

Guatemalan president jailed after being forced out

Bill Van Auken
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Otto Pérez Molina, Guatemala's ex-president, spent Thursday night in a military prison after being forced to resign over charges of massive official corruption.

The ousting of the right-wing head of state capped 19 weeks of demonstrations, peasant roadblocks, strikes and mass student protests across the country. It was met with noisy celebrations that began in the early morning hours of Thursday, following the 1:20 a.m. announcement of the president's resignation, and continued throughout the day.

Pérez Molina, a former general who led a genocidal scorched-earth campaign that killed as many as a quarter of a million of Guatemala's indigenous people under the US-backed military dictator Efraín Ríos Montt in the 1980s, had insisted up until Wednesday afternoon that he would remain in office until the end of his term in January.

A day earlier, the Guatemalan Congress had voted unanimously to lift Pérez Molina's immunity, opening the way for prosecution over corruption. An arrest order issued Wednesday finally compelled him to give up the presidency and join his former vice president, Roxana Baldetti, in prison.

Baldetti, a former television reporter, was forced to resign last May after her chief of staff and over 20 other officials were arrested in connection with the corruption scheme known as "La Linea" (the line), in which customs duties were slashed for importers operating in Guatemala in return for kickbacks. Attention had previously been drawn to Baldetti because of her sudden acquisition of wealth, including a multimillion-dollar home, at least four other properties and a private helicopter worth \$13 million.

Baldetti was jailed on August 21 after the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (known by its Spanish acronym CICIG), a

UN body set up in 2006, announced that its investigation had identified both her and Pérez Molina as the heads of the La Linea corruption scheme. A second investigation uncovered another corruption scandal involving payments of bribes that landed a government dialysis contract for a company whose shoddy care caused the deaths of several patients.

After Baldetti's ouster, the Obama administration continued to back Pérez Molina, despite ample evidence of his own participation in his government's rampant corruption, declaring his government "a strong partner of the United States and a regional leader."

The mass demonstrations began on April 25, less than a week after the first arrests in connection with the La Linea affair (named after the telephone line used by importers to arrange the falsification of customs papers in order to slash their import taxes.). On August 27, these protests reached their apogee in a nationwide general strike that shut down universities, schools and businesses, drawing in unions, indigenous groups and social movements. Over 100,000 gathered in the capital's central plaza, while simultaneous protests were held in over 140 municipalities across Guatemala.

Concern that this outpouring of popular opposition to the government over corruption could lead to an eruption of social struggle in Guatemala—a country with the third-worst poverty rate in Latin America and the fourth-worst indices for social inequality—the ruling oligarchy and ultimately the US government reached the conclusion that Pérez Molina had to go.

The Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial and Financial Associations (CACIF), Guatemala's main big business front, called a press conference on August 21 calling for the president's "immediate resignation." This was followed two days later with a statement by Catholic

Archbishop Oscar Vian also calling for him to step down.

Washington had held on as long as it could, viewing the former general and war criminal as a pillar of its newly inaugurated “Alliance for Prosperity.” This \$1 billion plan was put into effect earlier this year with the aim of beefing up the corrupt and murderous security forces of Central America’s so-called Northern Triangle—Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador—to combat drug trafficking and the flow of refugees north to the US border.

As with similar plans introduced in Colombia and Mexico, US military aid will inevitably be used to suppress popular opposition to the governments of the region.

Central to the timing of Pérez Molina’s resignation was the first round of national elections scheduled to take place on Sunday. The front-running candidates are all political representatives of the ruling oligarchy and Guatemala’s criminal mafias, who are vying with each other in making right-wing nationalist appeals and calls for the imposition of the death penalty.

A report issued by the CICIG in July on the funding of political parties found that “businessmen joined in the business associations provide a little less than 25 percent; from government suppliers divided into an infinity of entities of different sizes comes a little more than 50 percent of the financing; while the criminal organizations, above all those dedicated to drug trafficking, supply the rest.”

There is clearly widespread popular hostility to the elections and all of the major parties. Among the slogans chanted in the previous month’s protests was, “Under these conditions, we don’t want elections.” And signs carried by demonstrators after Pérez Molina’s resignation bore the statement, “Our dreams do not fit in your ballot boxes.” Unions, peasant organizations and left-wing parties have demanded the convening of a constituent assembly to redraft the constitution, imposed in 1985 under the military regime of Gen. Óscar Humberto Mejía.

The hopes of both US imperialism and Guatemala’s ruling class is that the vote can be used to diffuse the mass protests, and divert popular opposition away from a challenge to the entire economic and political setup.

However, given the discrediting of the entire political establishment and the institutions of the capitalist state,

along with widening social inequality and severe poverty, the prospect of revolutionary upheavals in Guatemala and throughout Central America is growing.



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