



**Global
Witness**

Weaponising social media

How Indigenous leaders and
climate activists are smeared and
criminalised in Guatemala.

MARCH 2026



Indigenous leaders who protested against efforts to overturn Guatemala's 2023 election results now face a wave of criminalisation and attacks on social media Indigenous leaders who protested against efforts to overturn Guatemala's 2023 election results now face a wave of criminalisation and attacks on social media.

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Introduction

Luis Pacheco had [served](#) as Guatemala's deputy energy minister for eight months when police came to his home and arrested him on charges of terrorism and sedition.

A Maya K'iche' leader from the country's forest-cloaked western highlands, his detention in April was the first in a wave of arrests of Indigenous leaders through 2025, ahead of [critical judicial elections](#) the following year.

Both [before](#) and [after](#) his arrest, [thousands](#) of [posts](#) on Facebook, [X](#) and [TikTok](#) accused Pacheco of [money laundering](#), [terrorism](#), [corruption](#), and [conspiring with foreign powers](#) to commit electoral fraud.

Some posts came from [accounts](#) notorious for spreading fake news with [tens](#) or [hundreds of thousands](#) of followers.

Others came from anonymous accounts, including one named Yes, Master!, known for coordinating with the country's public prosecution service to persecute human rights defenders. And others came from members of Guatemala's [military](#) or [political](#) elite.

“Social networks have become a tool to disinform and strengthen our criminalisation”

LUIS PACHECO, MAYA K'ICHE' LEADER IMPRISONED ON CHARGES OF TERRORISM



Guatemala's former deputy energy minister, Luis Pacheco (r), and the Governor of Sololá department, Edgar Tuy (l), have both been accused of terrorism online and pursued by the country's Public Prosecutor. Rafael Gonzalez / Global Witness

Speaking from his prison cell in Guatemala City, Pacheco told Global Witness that this smear campaign shows how [social media is being harnessed to attack defenders](#).

“Social networks have become a tool to disinform and strengthen our criminalisation,” he said.

“These attacks make people question our motives. They create doubts in our communities and people replicate the smears. They make it easier to damage our reputations and to criminalise us.”

Facebook, used by almost [80% of adults](#) in Guatemala at the start of 2025, is a key vector for these attacks. They are also widespread on TikTok, which has seen rapid growth to become Guatemala’s most popular social media platform, used by [89%](#) of adults. And attacks are also common on X, used by around 7.5% of the country’s adult population.

In this investigation, we analyse how social media is being used to persecute Guatemalan defenders. We take two crucial flashpoints in the country’s struggle for democracy and human rights:

- The efforts to overturn the result of Guatemala’s 2023 election and the backlash against activists who resisted this **“attempted coup”** – which we explore in **Part 1**.
- The persecution of land activists in the Guatemalan countryside, where Indigenous people are **criminalised for pursuing legitimate land claims** – the theme of **Part 2**.

Then, in **Part 3**, we look at the **forces behind these campaigns** to smear and criminalise those defending democracy and their land.

Finally, we set out how we can turn the tide – calling on **social media giants** such as Meta, X and TikTok to get to grips with the wave of disinformation and shield vulnerable activists from persecution.

Most of the attacks we analyse occurred after Meta followed X in [slashing support for fact-checking](#) and content moderation in the US in the wake of Donald Trump’s 2024 US election victory.

Such changes were touted as promoting “free expression.” But the crackdown in Guatemala proves the opposite: they risk leaving those fighting corruption and authoritarianism more vulnerable than ever to harassment, stigmatisation and [criminalisation](#).

Smear for resisting an “attempted coup”

Police arrived at Luis Pacheco’s door on 23 April 2025. They bundled him into a white van – a symbol [associated with thousands of disappearances](#) during Guatemala’s decades of armed conflict – and transported him to the [Court Tower](#) in Guatemala City.

There, he was charged with five crimes, including [terrorism](#), criminal incitement and illicit association – charges that could carry up to 30 years in prison.

Hector Chaclán, another Maya K’iche’ leader, was [arrested](#) at the same time as Pacheco. Before Pacheco took his role with the government, he and Chaclán had worked together in a K’iche’ organisation named the 48 Cantones. Chaclán is still in prison, charged with terrorism and illicit association.

A few months later, in August, Esteban Toc, a leader from another Indigenous people, the Maya Kaqchikel, was driving to hospital for kidney treatment when police pulled him over. Toc, too, was [charged](#) with terrorism, sedition and illicit association.

Guatemala’s Prosecutor’s Office has also sought to [strip political immunity](#) from the Governor of Toc’s home province, Sololá, another Maya Kaqchikel leader named [Edgar Tuy](#). Reportedly, [four more arrest warrants](#) have been issued for Indigenous activists, but have not yet been executed.

This wave of criminalisation by the Guatemalan Prosecutor’s Office stems from these leaders’ role in [mass protests](#) 18 months earlier, defending the outcome of Guatemala’s 2023 elections. Bernardo Arévalo, an anti-corruption outsider who had been polling below 3%, won a [shock victory](#) in the election after a last-minute surge carried him over the line.

[His victory was validated](#) by more national and international observers than in any other vote in Guatemalan history. But Guatemala’s establishment parties [refused to accept the result](#). Disinformation campaigns pushed by fake news pages [labelled it a fraud](#) orchestrated by the EU or US embassy.

Some [accused Luis Pacheco](#) of helping to [enact the fraud](#).



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ATTORNEY GENERAL PORRAS AND THE WEAPONISATION OF THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Efforts to overturn Guatemala's election result were [led](#) by Attorney General Consuelo Porras, who had been appointed to a [controversial](#) second term a year earlier. The EU and [Organization of American States](#) (OAS) [condemned](#) Porras's moves to nullify Arévalo's victory as an ["attempted coup."](#) Porras has been sanctioned by the [US](#), [UK](#) and [EU](#) for corruption and undermining democracy.

