

## **Rights Action public service:** **Correcting deceitful New York Times article about U.S. government promoting democracy in Central America**

By Grahame Russell, Rights Action  
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<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/rights-action-public-service>

Another deeply misleading article has been published in the New York Times, again censoring any reporting about actual U.S. policies and actions in Central America (past and present), censoring reporting about the profound changes needed in U.S. military and economic policies towards the region.

### **The U.S. Vowed to Defend Central American Democracy. Autocrats Had Other Plans**

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/17/world/americas/central-america-democracy-biden.html>

See full article, below.

Here, I set out a few of the more egregious deceptions in this article.

#### **Guatemala**

The article opens with the 100% misleading statement that President Biden's government is working to end corruption and impunity in Guatemala.

Since 2016, Trump and Biden administrations have done fundamentally nothing as the corrupt, military-backed regimes of Presidents Jimmy Morales (2016-2020) and Alejandro Giammattei (2020-current day) "methodically dismantled the last vestiges of independent institutions. One by one, [these governments have] jailed, exiled or silenced the very people the United States said would underpin its efforts to make Guatemala a more fair and ultimately more livable society: independent judges, prosecutors, journalists and human rights activists."

Dating back decades, and continuing today, the U.S. government (along with the governments of Canada and western Europe, the World Bank, IMF and numerous global companies and banks) refer to successive Guatemalan regimes as "democratic allies", maintaining mutually beneficial economic, military and diplomatic relations.

This U.S.-led "international community" effectively is enabling Guatemala's corrupt economic, political and military elites to destroy the capacity of the legal system to provide any accountability or justice for organized crime groups (including drug traffickers) that have infiltrated most branches of the government and State, and for crimes against humanity

investigations into the U.S.-backed war crimes committed by the Guatemalan regime in the 1980s and early 1990s.

At the same time, these same Guatemalan regimes continue to relentlessly – oftentimes violently – ensure that the richest lands of the country are controlled by wealthy, ‘for-export’ producers of bananas, African palm, sugarcane, coffee and minerals resources. Over 40% of Guatemalan exports go to the U.S.

*“If you are not careful, the press will have you hating the people being repressed and loving the people doing the repressing.”*

Malcolm X

### **Honduras**

The article grotesquely suggests the U.S. aided the return to democracy in January 2022, with the election of President Xiomara Castro.

Since the U.S. and Canadian backed military coup of June 28, 2009, the U.S. (and Canada, Spain and the EU, the World Bank, IMF and countless global companies and investors) maintained mutually beneficial military, economic and diplomatic relations with 12 years and 7 months of military-backed, repressive, exploitative regimes that directly operated (using the executive branch, government institutions, the military and police) a drug-trafficking cartel responsible for producing and/or trans-shipping hundreds of millions of dollars worth of cocaine through Honduras, on towards U.S. (and Canadian) cocaine markets.

During these 12 years, 7 months, more Hondurans desperately fled home and country, joining forced migrants and refugee caravans fleeing north through Mexico than ever before since the worst years of U.S. backed military regimes in Honduras in the 1980s.

It was the courage and dignity of the Honduran people alone that enabled President Xiomara to oust the U.S.-backed regime headed by President Juan Orlando Hernandez and the National Party.

### **Nicaragua**

The article openly lies about U.S. policy towards Nicaragua, stating the “Biden administration has largely stopped short of using financial sanctions in Central America.” Since the mid-1980s, the U.S. has imposed illegal economic sanctions against the government of Nicaragua almost continuously, in one form or another – through to today. These illegal sanctions have been, more often than not, dutifully copied by the governments of Britain and Canada. The purpose is to squeeze and harm Nicaragua’s tiny economy, with the intent of creating social-political upheaval in the country.

Thus, at the same time that the U.S.-led “international community” has been demonizing and attacking the government of Nicaragua politically and economically, they have maintained full diplomatic, economic and military relations with successive corrupt, repressive, military backed

governments in Guatemala and Honduras, holding them out in the media and international forums as “democratic allies”.

