

IN THIS SECTION**[News & Events](#)**[Overview](#)[The Policy Spotlight](#)← [The Policy Spotlight](#)**[National Security](#)**

Guatemala's Security Challenges and the Government's Response

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Image sourced online.

Introduction

The surprise election of reform candidate Bernardo Arevalo in Guatemala in August 2023, and his struggle with elites who sought to block his January 2024 inauguration and the legal standing of his Semilla political party,^[1] casts attention on the struggle of Guatemala as a transit country for illegal drugs and immigration, and the importance of its success as a stable prosperous democracy with healthy institutions, for both the U.S. and the region.

Guatemala's geographic position is strategic. It spans the Central American isthmus from Atlantic to Pacific, making it key for the transit of drugs and migrants to the U.S., and also controlling those flows. It also geographically links, or separates, North America, including Mexico, from the rest of Central and South America, including the Panama Canal. It is the last Spanish-speaking country in Central America to recognize Taiwan, rather than the PRC, at a moment in which the People's Republic of China (PRC) is consolidating political influence and strategic infrastructure projects with regimes to the south, with varying degrees of political differences with the United States.^[2] These include the anti-U.S. Ortega regime in Nicaragua, the leftist populist Libre regime in Honduras, and the maverick authoritarian regime of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador.^[3] The possible deterioration of Guatemala into a populist narcostate due to its inability to control criminal challenges, or its flip to the PRC and associated plunge into China-dependency,^[4] would each be strategically disastrous for the United States and the region.

This work examines the security challenges confronting Guatemala, and the efforts of the current administration of Bernardo Arevalo to confront them. It shows that the government and its security forces, with the support of the United States and others,

are making a valiant effort against a range of security threats but are severely challenged by the magnitude of the challenge, associated corruption, resource limitations, and divisions within the government itself.

Guatemala's Security Challenges

Due to its geographic position, Guatemala has long been a transit route for cocaine produced in Colombia, and later Venezuela, heading for the North American market.[5]

Guatemalan authorities seized 5.04 metric tons of cocaine passing through the country and its waters in 2022, far more than in neighboring Honduras and El Salvador, yet relatively small amount compared to the 739 metric tons seized by Colombian authorities the same year.[6]

Once a source country for migrants, Guatemala has also become a transit country for large numbers of migrants from Venezuela, Cuba, Haiti, Ecuador and elsewhere, passing through the Darien Gap and the Central American isthmus toward the United States.[7]

The structure of narco-trafficking routes and the relationship between external and local groups in Guatemala has evolved considerably in recent years. Prior to 2008, a limited number of Guatemalan smuggling "families," known locally as "transportistas," including the Lorenzanas, Mendozas, and Lopez Ortiz clans, worked with Mexican counterparts to move drugs from Colombia through the country via narcopistas (landing strips) in the relatively inaccessible Peten region in the north of the country, and later, overland from Honduras through Guatemala to Mexico and onward to the United States.[8] The result was a conservative-controlled state with relatively high levels of corruption, but relatively low levels of violence.[9]

From approximately 2008, two dynamics upset that criminal equilibrium. The Mexican cartel Los Zetas, with significant military capabilities owing to the recruitment of Mexican Military special forces members into their ranks,[10] aligned with a disadvantaged Guatemalan smuggling group led by Horst Walther Overdick,[11] to move into the country to dominate high value drug smuggling routes there. In 2012, the security forces of the Guatemalan administration of Otto Perez Molina, with significant help from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), expanded the government's campaign against key transportistas families. The result was an escalation of the violence, but also a fragmentation of Guatemalan smuggling groups. [12]

Eventually, the campaign by Mexican security forces against the Zetas in that country, coupled with resistance by well-entrenched Guatemalan groups such as the Huistas of Huehuetenango, pushed the Zetas out of Guatemala,[13] while Guatemalan President Perez Molino was jailed for corruption and association with narco-traffickers.