As Porras's efforts intensified, Indigenous authorities organised mass protests demanding her resignation. They blocked roads and established a picket outside her office, lasting 106 days.

The protests helped ensure a peaceful transition of power. But they failed to force the resignation of Consuelo Porras, who remains at the head of Guatemala's Prosecutor's Office. It is this body that is [pursuing the prosecution](#) of Pacheco, Chaclán, Toc and Tuy for their roles in organising the protests.

Shortly after Pacheco's arrest, the weaponisation of Guatemala's justice system was [condemned](#) by the UN Special Rapporteur on judicial independence, Margaret Satterthwaite.

"The instrumental use of criminal law by the Office of the Public Prosecutor appears to amount to a systematic, intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental human rights," she said.



Guatemalan Attorney General Consuelo Porras, who led attempts to overturn Guatemala's 2023 election result and has been sanctioned by the US and EU for alleged corruption. Moises Castillo, File / AP Photo



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THE WEAPONISATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Alongside criminal charges, all these leaders and their organisations have suffered sustained attacks on social media, smearing them as criminals, terrorists, traitors and guerrillas.

Starting immediately after Pacheco’s arrest, there was an explosion of activity on X and Facebook, with thousands of posts [echoing the charge](#) that he was a “[terrorist.](#)”

Several of [these attacks](#) came from an account in the name of Ricardo Mendez Ruiz, president of a far-right pressure group called the Foundation Against Terrorism (FCT) composed mainly of former military personnel. The FCT [filed the complaint](#) that forms the basis of the criminal case against Pacheco and Chaclán.

Some of the most aggressive came from anonymous account Yes, Master!, whose role at the centre of a network of accounts that target justice operators and anti-corruption activists we will discuss later.

Yes, Master! calls Pacheco a “terrorist” and accuses him of [“leading a criminal structure which paralysed the country in 2023.”](#)



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Sololá-based outlet G7 Canal told its 250,000 Facebook followers that Pacheco was arrested for “interfering in the justice system.”

The digital newspaper [Republica](#), which has more than 260,000 followers on [Facebook](#) and 80,000 on [X](#), frames the demonstrations as “protests against actions of the Prosecutor’s Office, including attempts to remove the Attorney General” in order to “guarantee the impunity of certain actors.”

Edgar Tuy, Governor of Sololá, and Esteban Toc, ex vice-mayor of the Indigenous municipality of Sololá, have also been [targeted with posts](#) accusing them of [terrorism](#).

The Mayor of Sololá’s Indigenous municipality through 2024-25, Simión Palax, told Global Witness that the criminalisation and online smear campaigns are a coordinated strategy aiming to weaken the Indigenous authorities.

“Criminalisation is the main strategy: to lock us up,” Palax said. “The social media attacks try [to] undermine our authority, to break our unity and support from the people.”

POINTING THE FINGER AT FOREIGN INTERESTS AND NGOS

Alongside direct accusations of terrorism and criminality, posts on various anonymous accounts and supposed local news pages claimed protesting Indigenous authorities acted as puppets of foreign interests, particularly the US and EU.

Many of these attacks [focus](#) on the 48 Cantones, which for [over a century](#) has worked to protect the rights of Maya K’iche’ people. During the 2023 protests, Luis Pacheco was president of the 48 Cantones, while Hector Chaclán served as treasurer.

The 48 Cantones are described as the [“savage shock forces”](#) of Arévalo’s party, Semilla, as well as the [“shock forces”](#) of US diplomats.

The Trump administration’s assault on USAID provided [useful fuel](#) for [these attacks](#). While Trump singled out USAID’s support for gender-affirming care in Guatemala – with White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt calling them [grants for “sex change operations”](#) – actors in Guatemala instead used the controversy to push their own narrative: that USAID used its funds to impose the Arévalo administration on Guatemala.

This narrative – that a US administration worked to force a left-leaning government on a Central American nation – could seem an ironic inversion of the region’s history. This is



Facebook.com



Xela News
about 7 months ago

DOBLE MORAL
Recibió dinero de la Unión Europea y de USAID para bloquear el país en el 2023
y ahora presenta una nueva "Ley Antilavado"

[#UrgenteCOMPARTAN LA DOBLE MORAL DE ARÉVALO Y SU GOBIERNO.](#)
En el 2023 recibió dinero de la UNIÓN EUROPEA, y de la desaparecida USAID 🇺🇸 (bajo la administración de [#JoeBiden](#)) para financiar los [#BloqueosGT](#), Medios de Comunicación, pseudoperiodistas y varios [#tiktokers](#), para garantizar su toma de posesión luego del FRAUDE ELECTORAL 2023. A 18 meses de su fracasado gobierno, el presidente [#BernardoArévalo](#) presenta junto a sus ministros de Finanzas y Economía, una nueva "ley anti... [See more](#)

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Facebook.com

particularly the case in Guatemala, where, in 1954, a coup orchestrated by the CIA plunged the country into a 30-year military dictatorship.

The 1954 coup was itself forged with disinformation.

A smear campaign in the US press painted Guatemala's then-President, Jacobo Arbenz, as a crypto-communist intent on bringing the country under Soviet influence – occluding his role as the second democratically elected President in Guatemalan history. Lobbyists targeted members of Congress with the same story.

The campaign was financed by the Boston-based United Fruit Company, a fraction of whose vast landholdings were set to be redistributed by Arbenz's government.

In Guatemala's new inverted world, however, it is the political right that decries US intervention. The ideological roots of this narrative can be seen in a [report](#) published in early 2025 by the University Francisco Morraquin (UFM) in Guatemala City.

