

Guatemala: Decriminalization? Don't Believe The Hype

By Dawn Paley, April 30, 2012 (dawnpaley@gmail.com)

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FLORES, PETEN--Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina has made headlines around the world for his suggestion that the U.S. led "War on Drugs" has failed, and that other options should be explored. Media fanfare around his position at the Summit of the Americas in Colombia has re-cast the retired hard line general as a progressive, innovative president. But according to analysts who spoke to Upside Down World, the President's decriminalization plan is a smokescreen for increased militarization, and the rearrangement of Guatemala's drug trafficking elite.

"My perspective is that [Pérez Molina's] proposal is a smokescreen, something designed to distract from the confluence of problems of Guatemalan society, and particularly those of the rural peasant farmers," Maximo Ba Tiul, a Mayan Poqomchi analyst and professor explained to Upside Down World.

"What is in dispute is territory, and especially the territory of Indigenous peoples, and so while he's consolidating his process of control he comes up with this, knowing full well that he can't fight his friends and colleagues, and that he has no capacity to pressure the United States."

When Pérez Molina flew from Guatemala City to Cartagena, he took the private jet of Multi Inversiones Company, one of the largest and most powerful business conglomerates in Guatemala. His speech at the Summit of the Americas was measured and diplomatic. He talked about poverty and disaster relief. Then he talked about how Guatemala is falling victim to a war that they didn't "provoke or initiate" because of their geographic position

between Colombia, the world's largest producer of cocaine, and the United States, the largest market for it.

Pérez Molina's speech didn't mention legalization, though he hinted at it by mentioning that tobacco and alcohol provoke less violence than other harmful substances. "We have to dialogue about whether we should continue doing the same thing we've done for fifty years to fight drug consumption, production and trafficking, even though we haven't succeeded in eradicating said market," he said.

The international media ate it up.

"Is the war on drugs over?" read a headline in Canada's Maclean's magazine in the lead up to the Colombia meeting, the article going on to suggest that Central American countries could go ahead and "legalize" drugs under the nose of the United States.

Other establishment publications took more studied approaches. Foreign Policy asked why the United States can't figure out something the rest of the world already knows: that the war on drugs isn't working. The Economist caught up with Pérez Molina for an interview about broadening the debate around legalization. The New York Review of Books ran a well written piece that delved a little more into Pérez Molina's background.

It's hard to imagine how a former intelligence chief who preceded over one of the bloodiest regions in Guatemala during a period later described as genocide by the United Nations could so completely transform his image in a matter of months. But since Pérez Molina first mentioned legalization on February 11th, that's just what's happened on the international stage.

Inside Guatemala, however, Pérez Molina's past isn't so easy to ignore, even in the wake of his bold new proposal.

“Otto Pérez Molina arrives to the Presidency of the Republic with a curriculum stained by his past in counterinsurgency, his dark passage through military intelligence, and his tight links with the conservative business elite,” wrote Luis Solano, an economist and researcher, in November of 2011.

Pérez Molina described his own style of governance as one inspired by Colombia's controversial ex-President Álvaro Uribe. He also promised to use Kaibiles, Guatemala's elite special forces (whose defectors have been linked to the Zetas) in the war on drugs.

After his election, Pérez Molina tapped numerous retired military men from his party, called the Patriot Party [PP], to become ministers in his government. One of them, General Ulises Noé Anzueto Girón, the minister of defense, was accused of participating with eight others in torturing and killing Efraín Bámaca, a member of the since disappeared guerilla group Organization of the People in Arms (ORPA).

Beyond his connections with a powerful elite connected to the extractive industries and the energy sector, there are also important links between Pérez Molina's government and a powerful sector of organized crime.

“Fernández Ligorria, a military man from [city of] Coban, was one of the most important figures in the Patriot Party, and was very close to the current president, Otto Pérez Molina,” a Guatemalan analyst told Upside Down World, asking to remain anonymous out of fear for his safety. Before his death in January of 2011, various media outlets described Ligorria as the head of the Mexican narco-paramilitary group Los Zetas in Guatemala. “One of his sons, José Fernández Chanel, is currently a sitting congressperson with the [Patriot Party].”

“It's complicated, because a direct fight [against drug trafficking] on the part of the government would implicate confronting their

own colleagues, ex-colleagues, and high ranking military officials,” the Guatemalan analyst told Upside Down World. “This could unleash wars of another kind, power disputes which could put at risk not only the stability of the government of Pérez Molina, but also the stability of the state itself.”

Military personnel from Coban make up an important part of Pérez Molina's support base. Coban is in the department of Alta Verapaz, where former President Alvaro Colom declared a state of emergency in 2010, allegedly because of the presence of Zetas there. A state of emergency was later declared in Guatemala's northern state of Peten, following the massacre of 27 (mostly Indigenous) farmhands in May of 2011, an act that was also blamed on the Zetas. Peten comprises one third of Guatemala's territory, and contains important oil fields, plentiful water resources, and mega diverse tropical forests.

For all the talk of a new strategy in the drug war, on March 30, the Guatemalan defense minister announced the creation of a new, anti-narcotics military task force called "Tecun Uman" that will benefit from technical and financial assistance from the United States. Four days later, on April 3, Horst Walter Overdick Mejia, a drug trafficker affiliated with the Zetas who was active in Alta Verapaz and Peten, was captured in Guatemala by U.S. officials and Guatemalan authorities.

“After the arrest of Overdick, the narcos began to reposition, and the Zetas as well, under the careful and close watch of the military,” said Ba Tiul. “It's not about controlling the narcos, but ensuring the business stays in their hands... as well as controlling social mobilization, which is very powerful.”

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