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Guatemala: An Overview

Guatemala, the most populous country in Central America, has strived to consolidate its democracy since the 1990s. It has faced many political and social challenges, as well as widespread corruption, impunity, and human rights abuses. Traditionally, the United States and Guatemala have had close relations, with friction at times over certain issues, such as democratic governance and migration. Government corruption, migration, and food security in Guatemala have been long-standing concerns for some in Congress.

Figure 1. Guatemala Map



Source: Congressional Research Service.

Political Situation

Guatemala has a long history of internal conflict and violence, including a 36-year civil war (1960-1996). For most of that time, the Guatemalan military held power and brutally repressed citizens' human rights, with an estimated death toll of over 200,000 people and forcible disappearance of some 45,000 (Indigenous people made up the majority of these victims). In 1986, Guatemala established a civilian democratic government, although military repression continued. In December 1996, then-President Álvaro Arzú (1996-2000) and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit (URNG), with support from the United Nations mission in Guatemala, signed peace accords to end the conflict, but goals put forth in the accords (e.g., eradicating extreme poverty, integrating indigenous Guatemalans, bolstering institutions) remain unfulfilled. Successive governments have failed to strengthen Guatemalan justice systems to punish perpetrators of grave human rights abuses and massive corruption; Indigenous Guatemalans continue to face poverty and social exclusion.

Democratically elected civilian governments have led Guatemala for over 30 years, but democratic institutions remain fragile, largely due to high levels of state capture by elites. In 2007, Guatemala requested that the United Nations establish the International Commission against

Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) to assist Guatemala in investigating, prosecuting, and dismantling illegal groups and clandestine structures. The United States provided more than \$44.5 million in funding for CICIG over the course of the commission's 12-year mandate (2007-2019). CICIG and Guatemalan attorneys general secured convictions of dozens of high-level officials, including a former president and vice president for graft and customs fraud. CICIG's work angered many elites, including then-President Jimmy Morales (2016-2020), himself under investigation, who refused to extend its mandate.

Guatemala at a Glance

Capital: Guatemala City

Area: 42,000 square miles, about the size of Tennessee

Population: 19.1 million (2023, IMF est.)

Ethnic Composition: Mestizo (mixed Amerindian-Spanish; called *Ladino* in local Spanish) 62.8%, Maya 34.9%, Xinka (Indigenous, non-Maya) 2.1%, Garifuna 0.1%, foreign 0.2% (2018 est., INE)

Gross Domestic Product (GDP)/Per Capita GDP: \$91.3 billion/\$4,880 (2022, current prices, IMF)

Key Import Partners: United States (31.9%), China (18.2%), Mexico (10.1%), El Salvador (3.3%) (2022, TDM)

Key Export Partners: United States (31.1%), El Salvador (13.0%), Honduras (10.1%), Nicaragua (6.4%) (2022, TDM)

Sources: International Monetary Fund (IMF); National Statistics Institute of Guatemala (INE), Trade Data Monitor (TDM).

Current President Alejandro Giammattei, with the right-wing *Vamos* party, won Guatemala's 2019 presidential elections with 58% of the vote. However, as his term has progressed, thousands of Guatemalans have protested widespread concerns about inflation and continued official corruption. Human rights groups have reported attacks against the press and harassment of former anti-corruption prosecutors and judges, more than 30 of whom have fled the country under threat of arrest since 2021. Giammattei's term is set to end in January 2024; he is constitutionally barred from seeking reelection.

2023 Elections

Guatemala is scheduled to hold presidential, legislative, and municipal elections on June 25, 2023. Presidential candidates include Sandra Torres (former first lady to President Álvaro Colom) and Zury Ríos (daughter of former military President Efraín Ríos Montt). Guatemala's Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) has rejected the candidacies of Maya Indigenous left-wing candidate Thelma Cabrera and her running mate, former human rights ombudsman Jordán Rodas, who are well-known anti-

corruption activists; the TSE also rejected Roberto Arzú, son of former President Álvaro Arzú. Some domestic and international observers have expressed concerns regarding the prospects for a free and fair vote.

Economic and Social Conditions

Guatemala has the largest economy in Central America, with an estimated gross domestic product (GDP) of \$91.3 billion in 2022, according to the International Monetary Fund. Despite a growing economy, more than half of the population and 79% of Indigenous Guatemalans live in poverty. Guatemala's tax-to-GDP ratio is the lowest in Latin America, severely limiting the funds available for public services and investments.