Titled *Foreign Aid as an Ideological Hobby*, the report argues that funds from the US and Europe seek "ideological rents" which condemn a recipient country to "remain economically



The El Estor nickel mine on the banks of Lake Izabal in Guatemala. The mine's Guatemalan operator has been accused of contaminating the lake with heavy metals and harassing journalists and activists who protested the damage. Alamy Photos

underdeveloped, as it is sabotaged by left-wing policies.” USAID is identified as the central node in a network of NGOs that share these aims. The report was shared widely on [X](#).

UFM was [founded in 1971](#) to promote libertarian ideals. A [five-metre-tall statue](#) drawn from Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* welcomes visitors to its Business School. The report itself is authored by Olav Dirkmaat, a former analyst at Gold Republic, a precious metal trading platform that “manages over €900 million in gold, silver, and platinum for more than 80,000 investors.”

Shortly after Pacheco joined the energy ministry, it announced a review of all of Guatemala’s mining licences, responding to widespread reports of bribery and corruption. Among the firms whose licenses were suspended are multinational gold and silver ventures accused of arsenic contamination and using disinformation to circumvent consultation processes.

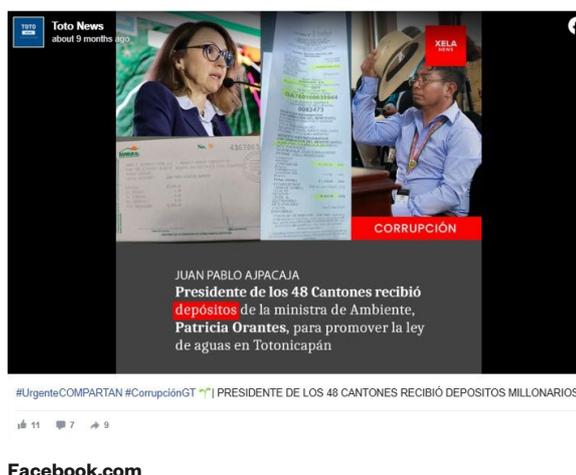
The only reference to these concerns in Dirkmaat’s work, however, is the inclusion of “anti-mining organisations” among the network of NGOs working to keep Guatemala impoverished.

According to USAID quarterly reports seen by Global Witness, Pacheco’s former organisation, the 48 Cantones, did indeed receive funding from the body.

Dispersed by an intermediary NGO named CEIDEPAZ, the grants – which totalled \$99,568.64 over 2021-3 – aimed to “strengthen their capacity to peacefully resolve conflict, improve social cohesion, contribute to good local governance, and promote peace in their territories.”

They aligned with USAID efforts in Guatemala towards “the inclusion of indigenous communities in the development of community action plans,” as well as with a broader strategic aim to “increase the amount of funding available to capable local partners,” following criticism that too much goes to US-based organisations.

The grants to the project with 48 Cantones represent a tiny fraction of USAID’s overall financing in Guatemala – less than 0.05% of the funder’s [expenditure](#) in 2022 alone.



Nor is it solely NGOs – such as Save the Children, World Vision and Catholic Relief Services – that benefited from USAID funding in Guatemala. In fact, the Prosecutor’s Office itself [received USAID support](#) to open offices across the country in 2021.

Exporters’ association AgExport and coffee growers’ association Anacafé together [received \\$86 million](#) from USAID over 25 years but were never accused of acting as puppets of the US administration – at least, not by anyone on Guatemala’s political right.

Claims that defenders are funded and influenced by USAID align with a broader line of attack – that they are profiting personally from their activism. Social media accounts presenting as local news sites have [repeatedly made](#) unevidenced [claims of corruption](#) against Pacheco’s successor as 48 Cantones president, [Juan Pablo Ajpacajá](#). Such smears continued against Ajpacajá’s successor, [Bernabé García Yax](#).

Luis Pacheco himself is also [frequently targeted](#) with claims he acted solely in [his own self interest](#).

“They say that we only did it in order to benefit individually – to get a post with the government, for example, or to make money from foreign interests,” Pacheco said, speaking from prison in Guatemala City.

“They want to delegitimise the ancestral authorities and separate us from our people.”

SMEARED AS HISTORIC ENEMIES OF THE STATE

Other smears draw explicitly on Guatemala’s years of armed conflict and genocide to accuse Mayan leaders involved in the 2023 protests of being guerrillas seeking to bring down the state.

For 36 years, from 1960 to 1996, [conflict](#) raged between the country’s US-backed military regime and leftist rebel groups. More than [200,000 people](#) were killed or disappeared, most of them Mayan civilians.

This blood-soaked history is part of the reason that Guatemala’s Indigenous communities spearheaded the resistance to attempts to overturn the 2023 election.

As Francisco Rocaël, a Maya Popti’ leader from the north-western province of Huehuetenango, told Global Witness: “We resist because we are aware of our historic dispossession, of our centuries of sacrifice, of genocide, massacres, extractive projects destroying our land.

“We are aware that by fighting for democracy, we are fighting for human rights. We can’t return to our dark past.”

Feliciana Herrera is the Mayor of the Indigenous municipality of Nebaj, in the mountainous, mist-shrouded home territory of the Maya Ixil people. In the early 1980s, after a military coup installed hardliner [Efraín Ríos Montt](#) as president, the Ixil endured some of the conflict’s worst atrocities.

A [UN-backed truth commission](#) found that between 70% and 90% of the Ixil region’s villages were razed in a wave of “indiscriminate massacres.”

