
Guatemala's Security Challenges and the Government's Response

Dr. R. Evan Ellis¹

ORCID code: 0000-0003-2646-9571

e-mail address: robert.e.ellis78.civ@army.mil

Summary

Guatemala stands at a crossroads, besieged by transnational drug trafficking, uncontrolled migration, and the relentless grip of violent street gangs. Weak institutions and systemic corruption erode governance, fueling public disillusionment. The election of President Bernardo Arévalo signaled a rejection of entrenched elites, yet his reform agenda faces resistance from a hostile legislature and deeply rooted power structures. US support remains essential but must tread carefully to avoid provoking nationalist backlash. The stakes are high: failure to restore security will accelerate migration, embolden criminal networks, and deepen regional instability. This study dissects Guatemala's security crisis, evaluates Arévalo's strategy, and assesses the geopolitical consequences of success or failure.

Keywords: Guatemala Security Crisis, Transnational Crime, Institutional Corruption, US Geopolitical Interests, Military Reform, Gang Violence, Migration Corridors

Introduction

The surprise election of reform candidate Bernardo Arévalo in Guatemala in August 2023—and his struggle against entrenched elites who sought to block his January 2024 inauguration and strip his Semilla party of its legal standing—underscores Guatemala's broader battle for stability.² As a key transit country for illegal drugs and migration, its success as a stable, prosperous democracy with strong institutions is vital not only for the region but also for US strategic interests.

Guatemala occupies a pivotal geographic position. Stretching across the Central American isthmus from the Atlantic to the Pacific, it serves both as a corridor for drug and migrant flows to the United States and as a potential chokepoint for controlling them. It also links—or separates—North America, including Mexico, from the rest of Central and South America, including the Panama Canal. Notably, Guatemala remains the last Spanish-speaking country in Central America to recognize Taiwan over the People's Republic of China (PRC), even as Beijing expands its political influence and strategic infrastructure projects across the region.³ China's growing footprint includes partnerships with governments at odds with Washington, such as

Nicaragua's anti-US Ortega regime, Honduras's leftist-populist Libre administration, and the authoritarian maverick Nayib Bukele in El Salvador.⁴

A weakened Guatemala, whether through collapse into a populist narcostate or a strategic realignment toward Beijing, would be a geopolitical disaster. Either scenario would entrench organized crime, deepen regional instability, and erode US influence in the hemisphere.⁵

This study examines the security challenges facing Guatemala and the efforts of the Arévalo administration to confront them. It highlights the government's struggle against formidable threats, from transnational crime to internal corruption, while contending with resource constraints and political fractures. With US support, Guatemala's security forces are mounting a determined defense, but the scale of the crisis threatens to overwhelm even their best efforts.

Guatemala's Security Challenges

Guatemala's geographic position has long made it a critical transit corridor for cocaine bound for North America. Initially sourced from Colombia and later Venezuela, these drug shipments have flowed through the country for decades.⁶ In 2022, Guatemalan authorities seized 5.04 metric tons of cocaine within their borders and coastal waters—far more than in neighboring Honduras and El Salvador. Yet this remains a fraction of the 739 metric tons intercepted by Colombian authorities that same year, underscoring the scale of the illicit trade.⁷

Once primarily a source of migration, Guatemala has also become a key transit hub for migrants from Venezuela, Cuba, Haiti, Ecuador, and beyond—many of whom cross the treacherous Darién Gap before moving northward through Central America in route to the United States.⁸

The structure of narcotrafficking in Guatemala and the relationship between external cartels and local smuggling networks have evolved significantly in recent years. Before 2008, a handful of Guatemalan smuggling clans—known locally as *transportistas*—controlled the trade. Families such as the Lorenzanas, Mendozas, and López Ortiz worked with Mexican partners to move cocaine shipments northward. Initially, traffickers used clandestine airstrips (*narcopistas*) in the remote Petén region before shifting to overland routes through Honduras and into Mexico.⁹ The result was a deeply corrupt but relatively stable system: a conservative-controlled state with endemic graft but low levels of violence.¹⁰

