caribbean communities and are notable eco-cultural tourist destinations.

Garífuna in Guatemala have largely escaped the violence that has affected the Maya and have even provided sanctuary in the Livingston area for some Maya groups escaping the conflict. Historically, Garífuna have existed on farming and fishing, as well as working in the logging, banana and shipping industries.

There are also small communities of Chinese- and Arabic-speakers, as well as a Jewish community, in Guatemala. A small Jewish population exists in Guatemala City and is influential within the national business community.

*Updated January 2018*

Guatemala is one of the most populous countries in Central America. It is also a multicultural society with a large number of indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant communities. Despite a slow economic recovery, unequal distribution has meant that Guatemala remains one of the poorest countries in the region. This impacts disproportionately on the country’s indigenous population, particularly women, who suffer markedly lower developmental outcomes in health care, nutrition and education. While literacy rates for non-indigenous young males in urban areas are 97 per cent, for example, for young indigenous women in rural areas the rates fall to just 68 per cent.

Similarly, while the country’s health system struggles with lack of resources and under-staffing, which undermines the ability of all citizens to secure adequate care, poor health outcomes disproportionally affect the indigenous population. For example, while only 59 per cent of children between the ages of 12 and 24 months were vaccinated at a national level, levels were even lower in departments that are predominantly indigenous, such as Huehuetenango (38 per cent) and Quiché (44 per cent). As in other public services, the limited availability of
culturally appropriate medical care is a barrier. Nevertheless, indigenous traditions continue to play an important role in health care, with 79 per cent of births in predominantly indigenous areas attended by traditional midwives. A public policy on traditional midwives was approved in 2015 and will seek to strengthen their relationship with the public health system, disseminate their knowledge and support the delivery of more culturally appropriate health care.

Guatemala continues to struggle with the legacy of its recent history of political violence, particularly towards indigenous peoples, with limited justice for the many victims of human rights abuses during the decades-long civil war. Indigenous women were especially vulnerable to rape and torture, comprising 88 per cent of all those targeted with gender-based violence during the conflict, and continue to experience high rates of violence and discrimination. While some steps have been taken by the government to address impunity, the problem of targeted violence against indigenous communities remains pervasive. In 2015, for example, the Observatory of the human rights organization UDEFEGUA reported 493 attacks against human rights defenders, 252 of whom were activists or leaders defending indigenous rights and the environment.

Much of this violence is related to the development of energy and extractive projects on indigenous or Garifuna land. While public institutions often side with corporations and private investors by criminalizing protesters, violence and intimidation against communities frequently goes unpunished. In particular, femicide of indigenous women remains rife in Guatemala. Though rooted in colonial times, the practice increased in frequency and intensity during the decades-long armed conflict. The Commission for Historical Clarification, a truth and reconciliation commission created after the war, found that 88 per cent of those affected by violence during the war were indigenous Mayan women and girls targeted for gender-based violence, including femicide, with two girls killed for every boy. Perpetrators were mostly military and paramilitary personnel. Even after the conflict, Guatemala still has one of the highest rates of femicide in the region, with few perpetrators brought to justice and a culture of impunity being the prevailing norm.

Palm oil production has caused severe environmental degradation over the years in many indigenous areas. As much as 30 per cent of the country’s production is located in Sayaxte, where nearly three-quarters of the population is indigenous. Energy and extractive concessions have also affected many communities. In the north of Huehuetango, several hydroelectric and mining projects have been undertaken, despite the opposition of the Mayan inhabitants in these areas. Regular confrontations between these communities and local authorities occur, with human rights defenders frequently arrested for protesting megaprojects. Besides causing environmental degradation, these development projects have often been situated in sacred spaces with unique spiritual value for local communities.