Four decades later, in 2013, a [landmark ruling](#) found Ríos Montt guilty of genocide. (The conviction was later overturned by Carol Patricia Flores, the same judge who would, years later, [charge](#) Pacheco and Chaclán with terrorism). A separate [2018 trial](#) found that the Guatemalan military committed genocide against the Maya Ixil people.

“They want to disappear the Indigenous authorities, like they managed during the war”

FELICIANA HERRERA, MAYOR OF THE INDIGENOUS MUNICIPALITY OF NEBAJ

Indigenous resistance to attempts to nullify Arévalo’s 2023 election victory is part of the struggle to protect the Ixil’s rights, Herrera told Global Witness.

“Those who suffer the consequences of corruption are our communities,” she said. “The attempts to steal the election violated a fundamental right of our people.”

Following their participation in the 2023 protests, Herrera and other Maya leaders were described on social media as [“pawns”](#) of the US embassy, [“false leaders”](#) who “sell their dignity for a few dollars and visas.”

This final accusation carries dark echoes – the genocide trials exposed how the army considered Guatemala’s Mayan population an [“internal enemy”](#), [“natural allies”](#) of the guerrillas.

For her work defending the rights of the Maya Ixil people, Herrera has suffered frequent smears on Facebook and X. She is accused of being an [“\(ex\)guerrilla,”](#) “traitor” and an “extortionist”.



Lesbia Artola, an Indigenous leader with the Campesino Committee of the Altiplano (CCDA), which supports communities pursuing land claims. A social media campaign has blamed her for the killings of fellow CCDA members. Rafael Gonzalez / Global Witness

“They create narratives that we deserve to be criminalised, that we are guerrillas,” Herrera told Global Witness. “They want to disappear the Indigenous authorities, like they managed during the war.”

Criminalised for pursuing legitimate land claims

[Leocadio Juracán](#) arrived at [Guatemala City airport](#) early on 13 August 2025 to fly to an Indigenous rights conference in Johannesburg. He passed through security and immigration before being stopped by police, questioned and arrested.

After being [taken in handcuffs](#) to the capital’s Court Tower, he was charged with a series of [crimes](#), including aggravated trespass and attempted arson of forests.

Juracán is a Maya Kakchiquel leader with the [Campesino Committee of the Altiplano \(CCDA\)](#), which supports communities pursuing land claims. His arrest is the latest in a series of killings and detentions of CCDA leaders. In 2018, [three died](#) in targeted attacks. [Many others](#) have faced criminal proceedings, [including 21](#) in 2024 alone.

The Guatemalan countryside is [riddled with disputes](#) like this. Land in Guatemala is dominated by a small elite, with less than [3% of farms](#) controlling nearly two-thirds of the agricultural land. A history of extractive colonialism and internal armed conflict has seen huge swathes of territory stripped from its original owners.

“As if this suffering and ensuing trauma were not enough, there is a clear pattern of criminalisation and intimidation”

BALAKRISHNAN RAJAGOPAL, THE UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON THE RIGHT TO ADEQUATE HOUSING

Visiting Guatemala in July 2025, Balakrishnan Rajagopal, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, documented **“forced evictions** carried out in a ruthless manner, with no opportunity to bring evidence of land ownership, no prior notice, or opportunity to salvage crops and belongings.”

These practices “amount to cruel and inhuman treatment and a grave violation of international law,” the Rapporteur said, calling for an “urgent moratorium on evictions.”

“As if this suffering and ensuing trauma were not enough, there is a clear pattern of criminalisation and intimidation of those trying to protest or denounce these forced evictions,” Rajagopal added. “Many are convicted or held in preventive detention on fabricated charges.”

A CAMPAIGN OF SOCIAL MEDIA DISINFORMATION

As with the arrests of Indigenous leaders, the criminalisation of Juracán and other land activists is facilitated by campaigns on social media.

A few months before Juracán’s arrest, a powerful landowners’ association, the Civil Association for the Defense of Private Property (ACDEPRO), called for his imprisonment in a post on X.

Such posts are part of a pattern of **social media attacks by ACDEPRO**, which label Juracán a **“violent criminal”** and **“terrorist”** who **“orders invasions of farms disguised as a human rights defender”**, calling for him other land activists to be **“arrested and brought before the competent judge.”**

ACDEPRO is **linked** to some of Guatemala’s most powerful business interests. It emphasises the importance of protecting private property, labelling land activists **“thieves”** and **“trespassers”**.



Speaking with Global Witness, ACDEPRO contested the Rapporteur’s findings, arguing that “there are no forced evictions in Guatemala, these are judicial evictions.”

Most of the conflicts in the countryside are scams, they argued, in which organised crime and other bad actors seek to trick poor communities out of money by promising to support them with unfounded land claims.

The rapporteur failed to understand this reality as he only met with groups who shared a pre-conceived agenda, ACDEPRO argued, adding that he may have suffered from poor translation.

By [its own account](#), ACDEPRO coordinates with a recently created department within the Prosecutor’s Office focused on the issue of land conflict: the Special Prosecutor against the Crime of Trespass.

The body was [created](#) by Attorney General Consuelo Porras in 2021 for the “investigation and prosecution of the crimes of trespassing, aggravated occupation, alteration of boundaries and disturbance of possession.”

ACDEPRO’s posts about Juracán are amplified by a network of local news sites and anonymous social media accounts notorious for spreading disinformation.

Following his arrest in August, one such site, XelaNews, called Juracán an [“ex-guerrilla”](#) who “leads a criminal structure ... that sets fire to properties and then invades them.”



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X accounts, including [Yes, Master!](#), falsely claimed Juracán had been arrested for [“the sexual abuse of minors.”](#)

Other accounts in the same disinformation ecosystem labelled Juracán a [guerrilla](#), corrupt and [violent](#), with ostensibly unrelated anonymous accounts [repeating the exact same text](#) across different platforms.

