

GUATEMALA - Water-Mining Invasion and the Dispossession and Expulsion of Native Peoples

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“The Niña, the Pinta and the Santa Maria arrived once more to the Q’anjob’al and Chuj territories.” Thus read the headline of a public announcement made on May 6th 2014 by the multinational government (sociopolitical articulation) of the nations Q’anjob’al, Popti, Chuj, Akateco and Mestizo, in the Huehuetenango region, before the military presence of the Spanish company Project of Water Development (PWD, of Spain’s HIDRALIA ECOENER) in the municipality of Ixtatan.}

In recent years, Guatemala (along with its neighbors) has suffered from a frenetic invasion of hydroelectric and mining companies with the active collusion of their neoliberal leaders. As if it were a “curse of wealth”, the desired natural goods are found in the minimized and pestered indigenous territories, which resist being moved from their places.

Neoliberal despotism and water dispossession

During colonization, the “civilized” Christians, when they couldn’t find the damned metal (gold), robbed the Mayans of their fertile lands and made them into their slaves (through the system of trade and indian villages). With the New Indian Law (1542), the Spanish crown established the statute of the common lands so that the Mayans cultivated them and paid the King’s fifth.

During the Republic, especially during the liberal revolution (1871 onward), the Mayans were cast out of their communal lands (through individual titling and the land market), and cornered to the highest zones in the hills. In these inhospitable corners, the Mayan villages survived almost everything that came from the republican history, without a state and isolated from progress.

But, when neoliberal despotism was imposed (with the affirmation from the 1996 Peace Agreements), the re-articulation of capitalism from dispossession and expulsion attacked these villages once again. This time, it wasn’t to take their land (almost all of it was in the hands of farming corporations), but rather to take their water (for the sure business of electricity) and exploit the mineral deposits.

The Mayan people could survive colonization and the liberal revolution secluded and excluded in the highlands without much land, but they can’t survive the vicious neoliberal theft so easily. Without sufficient land, life goes on. But without land and without water, it is impossible. This explains the current Mayan resistance to foreign water mining in their lands.

Violent hydroelectric frenzy and Mayan resistance

In 2012, Guatemala produced 8,703 GWh of electric energy, of which it exported 195.5 GWh of energy to regional marketing applications (even though more than 50% of the country’s rural area doesn’t use this service). The 49.7 percent of all electricity was generated by hydraulic plants.

Until a few years ago, there existed about 19 mentioned hydroelectric plants in the country. The biggest being Chixoy (which flooded and threw out more than 40 indigenous families from their lands).

In recent years, before the announced planetary energy crisis (byproduct of petroleum consumption),

national and foreign businessmen looted the watersheds in this impoverished country, always with the holy promise of development that never came. They knew that whoever controlled water and electricity had sure business in the present and in the future.

In this moment, it is difficult to know to who and how many the different rivers of Guatemala are awarded. The only sure thing is that the indigenous communities (that by “misfortune” count on watersheds) are visited and invaded by executives or technicians of the supposed hydroelectric companies. With promises and money in hand, they buy leaders and divide the mentioned communities. Quite often, they forego community resistance, invading the indigenous territories mounted on their machinery, permanently escorted by their private security, the federal police and the army.

Once installed inside, and before the growing resistance of the affected and contaminated communities, using all the devices of the sycophantic means of mass information, and with the silent accomplice of the rulers, these same people selectively disgrace, persecute and murder the community resistance leaders. And then, there is neither a prosecutor to accuse, nor a judge to punish the murderers.

Mayan resistance before the violent water-mining invasion

The resisting natives know that there is no more land where the disgrace of “others’ development” can continue. For them, by their preservational and survival instincts and by obligation, they come to confront one of their last battles for life: the unfair fight against water mining. They know that they lost battles during the colonization and the forming of the republic, but they are also aware that they are not defeated.

For them, they organize and optimize, with their limitations, before the current neoliberal blitzkrieg of water mining, the judicial resources that help them as villages. They don’t expect much from other municipalities. But they know that the International Agreement of 1989 by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) recognizes their right to advanced, free and informative inquiry.

Protected by judicial supportive declarations, in recent years, the organized resistance communities, already enacted about eighty self-inquiries that expressly repelled the water mining invasion in their lands.

In the case of the PDH hydroelectric project, in the Ixtatán municipality, Huehuetenango region, on April 28th 2009, exactly 25,646 personal inquiries rejected the presence of the company. But, the Spanish company HIDRALIA ECOENER, with its PDH project (one of the five projects that Huehuetenango had), arrogantly entered riding its heavy machinery.

The reaction and outrage of the mocked natives didn’t miss a beat. Mobilizations of the community and roadblocks supervened because of the unfulfilled promises of the company and the government. Finally, faced with plenty of harassment by the company, the heavy machinery of the invaders was burned and destroyed.

And this didn’t only occur in Ixtatán, but this last measure is about the last desperate resource of the indigenous Mayans that resist plunder, expulsion and death in their own lands. They know that the water mines or whatever other supposed “investment” in their territories not only dispossesses them, but rather kicks them out and exterminates them as a village. They know that the current neoliberal despotism (if they don’t take the proper preventative measures) will end up consuming that which the republic genocide didn’t achieve: genetic and cultural extermination of the Mayan peoples. For this, they undertake this inescapable and decisive battle against the water-mining invasion.

Translated by **Riley Pentico**.