

Iniciativa Causas Raíz

ROOT CAUSES INITIATIVE

June 12, 2023

President Joseph Biden
Vice President Kamala Harris
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President and Madam Vice President,

As indigenous, civic, and religious organizations and leaders from Guatemala, the U.S., and across the region, we implore you to speak out and act more forcefully against the destruction of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights in Guatemala. The Guatemalan people are struggling against a brutal effort to roll back decades of hard-won democratic and social progress. They need your support.

In plain terms, powerful and corrupt business interests, politicians, and current and ex-military officials have captured the Guatemalan state to enrich themselves. This corrupt pact is behind the persecution, imprisonment, and exile of dozens of prosecutors and judges who've dared to pursue the rule of law. These same corrupt forces have shut down Guatemala's most important independent media, most recently the May 12 closure of elPeriodico, and arbitrarily manipulated ballot access rules to undermine the upcoming national elections.

The consequences for ordinary Guatemalans are devastating. More and more people are being displaced by illegal mining and agribusiness projects that operate with impunity. The lack of democratic accountability leads to Guatemala having one of the lowest tax rates in Latin America and a massive underinvestment in education, health, and development. More than half of all Guatemalans live in poverty. These economic pressures are the root causes that force Guatemalans to migrate. If nothing is done to change course, Guatemala is headed into a period of greater political and social instability that will drive even more people to flee.

Continuing to engage with the Guatemalan government on migration and investment issues without forcefully denouncing the destruction of democracy and the rule of law in Guatemala or taking concrete action to hold those responsible accountable is short-sighted. As the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) has said about U.S. sanctions against corrupt officials in Guatemala, "no person from the circle of power close to President Alejandro Giammattei is named, despite strong indications of corruption around him and his acquiescence in the criminalization and persecution of independent justice operators." Contrary to the commitments made by President Biden in his February 2021 Executive Order, we believe that current U.S. policy toward Guatemala is exacerbating rather than addressing the root causes of migration.

We urge you to take the following steps before Guatemala's National Elections on June 25, 2023

1. **Speak out directly against the actions taken by the Guatemalan regime to undermine democratic elections, close independent media, and persecute, imprison, and exile anti-corruption prosecutors and judges.** The U.S. must communicate unequivocally that continued cooperation between the U.S. and Guatemala hinges on addressing the root causes of migration, including restoring the rule of law and human rights. If the U.S. and other foreign governments do not send a strong message now, the already flawed electoral process will end in direct fraud, raising the risk that Guatemala will become another dictatorship in Central America, with disastrous social conditions that would generate more migration and exile.
2. **Impose Magnitsky Act financial sanctions on oligarchs and high-level officials who have colluded to manipulate elections and persecute independent journalists, prosecutors, and judges.** Only a fraction of Guatemalans placed on sanctions lists have been subjected to financial penalties. Placing officials on visa sanction lists without applying financial sanctions, bypassing corrupt business people, and exempting governments that cooperate on short-term migration restrictions will not change the calculus driving systematic corruption and abuses.
3. **Immediately hold high-level meetings with leading indigenous authorities, civil society organizations, and religious leaders before the June 25 elections.** Guatemalans need to hear clearly and directly that the U.S. supports their struggle for democracy.
4. **Redirect U.S. foreign assistance away from U.S. for-profit companies and NGOs to civil society organizations working to restore democracy and sustainable development in Guatemala.** Despite commitments made by USAID in its Centroamérica Local initiative, almost all of the \$49 million in foreign assistance funding to Guatemala in FY 2023 and FY2024 has continued to flow to a handful of insider U.S. and international contractors and NGOs, with virtually no funding going to grassroots civil society organizations in Guatemala, according to U.S. data on foreignassistance.gov.

At one of Guatemala's darkest moments, taking these steps will communicate that the U.S. stands with the Guatemalan people in their struggle for democracy.

Sincerely,

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Obispado de Huehuetenango, Guatemala

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