Another CCDA leader who has suffered defamation is Lesbia Artola, an Indigenous Maya Q’eqchi from Alto Verapaz. She told Global Witness how, after the killings of CCDA members in 2018, she’d been the target of a campaign on social media blaming her for their deaths and linking her to organised crime.

Daniel Pascual, director of land rights organisation the Committee for Campesino Unity (CUC), has also faced extensive defamation and threats of criminalisation. A smear

campaign surged on social media in August 2024 after he was appointed as a director on the state Land Fund, which facilitates access to land for marginalised rural Guatemalans.

Two attacks compared his appointment to putting “[Dracula in charge of the blood bank](#)”, using the [same photo to illustrate the point](#).

High-profile figures including [Juan Carlos Tefel](#), ex-President of powerful private sector body the Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial, and Financial Associations (CACIF), and Ricardo Mendez Ruiz, President of the FCT, falsely claimed Bernardo Arévalo’s government nominated Pascual for the position.



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In fact, Pascual was [nominated to the position by Campesino organisations](#), not Arévalo. But the disinformation was [amplified by other accounts](#), including XelaNews, which reported his appointment with the subheading: ["From terrorist road-blocker to new head of the Land Fund"](#).

ACDEPRO has repeatedly pressed for Pascual’s criminalisation. “Trespass isn’t a right, it’s a crime. Aggravated trespass is paid for with prison,” the organisation says above a video of Pascual.

Another post accuses him of leading [“invasions in the name of ancestralism.”](#)

Other media outlets have sustained a long-running narrative that land rights organisations such as the CCDA and CUC are violent land invaders. A [50-minute documentary](#) produced by the digital news site Republica.gt accuses both organisations of encouraging land invasions for personal profit.

“We warn against the narratives of the companies, saying they will contaminate lakes and rivers,” Pascual told Global Witness. “This is why they work to discredit us.”

THE CRIMINALISATION OF WHOLE COMMUNITIES

As well as high-profile national leaders, entire Indigenous communities pursuing legitimate land claims also face criminalisation facilitated by social media smear campaigns.

In one notable example, a dispute between a ranching company and two Indigenous villages has seen hundreds of community members accused of illegally occupying the land they live on.

Located in the province of Baja Verapaz, the two Maya Poqomchi' villages – named Washington and Dos Fuentes – comprise around [70 families](#), totalling 500 people. Of these, more than 300 – nearly every adult in the community – are facing criminal charges.

In 2020, community member Mario Chun was [shot in the back](#) by [security guards](#) when he went out to gather corn. He survived, but the gunshot left him unable to walk.

Evictions and criminal charges are pursued by ranching firm Agropecuaria Pananish, owned by five brothers descended from a German settler who arrived in the area in 1917. Pananish, which manages five ranches, asserts that Washington and Dos Fuentes are located on two of them, named Corozal Pantutuz and Pampá San Rafael.

For their part, the Maya Poqomchi' sustain that, from the 19th century, German-descendent ranchers forced them to work without pay on their ancestral land. The first extrajudicial eviction attempt occurred in 2005 after they decided to stop working for the ranchers, they told the Interamerican Commission of Human Rights (IACHR), which [granted them protective measures](#) in 2020 following a series of alleged armed attacks.



Maya Poqomchi' land activists in the department of Baja Verapaz have been repeatedly accused on Facebook of violence and criminality by ranching firm Agropecuaria Pananish. WireStock / Alamy

An expert report on the dispute seen by Global Witness backs the Poqomchi's position. Published in 2025, the study concludes that the ranching company's property titles are based on the dispossession of communal land previously owned by the Maya Poqomchi, who have lived in the area for hundreds of years. As a result, the company's titles are said to be plagued with anomalies and lack legal validity.

In a letter to Global Witness, Agropecuaria Pananish said that the eviction attempts were the result of legal proceedings which spanned years and drew on technical reports from institutions such as the Guatemalan land registry. These reports, the firm said, "confirmed that the communities did not previously live on the site."

As well as trying to evict and criminalise community members, Agropecuaria Pananish has attacked them repeatedly on social media. On a Facebook account named [Finca San Rafael](#), it accuses Dos Fuentes community members of being "[invaders](#)" and "criminals".

ACDEPRO has added its voice to the calls to criminalise community members, calling them "[terrorist criminals](#)", "[violent terrorists](#)" and "terrorist invaders".

The national media outlet Republica [has also labelled](#) the community members "invaders", "ex-guerrillas" and "criminals".

A report based on testimony from Wendy Gomez, administrator of the Finca San Rafael property, accuses them of kidnapping her and other farm workers, and of shooting at the national police. Leocadio Juracán is named as a "leader" of the attacks. The report gives no opportunity to Juracán or any other community members to respond to these accusations.

Agropecuaria Pananish's social media campaign has targeted two Dos Fuentes leaders in particular, Jose Antonio Juc and Lázaro Choc. Jose Antonio Juc is called the "lead invader" and [accused of committing multiple crimes](#), including "trespass", "rape", "attempted murder", "kidnap" and robbery.

Finca San Rafael also [posted photos of Juc and personal details](#) including [the number](#) on his mandatory national ID card – a clear violation of Facebook's [privacy rules](#).

Choc is called a "[criminal](#)" and accused of having "[threatened shot burnt houses.](#)"

In its letter, Pananish told Global Witness that these two leaders were responsible for fuelling the conflict. "They have opposed direct communication" with other community members, the firm alleged, impeding attempts to reach a peaceful resolution.

"These individuals scam the other participants by making regular charges under the promise that, with these payments, they would obtain a right to the farm when it was taken over," the firm said.

