

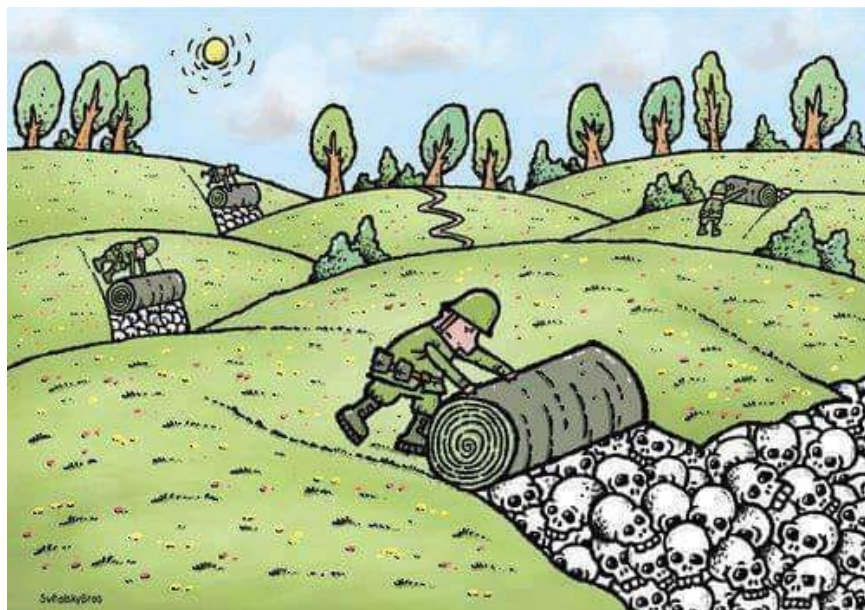
Interview with Ivan Velasquez, Commissioner of CICIG (International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala)

Impunity and corruption on the rise in Guatemala

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/interview-with-ivan-velasquez-commissioner-of-cicig>

“I never imagined that corruption in Guatemala would be so huge, that it would have taken over the state to such an extent.”

As the U.S. & Canada coddle the corrupt, repressive government in Guatemala, a “democratic allie” in the illegal U.S.-Canadian led aggression against Venezuela, the government of President Morales –himself with alleged links to organized crime– has been illegally blocking the work of CICIG lawyers and investigators, while the corrupt congress is close to passing an Amnesty law that would result in the release from jail of dozens of military and paramilitary men convicted of forced disappearance, rape, massacres and other war-time atrocities.



Interview with Ivan Velasquez, Commissioner of CICIG (International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala)

The Colombian anti-corruption prosecutor spoke with the El Pais newspaper in one of the few interviews he’s given since his illegal expulsion from Guatemala. Velasquez acknowledges the existence of a corruption network comprised of former military personnel, legislators and business owners, and that he had been naive in failing to recognize its strength and size.

By [Jacobo Garcia](#), San Salvador, [December 16, 2018](#)

https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/12/16/mexico/1544917421_544663.html?id_externo_rsoc=FB_CC&fbclid=IwAR0Eg4C1xn4vC3c7kZd517wfbkNGL9yADmMRdaLC09pPmEsNa29wBMGLUm4

That same Thursday night, few hours after this interview in a hotel in San Salvador, in a grey building protected by high walls and barbed wire in the City of Guatemala, a group of young prosecutors celebrated the success of an operation against the illicit financing of political parties.

This operation allowed them to issue an arrest warrant against former presidential candidate [Manuel Baldizón](#) and nine more for money laundering and illicit association. The operation entailed house searches, detentions, interrogations and several months tracking accounts, deposits and receipts.

CICIG (International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala) - a sort of national tribunal, created by the U.N. for corruption and other high impact cases - judged that this businessman and bus company owner, who almost became president of Guatemala, had diverted funds to finance his 2011 and 2015 campaigns. [CICIG brought charges against him](#) for this well-known secret.

The magistrate leading the investigation is a 63 year old Colombian with a greying beard and the attitude of an old law professor. He is unable to pat his colleagues on the back because the Guatemalan president, Jimmy Morales, prohibited his entry into the country, and labeled him “persona non grata”.

Before this incident, CICIG helped [incarcerate former president](#), Otto Pérez Molina, his former vice president, 7 cabinet ministers and dozens of legislators and business owners.

Guatemala’s Constitutional Court confirmed the illegality of prohibiting his entry into the country but president Morales refuses to allow him back and Velasquez has spent the last 3 months leading the CICIG while living in El Salvador and the United States, carrying the same luggage with a handful of shirts that he left the country with. “I knew this could happen but I didn’t expect that they wouldn’t let me return. I brought clothes for a week”, he jokes.

Charges of fraud against President Morales’ son

In one of the few interviews given since September 3, 2018, Velasquez acknowledges that the charges of fraud against the son of president Jimmy Morales (for the crime of falsifying invoices) was the tipping point in the relationship with the president.

Charges against President Morales – Illegal campaign financing

The investigation of his father (president Morales, himself) came shortly after, as did the political-business owner’s attack which included the lobbying the U.S. to suspend its economic support to the commission.

Morales, who is being [investigated for illicit campaign financing](#), decided to prohibit Ivan Velasquez re-entry into Guatemala and announced the end of this United Nations mission in 2019, after it worked in the country for 11 years.