That fragile equilibrium collapsed around 2008. The Mexican cartel Los Zetas—bolstered by former Mexican special forces operatives¹¹—aligned with a marginalized Guatemalan trafficker, Horst Walther Overdick, to seize control of high-value smuggling routes.¹² Their incursion escalated violence as they fought to consolidate power. In 2012, the administration of Otto Pérez Molina, with significant US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) assistance, intensified its crackdown on the

transportista networks. The result: a splintering of Guatemalan smuggling groups and a surge in violence as fragmented factions vied for dominance.¹³

The combined pressure of Mexican security forces targeting Los Zetas and the resistance of entrenched Guatemalan groups—most notably the Huistas of Huehuetenango—ultimately drove Los Zetas out of Guatemala.¹⁴ Meanwhile, Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina was jailed for corruption and ties to narcotraffickers, further reshaping the country's criminal landscape.

Today, Mexico's two dominant cartels—Sinaloa and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG)—operate through a still-fragmented network of Guatemalan smuggling groups. This arrangement benefits the Mexican cartels, giving them leverage and a vested interest in preventing the re-consolidation of organized crime in Guatemala.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the persistence of groups such as the Huistas—one of the country's largest surviving criminal organizations¹⁶—and the Pochos, whose leader, Juan José Morales Cifuentes, was recently arrested, underscores the enduring legacy of Guatemala's criminal past. Morales Cifuentes hails from the Zúñiga family, a clan with deep-rooted ties to the drug trade.¹⁷

Over time, coca cultivation and processing labs have emerged in remote areas such as Izabal and Alta Verapaz—regions where the Guatemalan state remains largely absent.¹⁸ The shift reflects both the incentives for producing cocaine domestically rather than smuggling it in from Colombia and the fertile conditions of Guatemala's mountainous regions, particularly San Marcos, which yield coca leaves with high alkaloid content. The result: higher-value product with greater profitability.¹⁹

Key smuggling routes remain largely unchanged. Traffickers continue to use narcopistas in the Petén, exploit Guatemala's porous southern border with Honduras, and move drugs overland into Mexico via well-established coastal and interior routes.²⁰ Meanwhile, maritime smuggling has intensified. Increasingly, traffickers deploy watercraft—including semisubmersibles—departing from Colombia's and Ecuador's Pacific coasts, often transiting Guatemala's vast 200-mile exclusive economic zone before making landfall in either Mexico or Guatemala itself.²¹ These operations have severely tested Guatemala's overstretched navy, whose small fleet of fast boats struggles to patrol vast distances in often rough Pacific waters.

Guatemala's eastern border with Belize has become an increasingly problematic frontier, plagued by weak state presence and minimal road infrastructure in its sparsely populated stretches.²² Further complicating the situation, the area surrounding the Sarstoon River remains the subject of a long-standing territorial dispute between the two countries. Tensions flared in 2016 when a clash erupted between their security forces.²³ Fortunately, the incident was contained, thanks to the close working relationship between their militaries. The dispute is currently before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), yet efforts to prevent further military confrontations have arguably led both nations to limit their armed presence in the

region—creating a security vacuum readily exploited by narcotraffickers and other illicit actors.²⁴

Guatemala's weak state presence, exacerbated by the post-Civil War defunding of its military, has allowed vast swaths of territory to fall under the control of criminal enterprises.²⁵ The mountainous region of San Marcos, near the Mexican border, became the region's primary hub for heroin poppy cultivation,²⁶ while marijuana production proliferated in remote parts of the country.²⁷