While the 2003 Languages Law mandates the protection of Garifuna, Mayan and Xinca languages in all areas of public life, including the stipulation that education and other services are to be provided in the predominant language of each community, in practice bilingual options may lack resources or capacity. This serves to further entrench educational inequalities that have left Garifuna, for example, with illiteracy levels as high as 97 per cent. Indigenous
language instruction is also limited and, as a result, some languages such as Ch’ortí’, Sakapulteko, Chalchiteco, Mopán, Tektiteko and Uspanteco are at risk of disappearance.

*Updated January 2018*

**Environment**

The Republic of Guatemala in Central America is bounded on the north and west by Mexico, and on the east by Belize and the Caribbean Sea. To the south-west is the Pacific Ocean and on the south-east it shares borders with Honduras and El Salvador.

The highland region, where most of the population lives, cuts across the country from west to east.

**History**

Before the arrival of the Spanish, the physical ‘boundaries’ of the ancient Mayan empire spanned the countries of modern-day Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras and the five Mexican states of Yucatán, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, Campeche and Chiapas.

The Mayan civilization, established for centuries in the region with extensive cities, culture and agricultural production, was already in decline before the arrival of the first Spanish colonialists. However, the arrival of Pedro de Alvarado’s forces led to the subjugation of Maya tribes and the beginning of a long history of marginalization, poverty and violence. In the ensuing centuries Guatemala’s indigenous population faced continued repression by the dominant Spanish ruling class, including widespread land dispossession in the 19th century.

With the abolition of slavery in Guatemala in 1823, Africans from neighbouring Belize began to escape from forced labour in that country, by crossing into the ‘highland jungles’ of northern Guatemala. They remained and most eventually intermarried with the local indigenous population. The descendants of these original colonial groups now form part of the Guatemala mestizo population and no longer have any strong awareness of African ancestry.

Recent Guatemala history has been dominated by the land distribution question. It is the most unequal in the whole of Latin America: 3.2 per cent of the existing farms cover 65 per cent of the land, making nearly 90 per cent of the other agricultural holdings of an inadequate size to provide subsistence for a family.

The large plantations cover most of the fertile coastal strips, where the large landowners grow coffee, sugar, bananas and cotton for export. Small farmers, mainly Mayan, try to grow subsistence crops (maize, beans, rice) on the stony leftover land in the mountains; many are forced to migrate annually to work on the large plantations for starvation wages.

From 1954, when a US-supported coup overthrew a government committed to social reform and the redistribution of land, Guatemala’s history was characterized by military rule, the repression of legal opposition and internal armed conflict. From the 1970s onwards, when many Mayans joined the guerrilla movements, the Maya have made up most of the at least
200,000 victims of the armed conflict. A particularly brutal counter-insurgency campaign launched by General Ríos Montt in 1982 (defined as genocidal by the United Nations-sponsored truth commission), involved the complete destruction of 440 Mayan villages in areas where the guerrillas were strong.

In 1985, the army restored civilian rule but maintained political control over a series of weak civilian governments. Prompted by significant pressure from the international community, after 1993, agreements were made between the government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) guerrillas. These accords on human rights, demilitarization, justice issues, refugees and displaced persons, and indigenous rights, led to the signing of a formal peace agreement between the government and the URNG in December 1996.

The signing in March 1995 of the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples (AIDPI) accord was an important step forward, but subsequent accords, particularly the socio-economic accord of early 1996, proved a disappointment to those hoping for a serious response to the land problem.

Nevertheless, Mayan rights have come to the fore of the national agenda for the first time since the Spanish conquest as a result of a series of internal as well as external factors. These contributed to removing the culture of fear that existed in the Mayan highlands, and allowed the Mayan movement to make its voice heard without fear of repression. Nevertheless, in the ensuing years Guatemala has continued to struggle with corruption, political violence and its legacy of genocide, facilitated by a broader climate of impunity. Both Maya and Guatemala’s Garifuna population have been disproportionately affected by these issues.

