

Narcos, the corrupt and daughter of a genocidal general are candidates in Guatemala's Presidential elections

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Elections again, and still no democracy in Guatemala

- Below: Article by Héctor Silva Ávalos, Prensa Comunitaria

"State institutions have been co-opted by political and economic elites and organized crime, who protect their own interests to the detriment of the majority of the population, promoting violence and threatening the country's democracy."

Grahame Russell, Rights Action, summarizes: "Given the historic and on-going conditions of systemic corruption, repression and impunity in Guatemala, elections serve only the interests of the traditional Guatemalan economic, political and military elites ('El Pacto de Corruptos' = 'The Covenant of the Corrupt') and their "international community" partners, providing justification for the governments of the U.S., Canada and E.U., plus international banks, companies and investors, to maintain full political, economic and military relations with the "democratic government" of Guatemala."

- See Rights Action's "Elections and no democracy in Guatemala" archives: <https://rightsaction.org/election-archives>

Drug traffickers, the corrupt and the daughter of a genocide are registered as candidates for the Guatemalan elections

In one of the most corrupt political systems on the continent, this year's presidential elections portend more of the same

By Héctor Silva Ávalos, Prensa Comunitaria, February 25, 2023

<https://prensacomunitaria.org/2023/02/narcos-corruptos-y-la-hija-de-un-genocida-se-inscribieron-como-candidatos-para-las-elecciones-de-guatemala/>

Jimmy Morales, former president of Guatemala, wore one of his best smiles at an event last February 12 in which his party, FCN-Nación, proclaimed him as a candidate for congress in the first box of the national list for the general elections that Guatemala will hold next June.

Former President Jimmy Morales - Corrupt

Gone, it seems, are the days when photos showed a circumspect, angry, worried man, who, upon leaving the presidency in 2020, was about to go to jail accused of illicit electoral financing and of negligence in a fire that cost the lives of 41 girls in a state foster home.

January 14, 2020, was the last day of Morales' presidency in Guatemala. The next day Alejandro Giammattei was sworn in. Without the legal protection of the office, Morales had to face justice in at least two cases.

One had to do with investigations that he and his party received illegal financing during the electoral campaign that led him to the presidency in 2015.

The other is a case known in Guatemala as "Hogar Seguro Virgen de la Asunción", after the name of a shelter for underage women that burned down in 2017 and in which dozens of girls died. According to investigations by Guatemala's Public Prosecutor's Office (MP), then-President Morales had knowledge of the incident but did not lift a finger, so he was investigated for negligence.

The prosecutors investigating Morales had arrest warrants prepared, that they intended to act upon the moment the president left office and lost his immunity from prosecution, but Morales beat them to it by rushing his swearing in as a deputy to the Central American Parliament ("Parlacen"), a regional legislative body to which former presidents are entitled to join, which also grants them immunity from prosecution.

He almost didn't make it. On the night of January 14, 2020, hours before Giammattei's swearing-in, dozens of outraged Guatemalans went to the Parlacen headquarters and prevented the board of directors from entering, thus preventing the session from being convened in which Morales would be sworn in;

the Parlacen members went to a hotel in the capital, where there were also demonstrators who prevented Morales from entering.

However, shortly before midnight on the 14th, Jimmy Morales was sworn in as a Central American deputy, which has guaranteed him immunity for the last three years.

Today, the former president is running for election to the national congress and it doesn't look like anything is going to stop him despite the pending criminal investigations.

Former President Morales is not the only one with a questionable past who, in search of immunity and influence, has registered as a candidate for the June elections.

Esduin Javier - Narco-Trafficker

Last February 16, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) approved the registration of Esduin Javier as a candidate for congress. Until now, Javier has been mayor of Ipala, in the department of Chiquimula, in the south of the country.

In Guatemala, Javier is known as Tres Quiebres. In the corridors of the MP (attorney general), he is identified as one of the most powerful drug traffickers in Guatemala.

