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The Guatemalan Presidential Election: What Comes Next?

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What's the state of the Guatemalan presidential election?

With current President Jimmy Morales' term concluding in 2020, the presidential election is currently underway in Guatemala to determine his successor. The Constitution of Guatemala [prohibits incumbent presidents](#) from running for a second term and several prominent political figures are competing to replace President Morales, with many accusations about their checkered political past.¹



Sandra Torres and Alejandro Giammattei (BBC 2019)

The first round of voting took place on June 16, 2019 and results were conclusive by the 17th. The outcome of the election showed former first lady Sandra Torres of the National Unity of Hope party emerge as the leading candidate, [scoring 25.7%](#) of the vote followed by Alejandro Giammattei of the conservative party Vamos, who won 13.92% of the vote.² The three following candidates [obtained 11.2%, 10.5%, and 6.2%](#), respectively, and represent vastly different political agendas and backgrounds, ranging from establishment conservative to grassroots liberal.³ Since no candidate, however, garnered more than 50% of the vote during the first round, a second round of voting [will take place](#) on August 11.⁴

This election occurs at a critical moment for Guatemala, as the country [finds itself](#) facing many pressing domestic issues such as organized crime, poverty, and corruption,⁵ of which several candidates in the election are also accused, and challenges in foreign policy, most notably problematic relations with the United States. The stakes are high in this election as it would steer the general direction of Guatemala domestically and internationally.

Who's in the race?

This election is unconventional in that three expected frontrunners -- the former Attorney General, the daughter of former Guatemalan dictator Efraín Ríos Montt, and the head of a major party in the Congress -- were all either arrested or legally barred from the election even before the first round of voting.

During the first-round election, voters had a choice among nineteen candidates, and among them five from different parts of the political spectrum emerged on top. Former first lady Sandra Torres, who placed first with more than a fourth of the vote, is the candidate of the center-left Unidad Nacional de Esperanza (UNE), or the National Unity of Hope party, which [identifies](#)

Image: "La candidata de UNE, Sandra Torres, y el del partido Vamos, Alejandro Giammattei," BBC, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-48645788>

¹ "Political Database of the Americas: Republic of Guatemala," Center for Latin American Studies, Edmond A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/ElecSys/Guate/guate.html>

² Adriana Barrera & Sofia Menchu, "Guatemala Ex-first Lady Faces Battle for Presidency after First Round Win," Reuters, June 17, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-guatemala-election/guatemala-ex-first-lady-faces-battle-for-presidency-after-first-round-win-idUSKCN1T10HV>

³ Elizabeth Gonzalez, "Guatemala Update: Torres and Giammattei Head to A Runoff," Americas Society/Council of the Americas, June 17, 2019, <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/guatemala-update-torres-and-giammattei-head-runoff>

⁴ "A Guide to 2019 Latin American Elections: Guatemala," Americas Society/Council of the Americas, <https://www.as-coa.org/content/guide-2019-latin-american-elections/guatemala>

⁵ "Guatemala's Election May Hold the Answer to Solving the Migration Crisis," *The Washington Post*, June 14, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/06/14/guatemalas-election-may-hold-answer-solving-migration-crisis/?utm_term=.52083562ac53

itself as a progressive party defending social democracy and social Christian values, including liberty, equality, human rights and social justice.⁶ Ex-wife of the party's founder and former President of Guatemala Álvaro Colom, Sandra Torres currently serves as general secretary of the party, which [controls a significant portion](#) of the Congress.⁷ Alejandro Giammattei, the candidate of the conservative Vamos party, came in second with an agenda that [includes](#) reviving the death penalty to fight gang crime, tackling poverty and migration, and ending "[disgusting](#)" corruption.⁸ The three following candidates are Edmont Mulet of the center-right Humanist Party; Thelma Cabrera, indigenous rights defender [running on a platform](#) for increasing indigenous, Afro-Guatemalan and mestizo⁹ representation and ending immunity for officials;¹⁰ and [Roberto Arzú](#), son of former President Álvaro Arzú and candidate of the conservative PAN-Podemos party.¹¹

Why has this election attracted significant international attention?

