

Guatemalan ‘narco-state’ headed by President-elect Alejandro Giammattei continues business-as-usual with US, Canada & global businesses and investors

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By Anita Isaacs and Álvaro Montenegro, New York Times, Aug. 23, 2019

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/22/opinion/guatemala-election.html>

Aug. 11’s [elections in Guatemala](#) may have thrown a wrench into the Trump administration’s plans to convert Guatemala into a beachhead against migration from Central America. This is partly because President-elect Alejandro Giammattei is wavering over the “safe third country” agreement negotiated with the current president, Jimmy Morales, though he has fallen short of [rejecting it outright](#).

The new government is also poised to generate intensified migration of Guatemalans fleeing poverty, gang and organized criminal violence, and political persecution.

Undoubtedly catching the Trump administration off guard, Mr. Giammattei has publicly conceded what everyone already knows. Guatemala does not meet the qualifications of a safe third country, a designation grounded in international law that implies that prospective refugees apply for asylum in the first country they pass through that can guarantee their rights and provide them basic services.

As the president-elect rightly highlighted, a country like Guatemala that can neither protect nor provide for its own citizens, who are the source of one of the largest groups of migrants to the United States, can hardly be expected to shield or shelter its neighbors from El Salvador and Honduras.

What Mr. Giammattei neglected to mention is that under his watch Guatemalans’ economic and physical security is likely to deteriorate further. In a country where almost [three-quarters](#) of the rural population live in conditions of abject poverty, [the majority of Guatemalan migrants are poor farmers](#),

uprooting their families as a last-ditch means of survival in the face of climate change and persistent government neglect.

If history is any guide, there is little reason to assume that [the incoming administration](#), in which some of the most conservative sectors of the business community have been awarded key ministries, will behave any differently. Rather than tackle the hunger, paucity of farmland, lack of formal job opportunities and miserly wages that drive migration, their instincts will be to do what they have always done. They will resist paying their fair share of taxes and denounce even modest social and economic reforms as Communist inspired.

The president-elect has [said](#) he will combat gang violence with harsh repressive measures that include labeling gangs as terrorist organizations and pledging to reintroduce the death penalty. While this is a policy approach consistent with his tenure as director of the penitentiary system in the mid 2000s, during which an extrajudicial death squad conducted social cleansing operations [within Guatemalan prisons](#), it is a recipe for more rather than less gang violence.

Time and again iron-fisted approaches have been shown to intensify rather than diminish gang violence. El Salvador is a prime example of where an alternative approach appears to be bearing fruit. In 2017, [USAID invested considerable resources](#) in promising regional initiatives aimed at offering poor and alienated youth alternatives to gang recruitment and assisting with the reintegration and rehabilitation of gang members. As a result, [homicide rates](#) and [migration flows](#) have declined sharply.

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Organized crime's ever entrenched power is no accident. Having [waged](#) and won a full-frontal war against the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, or Cicig, a United Nations-appointed body charged with investigating and dismantling organized criminal structures and having installed a [compliant attorney general](#), they are now able to operate unfettered.

Mr. Giammattei's victory is also generating uncertainty among those who have supported both the struggle to secure justice for victims of Guatemala's civil war and the Cicig's battle against corruption and organized crime.

Organized criminals, corrupt politicians, former military officials and their allies are [increasingly threatening](#) prosecutors, judges and civil society activists as a means of revenge. For Guatemalans fearing political persecution through a legal system controlled by organized crime, or facing direct and serious threats to their lives, exile is increasingly viewed as the only means of survival.

It is likely that President-elect Giammattei has shrewdly challenged the Trump administration to offer his government and the conservative economic and criminal elements that support it, something more in exchange for their agreement to play a border patrolling role. It is equally likely that, true to form, the Trump administration will respond with bullying and threats and perhaps a concession or two that will serve to exacerbate the economic and political insecurity that drives migration.

A distinct approach predicated by a new set of partnerships and tactics are urgently needed in Guatemala. The Trump administration should align with the United States Congress, the international community and Guatemalan civil society to prevent the country from becoming a failed state. Take the president-elect's dire assessment of his country's insecurity seriously, demanding that his government provide reforms to alleviate poverty, attenuate violence and salvage democracy. There are no other good options either for Guatemala or for a United States concerned about border security and unauthorized migration.