The letter also alleges that the leaders have attacked a 90-year-old woman living on the property and detained government personnel responsible for resolving the conflict.

“The company has used criminal law to create false accusations and victimize themselves”

UDEFEGUA, A GUATEMALAN HUMAN RIGHTS GROUP

Such allegations reached the courts after representatives of Agropecuaria Pananish filed a criminal complaint accusing Juc and Choc of threats and violence. On the day of the hearing, however, the complainants didn't show up. The case was dismissed, and Juc and Choc [walked free](#) in August 2025.

“It was reinforced in the hearing that the accusations were unfounded and that the company has used criminal law to create false accusations and victimize themselves,” UDEFEGUA, a Guatemalan human rights group which accompanied Juc and Choc through the process, told Global Witness.

The outcome did not deter Pananish, which has [continued calling](#) Juc and Choc [“criminal invaders”](#) on the Finca San Rafael Facebook page.

In posts from November 2025, the firm calls Choc [“a scammer selling land threatening extorting and robbing that which isn't his.”](#) and publishes his photo.

Pananish did not respond to Global Witness's questions about the court case. It didn't deny that hundreds of community members beyond Juc and Choc face criminal charges as a result of their legal actions. Nor did it address the shooting of Mario Chun, or the protective measures granted by the Interamerican Commission on Human Rights.

These measures did not apply solely to Juc and Choc, but to “the Poqomchi' Maya indigenous families of the Washington and Dos Fuentes communities” whose “rights to life and personal integrity ... are at risk.”

A VIOLATION OF INTERNATIONAL LAW

The struggle of the Maya Poqomchi' show how social media is used to threaten and harass Indigenous land defenders, even when they've been granted protective measures and exonerated in the courts.

It also highlights the impact of using criminal law to resolve complex land disputes. Hundreds of Poqomchi' community members still face criminal proceedings for trespass, even though, as the 2025 study asserts, penal law does not have competency to rule on the ownership of a specific property.

This echoes a key recommendation from the [Special Rapporteur](#), who called on Guatemala to “urgently issue an amnesty” for those convicted of trespass, and to “pursue cases of usurpation through the civil courts.”

Published shortly before Juc and Choc’s court hearing, the Rapporteur’s conclusions illuminate the broader context in which the criminalisation of Maya Poqomchi’ community members is taking place.

“Under international law, Indigenous Peoples and others have a right to demonstrate ancestral forms of collective land ownership or land possession,” the Rapporteur said.

“However, currently what prevails is a complete lack of understanding and recognition of ancestral forms of land ownership,” contributing to “an over-valorisation of private property rights of some and neglect of the rights of others.”

These conclusions, however, were dismissed by ACDEPRO, who took to social media to say: “We will not permit that any international organisation comes to dictate how we live nor which laws we respect.”

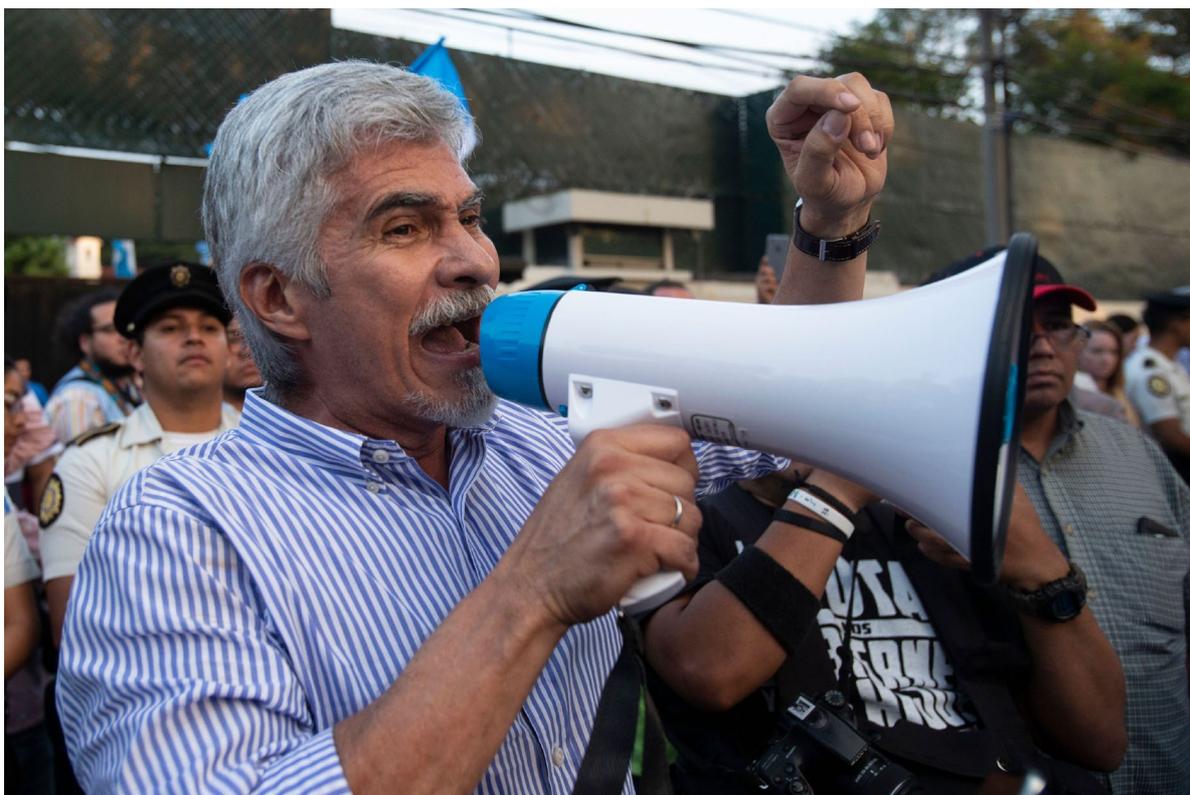


Facebook.com

A similar body to ACDEPRO, the [Observatory of Property Rights](#), created by the business association CACIF in 2021, also issued a statement rejecting the Rapporteur’s findings. Other users joined the chorus, attacking the Rapporteur for encouraging “illegal invasions” and “stirring up hate and resentment between the Indigenous population and ladinos [mestizos, those of mixed descent].”