However, as the Guatemalan government has escalated its operations against narcotraffickers, demand for San Marcos's heroin and locally grown marijuana has declined, causing a contraction in production. Meanwhile, coca cultivation and limited cocaine processing have reportedly expanded.²⁸ Experts consulted for this study warn that Guatemala's ungoverned spaces could soon serve as sites for synthetic drug production—including fentanyl—given rising global demand for such substances, particularly in the United States.²⁹

Alongside the drug trade, Guatemala—like neighboring El Salvador and Honduras—has struggled with the scourge of violent street gangs, particularly Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 (B-18).³⁰ However, unlike in El Salvador and Honduras, where gang influence has been more pervasive, Guatemala's gang activity has remained largely confined to the marginal outer suburbs of Guatemala City, particularly in Villanueva and Mixco,³¹ as well as to a lesser extent in Escuintla, south of the capital.³²

The dominance of Guatemala's countryside by narcotraffickers and conservative elites has prevented MS-13 and B-18 from expanding beyond their urban strongholds. Moreover, the two gangs have generally respected each other's territorial boundaries, limiting intergang turf wars but still subjecting residents under their control to systematic extortion.³³

Crackdowns in El Salvador against MS-13 and B-18 leadership have contributed to the fragmentation of these gangs within Guatemala, weakening their command structures and creating an opening for opportunistic criminal groups to extort businesses and residents under the guise of gang affiliation. As a result, extortion in Guatemala more than doubled between 2013 and 2021.³⁴ The rise of these “imitator” groups, along with crimes such as motorcycle robberies, has fueled a growing sense of public insecurity.

Despite a sharp decline in homicides—from 46 per 100,000 in 2016, one of the highest rates in the region, to 16.7 per 100,000 today—crime remains a persistent concern.³⁵ In 2023, reported crimes increased by 10.5 percent compared to the previous year, underscoring the continued challenges to law and order.³⁶

Beyond drugs and gangs, Guatemala has increasingly become a transit corridor for migrants moving through the Central American isthmus toward the United States.

These migrants hail from Venezuela, Ecuador, Haiti, Cuba, and other nations.³⁷ Guatemala's narrow Atlantic coast—the "corner" of Central America—borders Honduras to the east and Belize to the north, making it a key entry point. Many migrants are also smuggled across the porous Belizean border before continuing north, often crossing into Mexico near the coastal region opposite Tapachula.³⁸

While Venezuelans make up the largest migrant group passing through Guatemala, the country has so far avoided the entrenchment of Venezuelan criminal syndicates such as Tren de Aragua, which have exploited and trafficked migrants elsewhere in South America.³⁹ Experts consulted for this study suggest that Venezuelan gangs have yet to establish a foothold in Guatemala largely because Venezuelan migrants do not remain there in sufficient numbers or for long enough durations.⁴⁰

Within Guatemala, controlling the nation's prisons remains an acute challenge, compounded by rampant overcrowding.⁴¹ The prison population has tripled since 2000, with the overuse of pretrial detention as a key contributor. More than 47 percent of the 23,000 incarcerated individuals in Guatemala have yet to stand trial. In some cases, detainees have served the equivalent of their prospective sentence—or even died in custody—before ever appearing in court.⁴² Others have died awaiting trial, a grim indictment of the system's inefficiencies and legal inertia.⁴³

Compounding Guatemala's security and governance challenges, a wave of wildfires ravaged the country's northern departments in early 2024.⁴⁴ A combination of deliberate land clearing and dry conditions sparked massive blazes in Jutiapa and Petén, consuming more than 465 square miles of the Maya Biosphere Reserve.⁴⁵ The crisis forced President Arévalo to declare a national emergency and deploy the military to assist in firefighting, evacuation efforts, and security operations in coordination with the national emergency management authority, CONRED.⁴⁶ The deployment, while necessary, strained the already limited capacity of Guatemala's armed forces, diverting resources from other critical missions.⁴⁷

The Guatemalan Government Response

The Guatemalan government's security response reflects both continuity with initiatives launched under previous administrations and new directives under President Arévalo.