Corruption has been a prevalent theme in this presidential election, as two out of the three candidates who were ruled ineligible to run were barred due to corruption or criminal charges. Thelma Aldana was the former Attorney General who played a critical role in tackling government corruption in collaboration with the [International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala \(CICIG\)](#), a UN initiative with the authority to independently investigate illegal security groups that foster impunity and corruption in state institutions.¹² While she intended to enter the race with an anti-corruption agenda, a judge [issued a warrant](#) for her arrest in March 2019 on charges including embezzlement, lying, and tax fraud,¹³ and it was subsequently [ruled by the Guatemalan Constitutional Court](#) that she was ineligible to participate in the forthcoming presidential election.¹⁴ As Aldana's efforts represented "the possibility of continuing to affect political actors and structures that had previously been untouchable," her forced exit from the race came as a victory for the politicians, political parties, and institutions that benefit from the norms of corruption in the country, according to [the Washington Post](#).¹⁵ The second candidate who was unable to participate in the elections is Mario Estrada, candidate and head of the centrist Union del Cambio Nacional (Nationalist Change Union) who [was arrested in April](#) in Miami by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration on drug trafficking charges.¹⁶ While the arrest prevents him from participating in the election, it also [raises concern](#) for the infiltration of criminal networks into the Guatemalan political system,¹⁷ as he leads a party that consistently maintains a strong presence in the Guatemalan Congress. Meanwhile, far-right candidate and daughter of former Guatemalan dictator Efraín Ríos Montt, Zury Ríos [was barred from the election](#) due to a constitutional ban that prevents coup leaders and their relatives from running for president.¹⁸

⁶ "Guatemala: Political Parties," European Parliament Think Tank, July 3, 2015, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/search.html?keywords=001208>

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ "Corruption Tainted Guatemala Set to Elect New President," *Yahoo News*, June 16, 2019,

https://au.news.yahoo.com/corruption-tainted-guatemala-set-elect-president-054250817--spt.html?soc_src=social-sh&soc_trk=ma

⁹ Defined here as "Westernized Central American person of predominantly mixed Spanish and indigenous descent" and synonymous to "ladino."

"Ladino," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ladino>

¹⁰ Nina Lakhani, "Thelma Cabrera: Indigenous, Female and Shaking Up Guatemala's Election," *The Guardian*, June 15, 2019,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/15/thelma-cabrera-indigenous-woman-guatemalas-election-presidential>

¹¹ Sandra Cuffe, "Guatemala's Problems Need Solving. But in Its Presidential Election, Ballot Battles Have Overshadowed Any Policy Debate," *The Washington Post*, June 15, 2019, https://wapo.st/2MNWxXa?tid=ss_mail&utm_term=.01055f119483

¹² "CICIG (International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala)," Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, The United Nations, <https://www.un.org/undpa/es/node/183334>

¹³ Sofia Menchu, "Guatemalan Judge Orders Arrest of Former Attorney General," *Reuters*, March 19, 2019,

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-guatemala-aldana/guatemalan-judge-orders-arrest-of-former-attorney-general-idUSKCN1R02TE>

¹⁴ Sandra Cuffe & Mary Beth Sheridan, "Guatemala Court Rules Popular Anti-corruption Crusader Ineligible to Run for President," *The Washington Post*, May 15, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the-americas/guatemala-awaits-ruling-can-popular-anti-corruption-crusader-run-for-president/2019/05/14/8ec59356-7516-11e9-a7bf-c8a43b84ee31_story.html?utm_term=.b5c653367ccd

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ Jack Guy, "Claims of Corruption, Drug Trafficking and Political Divorce. Welcome to Guatemala's Elections," *CNN*, June 25, 2019,

<https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/25/americas/guatemala-elections-sandra-torres-intl/index.html>

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Sandra Cuffe, "Guatemala's Problems Need Solving. But in Its Presidential Election, Ballot Battles Have Overshadowed Any Policy Debate," *The Washington Post*, June 15, 2019, https://wapo.st/2MNWxXa?tid=ss_mail&utm_term=.01055f119483