The Rapporteur’s conclusions, however, reflect international agreements [Guatemala has ratified](#). These include [ILO Convention 169](#) on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples and the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People](#).

Indeed, by publicly calling for the eviction and criminalisation of communities such as Washington and Dos Fuentes before there is any legal clarity on the case, businesses such as Agropecuaria Pananish, and lobby groups such as ACDEPRO, risk contributing to the “grave violation of international law” described by the UN Special Rapporteur.



Ricardo Mendez Ruiz, president of a military-linked group named the FCT, protests against the UN-backed International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) in 2017. Ruiz has since been sanctioned by the US and EU. Moises Castillo / AP Photo

The forces behind digital attacks and criminalisation

It is time to look more deeply into who is driving this wave of criminalisation and social media smears.

Several of the organisations and individuals behind these attacks have been linked to networks of corruption operating in Guatemala.

Corruption has deep roots in the country's politics, fuelled by [criminal blocs](#) which spawned from the vast military and intelligence forces built up during the armed conflict.

In 2007, a UN-backed anti-corruption commission – the [International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala](#) (CICIG) – was established to help identify, prosecute and dismantle these blocs.

Its work swiftly bore fruit. [Dozens](#) of criminal groups and their links to state officials were exposed, resulting in more than [400 convictions](#), including [former presidents](#), [government ministers](#) and [military officials](#).

They even [investigated](#) Carol Patricia Flores, the judge who would later charge Pacheco and Chaclán, for money laundering. (The case didn't proceed after the Constitutional Court refused to strip Flores of her judicial immunity.)

Inevitably, however, there was a backlash. In 2019, the commission's mandate was [terminated](#) by President Jimmy Morales, after prosecutors working with CICIG [opened investigations](#) into [him](#), his son and his [brother](#). (All were later cleared after the Commission was [removed](#) from their cases.)

As the CICIG was dismantled, [prosecutors](#) and [judges who had worked with it were subjected to fierce attacks](#) on social media. Some of these attacks featured [confidential information from the Prosecutor's Office about potential criminal proceedings](#). Fearing for their freedom, dozens of justice officials [fled into exile](#).

Since then, key figures in Guatemala's Prosecutor's Office have been [sanctioned](#) for corruption or undermining democracy. This includes Attorney General Consuelo Porras, General-Secretary Angel Pineda, chief anti-impunity prosecutor Rafael Curricuche, and prosecutors Cinthia Monterroso and Leonor Morales.

Behind many of the accusations used to [persecute](#) those working to combat corruption and impunity with the CICIG was the FCT, several of whose members and associates were [named](#) in CICIG investigations.

The FCT's Ricardo Mendez Ruiz and Raul Falla have both been sanctioned: firstly [by the US](#), as "corrupt and undemocratic actors"; and also [by the EU](#), for "actions that undermine democracy, the rule of law, or the peaceful transfer of power in Guatemala."

A NETWORK OF FAKE NEWS

The prolific disinformation source **XelaNews** is [owned by Gustavo Cardenas](#), a communications specialist who worked closely with former President Jimmy Morales, as uncovered by the Guatemalan investigative outlet [Voxpopuli](#).

Public registries show that the XelaNews Facebook page was created in 2016 and originally named "Departmental Government of Quetzaltenango". Initially, it shared information about the region and the activities of the then-Governor, Claudia Avila, who was appointed to the post by Jimmy Morales.

The page passed through several names before settling on XelaNews in 2023, during the protests, Voxpopuli found.

Global Witness reached out to XelaNews with the allegations contained in this report, but did not receive any response.



Guatemalan judge Erika Aifán was forced into exile after facing threats of criminalisation backed by a campaign of defamation and harassment on social media. Moises Castillo, File / AP Photo

“They aimed to create hate against me, to defame and diminish me, calling me a guerrilla, a terrorist, a communist”

ERIKA AIFAN, FORMER JUDGE FOR HIGH-RISK CRIMES IN GUATEMALA NOW LIVING IN EXILE WASHINGTON D.C.

Republica is a digital newspaper founded and directed by the entrepreneur Rodrigo Arenas, who has been linked to [two corruption cases](#) in Guatemala. One [alleged](#) he channelled hundreds of thousands of US dollars to the political movement of former President Morales without declaring the sum – as he was legally obliged to do – to Guatemala’s electoral tribunal.

Arenas went on trial, but proceedings were frozen after the presiding judge, Erika Aifán, [fled the country](#) following a vicious defamation campaign on social media.

Aifán was targeted for her work with the CICIG, she told Global Witness from exile in Washington DC.

“They aimed to create hate against me, to defame and diminish me, calling me a guerrilla, a terrorist, a communist,” Aifán said. “There were gendered attacks, calling me crazy and hysterical, and personal sexualised attacks.”

Global Witness shared its analysis with Republica, but did not receive any response.

In the province of Sololá, home to Edgar Tuy and Esteban Toc, **G7 Canal** is **operated** by **Mario Delgado**. Multiple sources told Global Witness Delgado is notary for a congressional deputy named Allan Rodriguez, who has been **sanctioned by the US for corruption**.