To address mounting security challenges, the Guatemalan National Police has expanded its ranks and acquired additional resources, including 500 new motorcycles and 24 trucks in December 2023.⁴⁸ The Arévalo administration has set an ambitious goal of adding up to 12,000 officers. However, the limited capacity of the police academy and other training institutions constrains the speed of that expansion, even if funding for salaries, equipment, and operational costs can be secured.

Beyond numbers, systemic issues of professionalization and corruption within the police continue to undermine its effectiveness. According to experts consulted for this work, repeated shifts in leadership across multiple administrations have bred institutional instability, disrupting continuity without delivering substantive reform.⁴⁹ Under President Alejandro Giammattei, the government introduced a comprehensive strategy for police transformation.⁵⁰ Some elements of that plan were implemented—new uniforms and equipment arrived just as his administration left office—but broader structural reforms remained elusive.

President Arévalo and his Interior Minister, Francisco Jiménez, have pledged to strengthen the force and root out corruption. However, the specifics of their approach—and how it aligns with or departs from Giammattei's unfinished reforms—remain in flux.⁵¹

During periods of heightened murder rates and insufficient police presence, the Guatemalan government established "Citizen Security Brigades", composed primarily of former military personnel, to bolster public confidence in security.⁵² At their peak, 10 such brigades were in operation.⁵³ However, their limited authority—lacking the power to make arrests or employ lethal force—diminished their deterrent effect.⁵⁴ As the National Civil Police (PNC) expanded, the brigades were repurposed to provide perimeter security around Guatemala's prisons, supporting the PNC's internal operations by creating a buffer zone to prevent the smuggling of weapons, cellphones, and other contraband.⁵⁵

To address evolving security threats, the police have developed specialized units. Among them is the FIAAT, Guatemala's equivalent of US SWAT teams. In recent years, FIAAT has acquired its own helicopters through US donations,⁵⁶ with police officers trained as pilots—reducing the unit's dependence on the Guatemalan military for air mobility.⁵⁷

The PNC also operates a dedicated antigang unit, DIPANDA, which focuses on countering gang violence and extortion.⁵⁸ With US support, DIPANDA extends its mission beyond enforcement, engaging in initiatives to deter at-risk youth from gang recruitment.⁵⁹

In response to the escalating threat of extortion—perpetrated not only by established gangs like MS-13 and Barrio 18 but also by "imitator" groups—the Interior Ministry has launched a new Anti-Extortion Task Force.⁶⁰ However, its impact in curbing the crisis remains limited thus far.⁶¹

In addressing border security, previous Guatemalan administrations established a series of police-military Interagency Task Forces (IATFs) to monitor border regions and clandestine crossings.⁶² These included Chortí, covering the border with Honduras; Xinca, assigned to the El Salvador border; Tecún Umán, overseeing the coastal border with Mexico; and Belem, under development to secure Guatemala's interior

border with Mexico. However, operational tensions between the police and military—stemming from institutional differences that disrupted unity of command—ultimately undermined the effectiveness of these units. Consequently, the Giammattei administration disbanded the IATFs in March 2023, allowing the police to refocus on internal security.⁶³ This shift enabled a surge in law enforcement presence along the Mexican border in January 2024.

Within the Interior Ministry, efforts have also been made to address prison overcrowding and control. Guatemala's 15-prison system, including the maximum-security facility Enfermito in Escuintla, falls under the ministry's jurisdiction. Recognizing the need to separate detainees awaiting trial from convicted criminals, the government established a dedicated Preventative Detention Center. Plans to expand prison infrastructure—including the construction of a new maximum-security facility in Masagua—have been pursued but remain stalled due to administrative and legal challenges.⁶⁴

Regarding the Guatemalan military, the priorities of the incoming Arévalo administration and Defense Minister General Henry Sáenz Ramos have centered on ensuring the institution remains apolitical and addressing corruption within its ranks.⁶⁵

