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Guatemala: An Overview

Guatemala, the most populous country in Central America, has strived to consolidate its democracy since the 1990s. It has faced many political and social challenges, as well as human rights abuses and widespread impunity. Traditionally, the United States and Guatemala have had close relations, with friction at times over certain issues, such as corruption and migration. The 119th Congress may seek to assess the U.S.-Guatemala relationship on the aforementioned issues, the promotion of democracy, and efforts to combat illicit drug trafficking.

Guatemala at a Glance

Area: 42,000 square miles, about the size of Tennessee

Population: 18.1 million (2024, IMF est.)

Ethnic Composition: Mestizo (mixed Amerindian-Spanish; *Ladino* in local Spanish) 62.8%, Maya 34.9%, Xinka (Indigenous, non-Maya) 2.1%, Garifuna 0.1%, foreign 0.1% (2018 est., INE)

Gross Domestic Product (GDP)/Per Capita GDP: \$112.4 billion/\$6,300 (2024, current prices, IMF)

Key Import Partners: United States (29.1%), China (19.7%), Mexico (10.2%), El Salvador (3.32%) (2024, TDM)

Key Export Partners: United States (31.9%), El Salvador (13.4%), Honduras (11.5%), Nicaragua (7.27%) (2023, TDM)

Sources: International Monetary Fund (IMF); National Statistics Institute of Guatemala (INE); Trade Data Monitor (TDM).

Political Situation

Guatemala has a long history of internal conflict and violence, including a 36-year civil war (1960-1996). For most of that period, the Guatemalan military held power and repressed citizens' human rights. An estimated 200,000 people were killed or disappeared during the civil conflict; 83% of the victims were Indigenous. In 1986, Guatemala established a civilian democratic government, but military repression continued. In 1996, then-President Álvaro Arzú (1996-2000) and Guatemala's main insurgent group, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit (URNG), signed United Nations-mediated peace accords to end the conflict.

Nearly 30 years later, some of the goals put forth in the accords, such as eradicating extreme poverty, integrating Indigenous Guatemalans, and bolstering institutions, remain unfulfilled. Successive governments have struggled to strengthen the Guatemalan justice system to punish perpetrators of grave human rights abuses and massive corruption. Indigenous Guatemalans continue to face poverty and social exclusion. Guatemala's democratic institutions remain fragile, largely due to high levels of state capture by elites.

Current President Bernardo Arévalo, from the center-left *Movimiento Semilla* party, won Guatemala's 2023 presidential elections—capturing 58% of the vote—following a tumultuous election period marred by alleged irregularities and the disqualification of several leading candidates. Since his inauguration in January 2024, Arévalo has had trouble advancing his agenda, including anti-corruption efforts. Arévalo's *Semilla* party has 23 of 160 seats in Guatemala's congress; in November 2023, prosecutors suspended the party's status and declared its lawmakers as independents. In January 2025, Arévalo's approval rating stood at 39%, a decrease from 54% reported in May 2024.

Arévalo also has had to contend with repeated legal challenges from the Office of Attorney General María Consuelo Porras. Officials in that office have engaged in legal maneuvers against Arévalo since the election period and throughout his term, including seeking to lift Arévalo's immunity from prosecution and ordering arrests of party members, among other actions. Since 2021, the United States has designated Porras and other top Guatemalan prosecutors for allegedly obstructing high-profile corruption investigations against some government officials. At least 45 prosecutors and judges, including many who worked with the U.S.-backed International Commission Against Corruption in Guatemala (CICIG; 2007-2019), have fled Guatemala since 2018. Others have been imprisoned.

Although constitutionally the President can remove the Attorney General for a "duly justified cause," a law (the *Ley Orgánica del Ministerio Público*) requires due process for the removal of the Attorney General. In accordance with that law, Arévalo has filed criminal complaints against Porras for abuse of authority and has proposed legal reforms to remove the attorney general prior to the end of her term in 2026.

Economic and Social Conditions

Guatemala has the largest economy in Central America, with an estimated gross domestic product (GDP) of \$112.4 billion in 2024, according to the International Monetary Fund. Despite average real GDP growth of 3.5% per year over the past decade, more than 55% of the population live in poverty. Roughly 79% of Indigenous Guatemalans live in poverty, many of whom reside in the Western highlands, a high migrant-sending region of the country. Guatemala's tax-to-GDP ratio, which at 14.4% was the fourth lowest in Latin America in 2022—severely limits the funds available for public services and investments.

