

NYT report misrepresents U.S. actions, past and present, in Guatemala as protests for justice and reform continue

June 22, 2015, by Grahame Russell

Anita Isaacs's article "America's Second Chance in Guatemala" (published in the New York Times – see below) is based on misrepresentations of American history and interests in Guatemala.

Anita writes: "American policy toward Guatemala is driven by the concern that a political vacuum would empower organized criminals."

American policy towards Guatemala has never been driven by any such concerns. Policy has always been driven by U.S. economic, military and political interests, as defined by the dominant political, economic and military sectors of American society.

She writes: "[Guatemalans'] vision of the United States continues to be shaped by the C.I.A.-sponsored coup in 1954 that interrupted an initial democratic spring and triggered decades of armed conflict."

Correct, but there is more. Guatemalans remember decades of American military, financial, political and intelligence support for repressive regimes throughout the "cold war". In the eyes of many, the U.S. should be co-responsible for genocides carried out by the Guatemalan military in the 1970s and 80s.

Since the 1996 "Peace Accords", Guatemalans have known nothing but American (and Canadian, for that matter) support for and economic dealings with corrupted, repressive and exploitative "democratic" governments and the military and police.

Simply put, the U.S. government and economic and political elites will not support serious reform and transformation in Guatemala. The real challenge is whether enough support can be provided to enough Guatemalans to bring about the reforms and transformations they need and deserve, despite the U.S. government and economic elites.

Please support the people of Guatemala (and Honduras, for that matter – a different country, with a similar story and situation) as they courageously organize and demand justice and loooooong overdue political change and transformation.

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America's Second Chance in Guatemala

By Anita Isaacs, June 22, 2015

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/23/opinion/americas-second-chance-in-guatemala.html?emc=eta1&_r=1

HAVERFORD, Pa. — Guatemala is in political turmoil. In April a [United Nations commission](#) exposed a multimillion-dollar network of customs fraud, operating within the country's tax authority and involving a web of customs agents and high-ranking government officials, including the vice president's personal secretary.

Days later, the commission released wiretapped conversations of defense lawyers bribing a judge to release individuals detained in connection with the customs fraud.

Finally, last month the commission exposed another corruption ring, this time involving a scheme by the president's former personal secretary and 16 other officials to siphon off funds from the country's health care system.

The public response has been deafening: Hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans have taken to social media and the streets. What began as a largely middle-class and urban protest has evolved to include peasants and indigenous Guatemalans, the first time the country has united to demand democratic reform.

Peaceful weekly demonstrations have called for the resignations of the president, vice president and cabinet, as well as an investigation into their role in these criminal networks.

Protesters are also demanding the immediate passage of political and campaign-finance reforms ahead of elections scheduled for September, even asking to delay the vote in order to guarantee a transparent and competitive process.

Collective pressure by demonstrators, a few courageous members of the Guatemalan Congress and the United States forced the resignation of the vice president, Roxana Baldetti, who faces a judicial inquiry into her involvement in the customs fraud. The minister of energy and the environment, a senior intelligence officer and the minister of the interior, the president's most trusted adviser, have also been fired.

And yet the United States has fallen short of applying pressure on President Otto Pérez Molina directly, supporting his determination to stay in office in exchange for his apparent willingness to enact anti-corruption legislation. In doing so, Washington has turned its back on the protesters, just when outside pressure is most needed.

American policy toward Guatemala is driven by the concern that a political vacuum would empower organized criminals.

The United States is also betting that a weakened and isolated president will bow to its demands. In fact, American officials seem to be running the show at the presidential palace:

Recently Todd D. Robinson, the American ambassador, held a news conference, with Mr. Pérez Molina meekly standing to the side, where he announced that American officials would administer polygraphs to all tax authority employees.

This approach is desperately misguided. Mr. Pérez Molina cannot be the reformer he has undoubtedly pledged to become.

As a researcher who has interviewed him half a dozen times over the past decade, I can attest to his striking capacity, born of a career in intelligence, to say what his listener most wants to hear. It is easy to leave an initial interview convinced that he is the peacemaker and democratizer Guatemala needs. But as you measure his words against his deeds over time, you figure out that Mr. Pérez Molina is a master of manipulation.

He is playing the United States now. It is nonsensical to assume that a president who has tolerated, if not reaped the benefits of, a thoroughly corrupt administration is suddenly willing to purge it.

Furthermore, it requires a tremendous leap of imagination to accept that the president has no ties to the scheme involving the customs fraud. That network initially emerged during Guatemala's 36-year civil war, and its key players include several members of the military with close ties to Mr. Pérez Molina.

American support for Mr. Pérez Molina has bought him time to consolidate an unholy alliance with the equally, if not more corrupt, major opposition party, which has set its sights on winning the coming elections. The criminal networks that control politics also seem to have reaffirmed their influence over the judicial system: Last week the Constitutional Court blocked an investigation into whether to strip the president of immunity from prosecution.

What's needed, and is unlikely to happen under Mr. Pérez Molina, is real reform: banning private funding for political parties, guarantees of equal media access and the establishment of quotas for candidates who are indigenous people or women.

Absent reform, elections would hand-deliver a mandate to the opposition and usher in another four years of Guatemalan politics controlled by a criminal mafia. The only real chance for such reform lies with a minority in Congress, outsider candidates for election and the demonstrators themselves.

Guatemalans have long historical memories. Their vision of the United States continues to be shaped by the C.I.A.-sponsored coup in 1954 that interrupted an initial democratic spring and triggered decades of armed conflict.

After years of painstaking efforts to repair relations between the United States and Guatemalan society, Guatemalans are angrily pointing their fingers at the United States, which they see as

either propping up an increasingly illegitimate Guatemalan government or treading with excessive caution, refraining from using its substantial influence to move democracy forward.

Second chances rarely happen. Yet the United States is being offered one now. By publicly aligning itself with the diverse coalition of Guatemalan citizens seeking immediate democratic reforms, the United States has an opportunity to bolster a democracy that Guatemalans deserve and lay the foundation for a constructive relationship with an emerging Guatemalan political class.

In helping regenerate a Guatemalan democratic spring, this time the United States can unequivocally stand on the right side of history.

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