

PRESS RELEASE

Resignation of Otto Pérez Molina is an unprecedented step, but for the recovery of democracy in Guatemala much deeper structural reforms are needed, says Impunity Watch

Utrecht, The Netherlands, 3 September 2015

The Guatemalan President, Otto Pérez Molina, resigned just after midnight this Thursday September 3, after the Guatemalan parliament disposed him of his immunity earlier this week, and a warrant for his arrest was issued on Wednesday. Pérez Molina's position had been under pressure for several months as evidence regarding his involvement in large scale embezzlement piled up. His vice-president Roxana Baldetti had already been forced to resign in May, because of her role in the same criminal network used to defraud the state. This network—known as 'La Línea'—facilitated tax evasion by the country's economic elites in exchange for bribes and defrauded the Guatemalan state of millions of dollars. 'La Línea' has implicated dozens of officials in the highest levels of government, including the acting and former heads of Guatemala's tax collection agency, and reaching up to the President himself.

The case of La Línea came to light thanks to the investigations of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). The CICIG has played a pivotal role in the fight against impunity in Guatemala since its establishment in 2007. In collaboration with Guatemalan prosecutors, CICIG has conducted more than 200 investigations and helped levy charges against more than 160 current and former officials, dismantling illegal groups and clandestine power structures responsible for organised crime. Its investigations have brought to light criminal networks that reach into the highest spheres of government and that implicate a large part of the country's political and economic class in corruption and other crimes. It has proven how criminal interests have effectively penetrated State structures as well as political parties, posing severe challenges to democratic governance and the rule of law. Pérez Molina made several attempts to close down the CICIG, but was unsuccessful due to national and international pressure. Over the last months, CICIG investigations have rendered substantial evidence of the President's involvement in fraud.

Since April, Guatemalans have been taking to the streets en masse to call for an end to corruption, for the President's resignation and for postponement of the Presidential elections, to take place this coming weekend (September 6). These continued mass protests over months in a row already – some analysts already speak of 'the Guatemalan spring' – are unprecedented in Guatemala; a country that faced 36 years of armed conflict, that left as a legacy a culture of fear, of extreme levels of violence and ongoing human rights violations and a general absence of trust in democracy and the Rule of Law. Today, Guatemala is breaking with this culture of fear. Protesters make clear that they consider Guatemala a 'failed state' and demand substantial reforms and an overhaul of the political system, before any elections can take place. Without such reforms, offering renewed democratic guarantees, the Presidential elections will have an adverse effect and are likely to help deepen Guatemala's political crisis.

Guatemala stands at a crossroad. The last months have witnessed the most important political developments in Guatemala since the 1996 peace agreements that ended this country's civil war, but the country still has a long road ahead. The challenge is for the current crisis to translate into meaningful reform, rather than the Guatemalan regime continuing its political plight under a new president. To achieve this, Impunity Watch considers that the international community should listen to the calls of the population to postpone the elections and transform the political system and offer its strong support for these deep structural reforms as headed by the CICIG to take place.

For more information: Marlies Stappers, directeur Impunity Watch, 06-13639465 of 030-2720313