Guatemala is also home to one of the youngest populations in Latin America, with more than 60% of citizens under 29

years of age, according to Guatemala's 2018 census. Although the country's growing working-age population could boost economic growth, many youth face difficult circumstances and limited opportunities. According to the World Bank, Guatemala's child malnutrition rate is among the 10 highest in the world, with long-term effects on education and earnings prospects. About 71% of the population is employed in the informal economy, lacking job protections or benefits.

U.S.-Guatemalan Relations

Over the past four years, U.S. policy in Guatemala has focused on dismantling local and regional transnational criminal organizations and gangs; combating the flow of illicit drugs to the United States; strengthening border and citizen security in Guatemala and the region; fighting corruption; building democratic institutions; and addressing the root causes of migration, among other priorities.

The Biden Administration initially sought to increase engagement with the administration of President Alejandro Giammattei (2019-2024) to curb migration and drug trafficking. U.S. concerns about antidemocratic and corrupt practices by Guatemalan officials strained relations, however, particularly during the 2023 elections. After President Arévalo's inauguration, the Biden Administration sought to revitalize the U.S.-Guatemala relationship, including through new initiatives to address migration, governance, and security challenges.

In January 2025, Marco Rubio visited Guatemala as part of his first trip abroad as Secretary of State. He discussed cooperation with Guatemala on migration, drug trafficking, and economic issues, among other topics.

Migration

The U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) encountered more than 204,252 Guatemalans at the southwest border during FY2024. As of January 2025, CBP had encountered 29,318 Guatemalans in FY2025, roughly a 72% decrease from the same period last year. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) had identified the lack of economic opportunities, extortion, crime and violence, and corruption as the top drivers of irregular migration from Guatemala.

Congress may assess bilateral cooperation on migration issues and options for enhancing such efforts. Guatemala expels irregular migrants from its territory; maintains a U.S.-trained border task force, with support from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. Department of Defense; and has sought to cooperate with the Trump Administration on migration policy. In January 2025, the Arévalo administration reportedly said it could accommodate up to 20 U.S. deportation flights a week, up from 14 weekly under the Biden Administration. In February 2025, during a joint press conference with Secretary Rubio, President Arévalo offered to increase the number of flights of Guatemalan deportees and to receive deportees of other nationalities.

Democracy and Governance

The Biden Administration took various actions intended to stem Guatemala's backsliding on corruption and the rule of law. The U.S. State Department has imposed visa sanctions on Attorney General Porras and her family, among other Guatemalan officials and economic elites, pursuant to the United States-Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act (P.L. 116-260, Division FF, Subtitle F) and Section 7031(c) of annual Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS) Appropriations Acts. In January 2024, the State Department designated former President Giammattei and three of his children as generally ineligible for entry into the United States, pursuant to Section 7031(c). To date, the Trump Administration has not designated new sanctions on Guatemalan nationals.

U.S. Assistance

For FY2023, the United States allocated an estimated \$121.4 million in U.S. bilateral foreign assistance to Guatemala, including \$80.9 million in Development Assistance (DA), \$40.2 million in Global Health Programs (GHP) funding, and \$320,000 in International Military and Education Training (IMET) aid. FY2024 allocations are not yet publicly available. For FY2025, the Biden Administration had requested \$115.8 million for Guatemala—\$90.0 million in DA; \$25.0 million in GHP; and \$800,000 in IMET. Guatemala typically received additional assistance through the Central America Regional Security Initiative and other regional programs.

The FY2024 SFOPS legislation (P.L. 118-47, Division F) requires the State Department to withhold 60% of Economic Support Fund and security assistance to the Guatemalan government until the Secretary of State certifies the Guatemalan government has met conditions related to corruption and public integrity, human rights, and migration, among other issues. The State Department has not yet issued such a certification. P.L. 118-47 also prohibits Foreign Military Financing (FMF) to Guatemala. For FY2025, Congress has passed two continuing resolutions (P.L. 118-83 and P.L. 118-158) that fund foreign assistance programs in Guatemala under the same conditions as FY2024 from October 1, 2024, until March 14, 2025.

In a February 26, 2025, statement filed in federal court, the State Department said it was canceling thousands of unspecified foreign assistance awards and contracts worldwide. The full scope of the terminations remains unclear, though they reportedly include some USAID-managed agriculture, education, environment, democracy and governance, humanitarian assistance, and rule-of-law activities in Guatemala. During a February 2025 visit to Guatemala, Secretary of State Rubio commended Guatemala's cooperation on anti-drug efforts and described U.S. support for such efforts as "the kind of foreign aid America wants to be involved in."

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