Today, Mexico's two principal internationally oriented cartels, Sinaloa and Jalisco Nuevo Generacion (CJNG) work with a still fragmented array of Guatemalan smuggling groups,[14] a dynamic which advantages the Mexicans, and gives them a vested interest in preventing the re-consolidation of criminal organizations in Guatemala. Nonetheless, the composition of such groups, including the Huistas, one of Guatemala's largest surviving major groups,[15] and the Pochos, whose recently

arrested leader Juan José Morales Cifuentes, comes from the Zuniga family (with a long history of criminal association),^[16] are reminders of the legacy of Guatemala's criminal past.

With time, coca growing, and labs for processing it, have begun to appear in remote areas of the country such as Izabal and Alta Verapaz,^[17] reflecting the relative absence of the state in those regions, and incentives for producing cocaine in Guatemala rather than smuggling it in, or purchasing it from Colombia. The relative fertile ground and appropriate growing conditions, particularly in mountainous areas such as San Marcos, help to produce coca leaves of relatively high alkaloid content, producing more product of higher value.^[18]

In Guatemala, key smuggling routes continue to involve narcopistas in the Peten,^[19] crossing the porous border with Honduras to the South, and smuggling overland into Mexico, both along well used routes close to the coast, and in the interior of the country. In recent years, transits of watercraft, including semisubmersibles, from the Pacific coast of Colombia and Ecuador, have also increasingly traversed Guatemala's extensive 200-mile exclusive economic zone, en route either to landings in Mexico or Guatemala itself.^[20] Such transits have challenged the limited capabilities of Guatemala's Navy, with a limited number of fast boats which must patrol to the limits of their endurance in often rough Pacific Coast seas to respond to such transits.

For Guatemala, the border region in the East with Belize has also become a problem, due to relative lack of state presence and road infrastructure in the sparsely populated area.^[21] Compounding the problem, the border region in the vicinity of the Sastoon River is the subject of a territorial dispute between the two countries, leading to a clash between security forces of the two countries in 2016.^[22] The incident was fortunately managed without further escalation due to the close working relationship between the Armed Forces of the two countries. The territorial dispute is currently before the International Court of Justice (ICJ),^[23] but the efforts to avoid clashes between the armed forces of both nations in the region has arguably contributed to a limitation in presence by the militaries of the two nations, which in turn facilitates the exploitation of the region by narcotraffickers and other smugglers.

Taking advantage of limited state presence in parts of Guatemalan territory, augmented by the defunding of the Guatemalan military after the end of the 1960-1996 Civil War,^[24] the mountainous region of San Marcos, near the border with Mexico, became the primary site in the region for the growing of heroin poppies.^[25] Marijuana is also grown in sparsely populated areas throughout the country.^[26]

With the expanded operations by the Guatemalan government against narcotraffickers, groups buying the heroin of San Marcos, and marijuana have reportedly decreased, resulting in a withering of production, although coca growing and labs for limited processing it have reportedly expanded.^[27] Experts consulted for this work also expressed concern that areas of Guatemala with limited state presence could also be used to produce synthetic drugs including fentanyl, as the demand for such substances in the U.S. and elsewhere has grown. ^[28]

As a compliment to the drugs flowing through the region, Guatemala, like neighboring El Salvador and Honduras, have been beset by violent street gangs,^[29] particularly Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)^[30] and Barrio 18 (B-18).^[31] By contrast to El Salvador and Honduras, where the gang presence has been more widespread, in Guatemala, it

has been limited to the marginal outer suburbs of Guatemala City, particularly in the neighborhoods of Villanueva and Mixto,[32] and to an extent, to the urban zone of Escuintla, to the south of Guatemala City.[33]

The domination of the countryside outside Guatemala City by narcotraffickers and conservative elites has precluded MS-13 and B-18 from establishing a broader presence in the countryside. Moreover, the two principal gangs in Guatemala have generally respected the territory of each other, minimizing violence from turf battles between the two,[34] yet leaving citizens in the areas dominated by the gangs prejudiced by their extortion.