In maintaining its neutrality, the Guatemalan military demonstrated notable restraint during the contentious power transition preceding President Arévalo's inauguration. Despite the intense political struggle between President-elect Arévalo and his Semilla party on one side and the Attorney General's office and conservative elites seeking to challenge them on the other, the military successfully avoided the perception of taking sides.⁶⁶

On the issue of corruption, the Arévalo administration's Ministry of Defense has reportedly taken a firm stance against misconduct within the ranks. This includes compelling the retirement of officers strongly suspected of corruption—cases where securing convictions through military tribunals or civilian courts would have been challenging.⁶⁷

Border security has been another key priority, highlighted by the deployment of 5,000 personnel to reinforce the Mexican border in the departments of San Marcos and Huehuetenango under Operation Belt of Fire.⁶⁸

Additionally, the administration has emphasized strict adherence to human rights norms in military operations and interactions with civilian populations. In April 2024, it underscored this commitment by inaugurating a new human rights training school at the headquarters of the Mariscal Zavala Brigade.⁶⁹

The new administration has also prioritized efforts to make the military a more inclusive institution. Notably, Guatemala now has an unprecedented four female colonels, one of whom serves as the head of the recently established human rights

school. Given the current trajectory, it is likely that one of these officers will become the country's first female general, marking a significant milestone in the evolution of the Guatemalan armed forces.⁷⁰

In terms of specific capabilities, the Guatemalan military continues to operate impressively within the constraints of very limited resources.

Despite chronic resource constraints, the Guatemalan military continues to operate effectively within its limitations. Airspace control, particularly in countering narcoflights in regions such as Petén, remains a persistent challenge due to the military's limited fleet of interceptor aircraft. At present, Guatemala possesses a Pilatus PC-7 and two aging US-supplied A-37 jets, none of which are operational. While previous administrations have attempted to procure new interceptors from Argentina and Brazil, these efforts have been plagued by allegations of corruption, ultimately preventing the acquisitions from moving forward.⁷¹

In addition to a lack of interceptor aircraft, Guatemala's air defense capabilities are hindered by reliance on an aging Spanish Indira radar system.⁷² While the system offers some capacity for detecting unauthorized air incursions, its coverage gaps are well-known to narcotraffickers. Corrupt officials have reportedly leaked information regarding these vulnerabilities, enabling traffickers to circumvent radar detection and conduct flights outside of monitored areas.

Beyond interceptors, the Guatemalan armed forces also face constraints in transport and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. The military currently operates five Cessna 208 fixed-wing transports, a Pilatus PC-12 received from the United States in May 2024,⁷³ two Beech Super King Airs, an older DHC-6 Twin Otter, and a Bassler B-67, the latter of which remains unavailable due to maintenance issues. While the fixed-wing fleet remains limited, Guatemala has fared somewhat better in maintaining rotary-wing capability. Its helicopter fleet includes two Bell 412EXP helicopters, acquired in December 2022,⁷⁴ and a Bell 429, acquired in January 2024.⁷⁵ The introduction of the Bell 412s alone reportedly increased the operational readiness of Guatemala's rotary-wing fleet by more than 50 percent.

A significant contributing factor to Guatemala's rotary-wing preparedness has been Taiwan's support in training its helicopter pilots. This assistance proved critical after tensions between Guatemala and Colombia led to the cancellation of Colombian training programs. The diplomatic dispute stemmed from the appointment of the controversial former head of Guatemala's United Nations-backed anti-corruption body, CICIG, as Minister of Defense by the country's leftist president. However, following the inauguration of President Arévalo, Colombia reinstated its pilot training cooperation with Guatemala, helping to restore a key component of the country's military aviation readiness.