**Governance**

Guatemala continues to struggle with widespread corruption, impunity and other governance challenges. In 2015, the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and the Attorney’s Office uncovered several high-profile cases of corruption involving former high-level public officials and those who were in power at the time. These scandals ultimately led to the resignation of President Otto Pérez Molina and Vice-President Roxana Baldetti, who were subsequently arrested. The subsequent presidential elections were marked by violence between different political factions before the eventual victory of the National Convergence Front, led by Jimmy Morales, a former comedian with only a few years of political experience. Against this political backdrop, the country’s indigenous and Garifuna communities continue to suffer widespread discrimination and human rights abuses.

Political participation is also limited, with only 21 (13.3 per cent) of the 158 congressional deputies elected in 2015 having an indigenous background, although not all of these self-identify as indigenous. Official figures indicate that around 40 per cent of Guatemalans are indigenous – though some estimates are significantly higher. Only 2 of those 21 deputies are women. Minority Rights Group International understands that not a single deputy from the Garifuna community, who make up around 1 per cent of the population, was elected.

Guatemala’s justice system is another area where Garifuna and indigenous communities are
still marginalized. In May 2015, the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination reported that the country still lacked a law acknowledging legal pluralism. Despite this lack of support, communities have maintained their traditional justice systems, with around 40 per cent of legal conflicts resolved through these systems – an important service when the formal justice system regularly fails to deliver. While a welcome development was the creation of a specialized unit in 2015 dealing with discrimination complaints within the prosecution system, the unit reportedly had only five staff members and has yet to prove its effectiveness. By the end of the year, of the 98 complaints of discrimination it received, not a single case had yet been brought before a judge.

The failures of Guatemala’s justice system have contributed to a persistent climate of impunity for perpetrators of human rights abuses, particularly those targeting Garifuna and indigenous communities. The most high-profile example is former president Ríos Montt, responsible for the killing of 1,700 Ixil Mayans in the early 1980s. While a court found Montt guilty in 2013, his 80-year sentence was withdrawn shortly afterwards and subsequent legal proceedings against him have been marred by delays and procedural irregularities. In January 2016, his retrial was suspended; a new trial was again suspended after having opened in March 2016. At the end of March 2017, however, a prosecutor outlined charges against Montt at a pre-trial hearing concerning the 1982 Dos Erres Massacre, at which 200 people were killed. The judge ruled that there is sufficient evidence against Montt for the trial to proceed. It remains to be seen whether this process will be more successful.

The systematic marginalization of indigenous peoples from the country’s political, social and economic life, despite representing a large proportion of the population, continues with no meaningful efforts by the government to overcome it. The two government agencies in charge of preventing and addressing ethnic discrimination, namely the Indigenous Women’s Public Defender Office and the Presidential Commission against Racism and Discrimination, lack the financial and human resources to perform their duties.

Some progress has been made in Guatemala to address systematic human rights abuses against indigenous peoples, including the 2008 Law against Femicide and Other Forms of Violence against Women. However, femicides remain uninvestigated and unprosecuted, and indigenous women face difficulties accessing the justice system. Guatemala does not disaggregate data on femicide by ethnicity, making it impossible to know exact numbers on how indigenous women are affected.

*Updated January 2018*

**General**

Arzobispado de Guatemala, Office of Human Rights
Website: [www.odhag.org.gt](http://www.odhag.org.gt)

**Maya**
Academy of Mayan Languages (ALMG)
Website: http://www.almg.org.gt/

Centro de Acción Legal-Ambiental y Social de Guatemala (CALAS)
Website: www.calas.org.gt

Coordinadora Nacional Indígena y Campesina (CONIC)
Website: http://www.mayaconic.org/

Fundación Rigoberta Menchú Tum
Website: http://www.frmt.org.gt/
Website: http://frmt.org/en/Paises/guatemala.html

Majawil Q’ij
Website (Facebook): https://www.facebook.com/MajawilQij1990/

Updated January 2018

Minority based and advocacy organisations

Sources and further reading