

# Guatemalan government launches witch-hunt against journalists, judges and prosecutors

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Guatemalan journalist José Rubén Zamora Marroquín, internationally renowned for exposing corruption and human rights violations, was sentenced last Wednesday to six years in prison and a US\$38,000 penalty for allegedly laundering money.

The indictment marks the culmination of a politically motivated campaign by the far-right government of President Alejandro Giammattei against Zamora and the newspaper he founded and led, *elPeriódico*, which was forced to permanently shut down last month.

This witch-hunt and the complicit silence by US imperialism represent a stark warning. Four decades after the brutal US-backed junta that killed over 200,000 people, the Guatemalan ruling elite is dispensing with its democratic trappings and turning again to the methods of dictatorship and fascism.

Zamora was jailed in July 2022, only five days after *elPeriódico* published its latest corruption allegations against Giammattei. The police raided the headquarters of what was the main investigative newspaper in the country, temporarily detained numerous other employees and froze its bank accounts.

Zamora's defense insisted that the \$40,000 allegedly laundered were used for paying salaries and were donated by a businessperson who did not want to be openly associated with the paper for fear of reprisals.

The journalist received a show trial. No concrete evidence was presented against him, and Zamora was denied the right to present his own evidence and witnesses. He also had to switch lawyers eight times, with four being prosecuted themselves for their participation in the case and others facing various difficulties. His final lawyer was given just 12 hours before the process began.

His lawyers were also threatened by the fascist Foundation against Terrorism, which was created in 2013 to defend military officials accused of human rights abuses. Ironically, one of the group's first actions was to publish ads in *elPeriódico* protesting the conviction against the military dictator José Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-83) for carrying out a

genocide against Mayans. Now it has filed dozens of lawsuits against those investigating corruption cases.

On Wednesday, Zamora declared, "We live in a dictatorship. A veiled, multi-party, tyrannical dictatorship." He also explained to reporters: "I have a son in exile with an arrest warrant and, luckily, my wife left the country last night because I fear that they'll capture her."

His son described to BBC the long history of reprisals for Zamora's work, including an attempted murder with grenades in 1996, a raid by armed gangsters who kept the family hostage for hours while mock executing Zamora in 2003, a kidnapping in 2008, a beating in 2013, and numerous death threats.

Highlighting the vindictive character of the case, prosecutors were demanding a 40-year sentence over blackmail and influence peddling charges, which were rejected by the court.

Several prominent journalists have faced similar trumped-up charges of money laundering and "criminal association," as well as raids and harassment by the police and the military under Giammattei, and at least half-a-dozen have been compelled to leave the country.

These attacks against the press are part of a broader crackdown against journalists, judges and prosecutors in charge of investigating vast networks of corruption of politicians and leading businesspeople. These cases were launched under the aegis, at least initially, of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG).

At least two dozen judges and prosecutors have been compelled to leave the country—most prominently Miguel Ángel Gálvez, who sent Ríos Montt to trial for genocide, sentenced former President Otto Pérez Molina for corruption and was handling a case against military officials for torturing and massacring 175 left-wing professionals and students. Gálvez has stressed that threats against him come from the military leadership, and that it is again taking over each government department as in the 1980s.

The CICIG, several officials and news publications were

being sponsored by the US government, which was using select corruption cases as one of its weapons to keep the local bourgeoisie and state aligned with US interests. The case against Otto Pérez Molina triggered mass protests, which were ultimately channeled behind support for the CICIG.

However, since the actor-turned-President Jimmy Morales dissolved the CICIG in 2019 to halt investigations against him, the tables turned, and the prosecutors became the persecuted. The move was backed by the Trump administration, after the US Congress had virtually halted funding for the “anti-corruption” campaign.

Now, as US imperialism has done countless times, the Biden administration has effectively endorsed the repression of the forces it was sponsoring. The White House has limited its response to Giammattei’s crackdown to placing the General Prosecutor María Consuelo Porras, the leader of the Foundation against Terrorism, Ricardo Méndez Ruiz and several other officials on a list of “Corrupt and Undemocratic Actors.”

The US government has continued handing millions in military aid to Guatemala and working closely with the Guatemalan security forces.

In a recent interview with *El Faro*, the now exiled judge Gálvez explained that meetings with US officials in Washington led him to conclude that “the United States will not dare to take tougher action [against Giammattei].” He added: “The US is running out of allies in Central America and doesn’t want to lose Guatemala... there is the issue of China and Russia. The stage is complex, and they fear that, if they take a firmer decision, Guatemala will lean on someone else.”

The regional bourgeoisies have tried to use their current or potential ties with China, as well as Washington’s demands to detain migrants traveling north, to negotiate a greater share of the profits from the exploitation of local workers and natural resources for themselves. But any tussle with imperialism rests on the ability of the weak ruling elites to suppress the class struggle amid rampant inequality and poverty.

Since 2018, there have been repeated waves of mass protests and general strikes across Latin America and internationally that represent the greatest threat to both US imperialism and its local client elites. In November 2020, Giammattei responded with police-state repression to major protests against social austerity, which were triggered by the lack of anti-COVID protections and the indifferent response to those losing their livelihoods to the pandemic, droughts and tropical storms and hurricanes, whose intensity and frequency have increased as a result of climate change.

Giammattei then agreed to the demands by the Trump and

Biden administrations to deploy thousands of troops along its borders to detain and return migrants. In return, the Biden administration has repeatedly embraced the Giammattei administration.

Now, the presidential elections, which will take place next Sunday, have seen four candidates disqualified, including the right-wing TikToker Carlos Pineda, who was leading the polls. The top candidates have all based their campaigns on promises of iron-fist tactics against gangs, including building up the security forces and building mega-prisons, largely imitating El Salvador’s authoritarian President Nayib Bukele.

Most strikingly, the top candidate for the traditional right-wing parties will be Zury Ríos, the daughter of fascist military dictator Efraín Ríos Montt. She has argued that “The military had every right to execute the necessary actions” under her father and “took care of protecting the state.” She has also expressed admiration for Bukele, who has imprisoned more than 1 percent of the population and established police-state rule across El Salvador.

Particularly since the dissolution of the USSR, US imperialism has been relying on military force, including endless wars and furthering its historic ties to the local military castes, to counter the accelerating erosion of its economic position vis-a-vis China.

If Washington has decided to give a green light to the Guatemalan ruling elite’s attacks on journalists, judges and prosecutors, it is because it supports a turn to dictatorship and placing military officials trained and armed by the United States in control of the government, as it has done repeatedly in Guatemala and across Latin America throughout the last century, in pursuit of regional hegemony.



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