*“Propaganda is as powerful as heroin;  
it surreptitiously dissolves all capacity to think.”*  
Gil Courtemanche, “A Sunday at the Pool in Kingali”

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**The U.S. Vowed to Defend Central American Democracy. Autocrats Had Other Plans.  
The Biden administration’s plan to stem migration by building the rule of law in Central America has thus far failed to stop authoritarians or persuade people to stay.**

By Anatoly Kurmanaev and Jody García, Sept. 17, 2022

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/17/world/americas/central-america-democracy-biden.html>

GUATEMALA CITY — Standing in Guatemala’s National Palace last June, Vice President Kamala Harris outlined a sharp break with President Donald J. Trump’s approach to undocumented migration. Instead of building walls and deporting minors, the United States would focus on reducing corruption and impunity in Central America, giving the hundreds of thousands of migrants who leave the region each year a reason to stay.

Supporters of the rule of law would be rewarded with billions of dollars in U.S. investments. Those who subverted it would feel the United States’ wrath. “If we are to be effective, if we are to be true to our principles, we must root out corruption wherever it exists,” [Ms. Harris said](#), standing next to Guatemala’s president, Alejandro Giammattei. “That is one of our highest priorities.”

But a year later, Central America has emerged as one of the Biden administration’s biggest foreign policy setbacks. Many nations have slid deeper into authoritarianism and poverty and sent record numbers of migrants to the U.S. southern border, leaving the region’s fragile democracies in the worst state since the Cold War, according to former U.S. diplomats and civil society leaders.

In Guatemala, Central America’s most populous nation, Mr. Giammattei has methodically dismantled the last vestiges of independent institutions. One by one, his government has jailed, exiled or silenced the very people the United States said would underpin its efforts to make Guatemala a more fair and ultimately more livable society: independent judges, prosecutors, journalists and human rights activists.

President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua has over the past year jailed or forced into exile [nearly all dissident voices](#), turning the country into a totalitarian state. El Salvador’s president, Nayib Bukele, who [has used a crackdown against gangs](#) to suppress free speech, announced Thursday that he would seek a second term in the next elections despite the Salvadoran constitution’s explicit ban on re-election.

And even in the region's strongest democracy, Costa Rica, the newly elected president, Rodrigo Chaves, has launched unprecedented attacks against journalists [investigating accusations of sexual harassment and financial misconduct](#), calling them "rats" and using executive powers to starve their outlets of revenue.

"Everything that the U.S. has done to create conditions to stabilize and improve the region has failed to bring results," said Manfredo Marroquín, the head of Citizen Action, a Guatemalan anti-corruption policy group, and one of the last civil society leaders inside the country. "It was an empty bluff."

Though chronic poverty and inequality, which have been deepened by the pandemic and global inflation, are the main drivers of Central American migration, impunity and corruption are worsening living conditions and adding to the exodus.

In Guatemala, a top judge and a senior prosecutor who investigated [corruption cases involving the president](#) both fled the country this year to avoid arrest, despite Washington's pleas to protect their positions. The head of Guatemala's top independent news outlet, *elPeriódico*, which extensively covered those cases, [was jailed in July](#), accused of money laundering.

And Mr. Giammattei's picks for attorney general and head of an anti-corruption prosecution unit, which Ms. Harris said [would work with American law enforcement](#) to investigate graft, have instead been banned from the United States for undermining corruption investigations.

U.S. Border Patrol recorded more than 600,000 apprehensions of Guatemalans, Hondurans, Salvadorans and Nicaraguans — the four main groups of Central American migrants — in the first 10 months of this fiscal year, a record high and a 4 percent increase from the same period in 2019. The upticks mirror an overall sharp rise in border crossings under the Biden administration.

The numbers have risen even as the Biden administration has maintained some Trump-era agreements with Central American leaders to control migration. The government of Guatemala accepts weekly deportation flights from the United States and has mostly broken up migrant caravans on its borders.

The Biden administration's unwillingness to apply more pressure on increasingly autocratic governments is in part driven by a desire to preserve support for its migration and security policies in Central America, said former U.S. officials and civil society leaders.

"The deal is migration cooperation in return for censored criticism," said Claudia Samayoa, a prominent Guatemalan human rights defender.