Actions in El Salvador against the leadership and structures of MS-13 and B-18 has contributed to the fragmentation and lack of leadership of the gangs within Guatemala, creating an opening for other groups to extort the population in “the name of” the gangs, without the ability of the gangs to enforce their territory. From 2013 to 2021, extortion in Guatemala more than doubled.[35] Moreover, the extortion demands and other activities of the new “imitator” groups, such as motorcycle robberies, has contributed to a sense of public insecurity in the country. Although homicides have fallen from 46 murders per 100,000 in 2016 (one of the region’s highest rates) to 16.7/100,000 today,[36] the number of crimes reported by the Guatemalan police in 2023 was 10.5% greater than the prior year.[37]

Beyond drugs and gangs, Guatemala has increasingly become a transit country for migrants passing through the Central American isthmus toward the United States from Venezuela, Ecuador, Haiti, Cuba and other countries.[38] Guatemala’s narrow Atlantic Coast, the “corner” of Central America, with Honduras to its East and Belize to the North, has become a key entry point, although migrants are smuggled across the porous border from Belize as well, ultimately crossing into Mexico, frequently near the coast opposite the Mexican city of Tapachula.[39]

Although Venezuelans have been the largest group passing through Guatemala, by contrast to South America, where Venezuelan criminal groups such as Tren de Aragua have exploited and trafficked those migrants,[40] such Venezuelan gangs have not yet created a strong presence in Guatemala. Experts consulted for this work suggest that this is principally because Venezuelan migrants have not remained in Guatemala long enough, in large enough numbers, for Venezuelan gangs to establish themselves there.[41]

In the context of the activities of narcotraffickers and street gangs in Guatemala, control over the country’s prisons is an ongoing challenge.[42] A key part of the problem is prison overcrowding. The population of Guatemalan prisons has tripled since 2000.[43] The abuse of preventative detention is one contributor, with over 47% of the 23,000 people incarcerated in Guatemala not yet having gone to trial.[44] In some cases, persons not yet tried have served the equivalent of the time of the sentence for the crime with which they are charged, and even died in prison awaiting trial.[45]

Finally, in 2024, the deliberate setting of fires to clear land, in dry conditions,[46] led to a rash of major forest fires in the northern departments of Jutiapa and Peten during more than two months, including damage to over 465 square miles of the Maya Biosphere National Reserve,[47] obliging President Arevalo to declare a national emergency[48] and deploy the military to support the response. That deployment,

including fighting the fires, evacuating local populations, and maintaining security, in support of the national emergency management authority CONRED, taxed the limited capability of the armed forces for responding to other missions.[49]

The Guatemalan Government Response

The response of the Guatemalan government reflects initiatives begun prior to the current Arevalo administration, as well as new direction by the Administration.

In addressing national security challenges, the Guatemalan National Police has increased its size, and acquired additional equipment, including 500 new motorcycles and 24 trucks acquired in December 2023.[50] The Arevalo administration aspires to add as many as 12,000 additional police, although the capacity of the police academy and other institutions in which they would be trained will limit the speed with which that expansion can occur, even if the funds are found to pay the salaries, equipment, and other expenses of an expanded force.

Beyond numbers, according to those interviewed for this work, the police have been challenged in addressing the fundamental problems of professionalization and corruption within its ranks, limiting their effectiveness. Across multiple prior administrations, changes in the direction of the police have arguably had a chaotic effect on the institution,[51] without making real progress. During the administration of Alejandro Giammattei, the government developed an elaborate strategy for police transformation.[52] As noted previously, some changes pursuant to that plan were realized, including new police uniforms and new equipment delivered just as the Giammattei administration left office. President Arevalo and his Interior Minister Francisco Jimenez have made a strong commitment to strengthening and fighting corruption in the police,[53] although the specifics of the Administration's direction, and its relationship to the prior police transformation plan, are still being defined.