[Anita Isaacs is a professor of political science at Haverford College and a co-director of the Migrations Encounters Project. Álvaro Montenegro is a journalist and participant in #JusticiaYA, the movement that helped organize the anticorruption protests of 2015 in Guatemala. The Times is committed to publishing [a diversity of letters](#) to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some [tips](#). And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.]

65 years of repression, corruption, no real democracy

On June 27, 1954, Jacobo Arbenz – president of Guatemala's last truly democratic government – was forced from office during a U.S. orchestrated military coup against his government.



"Glorious Victory" is Mexican painter Diego Rivera's mural depicting the 1954 U.S. coup that ousted the government of President Arbenz. In the foreground, CIA director Allen Dulles shakes the hand of coup "leader" (selected by the U.S.) Colonel Castillo Armas. Allen Dulles' left hand rests on a bomb with the face of President Dwight Eisenhower. Behind Allen, brother John Foster Dulles, head of the State Department, and John Peurifoy, Ambassador to Guatemala, hand out cash to Guatemalan military commanders. A Catholic priest officiates over the killing of Mayans and other poor Guatemalans, while exploited workers carry United Fruit Company bananas.

Rights Action (U.S. & Canada)

Since 1995, Rights Action funds human rights, environment and territory defense struggles and projects in Guatemala and Honduras; funds victims of repression, human rights violations, health harms and natural disasters; and works to hold accountable the U.S. and Canadian governments, multi-national companies, investors and banks (World Bank, etc.) that help cause and profit from repression and human rights violations, environmental harms and forced evictions, corruption and impunity in Honduras and Guatemala.

Why are 100s of thousands of Hondurans & Guatemalans fleeing this year alone?

The U.S., Canada and “international community” are helping keep in place the very conditions that force Hondurans and Guatemalans to flee their countries, every year.

Impunity for U.S. & Canadian complicity

The U.S. and Canadian governments, the World Bank and global businesses and investors (privatized hydro-electric dams, mining extraction, African palm, sugar cane and fruit production, garment “sweatshop” factors, tourism complexes, etc.) maintain profitable relations with anti-democratic, corrupt, repressive governments in Honduras and Guatemala, turning participating in exploitation and repression, environmental devastation and human rights violations, corruption and impunity.

There is no political or legal over-sight or accountability in the U.S. and Canada for our complicity in Guatemala and Honduras’ nightmare.

Get Informed / Get Involved

- Speakers: Invite us to give presentations about these inter-connected issues and struggles
- Delegations: Join human rights educational trips to [Guatemala and Honduras](#)
- Daily news: www.democracynow.org; www.theintercept.com; www.telesur.tv/net/english; www.therealnews.com; www.theguardian.com/us-news; www.rabble.ca;

Act

Call, act, stir up the pot. Keep sending copies of Rights Action information (and that of other solidarity groups/ NGOs) to family, friends and networks, politicians and media – always asking the question as to why our governments, companies and investment firms benefit from and turn a blind eye to poverty, repression and violence, environmental and health harms that are directly causing the forced migrancy / refugee crisis in Guatemala and Honduras.

Senators: <https://www.senate.gov/senators/contact>

House of representatives: <https://www.house.gov/representatives/find-your-representative>

Parliament members: <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Parliamentarians/en/members>

Other solidarity/ NGO groups in U.S. and Canada

- Honduras Solidarity Network: www.hondurassolidarity.org;
- Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective: solidaritycollective.org;
- School of Americas Watch: www.soaw.org;
- Common Frontiers Canada: www.commonfrontiers.ca;
- Breaking the Silence: www.breakingthesilenceblog.com;
- NISGUA (Network in Solidarity with People of Guatemala): www.nisgua.org;
- Mining Watch: www.miningwatch.ca;
- CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with People of El Salvador), www.cispes.org;
- Alliance for Global Justice: www.afgj.org;
- CODEPINK: www.codepink.org;
- GHRC (Guatemalan Human Rights Commission): www.ghrc-usa.org;
- Mining Injustice Solidarity Network: <https://mininginjustice.org>;
- Mining Justice Alliance: <https://miningjusticealliance.wordpress.com>;
- Simcoe County Honduras Rights Monitor: <https://simcoecountyhondurasrightsmonitor.wordpress.com/>

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