U.S. officials and people close to the administration say the democracy push in Central America is a long-term task and that the authoritarian backlash shows that corrupt officials feel threatened by Washington's policies.

"We recognize that we are dealing with deep and entrenched challenges and problems that existed for centuries," said Ricardo Zúniga, a senior official at State Department's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs. "This is a process; we understand that these are conditions that are not going to change overnight."

Washington, Biden officials emphasized, can bypass corrupt governments and work with private sector, civil society and honest officials in the judiciary and congress to advance democracy.

"There are ways to find actors within every current government that are willing to do the right thing," said Todd Robinson, an assistant secretary of state and a former U.S. ambassador to Guatemala.

Mr. Robinson acknowledged that the U.S. government's dual priorities of controlling migration and supporting democracy can clash, but said Washington can effectively pursue both goals simultaneously.

"There is tension, but that is part of being a large government," he said. Administration officials have increasingly emphasized efforts to boost private investment to Central America, another plank of Washington's policy to tackle migration, and say they have secured \$3.2 billion in investment commitments in the region.

The downplaying of expectations stands in sharp contrast with the forceful language used by senior Biden officials in the early days of the administration. "The people, I think, need to understand that four years of ignoring corruption under the Trump administration have ended," Juan Gonzalez, the White House's chief Latin America adviser, [told a Guatemalan newspaper](#), La Hora, in January 2021.

"A leader who is not ready to combat corruption won't be an ally of the United States," he [said in a separate interview](#) with a Salvadorean news website, El Faro.

The presidents of Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua have responded to Washington's call for local allies by accelerating the attacks on democratic institutions within their nations.

The founders of La Hora have been summoned for questioning by pro-government prosecutors for allegedly revealing classified information. Five journalists of El Faro had to leave El Salvador because of fear of prosecution.

The Biden administration has revoked the visas of more than 60 government officials and businessmen in Central America for undermining democracy and has expressed public support for civic leaders facing persecution.

But diplomats and civil society leaders called the administration's response muted and said that it has only emboldened authoritarians.

"Weak, lukewarm sanctions are not effective," said Edgar Gutiérrez, a Guatemalan political analyst.

In May, Mr. Giammattei renewed the appointment of the country's attorney general, María Consuelo Porrás, who is under sanction by the United States. Months earlier, Ms. Porrás fired and then asked for an arrest warrant against the country's top anti-corruption prosecutor, Juan Francisco Sandoval.

The warrant came after Ms. Harris explicitly asked Mr. Giammattei to keep Mr. Sandoval in his position and Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken presented Mr. Sandoval with an [Anticorruption Champion Award](#).

"The United States has lost its ability to influence the region," said Claudia Escobar, a former senior Guatemalan judge who now teaches at the George Mason University in Washington

Mr. Giammattei and Ms. Porrás's offices did not respond to requests for an interview.

So far, the Biden administration has largely stopped short of using financial sanctions in Central America that were used extensively, if to little effect, by Mr. Trump in nearby Cuba and Venezuela.

Since President Biden took office, only seven Central American officials and their associates have been sanctioned under the so-called Global Magnitsky Act, which allows the U.S. government to freeze and expropriate assets of foreign nationals accused of human rights violations, according to the State Department.

The Biden administration has also largely refrained from targeting Central American economies or large companies close to authoritarian governments, a decision critics say reflects the White House's fear of destabilizing regional economies and triggering more migration.

Another tool created by the Biden administration to defend the rule of law in Central America, the [Justice Department's Anticorruption Task Force](#), has not issued an indictment since being formed a year ago.

In defense of their strategy, U.S. officials point to Honduras, whose citizens [voted out](#) the corrupt and authoritarian government of Juan Orlando Hernández last year. In April, Mr.

Hernández was [extradited to New York in shackles](#) to face drugs-related charges, a reminder, U.S. officials say, of the long reach of the American justice system.

His successor, Xiomara Castro, has stopped Mr. Hernández's worst abuses of power, though she, too, has so far [failed to make good](#) on her campaign promise to tackle corruption and expand human rights.

Yet such democratic transfers of power remain elusive in other key Central American countries. Mr. Bukele [remains wildly popular](#), Nicaragua's Mr. Ortega has jailed or exiled all opposition leaders and in Guatemala, the opposition remains too fragmented to seriously challenge Mr. Giammattei's coalition in elections scheduled next year.

