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Panama’s Noriega to Return Home Two Decades after U.S. Invasion

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Before the end of the year, Panama’s former strongman Manuel Antonio Noriega will return to his homeland—almost 22 years to the day that the US invaded and ended his ruthless rule (NotiCen, Dec. 20, 1989). After serving time for narcotics-related convictions in the US and France, Noriega, 77 and frail, is facing another 20 years for crimes committed during Panama’s military dictatorship. He will be locked up in a special unit of the jungle-surrounded El Renacer penitentiary but is expected to qualify for house arrest, which is likely the main reason Noriega has long fought to return to Panama despite facing certain jail time.

"Finally we will close this bitter chapter, and [Noriega] will serve his sentence here," President Ricardo Martinelli wrote on his Twitter account, promising that Noriega would go directly to jail. But questions remain as to how many pages Panama’s government—and Noriega—will close out to this chapter of Panama’s history and how much of the past will be rewritten. If Panama vigorously pursues new charges against Noriega and the former dictator cooperates, many mysteries of the dictatorship could be solved. Despite his age and physical problems related to strokes, Noriega is believed to be of sound mind and could shed light on the darker corners of a generation of military rule (1968-1989), including some 100 unsolved forced disappearances during that time. But, if he does talk, he could also name accomplices, pointing the finger at people who have never paid for dictatorship-era crimes or shadily amassed fortunes.

Victims’ relatives still want answers

"There are many people who say it’s necessary to turn the page, but I don’t believe the page should be turned until we know the truth," said Patria Portugal, whose father, Heliodoro, disappeared and was slain during the dictatorship (NotiCen, May 2, 2002, and Sept. 8, 2011). "There are people in this country, accomplices of Noriega, alive, peacefully enjoying the money they stole...and enjoying freedom, and they tortured and killed as well."

Panamanian prosecutors say Noriega will stand trial in the Portugal disappearance, which appears to be the only open criminal case that Noriega is currently facing in Panama. He was tried and convicted in absentia in relation to a number of high-profile dictatorship-era killings and faces 20 years in jail—the maximum allowed under Panamanian law at the time of his convictions. Any new convictions are unlikely to lengthen his jail time, and it is not clear if prosecutors have an appetite to bring new charges against Noriega.

Portugal, who is in charge of the Defensoría del Pueblo, Panama’s government-backed human rights commission, said she does not know what the government’s plans are but says she hopes Noriega will speak. "As soon as Manuel Antonio Noriega sets foot in this country, we are going to sit him down to speak and tell the truth," she said. "[Crimes] cannot remain unpunished."

But family members of other dictatorship-era crime victims are not so positive Panama will see that Noriega pays for his crimes in Panama. Even though Noriega was convicted in Panama in the 1985
killing of political opponent Hugo Spadafora (NotiCen, March 5, 1993), the victim's family tried to block Noriega's return by pressing premeditated homicide charges against Noriega in Italy, based on Spadafora's dual nationality (NotiCen, Sept. 8, 2011).

"We don't trust justice in Panama, and we believe that Noriega is going to return to Panama and be released," said Carmenza Spadafora, a sister. Their hope was that Italy would request that Noriega stand trial in Italy before being returned to Panama—as members of the European Union (EU), France could have given Italy priority for extradition even though Panama's request had been received and approved first. Spadafora said a conviction in Italy would have carried a life sentence without special considerations for age.

"Laws have been passed to favor the arrival of Noriega, such as the one that at 70 years of age one does not have to serve in jail but at home," said Spadafora. "It's an open secret here that judges are bought, and the fact is no person who was ever in a high position in government has been jailed."

Noriega's lawyers have revealed little about their plans for the former dictator's legal actions once home, though requesting house arrest appears to be the priority. There might also be legal action to recover Noriega property that has been seized by the Panamanian government—including a dilapidated mansion in Panama's posh San Francisco neighborhood that still bears the name "Noriega" spelled out in ceramic tile at the two main gates on the sprawling corner property, which the government has been unable to auction.

Some supporters also say that Noriega's in absentia convictions can be appealed, though Panama's government denies that is a possibility. Either way, it is unlikely Noriega will soon be seen in a public venue—his audience in the Portugal case will probably not happen for a number of months.

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