Guatemala is home to one of the youngest populations in Latin America, with roughly 60% of citizens under 29 years of age, according to Guatemala's National Institute of Statistics. Although the country's growing working-age population could boost economic growth, many youth face difficult circumstances and limited opportunities.

According to the World Bank, 47% of children under the age of five have stunted growth. Further, 29% of youth aged 15-24 were not in school, training, or employment in 2022, according to the International Labor Organization.

U.S.–Guatemalan Relations and Legislative Activity

Both Congress and the Biden Administration seek to promote human rights, dismantle corruption, increase citizen security, ensure transparency and accountability, address the root causes of migration, and suppress gangs and drug trafficking in Guatemala. U.S.–Guatemalan engagement initially increased under the Biden Administration, but anti-democratic and corrupt practices by Guatemalan officials have since strained relations.

Migration. In FY2022, the U.S. Border Patrol encountered more than 228,000 Guatemalans at the southwest border, making Guatemala the second-largest country of origin for people migrating irregularly to the United States that year. The U.S. Agency for International Development has identified the lack of economic opportunities, extortion, crime and violence, and corruption as the top drivers of irregular migration. The United States and Mexico annually remove tens of thousands of Guatemalans. The Guatemalan government has worked with U.S. and Mexican agencies to combat human trafficking and smuggling under an effort known as Joint Task Force Alpha, which started in 2021. Guatemala also expels irregular migrants from its territory and considers applicants for refugee status.

Corruption. The Biden Administration has taken various actions intended to stem Guatemala's backsliding on corruption and the rule of law under Giammattei. It has imposed visa sanctions on Attorney General Maria Consuelo Porras and her family, among other Guatemalan officials and economic elites, pursuant to the United States–Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act (P.L. 116-260, Division FF, Subtitle F) and Section 7031(c) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2022 (P.L. 117-103,

Division K). The Biden Administration also has redirected some aid over corruption issues.

U.S. Assistance. FY2022, the United States obligated \$117.9 million in U.S. foreign assistance for Guatemala, including \$85.5 million in Development Assistance (DA), \$31.6 million in Global Health Programs (GHP) funding, and \$800,000 in International Military and Education Training (IMET). Guatemala may receive additional assistance through regional programs for Central America.

For FY2023, the Biden Administration requested \$162.8 million for Guatemala—\$138 million in DA, \$24 million in GHP, and \$800,000 in IMET. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (P.L. 117-328), does not include a specific appropriations level for Guatemala. However, it recommends “up to” \$100 million for locally led development programs, \$61.5 million to support entities and activities to combat corruption, and \$70 million for programs to reduce violence against women and girls in Central America.

Food Security. An estimated one-fifth of Guatemalan citizens face “crisis” levels of acute food insecurity, according to a nongovernmental source (the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification). The U.S. Government Global Food Security Strategy for 2022-2026, mandated by the Global Food Security Act of 2016 (P.L. 114-195) and implemented through the Feed the Future initiative, identifies Guatemala as one of 12 target countries in which U.S. agencies are working to reduce poverty, hunger, and malnutrition. In FY2022, the United States—through the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration and Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance—provided \$57.1 million in aid to Guatemala to address food insecurity and other humanitarian needs.

Congressional Actions and Restrictions. Similar to prior years, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, FY2023 (P.L. 117-328), requires the State Department to withhold 60% of Economic Support Fund and security assistance to the Guatemalan government until the Secretary of State certifies that the Guatemalan government has met conditions related to corruption and public integrity, human rights, and migration, among other issues. Congress may consider whether to adjust the percentage of withholdings based on progress made by the Guatemalan government. The State Department reprogrammed some FY2021 assistance to other countries due to the Guatemalan government's failure to meet those criteria and has yet to issue certifications for FY2022 or FY2023.

P.L. 117-328 also prohibits Foreign Military Financing (FMF) to Guatemala. Although some members may consider allowing FMF in the future due to Guatemala's role in curbing irregular migration, others may be concerned due to Guatemala's misuse of Department of Defense-provided equipment on multiple occasions from August 2018 to October 2021, including intimidating U.S. officials and Guatemalan protesters.

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