During the time in which murder rates were higher, and the number of police lower, the government created "Citizen Security Brigades," comprised principally of former military members, to increase the perception of public security.[54] At the height of its implementation, there were 10 such brigades in operation.[55] Unfortunately, their lack of power to make arrests or use lethal force diminished the deterrent impact of the brigades.[56] In recent years as the number of national civilian police (PNC) has expanded, the Civilian Security Brigades have been repurposed to provide perimeter security around Guatemalan prisons, supporting work done by the PNC in the prisons themselves, through providing a buffer between the prison population and those who could pass them weapons, cellphones, information or contraband.[57]

The police have also created special units to address the particular challenges of the country. These include the FIAAT, similar to Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) units in the U.S. FIAAT units, in recent years, have acquired their own helicopters for air mobility through donations from the U.S.,[58] with police trained as pilots to move away from dependence on the Guatemalan military for their air mobility.[59]

The Guatemalan PNC also has a special anti-gang unit, DIPANDA, which focuses on the gang threat and extortion.[60] With the help of the U.S., it also seeks to address the causes of gang membership in Guatemala, helping at-risk youth to avoid gang recruitment.[61]

In addition to DIPANDA, with the escalation of the perceived extortion threat from both established gangs such as MS-13 and B-18, as well as “imitators,” the Interior Ministry has established a new Anti-Extortion Task Force,^[62] although the actual achievements of the organization in addressing the challenge have been limited to date.^[63]

With respect to border security, previous governments had established a series of police–military Interagency Task Forces (IATFs) to control the border and associated “blind passages.”^[64] These included Chorti to cover the border with Honduras, Xinca, to cover the border with Salvador, Tecun-Uman to cover the border with Mexico near the coast, and Belem, under construction, to cover the Guatemala Mexico Border in the interior of the country. Due to institutional differences between the police and the military that created tensions, undermined unity of command, and thus undercut operational effectiveness, the Alejandro Giammattei administration disbanded the IATFs in March 2023.^[65] This freed the police to concentrate on internal security matters, including a surge of increased presence along the Mexican border in January 2024.

Within the Interior Ministry, the government has also sought to address the problems of prison control and overcapacity. The 15 prisons in the Guatemalan system, including its Maximum-Security Prison, *Enfermito*, in Escuintla, come under the Interior Ministry. In recent years, recognizing the need to separate those detained without a trial, from those convicted of serious crimes, the government also created a Preventative Detention Center.

The Guatemalan government has also sought to build new prisons, including a maximum security facility in Masagua,^[66] although administrative and legal difficulties have slowed progress.

With respect to the Guatemalan military, the priorities of the incoming Arevalo administration and Defense Minister General Henry Saenz Ramos have been first and foremost to ensure that the institution remains removed politics, and to combat corruption within the military ranks.^[67]

With respect to staying out of politics, to the credit of the military before President Arevalo’s assumption of power, the institution managed to avoid perceptions that it was “taking a side” during the bitter struggles between President-elect Arevalo and his Semilla party on one side, and the Attorney General’s office and Conservative Elites who sought to challenge both.^[68]

With respect to the fight against corruption, the Arevalo Ministry of Defense has reportedly adopted a strict posture against corruption and wrongdoing within the ranks, including obliging the retirement of some officers who were strongly believed to be corrupt, but for whom proving such in a military tribunal or court of law would have been difficult. ^[69]

The Administration’s third priority has been border control, including the previously noted sending of 5,000 personnel to reinforce the border with Mexico in the Departments of San Marcos and Huehuetenango in Operation “Belt of Fire,”^[70] particularly in the Departments of San Marcos and Huehuetenango.