In the maritime domain, Guatemala continues to face significant challenges in securing its 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) against drug trafficking. The country's primary tool for maritime interdiction in the Pacific is its naval special forces unit, the Fuerza Especial Naval (FEN),⁷⁶ which operates from relatively small, fast boats in the often-turbulent waters of the Pacific.⁷⁷ However, the Navy's operational reach is constrained by its limited port infrastructure. The primary naval base is located at Puerto Quetzal, in the southern portion of the Pacific coast, far from the maritime border with Mexico, where a greater number of narcotics-laden vessels make landfall. While minor facilities exist at Ocos and Champerico, closer to the Mexican border, these lack the personnel, logistical support, and infrastructure necessary to sustain and resupply larger naval assets.⁷⁸ A planned second major military port at Champerico never materialized due to the failure to develop the necessary commercial port infrastructure. Nonetheless, the United States continues to explore options with Guatemalan authorities to enhance the country's military port capabilities in the future.⁷⁹

To extend the operational range and endurance of the FEN and its watercraft, the US Southern Command provided Guatemala with a logistics support "mothership" to refuel small interceptor craft in the Pacific and provide crew rest.⁸⁰ Additionally, Guatemala has engaged with the Colombian shipyard COTECMAR regarding the potential acquisition of a second such vessel.⁸¹ However, the initial mothership was ultimately found to be too slow and ill-suited for the rougher Pacific seas, leading to its reassignment to the Atlantic. To further improve maritime security operations, Guatemala is set to receive an 85-foot Naval Coastal Patrol Vessel (NCPV) from the United States at the end of June 2024. The vessel, retired from the US Coast Guard, will enhance Guatemala's ability to maintain an extended presence in the Pacific and conduct more effective interdiction efforts.

With regard to riverine security, which is critical both for internal movement in remote regions such as Petén and for cross-border smuggling routes, the Guatemalan Navy has expanded its capabilities by deploying shallow-bottom river patrol craft. These include smaller boats previously provided by the United States as well as vessels confiscated from criminals. In 2020, Guatemala further strengthened its riverine forces by opening a modest shipyard at its Atlantic port, which has since been used to construct approximately ten small watercraft in three different sizes, known as Eduarinos.⁸² The facility also provides maintenance and limited repair capabilities for the country's naval assets.⁸³ With this expanded capacity, Guatemala has been able to assert a reasonable degree of control over its inland waterways, including the Suchiate River, which forms part of the country's southwestern border with Mexico.

Guatemala's land forces remain significantly constrained by limited resources, with the country's military budget amounting to only 0.4%–0.5 percent of GDP.⁸⁴ The "Jungle Brigade," responsible for operations in the dense Petén region, functions primarily as a light infantry unit and lacks the specialized equipment—such as

riverboats—needed to enhance its effectiveness in the jungle environment.⁸⁵ Similarly, the High Mountain Brigade remains without sufficient organic equipment to allow it to operate at full capacity in the rugged terrain under its jurisdiction. In 2024, when these units were called upon to reinforce border security and combat wildfires in Petén and Jutiapa, the Guatemalan military temporarily attached units from other commands that possessed the necessary specialized capabilities. However, this solution came at the cost of increased operational tempo for those attached units and their reduced availability elsewhere in the country.⁸⁶

With respect to ground mobility, the Guatemalan military continues to rely on up-armored Jeep CJ-8s provided by the United States,⁸⁷ though these vehicles have long suffered from persistent suspension and mechanical issues that have negatively affected their operational availability.⁸⁸ In October 2022, the United States donated 95 additional vehicles, including Toyota Hiluxes, Land Cruisers, and motorcycles, a contribution that reportedly improved the armed forces' overall mobility.⁸⁹ This enhanced mobility was particularly useful during the January 2024 surge of forces to the Mexican border in San Marcos and Huehuetenango under Operation Belt of Fire.⁹⁰

Complementing its existing capabilities, the Guatemalan military has, since 2007, maintained an elite unit known as the Special Battalion for Interdiction and Rescue (BEIR). This force integrates the country's well-regarded military special forces, the Kaibiles, with enhanced air and ground mobility assets. Like the FIAAT in the police and the FEN in the Navy, BEIR is employed in high-risk operations against major narcotrafficking networks and other difficult targets.⁹¹