The US Treasury said he “used his authority as Speaker of Congress to provide construction grants in exchange for financial bribes” and “used his political influence to make deals in exchange for bribes and facilitated bribes for others.”

Global Witness contacted G7 Canal with its findings, but did not receive any response.

The **national broadcaster TVGT** has refused to disclose its funding. Its owner, Iván Andrés, has claimed **the operation** is **entirely voluntary**.

Again, Global Witness reached out to TVGT with the findings of this report, but did not receive any response.

“It impacted my security and scared my family, as we didn’t know who was behind the threats and harassment”

ERIKA AIFÁN, PRESIDING JUDGE ON RODRIGO ARENAS CASE

An **analysis** by the **Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística** highlighted consistent interactions between Yes, Master!, another anonymous account named EriolGt, Raul Mendez Ruiz and Raul Falla, the FCT’s lawyer, in propagating this content.

Various investigations have shown that Yes, Master! repeatedly **pre-empts arrests** by sharing confidential information from the Prosecutor’s Office, indicating deliberate coordination between criminalisation from the Prosecutor’s Office and smear campaigns orchestrated by social media accounts. Such coordination was also apparent in the case of Luis Pacheco. A few hours before his arrest, Yes, Master! posted: **“Today will be a great day.”** Just an hour earlier, Angel Pineda, from the Prosecutor’s Office, posted the **exact same phrase** on his X account.

Together, this network of fake news sites, anonymous profiles and real people has collaborated to smear Indigenous leaders and land activists. Criminal accusations filed by the FCT are supported by coordinated disinformation campaigns on social media. Such attacks work to isolate activists from their communities and pave the way for their criminalisation.

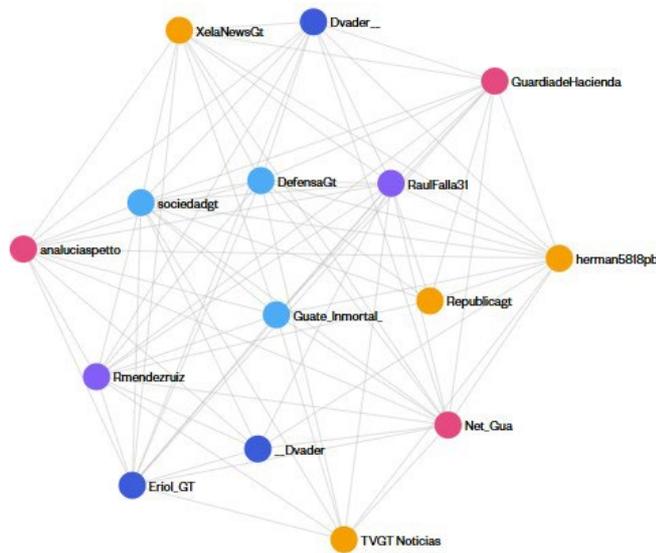
Within Guatemala, these networks are known as “net centres”, and they operate aggressively across Facebook, X and TikTok.

Using analytic tools, we identified X accounts which frequently shared smears and disinformation targeting Indigenous and land defenders in Guatemala

We found that some of the most prolific not only share their own content, but are also directly connected to each other - seemingly working as a network to amplify their narratives

Category:

- Mother account
- Anon account
- Rightwing movement account
- News account
- Public figure



How social media giants can defend the defenders

As this report shows, powerful social media companies such as Meta, X and TikTok are not preventing the weaponisation of their platforms to harass, intimidate and silence human rights defenders. Their failure to moderate online hate combined with their engagement-seeking algorithms is putting defenders in Guatemala in danger.

This is compounded by their moves to cut content moderation, shift to community-based models and roll back safety policies.

As it stands, the likes of Meta, X and TikTok risk being complicit in the real-world harms suffered by Indigenous leaders and other defenders working to protect freedom and democracy in Guatemala.

TIME FOR MODERATION

It is time for social media companies to reverse direction and improve their ability to engage in context-specific content moderation, including robust factchecking capabilities.

Proposals for such measures were outlined in an [American Bar Association \(ABA\) report](#) on the digital harassment of justice officials working with the CICIG. The ABA urged social media companies to “provide heightened scrutiny of content in problematic or sensitive countries, engage localized personnel and guidance, and consider the greater impact of the speaker in monitoring and possibly de-platforming high profile accounts.”

Platforms also need to take appropriate action against sites that present themselves as sources of news and information – but instead spread fake or illegal content, or breach platform policies. They have the power to shut down these pages, deprive them of advertising revenue or make sure their content is fact-checked and comes with warning labels. It is time they started using these powers.

While many social media companies are increasingly reluctant to take action against disinformation, most have policies against inciting violence, harassment and hate speech. They should be held to account for their poor enforcement.

2026: A CRUCIAL YEAR

2026 is a critical year for defenders in Guatemala, with [elections scheduled](#) to appoint senior officials in four institutions fundamental to the country’s democracy and justice system.

This includes the position of Attorney General, currently held by Consuelo Porras, whose Prosecutor’s Office has overseen the criminalisation documented in this report. It also includes magistrates in the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, as well as the Comptroller General. These appointments will be a fraught process, as the corrupt interests protected by Porras and other high-level officials within the Prosecutor’s Office seek to maintain their influence over Guatemala’s judiciary.

It is critical that the international community does everything possible to ensure these appointments foster greater judicial independence in Guatemala. To this end, the Washington Office on Latin America has [urged](#) the US and other international actors to:

- Support Guatemalan civil society and independent media
- Back international observer missions
- Consider the use of individual sanctions
- Support reform of civil service selection processes

Taken together, such actions could help break the stranglehold maintained by corrupt actors on Guatemala’s justice system, and make the country safer for human rights defenders to do their crucial work.