

Rights Action  
May 17, 2015  
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## **Corruption In Guatemala, Added To Repression, Exploitation And Impunity. Ho Hum, Business Is Good**

**Below:**

- Commentary by Grahame Russell
- The Guardian article, by Jo Tuckman

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## **Corruption In Guatemala, Added To Repression, Impunity And Exploitation. Ho Hum. Business Is Good**

By Grahame Russell, Rights Action

Breaking news in Guatemala. A new Vice-President is appointed in Guatemala to replace the ousted VP Roxana Baldetti accused of being a mastermind of the “La Linea” organized crime syndicate.



(Anti-corruption protest in the Parque Central of Guatemala City, May 16, 2015. Photo @ Sandra Cuffe)

The new VP was a judge on the corrupted Constitutional Court that improperly and not surprisingly overturned the well-reasoned guilty verdict against General Rios Montt for his role as intellectual author of the U.S.-backed genocide against the Mayan Ixil people in the 1980s.

It is the actual President of Guatemala, former army General and C.I.A. asset Otto Perez Molina, who was responsible for selecting Roxana Baldetti and now Alejandro Maldonado.

Perez Molina – an alleged war criminal for his role as an intellectual and material author of war crimes during the years of U.S.-backed repression in the 1980s – is also suspected of being, along with the disgraced VP Roxana Baldetti, one of the masterminds of the “La Linea” crime syndicate.

Yes, it is that complicated, corrupted and intertwined in Guatemala. But, there is NOTHING NEW about corruption and power abuse in Guatemala.

For most Guatemalans, all of this is profoundly depressing and depressingly repetitive. The nominating of Alejandro Maldonado as VP simply ensures continuity of an undemocratic, repressive and exploitative regime in power.

The Guatemalan people are massively taking to the streets, demanding first the resignation of VP Baldetti, and now of President Perez Molina. Given the history and on-going reality of repression and impunity in Guatemala, this is a very courageous display of citizen action; repression is a very real reality in the coming days and weeks as a growing number of people overcome their fear and peacefully take to the streets to express their indignation at so many generations of corruption, exploitation, repression and impunity.

In all of this, arguably the most important question to ask is WILL ANY OF THIS WILL STICK TO THE ‘INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY’ – i.e., the governments (mainly the United States and Canada, but others as well), the “development” banks (World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, ...), and countless private companies and investors in the sectors of mining, African palm, sugar-cane, bananas and pineapples, maquiladora sweat shops, hydro-electric dams, etc., that long have maintained mutually beneficial military, business and political relations with the corrupted, repressive, exploitative elites of Guatemala?

The actual power of the Guatemalan elites – economic, military and political power – comes from their historic and on-going relations with this ‘international community’. Their power – they have no real moral authority – does not come from healthy, transparent procedures and mechanisms of democracy that are protected and fortified by a robust and transparent rule of law and widespread respect for constitutional and human rights.

It is the people of Guatemala that continue to suffer the consequences of this international economic, military and political collusion that empowers and enriches the corrupted oligarchs and military that continue to dominate and abuse Guatemala.

Grahame Russell, director of Rights Action  
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## **Guatemala On Brink Of Crisis After Vice-President Falls To Corruption Scandal**

By [Jo Tuckman](#), 14 May 2015

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/14/guatemala-brink-crisis-vice-president-corruption-scandal>

Central American country heads for biggest political crisis since end of civil war in 1996 but while some fear chaos others see chance to strengthen democracy

Guatemala's congress has chosen a successor for the vice-president who resigned last week amid a widening corruption scandal which threatens to unleash a political crisis in the Central American country.

After a week in which the government struggled to find a candidate the congress would accept, the appointment of constitutional judge Alejandro Maldonado seems unlikely to stall the growing wave of public indignation that helped force Roxana Baldetti out of office.

Baldetti stepped down last Friday after politicians began an investigation into whether to remove her immunity from prosecution. The former vice-president denies any involvement in the corruption scheme, but prosecutors have accused her private secretary of being at the centre of the multimillion-dollar scam.

The scandal has prompted a wave of demonstrations. A fresh protest called for Saturday is expected to be the biggest yet, with activists, emboldened by their success in bringing down Baldetti, now calling for the head of President Otto Pérez Molina.

The crisis is playing out ahead of presidential elections in September, with polls giving a large lead to Manuel Baldizón, a populist rightwing tycoon.

"Baldetti's resignation came too late to defuse the situation," said Raquel Zelaya, director of the Asies think tank and the former head of a body set up to monitor implementation of the peace accords that ended the country's 36-year civil war in 1996.

Most analysts agree that this is the deepest political crisis of the post-war era in [Guatemala](#). But it remains unclear whether it will eventually strengthen or dangerously undermine the country's still-feeble democracy.

Zelaya is among the most pessimistic. "We could be heading for chaos," she said. "If the president is forced to resign there would be a power vacuum and the consequences of that could be terrible."

Others, however, see a chance for forcing political reforms that could start rooting out the corruption endemic in many Guatemalan institutions.

“The size of the social action shows that people are now really fed up, and they are finally losing their fear,” said Iduvina Hernández, a human rights activist and expert in hidden influence of the country’s military, who supports the call for the president to resign. “The challenge is to find a common demand that can channel the energy.” But Hernández warned that the crisis could provoke a repressive response by the country’s authorities – or even a military coup.