The Arevalo Administration’s fourth priority for the military has been to ensure continued strict compliance of the military with human rights norms in its interactions with civilian populations, and otherwise. In April 2024, it inaugurated a new school

for training in human rights in the Headquarters of the Mariscal Zavala Brigade.[71]

Beyond these, the new administration is also working to make the military a more inclusive force. It currently has an unprecedented four female Coronels, including the head of the new human rights school. One of the four will likely become Guatemala's first female General Officer. [72]

In terms of specific capabilities, the Guatemalan military continues to operate impressively within the constraints of very limited resources.

With respect to control of the national airspace against incursions by narcoflights in areas such as Peten, the military has been constrained by a limited number of interceptor aircraft, including a Pilatus PC-7 and two aging U.S. A-37s, none of which are currently in active service. Although prior government have sought to acquire new interceptor aircraft from Argentina and Brazil, the procurements have been filled with allegations of improprieties and ultimately have not advanced. [73]

Similarly for detecting incursions into its airspace, Guatemala relies on an older Spanish Indira radar system.[74] Although the systems provide some capabilities, the gaps and limitations in their coverage is information that has been provided, through corrupt officials, to narco-traffickers, who use knowledge of the gaps to conduct flights outside of the limits of that coverage.

Beyond interceptors, the transport and aircraft-based intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities of the Guatemalan armed forces are similarly constrained, with five Cessna 208 fixed wing transports, a Pilatus PC-12 received from the U.S. in May 2024,[75] two Beech Super King Airs, an older DHC-6 Twin Otter, and a Bessler B-67 which is not operationally available due to maintenance.

Guatemala's rotary wing capabilities are somewhat better. They include two Bell 412EXPs, received in December 2022,[76] and a Bell 429, acquired in January 2024. [77] The acquisition of the Bell 412s alone reportedly increased the operational readiness of the Guatemalan rotary wing fleet by more than 50%.

A complimentary factor that rotary wing readiness has been the contribution of Taiwan to the training of its pilots. Indeed, Taiwan's gesture to do so was key in the country's preservation of its rotary wing flight capability when Guatemalan tensions with Colombia led it to cancel Colombian training of its pilots. The tensions owed to the selection of the controversial former head of Guatemala's United Nation's sponsored anti-corruption organization CICIG, was named Minister of Defense by the country's leftist President. Following the inauguration of President Arevalo, Colombia subsequently renewed its training.

In the maritime domain, as noted previously, Guatemala struggles to cover its 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone against drug transits. Its key tool for maritime interception in the Pacific is its naval special forces, the FEN,[78] which operates from relatively small fast boats in the often-rough Pacific seas.[79] Contributing to the challenge, the Guatemalan Navy has only one main port facility at Puerto Quetzal, in the southern portion of the Pacific coast, relatively far from the maritime border with Mexico where more of the transiting narcovessels land. The Navy does have minor facilities at Ocos and Champurico, closer to the border, but without large numbers of persons there or substantial capabilities there to support and resupply larger vessels. [80] A planned second major military port at Champurico never went

forward, because the enabling commercial port infrastructure was never built. Nonetheless, the U.S. continues to work with the Guatemalans on options to augment its military port capabilities in the future.[81]

To extend the range and time on station of the FEN and its watercraft, the U.S. Southern Command provided Guatemala a logistics support “mothership” to refuel its small interceptor craft in the Pacific and provide crew rest,[82] and Guatemala has been in contact with the Colombian shipyard COTECMAR regarding purchase of a second such vessel.[83] Nonetheless, the original vessel was found to be too slow, and not appropriate for the rougher seas in the Pacific and moved to the Atlantic.

To extend its reach and time on station in the Pacific, in the end of June 2024, Guatemala will receive a larger, 85-foot Naval Coastal Patrol Vessel (NCPV) from the U.S., retired from the U.S. Coast Guard.