“Guatemala is a captured state”

For the jurist, this “powerful and well financed” reaction is because they were getting to the core of the problem. “In 2014, our hypothesis was that corruption was nested in multiple state dependencies, which enabled them to act easily and with impunity. But after the 2015 La Linea case (against the former president, vice president and seven ministers), we realized that Guatemala is simply a captured state”, he summarized.

Velasquez admits that they are up against a network that “has put the state in service of private interests for decades”. Velasquez sees that this pro-impunity front includes “business owners, former military, members of the government, legislators and high ranking members of political parties, with the support of some judges and lawyers”. “Everything is designed to maintain this control and not lose it. And a power that feels threatened, responds with ferocity” he added.

CICIG

CICIG was a novel creation of the United Nations in 2006, when Guatemala, with its 18 million inhabitants, sought assistance, fearing the possibility of becoming a failed state controlled by a handful of businesspeople, military and politicians. In response they created a high level office of the prosecution, with highly qualified investigators, financed by international cooperation and protected by the international community, far from the temptations of bribes.

Since its creation it has been led by combative prosecutors such as Carlos Castresana from Spain or Ivan Velasquez today. Over the last 5 years CICIG broke up 60 criminal groups, many of them with ties to government and 680 people have been brought up on charges of corruption.

Had you sensed that corruption in Guatemala was this big?

No, no. I thought that corruption was focalized, that there were only some “bad apples”, but I never thought it could reach these proportions, I never imagined the degree to which it overpowered the state apparatus.

If CICIG leaves, does it mean that the bad people won?

That depends on Guatemalan society, if they want to continue to build or if they accept regression.

Will you try to return?

My objective is to return, and in January it should probably be possible, he responds.

Ivan Velasquez began his judicial career in [Pablo Escobar’s](#) Medellín. Later, he was the star prosecutor who dismantled the paramilitary-political structure in Colombia when Alvaro Uribe was president.

With his background, the Guatemalan government's decision to declare him a "danger to national security" provokes more indignation than fear. During his four years leading the CICIG he has been criticized for making a "public relations" show, for abusing of the power of preventive imprisonment - 156 people have been imprisoned while waiting to go on trial - or his limited skills at choosing his enemies, as occurred with the son of the president for an apparently 'less important' case.

Nevertheless, Velasquez thinks that each prison sentence "contributes to strengthen democracy" in a country with a delicate social equilibrium, only 22 years after a civil war that caused 200,000 deaths. "The crime of the president's son appeared without looking for it. What were we supposed to do? Look away? Not act against the television stations that illegally financed political parties because it would mean putting ourselves against very powerful media outlets?", he asked himself.

Showing these cases publicly is away to show that institutions are working. The construction of a culture of legality implies a culture of consequences, which also reaches the powerful." "It was likely naive, since we didn't take precautions, but I think that not being partial is a virtue of justice."

The prosecutor attributes the slow pace of the legal proceedings to the deliberate abandonment of the justice system during many decades. "Guatemala has six judges for every 100,000 inhabitants, which is half of the average number in Latin America, because they thought that judges were only good for prosecuting people who steal purses and cell phones."

"We have shown that the struggle against corruption and impunity is possible, and there's the proof, but in the present state of the country and the justice system, it is impossible to win this war against impunity."

Velasquez is pleased that prison conditions and the harshness of prison sentences have become subjects of public debate, ever since presidents, ministers or businessmen began to parade through prisons. "Nobody had ever cared about prison conditions or the laws that govern the loss of liberty, because it was an invention of human rights defenders who are all communist" said the jurist ironically.

Corruption, Impunity, Poverty & Refugee Caravans

Ivan Velasquez feels there is an evident link between corruption and poverty and the migrant caravans don't surprise him. "The struggle against corruption is the struggle for life in dignity for people, even in a material sense." "There are municipalities where two or three million dollars are stolen, in a country where 46% of children under five suffer from chronic malnutrition, and there are areas, like Alto Verapaz, with municipalities where malnutrition affects 85% (...) the State cannot be pillaged by a few people and still be called a democracy."

During his four years leading CICIG, Velasquez has been called a “foreigner and communist”. During this time he lived in the gray cement bunker of CICIG headquarters, leaving rarely, just to go to church each week for Sunday Mass.

The “Falcon of Guatemala” sparks hatred and passion, just like a soccer player, but Guatemalans are clear: 70% support his continued presence in the country against the 15% popularity rating of the president. Ever since Morales announced that CICIG will leave the country next year, those who aspire to a different Guatemala feel orphaned.

Recommend reading: “Guatemala: Impunity for War Criminals, Again”

[Jo-Marie Burt and Paulo Estrada](#), February 5, 2019

https://nacla.org/news/2019/02/05/guatemala-impunity-war-criminals-again?fbclid=IwAR3rqum6YhGj1-mxx5ZzLdO3mEoalPzCp_-lluQ34RLqrVsFE_d_rm4rwpww

Need to hold U.S. and Canadian governments accountable

Keep on sending this information to your elected politicians in the U.S. and Canada holding them to account for their support for the Honduran and Guatemalan regimes, turning a blind eye to the systematic human rights violations, killings, corruption and impunity ... including now this very harmful attempt to give impunity to war criminals.

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- Canada: Contact your Member of Parliament and make your demands known to them (<https://www.ourcommons.ca/Parliamentarians/en/members>).
- Minister Chrystia Freeland, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Global Affairs Canada, 1-613-992-5234, 1-343-203-1851; chrystia.freeland@parl.gc.ca, chrystia.freeland.c1d@parl.gc.ca, chrystia.freeland@international.gc.ca

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