The fraud allegations that triggered the current crisis were announced on 16 April by a United Nations-sponsored body of international prosecutors called the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, and known by its Spanish acronym Cicig.

The Cicig’s investigation, now in the Guatemalan courts, alleged the existence of a massive corruption ring that took bribes from importers in exchange for lower customs duties. It charges that the ringleader was Baldetti’s private secretary, Juan Carlos Monzón.

Baldetti is not named in the investigation, but there is widespread scepticism in Guatemala at her claims to have had no idea of what was going on. She was on a trip to South Korea when the investigation was announced, accompanied by Monzón who has not been seen since, though 27 other alleged participants have been arrested.

Baldetti’s position became untenable when the country’s extremely powerful organised private sector added its call on her to resign. She has since been ordered not to leave the country as the investigation continues.

The alleged customs corruption scam is particularly damaging in a country where dismally low tax income is frequently blamed for the failure of efforts to tackle the pervasive poverty.

The customs system also has a long history of association with military-based corruption networks that goes back to the civil war. Monzón is a retired captain, Baldetti’s political rise was reportedly linked to important figures in the military, and [President Pérez Molina is a former head of military intelligence](#).

The scandal has also greatly strengthened the position of the Cicig that was set up in 2007 with a mandate to help dismantle such networks, made all the more complex by the increasing influence in Guatemala in recent years of drug cartels.

The Cicig has conducted a series of major investigations, which have then been channelled through the Guatemalan judicial system, and is credited by many with providing the first signs of hope that that system can eventually become strong enough to stand on its own.

“It made it seem like this could be done,” said Daniel Wilkinson, of the US-based group Human Rights Watch. “It made it seem to the prosecutors, criminal investigators and judges in Guatemala who are committed to this that they are taking risks that are not entirely in vain.”

Wilkinson said that before the customs investigation, Pérez Molina had made it clear he was not intending to extend the Cicig’s mandate. The president, however, announced he would ask the UN to extend the mandate for a further two years a week after the scandal broke.

Analysts say that the demonstrations prompted by the scandal are particularly significant because they mark the first time in decades that the Guatemalan middle classes have taken to the streets en masse to demand political change. The large number of young people, lack of clear leaders and the prominent role of social media in organising the protests has also lent a sense of freshness to the movement.

Saturday’s demonstration is now also set to include a presence of more traditional protest groups, such as poor indigenous farmers. Amilcar Pop, one of the left’s few congressional deputies, said that this development has convinced him that Guatemala is at a watershed.

“I am not so much optimistic as convinced that this is the moment,” he said. “The march on Saturday will be the test of whether this goes to the next chapter or not.”

But the diffuse nature of the protests so far, alongside the focus on the demands for resignations, has some worrying that the protesters could be sabotaging their own cause.

Plaza Pública, a well-respected left-leaning news website, published an editorial this Thursday titled “[What do we do now?](#)” in which it argued against pressuring for President Pérez Molina’s resignation. “We need to subjugate catharsis to strategic thinking,” it warned.

With characteristic black Guatemalan humour, the editorial included a video clip from the Life of Brian in which the Judean Peoples’s Front Suicide Squad kill themselves rather than rescue Brian from the cross.

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## **What to do?**

### **Say No To ‘International Business and Investments, Militarism and Impunity As Usual’**

The U.S. and Canadian governments, the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, and North American companies and investors (including pension funds) maintain profitable economic and military relations with the Guatemalan, Honduran and Mexican elites, turning a blind eye to death and suffering by exploitation, repression, violence and impunity that are the norm in these countries.

Send, and keep on sending copies of this information, and your own letters, to your own elected politicians (MPs, Congresspersons, Senators), to your media, and to your own pension and investment funds, asking: Why our governments, companies and investment firms do nothing about the poverty, repression and violence, and environmental and health harms associated with North American businesses, while benefiting from these economic, military and political relations?

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

Rights Action funds grassroots organizations in Guatemala and Honduras (and less-so in southern Mexico and El Salvador) working for locally-controlled development, environmental and human rights protection, and the strengthening of real democracy and rule of law. Rights Action does education and activism work concerning how the United States and Canada (governments, companies, investors and consumers) contribute to and benefit from environmental harms and human rights violations, repression, corruption and impunity in these countries.

### **Tax-Deductible Donations (Canada & United States)**

To support community organizations working for locally-controlled development, the environment, human rights, real democracy and the rule of law in Honduras and Guatemala, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

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

Credit-Card Donations: <http://www.rightsaction.org/tax-deductible-donations>

Stock donations: [info@rightsaction.org](mailto:info@rightsaction.org)

### **Get Informed / Get Involved**

- Speakers: Invite us to give presentations about these issues
- Educational Delegation: Join an educational delegation seminar to Guatemala and Honduras to learn more about these issues and struggles
- Daily News: [www.democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org) / [www.upsidedownworld.org](http://www.upsidedownworld.org) / [www.dominionpaper.ca](http://www.dominionpaper.ca) / [www.rabble.ca](http://www.rabble.ca) /
- Recommended Reading: "This Changes Everything: Capitalism versus The Climate", by Naomi Klein; "Open Veins of Latin America", by Eduardo Galeano; "A People's History of the United States", by Howard Zinn

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