

## ANTI-CORRUPTION ORGANISMS AND US HEGEMONY IN CENTRAL AMERICA

### *Organismos de Combate à Corrupção na América Latina e a Hegemonia dos Estados Unidos*

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Criminal investigations involving presidents have become a political element of utmost importance for the stability of Latin American governments in the past few years. Between 2014 and 2015, cases of legal complaints against leaders of the Executive flamed up the political systems of Argentina (Nisman case), Bolivia (Fondo Indígena case), Brazil (Lava-Jato Operation), Chile (Caval case), El Salvador (lawsuit against Ernesto Funes), Guatemala (La Línea case), Honduras (Oposición Indignada movement), Mexico (Casa Blanca case), and Panama (lawsuit against Ricardo Martinelli).

The Guatemalan case deserves special attention because it led up to an extreme result—the ouster of a sitting president—and because it concerned significant geopolitical calculations. It began with legal accusations brought up by an international organization named “International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala” (CICIG, Spanish abbreviation). CICIG was created in 2007 through a partnership between Guatemala and the United Nations (UN). Although it is formally bound to the UN, the organism is financed by voluntary contributions from any country or organization (CICIG, 2016b). The United States has donated to CICIG around US\$ 36 million since 2008 (POCASANGRE, 2016).

Designed to last until 2009, CICIG's mandate has been renewed every two years. Its official goal was to assist the police and the Public Ministry to investigate “illegal security groups” and “clandestine security organizations” (CICIG, 2016a; CICIG, 2016b). This wording is given to militias involved with organized crime and repression against those who condemn human rights violations by the Army during the civil war of 1960–1996. Public servants suspected of being embroiled with these militias may be investigated. Complaints are

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brought to the Guatemalan judiciary. CICIG also has the prerogative of proposing laws concerning organized crime, such as corruption and forced migration.

In April 2015, CICIG brought to light an investigation involving president Otto Pérez Molina, a retired military officer and affiliated to the conservative Patriotic Party. The indictment, however, did not comprise any action of paramilitary groups or militias. Molina was accused of being the leader of a customs corruption ring, in which discounted tariffs were supposedly exchanged for bribes from importers. The case, known as La Línea, was one of a Chinese businessman involved in the scheme (LUHNOW, 2015). In the following months, mass demonstrations started to call for his resignation. In September, the Guatemalan Congress revoked his political rights, which led to his stepping down and pre-trial imprisonment.

Molina had been in power since 2012. In the course of his mandate, he adopted positions contrary to those of the United States. For instance, he defended the legalization of drugs, recognized the Palestinian State, and did not want to renew CICIG's mandate. In the presidential elections following his resignation, Jimmy Morales, a TV comedian and inexperienced politician, won based on an anti-corruption platform. His party, the National Convergence Front, is financially tied to a group of military officers that were active in the civil war (MOLINA, 2016). Morales has also taken stances closer to the US's, such as the use of the Armed Forces to combat drugs and the continuity of CICIG.

CICIG's popular success for deposing a powerful politician starting from an accusation of corruption led to its quick reproduction in neighbouring countries. In February 2016, the "Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras" (MACCIH, Spanish abbreviation) was created. Instead of the UN, MACCIH is formally linked to the Organization of American States (OAS) (OAS, 2015). Honduras saw massive anti-corruption protests in 2015 which demanded the creation of a Honduran CICIG after the governing party was connected to a Social Security embezzlement scheme (MALKIN, 2015). The US Department of State promptly supported the initiative and declared that it hoped to see the creation of a similar body in El Salvador (RENEWICK, 2016).

Since 2014, the US has tried to deepen its ties with these three countries. That year around 70,000 people, mainly children, left Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador to enter without documents in the US due to high levels of violence and economic crisis (WILTZ, 2015). Washington launched the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle to suppress this immigration flow. This initiative is a billion dollars investment plan which officially aims to stimulate the economies of the three Central American states and strengthen their public institutions.

The Alliance is part of the broader policy of the Obama administration for Central America, the "US Strategy for Engagement in Central America" (ALVARADO, 2016). Besides reducing corruption levels in public institutions, its objectives include the strengthening of free trade agreements, boosting the private sector, intensification of the cooperation between the military and police forces, containing migration flows, and increasing infrastructural links between Central and North America (USA, 2015).

Achieving US goals becomes easier with organisms such as CICIG and MACCIH, which are maintained through international donors, since they may carry out criminal investigations of political actors and foreign

businessmen and -women, and also have the power to propose laws. A weaker Venezuela due to the steep fall of oil prices and Brazil's choice to focus on a South American integration project (instead of Latin American) offer little if none regional option to Central America to balance US interests.

Outside the hemisphere, China has offered an alternative for political support. In Nicaragua, a Chinese company is building a bi-oceanic shipping route through the country. The Nicaragua Canal, as it is known, is going to be managed by this firm for 100 years (HKND..., 2013). In Jamaica another Chinese company unveiled in 2016 a highway connecting the North of the country to the South to be administered by China for 50 years (RUTTENBERG, 2016). China is also studying the construction of a deepwater port in the island nation (LAVILLE, 2015; RUTTENBERG, 2016). These projects challenge the traditional US hegemony in a security sensitive area and make Washington create new control mechanisms over Central American countries.

Corruption allegations had already become an important political variable in recent episodes of government overthrows in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East during the so-called “Colour Revolutions” and “Arab Spring”. Such accusations have the capacity of receiving extensive media coverage, changing governmental and party approval ratings, reflecting on electoral campaigns, producing mass protests by the middle class, and creating mistrust of state activities. The novelty in Central America is the existence of international institutions than can produce these outcomes on a regular basis (IVES, 2016).

The combat against corruption is an endless and arduous task wherever it takes place. However, it cannot be confused with the fight against one political force or another. Yet this seems to have been the case in Central America, where international anti-corruption organisms have spearheaded US efforts to maintain its hegemony in the region. This does not mean that the Western concerns over corruption abroad are entirely self-interested, but they ought to focus on measures to be taken domestically, such as regulating the international activities of their national companies, rather than prying other countries' leaders which do not please them. UN- and OAS-sponsored initiatives should be watchful of these ulterior interests for better respecting the sovereignty of the target states, such as Guatemala, Honduras and elsewhere.

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## RESUMO

Esse texto analisa como os organismos de combate à corrupção na América Central garantem o domínio dos EUA sobre a região. Essas instituições parecem ter defendido interesses estadunidenses na Guatemala, em Honduras e em El Salvador em um contexto de crescente disputa com a China. Sugerimos que os países ocidentais se foquem em medidas domésticas para combater a corrupção no exterior e que órgãos internacionais respeitem a soberania dos países afetados.

**Palavras-Chave:** América Central; Estado Unidos; Políticas anticorrupção

## ABSTRACT

This piece analyses how anti-corruption organisms in Central America advance US dominance in the region. These institutions seem to have spearheaded American interests in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador in a context of growing dispute with China. We suggest Western countries should focus on domestic measures to fight corruption abroad and international organisms should respect the sovereignty of target states.

**Keywords:** Central America; United States; Anti-corruption policies