Beyond equipment, infrastructure, and training, the Arévalo administration is in the process of drafting a new national security strategy. President Arévalo, whose academic background includes several books on civil-military relations in Guatemala, has demonstrated a particular interest in defense policy.⁹² Under his administration, Guatemala is also revising its military penal code with support from the United States. As part of broader defense cooperation, the United States has worked with Guatemala to improve its military planning system, SIPLAGDE, and has introduced new operational research tools such as MAGDEF to strengthen the Ministry of Defense's analytical and strategic planning capabilities. Additionally, the United States has funded the placement of a senior-level Ministry of Defense Advisor (MODA) to assist with military reform efforts.⁹³

With this increased support, the Guatemalan armed forces—particularly the Navy—have made notable progress in defense planning. This includes improving the rationality of acquisitions, gaining a more sophisticated understanding of lifecycle costs, and enhancing the military's ability to justify specific capability requests before Congress.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, despite these strides in defense reform, Guatemala's broader struggle against organized crime continues to be hindered by political infighting between the executive branch and the independent Public Ministry, led

by Attorney General Consuelo Porras.⁹⁵ While routine prosecutions against criminal elements persist, high-profile cases have been adversely affected, including instances of limited intelligence-sharing between Porras' office and law enforcement. In the absence of reliable high-level intelligence from the Attorney General's office, the Interior Ministry's intelligence agency, DIGCI, has been forced to rely primarily on police intelligence, which remains insufficient for effectively combating transnational criminal organizations.⁹⁶

Civil-Military Challenges

President Arévalo has encountered several minor challenges and tensions in his role as civilian commander-in-chief of Guatemala's military. However, his background as a scholar specializing in civil-military relations,⁹⁷ combined with guidance from trusted advisors such as his national security chief, retired General Ismael Cifuentes Bustamante, has allowed him to navigate these difficulties effectively.⁹⁸

One of the primary sources of contention stemmed from President Arévalo's decision to select senior military leadership from Promotion 117, bypassing members of Promotion 118, who possessed an additional year of seniority and experience. This decision led to some dissatisfaction within the ranks. The most high-profile point of friction emerged between his former Chief of Defense Staff, General Carlos Medina Juárez, a member of Promotion 118 with extensive command experience—including in combat operations as part of Guatemala's peacekeeping contingent in the Congo—and his Minister of Defense, Henry Sáenz Ramos of Promotion 117.⁹⁹ Sáenz had concluded his service at the rank of colonel before being promoted to general, yet he enjoyed President Arévalo's confidence and demonstrated strong capabilities in representing the Guatemalan Armed Forces before Congress, civil society, and the international community.¹⁰⁰

While the differing skill sets of the two leaders were, in some respects, complementary, tensions between them persisted. These tensions came to a head when General Sáenz, as Minister of Defense, chose to accompany President Arévalo in uniform during a public march from the Presidential Palace to Congress.¹⁰¹ The march was part of the President's broader effort to pressure the legislature into passing a law that would restrict the powers of the Attorney General's office, whose head, Thelma Aldana, had been actively working to undermine his administration through investigations and other legal maneuvers.¹⁰²

General Medina, however, declined to join the President and Defense Minister in the demonstration. In the aftermath of a public dispute over the appropriateness of uniformed senior officers participating in such a political activity, the underlying tensions within the military's leadership became unsustainable. This ultimately led President Arévalo to dismiss General Medina and replace him with Colonel Hermalindo Choz.¹⁰³

The decision to place a colonel in a position of authority over generals on the General Staff further exacerbated discontent within the ranks. It also fueled concerns among right-leaning observers regarding President Arévalo's leftist credentials, with some interpreting the move as an attempt to undermine the traditional military hierarchy.¹⁰⁴ Adding to the tensions, a legal suit filed by another Guatemalan colonel temporarily blocked several military promotions proposed by the President. The suit alleged that those selected for advancement did not meet the legally mandated qualifications for their new ranks.¹⁰⁵