"The United States will not save our lives," said Jordán Rodas, Guatemala's former human rights ombudsman, who left the country hours before the end of his term in August. "But they can play an important part by helping guarantee transparent elections that give us an opportunity to choose change."

Anatoly Kurmanaev and Jody García reported from Washington and Guatemala City. Reporting was contributed by Bryan Avelar and Yubelka Mendoza from Mexico City, David Bolaños from San José, Costa Rica, and Joan Suazo from Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

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#### **Rights Action (US & Canada)**

Since 1995, Rights Action funds land and environment, justice and human rights defense struggles in Guatemala and Honduras; Rights Action provides emergency relief funds (hurricanes, victims of repression, Covid19, etc.); Rights Action 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 exploitation and poverty, repression and human rights violations, environmental harms, corruption and impunity in Honduras and Guatemala.

#### **Tax-Deductible Donations (Canada & U.S.)**

To support land and environmental defenders, and human rights and justice struggles in Honduras and Guatemala, make check to "Rights Action" and mail to:

- U.S.: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887
- Canada: (Box 552) 351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8

Credit-Card Donations: <http://rightsaction.org/donate/>

Donations of securities in Canada and the U.S.? Write to: [info@rightsaction.org](mailto:info@rightsaction.org)

#### **Act / Stir up the pot / Chip away**

Keep sending copies of Rights Action information (and that of other solidarity groups/ NGOs) to family and friends, your networks, politicians and media outlets, asking: *'When will there be binding legal and political accountability for how our governments, companies and investment firms help cause, benefit from and turn a blind eye to corruption and impunity, and to poverty, repression environmental harms in countries like Honduras and Guatemala (and beyond)?'*

- U.S. Senate: <https://www.senate.gov/senators/contact>
- U.S. House: <https://www.house.gov/representatives/find-your-representative>
- Canadian Parliament: <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Parliamentarians/en/members>

**Follow work of / get involved with other solidarity/NGO groups**

- Honduras Now: <https://www.hondurasnow.org/>; <https://twitter.com/HondurasNow>
- Honduras Solidarity Network: [www.hondurassolidarity.org](http://www.hondurassolidarity.org); <https://twitter.com/hondurassol>
- Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective: [www.solidaritycollective.org](http://www.solidaritycollective.org); <https://twitter.com/WfPSolidCollect>
- Friendship Office of the Americas: [https://friendshipamericas.org](http://friendshipamericas.org)
- NISGUA (Network in Solidarity with People of Guatemala): [www.nisgua.org](http://www.nisgua.org); [https://twitter.com/NISGUA\\_Guate](https://twitter.com/NISGUA_Guate)
- GHRC (Guatemalan Human Rights Commission): [www.ghrc-usa.org](http://www.ghrc-usa.org); <https://twitter.com/GHRCUSA>
- Breaking the Silence: [www.breakingthesilenceblog.com](http://www.breakingthesilenceblog.com), [https://twitter.com/BTS\\_MG](https://twitter.com/BTS_MG)
- CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with People of El Salvador): [www.cispes.org](http://www.cispes.org); <https://twitter.com/CISPES>
- Peace Brigades International-Canada: <https://pbicanada.org/>; <https://twitter.com/PBIcanada>
- Mining Watch Canada: [www.miningwatch.ca](http://www.miningwatch.ca); <https://twitter.com/MiningWatch>
- Mining Injustice Solidarity Network: <https://mininginjustice.org>; <https://twitter.com/mininginjustice>
- Mining Justice Alliance: <https://miningjusticealliance.wordpress.com>
- Common Frontiers Canada: [www.commonfrontiers.ca](http://www.commonfrontiers.ca); <https://twitter.com/comfront01>
- Alliance for Global Justice: [www.afgj.org](http://www.afgj.org); <https://twitter.com/All4GlobalJust>
- CODEPINK: [www.codepink.org](http://www.codepink.org); <https://twitter.com/codepink>
- School of Americas Watch: [www.soaw.org](http://www.soaw.org)

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