

# Power, Impunity, and the 2023 Guatemala Elections

#ELECCIONES2023





# **Guatemala Presidential Elections - 2023: How Political Power Blocs Have Been Reconfigured, Secured Impunity, and Armed Themselves for the Campaign**

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## Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	5
<b>2</b>	<b>Major Findings</b> .....	7
<b>3</b>	<b>Background</b> .....	16
<b>4</b>	<b>Bloc I: Vamos - The Fight to Stay in the Game</b> .....	<b>26</b>
	Executive Power, Congress, and Mayors .....	26
	<i>How the Executive Branch Divvies up the Pie</i> .....	27
	<i>Congressional Quid Pro Quo</i> .....	28
	<i>Path to Power: Old Mayors, New Allies</i> .....	30
	Denying Justice, Destroying Enemies .....	32
	<i>An Unholy Alliance: The President and the Attorney</i>	
	<i>General's Office</i> .....	32
	<i>Stacking the High Courts: Part I</i> .....	37
<b>5</b>	<b>Bloc II: UNE's One-Pronged Strategy</b> .....	39
	The UNE's Congressional Carrousel .....	39
	<i>Congressional Powerbrokers</i> .....	40
	<i>Controlling the Ports</i> .....	40
	<i>Caciques, Elites, and Evangelical Churches</i> .....	43
	Judicial Protection and Political Survival .....	44
	<i>Trading Favors: The Courts, Attorney General's Office,</i>	
	<i>and Congress</i> .....	44
	<i>TSE: Getting on the Ballot</i> .....	46
<b>6</b>	<b>Bloc III - Valor and the Ghost of the CIACS</b> .....	48
	Three Pillars .....	48
	<i>Pillar I: The Old Guard</i> .....	49
	<i>Pillar II: Unionistas</i> .....	50
	<i>Pillar III: FCN-Nación</i> .....	53

	Political Power, Impunity, and Judicial Vengeance .....	54
	<i>Swaying the Postulation Commissions</i> .....	54
	<i>Stacking the High Courts: Part II</i> .....	55
	<i>Seeking Vengeance From the Outside In</i> .....	58
<b>7</b>	<b>Bloc IV - Cabal: Caciques and Compromises</b> .....	60
	The Candidate .....	60
	A Fragile Coalition and Lots of Red Flags .....	62
<b>8</b>	<b>Case Study: Citizen Prosperity - Wild Card Meets</b>	
	<b>Status Quo</b> .....	65
	Carlos Pineda: A Wild Card .....	66
	Wild Card Meets Status Quo .....	69
<b>9</b>	<b>Methodology</b> .....	71
	<b>Related Content</b> .....	73

## 1

# Executive Summary

This report delineates the evolution of organized crime in Guatemala with a particular emphasis on its penetration of the political and judicial systems as the country heads to the polls for general elections in June 2023. It does this by providing historical and present-day context on how organized crime works in the Central American nation, in addition to detailed descriptions of four of the country's most prominent political power blocs: **Vamos**, the **National Unity of Hope** (Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza - UNE), **Valor**, and **Cabal**.

These political blocs draw **power** from their current or former positions in government, in addition to profits from legally registered businesses and sometimes illicit sources of capital. The blocs are by no means exhaustive. Nor are they monolithic or hierarchical. Rather, they are coalitions and include a number of satellite parties. They have been selected because their activities exemplify broader power dynamics in the political and judicial sectors, and they are the leading power brokers in Guatemala. The blocs also have a strong chance of retaining significant clout or gaining more influence via the elections, illustrating how these patterns are likely to repeat themselves. Control of state institutions also allows these groups to undermine the election process by eliminating candidates that threaten the status quo. The most prominent example of this is the candidacy of Carlos Pineda Sosa of Citizen Prosperity (Prosperidad Ciudadana - PC) who is the subject of our case study. But other candidates have also been excluded by the establishment.

Undergirding these blocs are various **types** of corrupt-criminal elites, some of whom pre-date the current political configurations dominating the polls and most of whom came together around a single cause in recent years: reversing judicial processes and legal reforms spearheaded by a supranational judicial body known as the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala - CICIG). These elites wield enormous economic, political, and social capital as a means of establishing and expanding their interests, debilitating their rivals, and securing impunity.<sup>1</sup> They may form part of or support any or all four of the above-mentioned political blocs, if they feel it is in their interest. Or they may not, choosing to form an alliance or a separate political bloc they can dominate.

1 The International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala - CICIG) referred to these as "Redes Política-Económicas Ilícitas," or Political-Economic Illicit Networks. See: CICIG, "Guatemala: un Estado Capturado," 2019.

These political power blocs, along with these elites, have created a **system** whereby each can continue to control and expand their interests and ensure impunity. They do this by gaining access to what amounts to a carousel of power. Each pays-to-play, then takes part in a mutually beneficial arrangement with one or various parts of the government and the political parties that control it. Part of this is the explicit and implicit promise of funding their campaigns and not actively undermining their political power. The system is perpetuated, in part, by the country's fragmented politics, which precludes any party or *caudillo* from total power.

**Impunity** is also ensured by consensus. These blocs have established a virtual monopoly on the institutions that regulate the economic and political life and those that police illicit activity. Influence of the judicial system specifically begins with special selection commissions who are infiltrated by political mafias and, at the bidding of corruption networks, choose unqualified and compromised candidates for the top judicial and regulatory posts. Once in office, these judicial and regulatory officials serve corrupt interests. They archive or do not investigate political mafias. They prosecute enemies and rivals, reverse sentences against allies and friends, and fill key posts with their allies to reinforce the status quo and to fulfill the wishes of their patrons.