Current candidates have also faced allegations of political corruption. Besides being accused of unethical campaign financing, Sandra Torres has [drawn criticism that](#) her former position as first lady and “advisor” rather than elected official provided her with immunity against the risks of corruption that came with her “oversized role” in her husband’s administration from 2008 to 2012.¹⁹ Torres denied any allegations of impropriety.²⁰ Alejandro Giammattei has been similarly suspected of corruption -- he was head of Guatemala’s prisons when an execution squad of high-ranking officials ordered the unjustified killing of prisoners, and [only Giammattei’s case was dropped](#) while several other relevant officials were convicted.²¹

Despite this undercurrent of corruption allegations, the presence of the indigenous grassroots movement in this election sends a message of hope for the indigenous population of Guatemala, which [accounts for](#) 40% of the population with an additional 20% of mestizos.²² Candidate Thelma Cabrera [was selected](#) by grassroots members of CODECA, the country’s largest farmers’ organization, to represent its newly formed political party the Movement for the Liberation of Peoples (MLP).²³ Her platform [includes](#) developing poverty-stricken and indigenous majority rural Guatemala and holding a constitutional assembly to increase the plurality in mainstream Guatemalan society.²⁴ As only the second indigenous candidate to run for President, Cabrera’s campaign is considered a demonstration of the will of the rural communities -- those [harboring](#) “discontent with the system”²⁵ -- to transform Guatemala’s exclusive and elitist political landscape, as Guatemalan presidents have historically been of white or European descent and all other frontrunners are no exceptions.

What was the state of corruption in Guatemala before this election?

Guatemala transitioned from a military dictatorship to democracy in 1985, and its politics has since been intertwined with organized crime and corruption. According to [Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index](#), Guatemala is currently ranked 144th out of the 180 countries in the study, placing it at the bottom 20th percentile.²⁶ This represents [a deterioration from](#) its performance in 2001 when it was first included in the study, in which it was ranked 65th out of 91 countries and was placed in the bottom 40th percentile.²⁷

Former President Otto Pérez Molina [resigned in disgrace](#) in September 2015, and was subsequently arrested, after accusations that he took a cut from bribes received by Guatemalan customs officials to help businesses evade customs taxes.²⁸ The current president, Jimmy Morales, who is nearing the end of his four-year term, campaigned with the slogan “Not corrupt, nor a thief” after the Perez Molina scandal. Yet in 2018, [due to](#) illicit campaign financing, Morales himself became subject to investigation by the CICIG.²⁹ In this context, Morales adopted a hostile attitude towards the UN initiative, [intending to deny](#) its chief prosecutor entry to Guatemala, followed by tension with the Guatemalan Constitutional Court over the legality of his decision.³⁰ With a history of corruption in the presidency and Morales’ relentless efforts to defend his impunity, domestic and international anti-corruption efforts in Guatemala are facing immense systemic challenge.

¹⁹ Jack Guy, “Claims of Corruption, Drug Trafficking and Political Divorce. Welcome to Guatemala’s Elections,” *CNN*, June 25, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/25/americas/guatemala-elections-sandra-torres-intl/index.html>

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ Elisabeth Malkin, “Guatemala’s Presidential Election May Be a Blow to Anti-Corruption Effort,” *The New York Times*, June 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/17/world/americas/guatemala-election.html>

²² “The World Factbook: Guatemala,” Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gt.html>

²³ Nina Lakhani, “Thelma Cabrera: Indigenous, Female and Shaking Up Guatemala’s Election,” *The Guardian*, June 15, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/15/thelma-cabrera-indigenous-woman-guatemalas-election-presidential>

²⁴ “Former First Lady Leads in Guatemala Election,” *Al Jazeera*, June 17, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/06/lady-leads-guatemalan-election-190617085614257.html>

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ “Corruption Perception Index 2018,” Transparency International, <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2018>

²⁷ “Corruption Perception Index, CPI 2001,” Transparency International, <https://www.transparency.org/research/cpi/overview>

