

# Guatemala asks President Trump to weaken anti-corruption commission

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For more than a decade, the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) has sought to dismantle organized crime groups operating within and at the margins of the state, tackle corruption, and strengthen institutions in Guatemala. CICIG has worked alongside its Guatemalan counterparts in the Attorney General's Office, the police, and other state institutions to arrest hundreds of corrupt members of the political and economic elite, drug traffickers, and government officials. In doing so, they have made powerful enemies in Guatemala, enemies who have spent the last few years undermining the integrity of CICIG.

Until recently, the United States and international community had remained steadfast in their support for CICIG. However, such support seems to be wavering as the Guatemalan government hopes to leverage its newfound goodwill with the Trump administration to weaken CICIG. If these forces collude to weaken CICIG, the United States and Guatemala will suffer the consequences.

In 2015, the CICIG and Attorney General's Office arrested former president Otto Pérez Molina and former vice president Roxana Baldetti for their involvement in a multimillion scheme to defraud the Guatemalan state of customs revenue. Earlier this year, CICIG and the attorney general arrested former president Alvaro Colom and members of his cabinet on embezzlement and fraud charges.

Earlier this week, a legal complaint was filed with the Attorney General's Office accusing current President Jimmy Morales of sexual abuse of two young women. The previous attorney general, Thelma Aldana, concluded that President Morales was no partner in the battle against corruption. Morales fought back against CICIG and the attorney general after they previously accused him of illicit campaign financing and his family members of corruption. As a target of various criminal investigations, President Morales unsuccessfully tried to have CICIG Commissioner Ivan Velasquez declared persona non-grata and expelled from the country.

Earlier this month, the National Civil Police reassigned nearly half of CICIG's police protection and investigative support. With over half of them under investigation, Congress has tried to protect itself from prosecution. Now, according to a recent report from McClatchy, Morales and the Guatemalan government are looking to the United States for help "reforming" the CICIG. These reforms seek to weaken the CICIG and protect the country's most powerful, as they include reforms such as "changing the body's mandate to more narrowly redefine corruption, increasing reporting requirements for donors, limiting terms of the commissioner and appointing a deputy commissioner which Guatemala would help select."

In President Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy, he got a win when the Guatemalan government followed the United States and also moved its embassy to Jerusalem. He might repay the favor by giving the Guatemalan government what it wants — a weakened CICIG — even if it comes at the expense of the Guatemalan people and, ultimately, the United States.

That would be a mistake. CICIG has earned the bipartisan support of U.S. government officials. As recently as August 2017, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley declared that the commission had "the full support of the United States." Rep. Eliot L. Engel (D-N.Y.) recently remarked that "absurd and unfounded attacks on the U.N. International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala — what we call CICIG — threaten the institution's ability to fight corruption and support the rule of law."

Analyzing data from Vanderbilt University's survey research project LAPOP AmericasBarometer, Elizabeth J. Zechmeister and Dinorah Azpuru found that over 70 percent of Guatemalans supported CICIG's work. In a June 2018 op-ed published in the Washington Post, Guatemalan entrepreneur Estuardo Porras Zadik and lawyer and journalist Pedro Pablo Marroquín Pérez argued that "Since its establishment, the CICIG has decisively contributed to the strengthening of Guatemala's institutions. Under the leadership of its current commissioner, Iván Velásquez, the CICIG has supported the public prosecutor's office in identifying and dismantling networks of corruption."

The CICIG has been one of the international community's most innovative tools available to tackle organized crime and corruption in Guatemala. While it is no magic bullet, the CICIG is a low-cost, win-win institution for the United States, international community, and people of Guatemala. With one year remaining in its mandate, now is the time to discuss the strengthening and extension of CICIG's mandate, not to negotiate its death by a thousand cuts.