In interviews with international media, Javier has denied that he is involved in regional cocaine trafficking, and has even said that he has confronted drug traffickers in his municipality.

For years, Guatemalan and U.S. investigators followed Tres Quiebres' trail. In 2021, the MP asked for the prosecution immunity of Javier, then the mayor of Ipala, to be lifted so as to bring him up on criminal charges for drug trafficking. Investigations including wiretaps put him at the center of a drug-related triple murder and an operation to move and hide cocaine on cattle ranches.

But nothing happened. Javier was protected by his prosecution immunity, which he now seeks to extend as a deputy in the national congress.

Manuel Baldizón, ex-official and ex-presidential candidate - Narco-trafficker

Esduin Javier - Tres Quiebres - is a candidate for Cambio, a political party related to Manuel Baldizón, a former government official and presidential candidate investigated in multiple corruption schemes, including one related to bribes given by the Brazilian consortium Odebrecht in Guatemala.

Manuel Baldizón was also convicted of money laundering in the United States, and he too aspires to become a congressman in Guatemala.

Baldizón served a sentence in the United States after pleading guilty to laundering drug money in Guatemala.

Upon completing his sentence in the U.S., Baldizón was deported back to Guatemala in 2022. Upon arrival, he was imprisoned due to pending cases against him, including corruption related to Odebrecht. However, the politician was released last January after paying a bail of US\$230,000. Shortly thereafter, he was proclaimed as a candidate for congress in the first box of the national list for the Cambio party. He still needs to be formally registered by the TSE (Supreme Electoral Council).

The list goes on.

Seven politicians that the U.S. State Department has concluded are corrupt and anti-democratic actors, and included on the so-called Engel List (a list compiled by the U.S. democratic congressman, that obliges the U.S. State Department to inform the congress in Washington about questionable Central American politicians, have been proclaimed as candidates for deputies or mayors.

Elisa Judith Mejia Salazar de Rozotto - Wife of narco-trafficker

On February 22, the TSE's Citizen Registry registered Elisa Judith Mejia Salazar de Rozotto - wife of Juan Bautista Rozotto Lopez, alias Juancho, who is a leader of the drug trafficking gang known as Los Huistas, which operates in the northern routes of Guatemala, bordering Mexico - as a candidate for congress.

Zury Ríos - Daughter of former genocidal dictator

Depending on who is running for office in Guatemala's elections, the acceptance criteria of the TSE are more or less narrow.

The TSE system has been kind to Zury Ríos, the ultra-right-wing candidate who is a favorite to win the presidency in next June's general elections. Ríos has not been investigated for corruption or alliances with drug traffickers, but she has a family shadow that stretches back to the 1970s and 1980s, when Guatemala experienced the darkest years of its internal armed conflict.

Zury Ríos is the daughter of former general Efraín Ríos Montt, one of the most bloodthirsty military men who participated in the internal conflict and who, according to a court ruling in May 2013, led a campaign of genocide against the indigenous Mayan Ixil population between 1982 and 1983, when he was 'de facto' president of the country after staging a coup d'état.

As daughter of a former dictator convicted of genocide, Zury Ríos was barred from the 2019 presidential elections because her father led a coup d'état in the 1980s. The Guatemalan Constitution prohibits the children of coup leaders from being candidates. In 2019, Zury Ríos tried to register as a presidential candidate in that year's elections, but the Constitutional Court (the CC) of Guatemala prevented her from doing so.

The high court's argument was that Ríos' aspiration contravened article 186 of the Constitution, according to which "the heads of a coup d'état... or those who as a consequence of such events assume the leadership of the government... (or) relatives within the fourth degree of consanguinity..." cannot be candidates.

Although she was unable to participate four years ago, Ríos kept her political aspirations alive. In 2021, Francisco Molina Barreto, a vice-presidential candidate who was going to run with Ríos in 2019, obtained a position as a magistrate of the Constitutional Court, which, in the end, has proved convenient for the aspiration of the former dictator's daughter to become Guatemala's president.

