

bulletin

The future is collective: Grassroots movements for peace and rights

Across the globe, communities are shaping democratic futures—sometimes in the face of great adversity. In Burma, grassroots movements build inclusive governance structures amid a brutal conflict. In Canada, civil society defends civil liberties and human rights as cornerstones of democracy. And in Guatemala, Indigenous women lead efforts to ensure peace and democracy are reaching those long excluded. These stories, from Inter Pares counterparts and allies, highlight the power of collective action and the enduring struggle to make democracy real, just and representative for all.



Guatemala's civil war ended nearly 30 years ago but women like Carmen Jimenez Ortiz (right) are still owed a debt of peace. | Photo: ROMI

“We are building democracy”: The long journey to peace in Guatemala

Peace and democracy building continues long after conflicts end.

For women in Ixcán, Guatemala, a remote, predominantly Mayan municipality, building a peacetime democracy that serves everyone is entwined with advocating for their rights. >>>

While the 1996 peace agreement ended Guatemala's 36-year civil war, it did not yield peace for everyone, and many barriers continue to limit peace and inclusive democracy. A debt is still owed to the women of Ixcán, many of whom were at the centre of the peacebuilding process. Democratic institutions have all but abandoned rural communities like theirs, and the lack of services hits women especially hard, making them vulnerable to inequality and violence.

Carmen Jimenez Ortiz is pushing back. She is a member of Inter Pares counterpart Asociación Red de Organizaciones del Ixcán (ROMI), a network of more than 200 grassroots women's organizations in Ixcán. ROMI supports women through cases of sexual and gender-based violence. The organization also supports increased women's participation in decision-making and the defense of their territory.

"This is how we are building democracy," says Carmen.

Carmen—like many of ROMI's members—was forced to flee her land in Ixcán during the civil war, when the military occupied it and began kidnapping, torturing and killing *campesinos* (Indigenous or peasant farmers) involved in the struggle for equitable land redistribution.



"We carry on because we cannot give up on our rights," says Carmen Jimenez Ortiz.
| Photo: ROMI

Determined to resist, entire communities, Carmen included, fled to the region's jungle where they became thorns in the side of the military. Carmen remained there for seven years with her husband and children. It was only when Carmen fell ill that she sought refuge in Mexico.

Carmen came home to Ixcán in 1993, as part of a collective return coordinated by the refugees themselves. Women's groups that would later go on to form ROMI helped make this happen.

She may be living in a post-conflict country with "democratic" institutions, but Carmen still feels

that her participation as a woman is not welcome. She cannot enjoy the peace that she risked her life to help build. After surviving battles, bombs, massacres and a harrowing homecoming, women in Ixcán continue to be subjected to violence.

But thanks to Inter Pares donors, we're able to support the work of dedicated women like Carmen who are demanding that Guatemala's democracy work for everyone.

"We carry on because we cannot give up on our rights," says Carmen.



INTERVIEW: Defending civil liberties, defending democracy

The International Civil Liberties Monitoring Group (ICLMG) is a coalition of Canadian civil society organizations, including Inter Pares, working to protect civil liberties and human rights from the negative impacts of national security and anti-terrorism measures. Tim McSorley, ICLMG's coordinator, spoke with us about how defending civil liberties is essential to protecting democracy.

Interview edited for length and clarity.

⦿ Why was ICLMG founded and how was Inter Pares involved?

ICLMG was founded in 2002 in the wake of the attacks in the U.S. on September 11th, 2001, and Canada's response. There was incredible growth in the use of surveillance tools, police powers and national security measures, a sharp increase in xenophobia, Islamophobia and hate-based violence, and mounting criminalization of the aid sector. The sector was worried by the significant negative impacts of new anti-terrorism laws on limiting humanitarian aid and international cooperation. Inter Pares was one of the key

organizations and leading forces that initiated the first meetings and helped form the coalition.

⦿ How does protecting civil liberties support democracy?

Protest and free expression are fundamental to democracy. We see our work as supporting democracy and people's ability to be involved in democratic decision-making—not just voting, but engaging with MPs, protesting and exercising free expression. That includes speech people might find disagreeable or offensive.

⦿ Are you seeing parallels between the post-9/11 context and today?

Definitely. In both contexts, people are protesting for peace, against war, to save people's lives. The rhetoric we're seeing now—labeling people protesting the genocide in Gaza as extremists or supporters of terrorism—is very similar to what we saw after 9/11.

Once put in place, new national security laws (like the Anti-terrorism acts in 2001 and 2015 and 2017's National Security Act) justified in the wake of 9/11 or similar crises, tend to stick around and get repurposed. We've seen them used against Indigenous land defenders, and now again in the context of Gaza protests. The context changes, but the patterns are the same.

⦿ What can people do to protect their civil liberties?

When civil liberties are eroded, there's a chilling effect. That fear stops people from participating in democracy. So, reach out to your elected officials—call, email, talk to them at events. ICLMG has tools on our website to help with that. Join local groups, show up to protests. [These actions matter.](#)



"Fear stops people from participating in democracy," says Tim McSorley (right), coordinator of ICLMG, an Inter Pares counterpart. | Photo: ICLMG



Democracy in the making: Grassroots governance in Burma

As civil war rages in Burma, people are laying the foundations for a future democracy.

In Karenni State, activists, civil society groups, local political parties and the local governance body formed a consultative council shortly after the 2021 military coup. Their goal: to build an inclusive state government from the ground up.

With support from Inter Pares, the council began drafting an interim constitution for the state. They prioritized grassroots participation, including from

youth and women, to ensure the policy represented the will of the people. Today, the Karenni council includes youth, women and former civil society leaders.

Whether a military dictatorship or a nominally civilian regime, Burma's government has long excluded and oppressed Indigenous peoples. This has been a major, recurring cause of conflict for decades. Those leading the state-level efforts to build inclusive new systems know they must succeed for any future peace to be sustainable. States and the people in them must shape their own destinies.



Writing policy from the ground up: Farmers from across Karenni State share their perspectives on the state's future agricultural policy. | Photo: Karenni State Farmer Union

Other states in Burma are at varying stages of building their own new structures. In Chin State, where we support counterparts working on new democratic institutions local leaders are pursuing an approach to governance focused on local representation and autonomy.

Today, the junta controls an estimated one-fifth of the country's territory. Desperate to cling onto control of major cities and centralized organs of the country, it relies heavily on airstrikes, often bombing Indigenous civilian areas, including hospitals and schools. In addition to the staggering human costs, these attacks devastate livelihoods and tax revenue, making it hard for local and state governance bodies to access resources to govern as they envision.

But amid destruction, hope persists. Through collaboration and a shared vision, people in Burma are building the foundations of a future that respects the will of its people—one that puts power in the hands of communities, not military generals.



Karenni States's interim government invited farmers from across the state to regional conferences, where farmers shared their recommendations for a future agricultural policy. | Photo: Karenni State Farmer Union

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With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequalities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

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