**Justice delayed**

Jeff Abbott

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Nanci Sinto and Dulce Archila are facing charges of ‘depredation of cultural property’ during the November 2020 mobilization, which protested cuts to key social programs included in Guatemala’s 2022 budget bill and demanded the resignation of the country's president and ministers. Sinto and Archila were arrested a year later in November 2021.

During the protest, many gathered at the congressional building, where a small group – which did not include Sinto and Archila – set fire to an office. Riot police deployed teargas to disperse the protesters,drawing others into a violent standoff. During the initial dispersal Sinto was beaten and pushed to the ground before being helped away by a couple photojournalists.

In June 2022, a judge ruled that there was no evidence to prosecute Sinto and Archila, but an appeals court allowed the Public Ministry to proceed with their prosecution.

“The idea of keeping them [facing charges] is to generate this state of fear and almost terror, to prevent it from happening again,” Renzo Rosal, a Guatemalan independent political analyst tells The Progressive.

But while the state goes after these two protesters for allegedly tagging the congressional building, groups of ex-soldiers who burned parts of the congressional building and vehicles in the parking lot in October 2021 remain free and uninvestigated. The former soldiers who were active during Guatemala's thirty-six-year internal armed conflict are demanding that the State pay 120,000 Quetzales, or more than $15,000 dollars, to each of the thousands of soldiers who served during the war.

“When justice does not apply equally to everyone, that is a selective application; it is not justice,” Rosal says. “That is a serious indicator of the deterioration of the democratic model.”

Guatemala has a long history of falsely accusing community activists accused of crimes including land usurpation and kidnapping. Such criminalization has expanded to impact prosecutors and anti-corruption activists in recent years. Amid the rollback of anti-corruption efforts, the Guatemalan government continues to take new steps to reprimand people who protest living conditions in the country.

“Right now we are in the crack-down period,” Samayoa says. “We are at that moment where I believe that society still has to understand where the difference [between authoritarianism and democracy] stands.”

The Guatemalan congress has been pursuing a measure that will permit the police and military to use deadly force during protests. As law it would establish an immunity from prosecution for security officers accused of using deadly force. Known as Initiative 6076, the measure was proposed by congressional representatives with the Unión del Cambio Nacional, or UCN, a far-right party that is known to have deep ties with drug cartels.

The bill was forced through the first two debates, despite outcry from the opposition in congress and communities that have been affected by state violence.

Excerpted: ‘Central American Anti-Corruption Activists Are Facing Criminal Prosecution’.

Courtesy: Commondreams.org