



CLIMATE VANGUARD

The US' Coup in Guatemala

Image: Carlos Castillo Armas (sitting next to the driver) entering Guatemala City after the success of Operation PBSuccess. London Review of Books.



**On this day in 1954,
democratically-elected
president, Jacobo
Árbenz, resigned
following a US-backed
coup that crushed the
Guatemalan Revolution.**

Image: Jacobo Árbenz.

Following hundreds of years of European colonisation, Guatemala was subjected to decades of US imperialism, facilitated by a series of comprador dictators.*

For example, during General Jorge Ubico's regime (1931–1944) huge land concessions and tax breaks were offered to US companies, landless peasants were forced to work 100-150 days a year on plantations, and secret police silenced dissent through torture and disappearances.

This made Guatemala "a paradise for foreign corporations and a prison for its own people."

No company evidences this more than the United Fruit Company (UFC) →

* Compradors are local intermediaries that ally themselves with foreign oppressors to facilitate exploitation while enriching themselves.



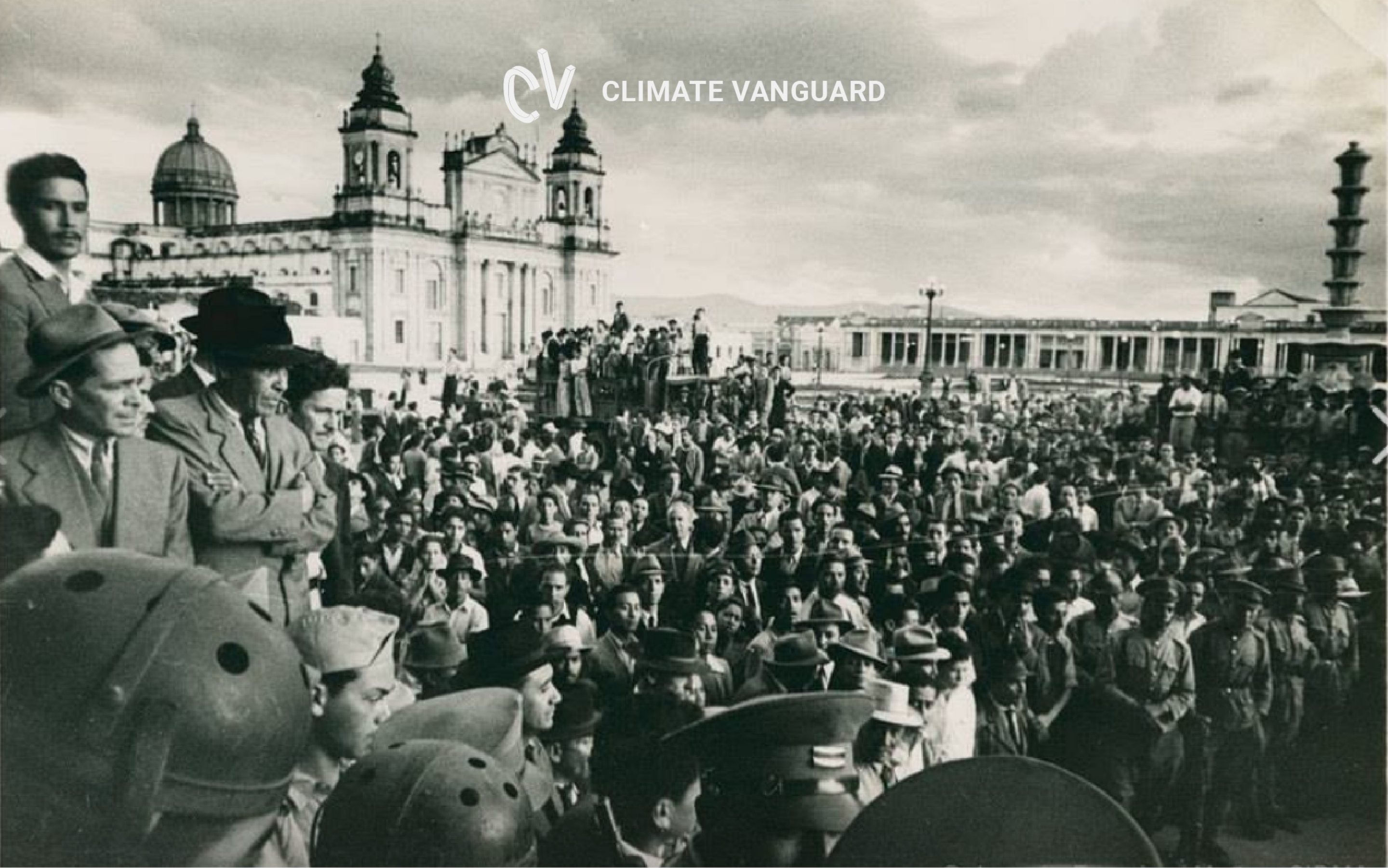


United Fruit Company

The UFC's main business was the production and export of bananas. By the 1940s, the UFC owned about 20% of the country's arable land and accounted for 90% of banana exports from Guatemala – the country's second largest export.

However, the company's dominance did not stop there. To ensure maximum profits, the UFC also owned and operated the country's major ports, railroads, and telecommunications. It was almost like **"a state within a state."**

In 1950, the UFC made a profit of \$65 million, about twice the Guatemalan government's revenue that same year.



The Ten Years of Spring

In 1944, a popular coup deposed Ubico and brought in Guatemala's first democratically-elected president, Juan José Arévalo. **This marked the beginning of the Guatemalan Revolution** – a period also referred to as the “Ten Years of Spring.”

Arévalo implemented progressive reforms, including the introduction of a minimum wage and increasing corporate tax rates, but more substantive changes only came once Arévalo's successor, Jacobo Árbenz, was elected in 1951.



Jacobo Árbenz

In 1952, Árbenz passed **Decree 900** – a sweeping agrarian reform bill that sought to dismantle the country's feudal-style landholding system and address extreme rural poverty. The Decree required unused or underutilised estates larger than 223 acres to be redistributed to landless peasants. Between 1952 and 1954, **over 100,000 Guatemalan families received land** through this reform.

