3-1-2012

Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina Proposes Legalizing Drugs; U.S. Rejects Idea

Louisa Reynolds

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina Proposes Legalizing Drugs; U.S. Rejects Idea

by Louisa Reynolds
Category/Department: Guatemala
Published: 2012-03-01

Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina, who took office in January, caused a stir when he announced last week that he would propose legalizing drugs in Central America during a meeting with the region’s leaders. "I want to bring this discussion to the table," he said. "It wouldn’t be a crime to transport, to move drugs. It would all have to be regulated."

Pérez Molina added that the war on drugs and all the money and technology received from the US had not had a significant impact. "There was talk of the success of Plan Colombia, but all it did was neutralize big cartels," the president said.

The retired Army general, who came to power promising a tough stance on crime, also blamed the drug trade for soaring violence in Guatemala (NotiCen, Feb. 2, 2012), which has a homicide rate of 41 murders per 100,000 people.

On Feb. 28, Vice President Roxana Baldetti embarked on a trip across the region to persuade Central America's leaders to back Pérez Molina’s proposal. Her first port of call was Panama, where the government firmly stated that it would not support the initiative. "We’re 100% against legalizing drugs," said Foreign Minister Roberto Henríquez.

Baldetti now faces the task of winning over the presidents of Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador.

While Baldetti tried to woo the Panamanian authorities, Pérez Molina held a meeting with the US Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, who made it clear that US authorities would not compromise on the issue. "The United States does not consider legalization to be viable. We believe that there are better ways to fight drug trafficking. One is to reduce addiction, and the other is to prevent the production and distribution of drugs," she said.

Napolitano added that the US government would continue to support Central America’s war on drugs. When questioned by the press about what the US is doing to reduce the demand for narcotics she said, "Of course, the United States should also try to reduce the demand for drugs."

What does legalization imply?

So far, the Pérez Molina administration has been vague when pressed by the media as to what exactly the president is proposing. Would all drugs be legalized or just soft drugs like marijuana? And would legalization be implemented gradually over a period of time or suddenly? These are some of the questions that remain unanswered.

During a forum on regional security held on Feb. 27 at the Universidad Francisco Marroquín, Interior Minister Mauricio López Bonilla was questioned on this. He reiterated that one of the first steps would have to be decriminalizing the transportation of drugs and said that it was important to analyze successful experiences in other countries and the lessons that can be learned.

©2011 The University of New Mexico, Latin American & Iberian Institute
All rights reserved.
For instance, López Bonilla said that the Guatemalan security forces are currently carrying out an operation to eradicate poppy plantations in the municipalities of Sibinal, Tajumulco, and Ixchiguán, in the northern department of San Marcos. In these municipalities on the Guatemala-Mexico border, impoverished farmers continue to resort to cultivating marijuana and opium poppy despite regular raids from the armed forces, a vicious cycle that cannot be broken unless the state can offer them a sustainable livelihood and a way out of rural poverty.

"We are destroying these plantations because they are so huge that we run the risk of being considered a drug producer. But what incentives are we giving these people to give up drugs? We need to examine what other countries such as Colombia have done and include this in the legalization debate," the minister said.

However, López Bonilla admitted that Guatemala cannot push forward a legalization proposal without the support of other countries in the region.

Roberto Ardón, director of the Comité Coordinador de Asociaciones Agrícolas, Comerciales, Industriales y Financieras (CACIF), the representative body of the Guatemalan private sector, and member of the Consejo Asesor de Seguridad (CAS), a civil-society board that advises the executive on security issues, emphasized that the legalization debate should include more than just security concerns and that it is important to analyze the potential impact of the government’s proposal on public health.

He also raised concerns about Guatemala’s capacity as a weak and almost failed state to regulate the production and transportation of drugs. "If the authorities find it difficult to prosecute drug traffickers it will be even harder to enforce regulation of the drug market, which could lead to the creation of a new clandestine drug trade, which could be just as dangerous. Another risk is the potential increase in domestic drug use," said Ardón.

Although Guatemala is a major cocaine-transshipment point between South and North America, it has one of the lowest cocaine-consumption rates in the region. The latest report by the Secretaría Contra las Adicciones y el Tráfico Ilícito de Drogas (SECATID) said only 3.16% of Guatemalans take drugs. The most commonly used narcotics are cannabis and solvents.

Professor Bruce Bagley, an expert on US-Latin American relations at the University of Miami and a staunch advocate for legalization, says that legalizing the drug trade would reduce the price of narcotics to one-tenth of their current market value, thus slashing profits and ending the vicious wars between rival cartels that have cost the region so much bloodshed. "Nobody wants to encourage drug addiction, but, after 40 years, the war on drugs has failed. There must be a better way of fighting drugs than sacrificing one country after another," he said.

-- End --