With respect to control over Guatemala’s rivers, critical for movement within the country in remote regions like the Peten, as well as across its borders, the Navy has expanded its capability with shallow-bottom river patrol craft. It has deployed smaller boats previously provided by the U.S. or confiscated from criminals. In 2020, Guatemala also opened a modest shipyard on its port on the Atlantic coast,[84] which it has used to build approximately 10 smaller watercraft in three sizes, known as Eduarinos. The shipyard also has capabilities to perform maintenance and some repair of Guatemala’s watercraft.[85] With its expanded capacity Guatemala has been able to exercise a reasonable level of river control, including patrols of the Suchiate river defining the southwest portion of the Guatemala-Mexico border.

With respect to land forces, Guatemala’s military has been highly resource constrained, with a budget for its military of only .4%- .5% of its GDP.[86] The country’s “Jungle Brigade” is principally a light infantry unit without the specialized equipment, such as riverboats, to give it greater effectiveness in the jungle environment of Peten.[87] Similarly, its High Mountain Brigade still lacks the organic equipment to allow it to operate as effectively as it could in the mountainous terrain it is responsible for controlling. In 2024, when those forces have been called upon to surge to increase control of the border, and fight fires in the Peten and Jutiapa, the Guatemalan military has supplemented their capabilities by temporarily attaching units from elsewhere with the needed specialized capabilities, although at the expense of a high operational tempo of those temporarily attached units, and their non-availability elsewhere in the country.[88]

With respect to vehicles for ground mobility, the Guatemalan military continues to operate up armored Jeep CJ-8s provided by the US,[89] although they have long been plagued with suspension and other issues that have adversely impacted their operational availability.[90] In October 2022, the U.S. donated 95 new vehicles, including Toyota Hiluxes, Land Cruisers, and motorcycles.[91] The donation reportedly helped the Armed Forces somewhat in increasing its mobility, particularly when it was called upon in January 2024 to surge capabilities to the Mexican border in the Departments of San Marcos and Huehuetenango in Operation “Belt of Fire.”[92]

As a compliment to equipment, as with the FIAAT in the police and the FEN in the Navy, since 2007, the Guatemalan Armed Forces have an elite unit that combines their well respected military special forces, the Kabiles, with enhanced air and other mobility assets. The unit, the Special Battalion for Interdiction and Rescue (BEIR),[93] is used in operations against high value narco-trafficking, and other difficult targets.

Beyond new equipment, support facilities and training, the Arevalo government is currently writing a new National Security Strategy. President Arevalo himself, whose academic background prior to taking office, includes several books on Civil-Material relations in Guatemala,[94] has taken a particular interest in the Defense sector and defense policy. The country is currently working to revise the country's military penal law, with U.S. support. Indeed, as the U.S. expands its cooperative relationship with the United States, it has worked with Guatemala to improve its military planning system, Siplagde. The U.S. has also helped the Ministry with new operational research tools for strengthening its analysis and planning capabilities, including MAGDEF, and has paid for it to have a senior-level Ministry of Defense Advisor (MODA).[95]

Bolstered by such support, the Armed Forces, and particularly the Guatemalan Navy, have reportedly made important strides in defense planning, increasing the rationality of defense acquisitions, understanding of lifecycle costs, and the ability of the military to justify budget requests for the acquisition of specific capabilities to Congress.[96]

Despite Guatemalan efforts at defense reform, the government's response in the struggle against organized crime continues to be hampered by political infighting between the executive branch, and the independent Guatemalan prosecutor's office, headed by Consuela Porras.[97] Although routine prosecutions against Guatemalan criminal figures continue to go forward, higher level cases have been prejudiced, including reported limited sharing of important information between Porras' office and the police. In the absence of reliable high-level intelligence from the Attorney General's office, the Interior ministry intelligence organization, DIGCI, has been forced to rely principally on police intelligence, which is often wanting.[98]

Civil-Military Challenges

As noted previously, President Arevalo has had a several minor challenges and tensions as he has moved forward as civilian commander in chief of Guatemala's military, although his own background as a scholar on civil-military relations issues, [99] plus inputs from trusted advisors such as his national security head, retired general Ismael Cifuentes Bustamante, has helped him to manage them.[100]

