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Morales Has Few Accomplishments After First Five Months as Guatemala’s President

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Five months after his inauguration, President Jimmy Morales of Guatemala, a former comedian who came to power promising to stamp out a deeply ingrained political culture of graft and corruption, has little to show for his time in office. Morales won a landslide victory in October 2015 with the slogan “neither corrupt nor a thief” (NotiCen, Nov. 5, 2015), which successfully exploited voters’ disaffection with the political establishment in the wake of a massive corruption scandal that landed former president Otto Pérez Molina, and his vice president, Roxana Baldetti, in jail.

A number of controversial appointments and actions have already taken a toll on Morales’ public image. The first scandal that cast doubt over his claim that he was determined to stamp out corruption hit the headlines in late January, when the investigative journalism website Nómada revealed that the newly elected president and his family had spent three months in a luxury hotel before Morales’ inauguration on Jan. 14, paid for by the Kong family, one of Guatemala’s wealthiest clans. The Kongs own an African palm exporting company that faces an international lawsuit for failing to comply with labor standards established by the DR-CAFTA agreement. Morales said he had been forced to live there before moving into the presidential palace when he and his family received death threats.

Shortly afterwards, Morales came under fire from civil society organizations for choosing Judge Dina Josefina Ochoa as a magistrate of the Constitutional Court (CC), Guatemala’s highest court. Following the procedure established under Guatemalan law, the five members of the CC are selected by the executive, Congress, the Guatemalan Bar Association, the Supreme Court, and the University of San Carlos. Morales’ decision to appoint Judge Ochoa was controversial because in 2012 she was included in a report on corrupt judges published by the UN-funded International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala, CICIG), even though the commission later stated that the file on Judge Ochoa had been closed.

Then, in April, Morales was heavily criticized for reneging on his campaign pledge not to accept deputies from parties tainted by corruption scandals when he allowed 16 deputies from other parties to defect to his own Frente de Convergencia Nacional (FCN). The move came days before a new law penalizing deputies who constantly switch from one party to another—a common practice in Guatemalan politics known as transfugismo—came into effect (NotiCen, March 17, 2016).

After the latest wave of defections, the balance of forces in Congress is as follows: the FCN has 37 deputies, followed by the Unión Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE), 32; the Movimiento Reformador (MR), 20; Todos, 17; Alianza Ciudadana, 13; Encuentro por Guatemala, 7; Unión del Cambio Nacional (UCN), 6; Compromiso, Renovación y Orden (CREO), 5; Libertad Democrática Renovada (LIDER), 4; Visión con Valores (Viva), 4; Convergencia, 3; Partido de Avanzada Nacional (PAN), 3; Partido Patriota (PP), 2; Fuerza, 2; Winaq, 1; Unionista, 1; and Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG), 1. There is one independent deputy.
The FCN has continued to grow even though several of its members have been involved in a series of widely publicized scandals, such as the one involving text messages sent by Congressman Juan Manuel Giordano revealing that governors have been intimidated and pressured into appointing contractors with ties to the official party. Giordano was forced to admit he had sent the text messages, which were leaked to the local press. He faces mounting pressure to step down.

**No clear strategy**

President Morales has yet to produce a government plan or to outline concrete proposals to tackle crime and deal with the country’s long-standing public healthcare crisis, among other issues, leading critics to accuse his administration of improvisation and to brand Morales as a political neophyte.

Guatemala’s chronically underfunded public healthcare system virtually collapsed in mid-2015, and during an official visit to the country’s hospitals, Morales was forced to issue a public apology to hospital staff for the lack of medicines and basic supplies. He did not say how his administration intends to deal with the crisis.

One case, in particular, caused widespread outrage: the death of 11-month-old Maycol David Morales, who was taken to a health clinic in Guatemala City by his impoverished mother. The mother was turned away and told the clinic lacked the necessary resources to treat him; Maycol died in his young mother’s arms in the middle of the street. The baby’s death, on March 29, caused the healthcare crisis to hit the headlines.

Under mounting pressure and facing a possible congressional inquiry, Minister of Health Alfonso Cabrera has expressed his intention to step down on several occasions, but President Morales has refused to accept his resignation.

Two other cabinet ministers—Minister of Communications Sherry Ordóñez, a state contractor who was accused of falling behind with tax payments, and Minister of Energy and Mining Juan Pelayo Castañón—have already resigned.

President Morales’ belligerent stance on a long-standing border dispute with Belize—re-ignited on April 20 after a Guatemalan teenager was killed in a shooting on Belize’s western border with Guatemala—has been regarded by critics as a desperate attempt to exploit patriotic sentiment in order to deflect attention away from domestic issues (NotiCen, May 12, 2016).

During the election (NotiCen, Sept. 24, 2015), Morales’ eloquence and the ease with which he appeared to handle the media gave him a key advantage over other candidates. However, once in office, Morales’ use of humor has often backfired, and he has often been lambasted by critics for not being serious and for lacking statesman-like qualities. A case in point was his interview with The New York Times on April 18. When he was asked what he thought of Republican candidate Donald Trump’s proposal to build a huge wall on the US southern border in order to stem the flow of undocumented immigrants, Morales replied: “I would offer him cheap labor. We have very good labor, and we would be very pleased to build the wall for him. All he needs to do is tell us how big the wall needs to be, and we’ll do it.” Although intended as a joke, Morales came under fire from social media users, who said the remark was tasteless and had made him a target for ridicule.