As one of the largest landholders in Guatemala, the **UFC was heavily impacted** by Decree 900, especially since the company only used about 15% of its 550,000 acres.





Image: United Fruit Company in Guatemala.

Triggered by Decree 900 and the prospect of further reforms under Árbenz, **the UFC lobbied the US government to intervene in Guatemala** and restore the conditions for super-exploitation and profit-making.

In the midst of the Cold War and at the height of McCarthyism,* President Eisenhower did not need much convincing.

Although Árbenz's government did not have especially close ties with the Soviet Union, anti-communist paranoia made Eisenhower fear that Guatemala's progressive changes could be a gateway towards socialism and act as an example for other Latin American countries.



* 'McCarthyism' was a campaign to root out alleged communists and Soviet sympathisers from US institutions. It was characterised by intense political repression and fear-mongering.



The Coup

In 1953, Eisenhower authorized the CIA to carry out Operation PBSuccess, in which **they armed, funded, and trained a Guatemalan militia.**

On June 18th, 1954, the militia invaded Guatemala, supported by air bombings of Guatemala City, a naval blockade, and a propaganda campaign to demoralise the Guatemalan military.

On June 27th, Árbenz resigned and military dictator Carlos Castillo Armas took power.

Aftermath

Backed by the US, Armas rolled back the progress made during Guatemala's Ten Years of Spring and launched an anti-communist crusade that laid the ground-work for decades of state violence in which **over 200,00 indigenous people were murdered.**

After the UN Truth Commission report on Guatemala was released in 1999, President Clinton apologised for the US' role in staging the 1954 coup and supporting decades of dictatorial terror.

In 1984, the UFC was renamed to Chiquita and **it remains the second-largest banana producer in the world.**

Sources: Schlesinger & Kinzer, Bitter Fruit (1982); Bevens, The Jakarta Method (2020). Image: Campaign Pop by Nature by Chiquita (former UFC), 2025.



**Wherever people
stand up against
imperialism, they
are met with
economic
strangulation,
military force,
and propaganda.**

**This is no less
true of Guatemala
in 1954 than it is
today of Palestine,
Iran, and China.**