President Arevalo's selection of officers for senior leadership positions from promotion 117 to obtain the officers that he wanted to work with, when members of promotion 118 had an additional year of seniority and experience, caused some discontent. The highest profile tension was between his former Chef of Defense Staff, General Carlos Medina Juarez, from Promotion 118, who had ample record of command experience,[101] including in combat operations involving Guatemala's peacekeeping contingent in the Congo, and his Minister of Defense, Henry Saenz Ramos of Promotion 117, who had ended service as a Colonel, before being promoted to General, but who had both the confidence of President Arevalo, and strong capabilities in representing Guatemala's Armed Forces to its Congress, Civil Society and the International Community. [102]

While the different capabilities of the two leaders were also complimentary, there were also tensions, which came to a head in a decision by General Saenz, as Defense Minister, to accompany President Arevalo in uniform, in a public march from the Presidential Palace to Congress,[103] as part of President Arevalo's effort to get

Congress to pass a law restricting the powers of the Attorney General's office, whose head, Thelma Aldana, had been working to cripple, and possibly oust, the President and his parties through investigations and other maneuvers.[104]

General Medina chose not to accompany the President and Defense Minister in the march. In the context of a public dispute over whether or not it had been appropriate for uniformed senior officers to join the President in the activity, the underlying tensions apparently became too much, leading the President to dismiss General Medina and replace him with a Coronel, Hermalindo Choz.[105]

Insofar as the change also temporarily put a Coronel in a position of authority over the Generals on the General Staff, it led to further discontent, and concerns by those on the right over Arevalo's leftist credentials, that the President was seeking to undermine traditional military hierarchy. [106] Other military promotions proposed by President Arevalo were at least temporarily blocked by a legal suit brought by another Guatemalan Coronel claiming that those being promoted did not have the legally stipulated capabilities for their new ranks. [107]

Arevalo has also had difficulty passing legislation to implement security and other policies. At the 100-day mark of his administration, the President had not succeeded in passing any laws. The failure to do so was principally because his allies in the Semilla party had been blocked by conservative opponents who control electoral institutions, from having a legal identity in Congress, allowing them to occupy committee chairmanships and exercise other forms of procedural power. [108]

Contributing to further difficulties, Arevalo as "clean government" candidate has been obliged to fire two members of his new government. In April 2024, he fired his Environment Minister Maria Jose Iturbide, over improper use of a government car by her daughter.[109] In May 2024, he dismissed his communications minister Jazmin de la Vega in May 2024, over irregularities in payments to construction firms.[110] While the people of Guatemala continue to strongly support Guatemala, President Arevalo is under pressure to produce results, and avoid perceptions of wrongdoing, in order to continue to have political capital to manage the security and other difficult challenges facing the country. [111]

Conclusions

The corrupting influence and societal stresses of transnational narcotics and immigrant flows through Guatemala, as well as the public insecurity fueled by street gangs and criminality, continue to erode the faith of Guatemalans in their democratic institutions.

The selection of Bernardo Arevalo was an expression of Guatemalans frustration with the perceived inability of previous governments to address fundamental challenges of corruption, insecurity, inequality, and a lack of opportunity. The Arevalo regime currently enjoys the benefit of the doubt of the Guatemalan people as it struggles to address those challenges and restore the faith of Guatemalans in their government. Unfortunately, it confronts those hurdles with severely limited resources and little leverage in the legislature to acquire more resources and strengthen legal frameworks. Arevalo's government also continues to confront entrenched elites with a vested interest in the Administration's failure and displacement from power. The United States has provided substantial support to the new government in security and other matters, yet the U.S. government must also tread carefully in not

intervening too forcefully in the internal affairs of Guatemala in its desire to see Arevalo and democracy succeed. It is a fight against considerable odds, yet one in which the costs of failure for Guatemala, the U.S. and the region, are unacceptable.

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