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## Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales Accused of Taking Bribes from the Army

by Louisa Reynolds

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Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales is under investigation for allegedly receiving bribes from the armed forces.

Guatemala's public finance watchdog, the Contraloría General de Cuentas, said that Morales received eight monthly payments from the Army totaling US\$53,000. The Contraloría is investigating the legality of the payments. Óscar Pérez, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Defense, said the payments were made as a bonus for the president and high ranking military officers due to "the high responsibility of his position," but several former presidents have said they never received similar payments during their time in office.

Morales' official salary is US\$20,100 per month, a figure that increased to US\$27,300 with the bonus from the armed forces.

These revelations, made by the investigative news website *Nómada*, led to a national outcry. Guatemala is one of the poorest countries in Latin America, and yet Morales is the best paid president in the region, with a salary that is 50 times higher than the minimum wage.

On Sept. 14, in the midst of a public opinion backlash, Morales announced he would pay back the US\$53,000 he had received from the armed forces.

A week later, on Sept. 27, the office of the attorney general requested for the second time this year that the Supreme Court lift Morales' prosecutorial immunity so that he could be investigated for corruption and abuse of authority. However, the Supreme Court blocked the probe on the grounds that he had returned the funds and that there were no grounds for an investigation.

### *A string of corruption scandals*

Morales, a comedian with no political experience who won the 2015 elections on an anti-corruption platform, fell from grace soon after he assumed the presidency as he became embroiled in one corruption scandal after another ([NotiCen, March 17, 2016](#), [June 30, 2016](#), [Sept. 15, 2016](#)).

In September 2016, the UN-funded International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) accused Morales' brother and one of his sons of involvement in the simulation of a state purchase and the use of false documents to fake a public tender ([NotiCen, Oct. 13, 2016](#), and [Feb. 23, 2017](#)).

This year, on Aug. 25, CICIG and the office of the attorney general accused Morales of violating Guatemala's electoral law by failing to justify the origin of US\$918,000 received as campaign donations by his party, the Frente de Convergencia Nacional (FCN), while he acted as party chairman. A day earlier, CICIG had announced it was investigating two other political parties—the Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE) and the now defunct Libertad Democrática Renovada (LIDER) party—for similar charges.

It was at that moment that CICIG and the office of the attorney general first requested that the Supreme Court strip Morales of his prosecutorial immunity so that he could be investigated for illegal campaign funding.

### *Feud with head of CICIG*

Morales reacted angrily, demanding in a meeting with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres in New York that the UN should remove head of CICIG, Iván Velásquez.

Upon his return, on Aug. 27, Morales declared Velásquez persona non grata and expelled him from the country in a recorded video message posted on the Guatemalan government's official Twitter account.

Pro-transparency organizations, the donor countries that support CICIG, and ordinary citizens rallied behind Velásquez, who became hugely popular in Guatemala after a CICIG-led investigation into a massive customs fraud network known as La Línea forced Morales' predecessor, Otto Pérez Molina (2012-2015), and his vice president, Roxana Baldetti, to resign in 2015 ([NotiCen, Sept. 3, 2015](#), [July 14, 2016](#), [July 13, 2017](#)). The groups are defending Velásquez's right to complete his mandate and continue his work without interference from the government.

The office of the ombudsman for human rights (Procuraduría de los Derechos Humanos, PDH), the pro-transparency group JusticiaYa, and a lawyer acting on behalf of hundreds of ordinary Guatemalans legally challenged and thereby blocked Velásquez's expulsion.

Several cabinet ministers, including the ministers of health, labor, and finance, as well as the secretary of state, resigned in protest against Morales' decision to expel Velásquez.

The Supreme Court ruled there were sufficient grounds to strip Morales of his prosecutorial immunity, but Congress, which has the final say on whether a president can be impeached, blocked the probe.

### *Effort to repeal campaign funding laws*

On Sept. 13, 105 deputies in the 158-member Congress voted in favor of amending Article 407 of the Penal Code, which relates to illegal campaign funding. The move transferred responsibility for providing detailed accounts of the party's sources of funding from the party's chairperson to the party's accountant. Under the new law, party leaders such as Morales would be guaranteed immunity from prosecution for illicit campaign funding.

The amendment was put forward by deputies Javier Hernández, of the FCN party, Orlando Blanco of the UNE party, Alejandra Carrillo, of the Movimiento Reformador, and Delia Bac of Alianza Ciudadana—the leading members of the parties under investigation and their Congressional allies.

Under another amendment passed by Congress the same day, 400 crimes ranging from extortion to child pornography would qualify for alternative sentencing, such as probation or community service. The deputies behind the amendment argued it would help to alleviate overcrowding in the Guatemalan prison system.

The move was met with public outrage and sparked off a wave of protests demanding that Morales and the 105 deputies who had voted in favor of the amendment should resign immediately.

Two days later, under intense pressure, 130 deputies voted to block the amendments they had just passed. A number of them tried to put a positive spin on this sudden U-turn, saying they were "following the people's will" and arguing that they had "shown the necessary humility to correct their mistakes." However, this did not suffice to placate demonstrators' wrath, and the country's Sept. 15 Independence Day parade turned into a massive protest calling for all deputies to resign.

After several deputies were pushed and pelted with eggs as they entered the congressional building, even those who had armed bodyguards were afraid to leave the premises until riot police dispersed the crowd late in the evening.

The embarrassing legislative U-turn was not enough to quell the demonstrations, and on Sept. 20, thousands of Guatemalans took to the streets again demanding the immediate resignation of President Morales as well as the 105 deputies who voted in favor of the amendments. The nation-wide demonstration brought the country to a standstill, with many small and medium-size businesses joining the protest by closing their doors in order to allow their employees to attend the march.

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