Beyond military affairs, President Arévalo has struggled to advance his legislative agenda, particularly in the realm of security policy. By the 100-day mark of his administration, he had yet to secure the passage of any significant laws. This failure was largely due to conservative opponents controlling Guatemala's electoral institutions, who had successfully blocked his allies in the Semilla party from gaining legal recognition in Congress. As a result, Semilla was unable to hold committee chairmanships or exert procedural influence in legislative matters, effectively stalling the President's policy initiatives.¹⁰⁶

Compounding these difficulties, Arévalo, who campaigned on a platform of clean governance, has been forced to dismiss two members of his administration due to allegations of misconduct. In April 2024, he fired Environment Minister María José Iturbide after it was revealed that her daughter had improperly used a government vehicle.¹⁰⁷ The following month, he dismissed Communications Minister Jazmín de la Vega over irregularities in payments to construction firms.¹⁰⁸ While Arévalo continues to enjoy strong public support, he faces mounting pressure to deliver tangible results and maintain an unblemished record. His ability to sustain political capital will be critical as he navigates the complex security and governance challenges confronting the country.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

The pervasive influence of transnational narcotics trafficking, unchecked migration flows, and the widespread criminality driven by street gangs continue to undermine Guatemala's democratic institutions. These forces not only strain the nation's security apparatus but also contribute to deepening societal disillusionment, eroding public confidence in the government's ability to protect its citizens and uphold the rule of law. The election of Bernardo Arévalo represented a resounding rejection of the entrenched corruption, insecurity, and economic stagnation that have long plagued the country. His victory signified Guatemalans' desperation for change and their hope for a government capable of addressing these systemic challenges. However, while Arévalo enjoys a degree of goodwill from the public, his administration faces formidable obstacles. Limited financial resources, a hostile legislature unwilling to grant additional funding or legislative support, and entrenched power structures resistant to reform all threaten to derail his efforts. Corrupt elites, many of whom benefited from the inefficiencies of previous

administrations, remain deeply invested in his failure and seek to weaken his government at every turn.

The United States has extended significant security and development assistance to Guatemala, recognizing the broader implications of the country's stability for the region. However, US policy makers must strike a delicate balance, supporting the Arévalo administration without overstepping in ways that could provoke nationalist backlash or be perceived as undue foreign interference. While Washington has a vested interest in strengthening Guatemala's governance and security institutions, its role must be calibrated to respect Guatemala's sovereignty and domestic political dynamics.

Ultimately, the stakes are high. Should Arévalo's government falter, the consequences would extend far beyond Guatemala's borders. A failure to contain corruption, organized crime, and instability could exacerbate migration pressures, strengthen transnational criminal networks, and further destabilize the region. The struggle to reform Guatemala's institutions and restore public trust in democracy is an uphill battle, yet it is one in which failure is not an option—for Guatemala, for the United States, and for the broader region.

About the author

Robert Evan Ellis is a research professor of Latin American Studies at the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, with a focus on the region's relationships with China and other non-Western Hemisphere actors, as well as transnational organized crime and populism in the region. He has published over 500 works, including five books. Dr. Ellis has worked in both the government and private sector in more than 30 years of work on Latin America and other security issues, including service on the Secretary of State's Policy Planning Staff (S/P) from 2019-2020, with responsibility for Latin America and the Caribbean (WHA), as well as International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) issues.

Endnotes:

¹ Dr. Ellis is a Latin America research professor with the US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute. The views expressed herein are strictly his own. The author thanks GEN Juan Perez Ramirez, VADM Carlos Lainfesta, BG Carlos Villagran, Dr. Guillermo Pacheco, and Diego Solis, among others, for their important inputs into this work.

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