²⁸ “Former Guatemala Leader Otto Pérez Molina to Face Trial,” *BBC*, October 28, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-41786239>

²⁹ Rachel E. Bowen, “Guatemala in Crisis after President Bans Corruption Investigation into His Government,” *The Conversation*, January 15, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/guatemala-in-crisis-after-president-bans-corruption-investigation-into-his-government-109864>

³⁰ Rachel E. Bowen, “Guatemala in Crisis after President Bans Corruption Investigation into His Government,” *The Conversation*, January 15, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/guatemala-in-crisis-after-president-bans-corruption-investigation-into-his-government-109864>

What comes next?

While the candidacy of Thelma Cabrera serves to increase the visibility of the rural and indigenous population and to challenge the political status quo, this second round of elections is critical as it will determine Guatemala's commitment to anti-corruption reform. Decreasing corruption in the Guatemalan government is essential to beginning any other systemic transformations, as corruption often prevents the delivery of essential goods and services to populations in need.

The devolvement of effective governance in Guatemala, due in large part to corruption, in turn directly contributes to the flow of migration to the United States looking for safety and stability. This has increased tension in the political relations between Guatemala and the United States as the immigration crisis at the U.S. southern border persists. Guatemala is one of the largest sources of immigrants on the U.S.-Mexico border and President Trump [has threatened to cancel aid](#) to Guatemala in March for not doing enough to combat migration.³¹ On July 23, President Trump [threatened to impose](#) tariffs and an unspecified [“ban”](#) on Guatemala for its alleged renegeing on a deal that would divert Central American migrants to the country.³² As of July 30th, the U.S. and Guatemala are still negotiating on this deal that would establish Guatemala as a “safe third country” in which migrants may seek asylum instead.³³ Meanwhile, remittance fees from Guatemalans residing in the United States [accounted for](#) approximately 12% of Guatemala's GDP in 2018, preventing Guatemala from endorsing the current U.S. immigration policy without hesitation.³⁴ As a result, Guatemala finds itself in a dilemma with its relations with the United States, which is currently underpinned by immigration -- and at its root is the corruption within Guatemala's government. In other words, this election could provide an answer to both curbing the migration exiting Guatemala and protecting the country from sanctions from the United States.

With most frontrunners, most notably Sandra Torres and Alejandro Giammattei, bearing some history of corruption, this election is both a manifestation of the country's relatively weak democracy and an opportunity to begin its transformation. Each candidate includes anti-corruption measures in their presidential platform, and yet it is possible that the next president could adopt Morales' hostile approach towards the judiciary or independent anti-corruption initiatives if they began focusing on the candidates' checkered past. Guatemala's democracy is facing the option of continuing the malicious cycle of corruption and poverty or reinstating a political system that represents the indigenous-majority populace and resistant to conflicts of interest, with independent oversight that would cooperate with international oversight agencies. The outcome of the second round of election will determine which direction Guatemala chooses.

³¹ “Guatemala Says It's Working with the United States to Tighten Borders, Break Up Migrant Caravans,” *The Washington Post*, June 5, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/guatemala-says-its-working-with-the-united-states-to-tighten-borders-break-up-migrant-caravans/2019/06/05/3e7aa742-87bd-11e9-9d73-e2ba6bbf1b9b_story.html?utm_term=.c13e5f15a09d

³² “Trump Wants to Punish Guatemala Over Failed ‘Safe Third Country’ Deal”, *The Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-says-he-will-punish-guatemala-for-not-reaching-safe-third-country-agreement-11563887818>

³³ “US Still Negotiating ‘Safe Third Country’ Agreement with Guatemala,” *The Hill*, July 30, 2019, <https://thehill.com/latino/455402-us-still-negotiating-safe-third-country-agreement-with-guatemala-report>

³⁴ “Trump Wants to Punish Guatemala Over Failed ‘Safe Third Country’ Deal”, *The Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-says-he-will-punish-guatemala-for-not-reaching-safe-third-country-agreement-11563887818>