In December 2022, Zury Ríos was proclaimed as presidential candidate for the Valor party, and this time her candidacy was accepted by the TSE. The woman is, for now, the favorite to win according to most polls published to date.

Rejection of candidacy of Thelma Cabrera, indigenous Mayan leader

Others have been prevented by the TSE from participating in the electoral process. The most relevant case is that of the Movement for the Liberation of the Peoples (MLP), which links broad indigenous support in the country side with a professional base in the capital.

The presidential candidate for the MLP is Thelma Cabrera, an indigenous Mayan leader of the Mam ethnic group. The vice-presidential candidate is Jordán Rodas, the former human rights prosecutor who gained fame for confronting former President Morales when he insisted on kicking the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) out of the country, the supra-national entity that worked directly with the Attorney General's office on the most important anti-corruption and organized crime investigations in the country's judicial history.

In the 2019 presidential elections, the MLP, with a ticket then also headed by Thelma Cabrera, achieved a surprising fourth place at the national level and positioned itself as the leading force in four departments with an indigenous majority.

After [the government of former President] Morales kicked out the CICIG, Alejandro Giammattei, his successor in the presidency, re-elected lawyer Consuelo Porras as attorney general, who, from the Attorney General's office, began a campaign of persecution against prosecutors, investigators, judges and other justice operators who had opened or tried cases that sent dozens of corrupt politicians and businessmen to jail, among them a former president, a former vice-president and several former ministers of state.

Rodas, the former prosecutor, was one of the few officials who, from his office, maintained a critical attitude of opposition to the Giammattei government's persecution of former investigators, which earned Rodas himself persecution during his years in office.

When his term ended in August 2022, Rodas participated in the elections for the rectorship of the University of San Carlos, the only public university in the country and a center of political influence in Guatemala. After a fraudulent process involving the restriction of voters sympathetic to Rodas, a candidate sympathetic to Giammattei won the rector's post.

In January 2023, Rodas was named as vice-presidential candidate of the MLP, but the TSE's Registry of Citizens - the same one that has registered drug traffickers and their relatives, and corrupt and anti-democratic politicians - refused to register the candidacy of Cabrera and Rodas.

The MLP has appealed the decision before the local courts and has asked the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the OAS in Washington to pronounce itself.

Some are already calling the exclusion of the MLP, the party with the most indigenous representation (the Maya, Xinka and Garifuna make up more than 60% of the Guatemalan population), as a democratic fraud that is taking place before the June elections.

"The decision to leave the Cabrera-Rodas candidacy out of the elections is an electoral coup that corrupts the integrity and credibility of these elections," said Daniel Zovatto, president of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA).

During a recent tour in Washington, Jordán Cabrera, the MLP's vice-presidential candidate, called on the international community to speak out about what is happening in his country's electoral process. Silence, he says, could have dire consequences of which there are already precedents in Central America.

"We must learn from history: the international community played a complicit role with the validation of Juan Orlando Hernández in Honduras, then they complained about the forced migrant caravans and all the societal problems due to the economic and political crisis", he said.

All this is happening in Guatemala, one of the most corrupt countries in the Americas according to the Corruption Perceptions Index that Transparency International (TI) published last January.

In Guatemala, says TI, "state institutions have been co-opted by political and economic elites and organized crime, who protect their own interests to the

detriment of the majority of the population, promoting violence and threatening the country's democracy".

In the report, TI makes reference to the fact that the Attorney General's Office has persecuted those who in the past investigated the corruption of these elites. As an example, they mention that the AG released from prison of "a public official accused of money laundering" while taking "legal measures against those who demanded accountability".

The released official is Manuel Baldizón, who today is on his way to becoming a candidate for Congress without opposition from the system. One of those who demanded transparency is Jordán Rodas, the vice-presidential candidate that the system does not want to let participate in the election.

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