

Rights Action
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U.S. And Canadian Governments, Along With Mining Companies, Continue To Prop Up And Do Business With Repressive, Corrupted Regimes In Guatemala And Honduras

- What To Do: see below

Thousands Of Protesters Demand Resignation Of President In Guatemala

Angered by recent revelations of corruption scandals, the diverse crowd includes priests, businessmen and students in an unprecedented mass mobilization



Protesters gather outside the National Palace, June 12, 2015. Photo: Moisés Castillo

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/12/protesters-guatemala-president-resignation>

Every Saturday for nearly two months, Constitution Square outside [Guatemala](#) City's National Palace has overflowed with thousands of protesters demanding an end to corruption and the resignation of President Otto Pérez Molina.

Most are from the young, middle-class, smartphone generation, and they organize the leaderless demonstrations through social media. But there are also priests standing shoulder-to-shoulder with businessmen, and students alongside homemakers, in what Guatemala analysts call an unprecedented mass mobilization cutting across socio-economic, political, even class lines.

Angered by recent revelations of multimillion-dollar corruption scandals and emboldened by the jailing of dozens of suspects and the [resignation of the vice-president](#), the protesters show no sign of letting up. And they're bringing increasing pressure on the government, culminating in this week's supreme court ruling green-lighting a congressional inquiry that could lead to impeachment proceedings against Pérez Molina.

“It is an expression of accumulated frustrations in mostly urban populations ... that finally found a way of expressing itself publicly in a massive way,” said Eduardo Stein, a former Guatemalan vice-president and foreign minister. “There were people from many sectors of society fed up with corruption.”

Pérez Molina has not been implicated in any wrongdoing and insists he intends to serve out the remainder of his term, which ends in early 2016. But protesters blame him anyway since the scandals involved government officials, and it is an opposition-led Congress that will decide his political fate.

The first bombshell came in April when authorities broke up a customs agency graft scheme in which officials allegedly took kickbacks from businesses to lower duties on imports. Former vice-president Roxana Baldetti’s private secretary, Juan Carlos Monzón Rojas, is accused of being the ringleader. Monzón is a fugitive and Baldetti has had her bank accounts frozen, properties raided and been banned from traveling abroad during the investigation.

Weeks later the nation was rocked by a second scandal at the Social Security Institute, where officials purportedly awarded a \$15m contract for kidney treatments to a company that lacked a license to perform the services; at least 13 patients subsequently died.

Both were exposed with the help of a UN commission set up in recent years to investigate criminal networks because Guatemala’s judicial system was seen as too weak and graft-prone to handle high-level investigations.

In a country of more than 14 million inhabitants struggling with chronic social problems such as a sky-high homicide rate of 34 per 100,000 inhabitants, rampant gang violence, widespread poverty and child malnutrition, seeing public servants enrich themselves so blatantly was a tipping point, said Adriana Beltrán, a security analyst at the Washington Office on Latin America, a US-based organization that promotes human rights in the region.

“I think [the scandals] finally demonstrated to the population how these networks of corruption and organized crime really impact their daily lives,” Beltrán said. “For them to say, ‘We’re paying taxes and the state is not able to provide basic services because they’re embezzling or stealing them,’ I think that eventually just kind of was the drop that overflowed the cup.”

Trying to tamp down the anger, Pérez Molina has accepted the resignation of several cabinet officials, including the powerful interior minister, fired others and initiated reviews of government contracts. Congress set up commissions to examine possible legal, political and social reforms.

“I feel at peace. I have committed no crimes in relation to these cases,” Pérez Molina said Thursday. But crowds of tens of thousands continue to demonstrate.

Guatemala is no stranger to protests, with land invasions and indigenous farmer marches relatively common occurrences. The anti-corruption movement is unique for constituting sustained demonstrations in the capital by a broad-based, mostly well-educated crowd that relies on social media and smartphones.

There are no stages, fancy PA systems or politicians making speeches at the marches. Instead, demonstrators punch fists in the air, sing the national anthem and hoist national flags and signs criticizing the political elite to cries of “Enough!”

“Few people thought Guatemalan society would react like it did,” said Pedro Cruz, who has taken part in several marches. “The protests are like a democratic spring where the people have taken to the streets to demand many things. I have seen the people awaken.”

Activist Mario Polanco said Guatemalans have long been afraid to speak out due to the 1960-1996 civil war, during which at least 245,000 people died or disappeared. Most were indigenous people living in rural areas killed by the army, according to the UN, fueling charges of genocide against the Guatemalan government. The army has said those killed were rebel sympathizers.

During the war, the middle class too was terrified of the army. “But now there are young people who didn’t live through the war and the repression, and they are the ones who came out and feel more empowered,” Polanco said.

The president, a 64-year-old retired general, took office in 2012 promising an “iron-fist” crackdown on crime and impunity, but a recent poll by the newspaper Prensa Libre put his approval rate at just 38%.

Ahead of September elections to choose his successor, protesters are setting their sights on deep reforms to a system where corruption is seen as the norm. They are also targeting a political class symbolized by presidential frontrunner Manuel Baldizón, who lost four years ago to Pérez Molina and has the campaign slogan “It’s Baldizón’s turn.” Guatemala’s last five presidential elections were won by the runner-up in the previous campaign. “Baldizón, it’s not your turn!” the protesters shout.

Michael Allison, a political scientist specializing in Central America at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania, said the scandals and protests have brought the country to a crossroads of either maintaining business as usual or truly committing to reform.

“I think Guatemala is teetering on the verge of progress,” Allison said. “The idea is maybe with all these investigations going on, potential prosecutions, that it could lead to elected officials behaving more sensibly.”

Honduras Education Seminar Trip, November 7-15, 2015

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(<http://selkirk.ca/mir-centre-for-peace/events-workshops/honduras-education-seminar-tour>)

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