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## 2

## Major Findings

**1. There are four major political power blocs to keep an eye on for this election. All of them have connections to powerful corrupt-criminal interests.**

The first bloc, **Vamos**, revolves around the political party of incumbent President **Alejandro Giammattei** (2020-present). The president -- with the help of his chief aide, Miguel Martínez, and their allies -- has presided over a period during which numerous corruption scandals have emerged. Nonetheless, the administration has survived relatively unscathed. This is, in part, because of the near unprecedented alignment of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Aligning these three powers has transformed the judicial sector into a tool for protecting graft schemes and persecuting political rivals. Giammattei's bloc has become the central node of this alliance, born out of a shared interest in reversing the progress made in the judicial sector over the previous decade under the guidance of a United Nations-backed judicial body.

The second bloc, **UNE**, centers on one the country's most enduring political parties, the National Unity of Hope (Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza - UNE), headed by serial presidential candidate and former first lady, **Sandra Torres**. Torres' party has not governed for over a decade, but it consistently maintains an outsized coalition in Congress. This allows the bloc to trade votes for access to lucrative state resources, control of important government institutions, and legal protection. Like many parties, UNE's thirst for government bounty has drawn it into the orbit of the establishment -- there are reports of a pact between Torres and Giammattei -- reducing opposition to the status quo.

The third bloc, **Valor**, is led by one-time presidential frontrunner, **Zury Ríos**, the daughter of an infamous former military dictator. The bloc centers on a recently formed political alliance between two parties -- Valor and the Unionist Party (Partido Unionista) -- whose collective ranks span far-right military, private sector elites, and religious leaders. These actors leverage their clout in politics, business, and organized crime to undermine state institutions and facilitate licit and illicit business. Among the bloc's most vocal supporters is a paralegal entity known as the Foundation Against Terrorism (Fundación Contra el Terrorismo - FCT). The FCT is now spearheading efforts to disrupt the judicial sector by persecuting prosecutors, judges, social activists, and journalists that once led the fight against impunity.

The fourth bloc, **Cabal**, revolves around a newly-formed party led by second-time presidential candidate, **Edmond Mulet**. A career politician and diplomat, Mulet presents himself as an outsider and anti-corruption crusader, but any ambition to break from the status quo may be compromised by the numerous questionable characters that make up his party's ranks. These include congressional and mayoral candidates previously affiliated with political parties linked to major corruption schemes. Many of the candidates have themselves faced accusations of corruption and other crimes. If Mulet were to emerge victorious in the elections, he would almost certainly need to negotiate with the other factions outlined in this report to have any kind of clout in Congress and the judicial sector.

Though these blocs hold diverse interests and compete for access to state resources and judicial favors, they are also all part of a broader multi-party, multi-institutional alliance that seeks to perpetuate corruption. Often referred to euphemistically as the *Pacto de Corruptos* (Corrupt Pact), this is not a formal pact. Still, they have all benefited from the climate of impunity and, regardless of the election outcome, will likely continue working together to avoid upsetting the status quo.

There are few better illustrations of this than the establishment's cutthroat efforts to oust unwanted candidates from the elections by leveraging the court system, thereby ensuring power remains within the pact. This is explored in a case study of presidential candidate Carlos Pineda Sosa, a non-aligned actor whose rise to the top of the polls threatened to wrestle clout from the current order. A lower court suspended his candidacy and that of his adopted political party. Pineda's attempts to appeal the decision were shot down by higher courts, which are influenced by the major political blocs.

## **2. There are five major corrupt-criminal blocs who work in concert with the major political movements and political coalitions.**

The political blocs described above house different types of competing elites, some dating back to the country's civil war (1960-1996), which vie for increased clout and influence over top politicians and judicial officials to ensure their licit and illicit business interests. We have identified five. Three of these types operate in the open, furthering their interests via government institutions, laws, and regulations that permit them to act in relative concert with the country's judicial and regulatory bodies. Two operate more clandestinely, ignoring, coopting, or subverting judicial and regulatory bodies in their quest of power and economic capital.

In the open sphere are **traditional economic elites** -- some families that leverage business and capital to avoid scrutiny and exert political influence to further their economic interests and debilitate or destroy competition.



Various **congressional and regional political coalitions** are cross-party alliances between mid-level politicians in Congress and city halls that trade votes for access to state contracts and other government bounty. They often include technocrats and well-positioned bureaucrats. Some **emerging elites** have also leveraged their access to political power to establish and control lucrative businesses in less traditional fields such as the pharmaceutical industry, construction, or telecommunications, much of which is funded or subsidized by the government. They also differ from traditional elites in that they participate more openly in the political process.

In the more clandestine sphere are Illegal Clandestine Security Apparatuses (Cuerpos Ilegales y Aparatos Clandestinos de Seguridad - **CIACS**). The CIACS are networks of civil-war era military generals and intelligence officers that have penetrated high office to facilitate impunity for their war crimes and criminal activity, including drug trafficking and contraband smuggling. Over time, they have expanded economic interests into private security, among other industries. CIACS is also increasingly used to describe diverse criminal interests that spread across a wide spectrum of backgrounds but remain encrusted in the state and use the government to further their interests.

Finally, there are drug trafficking organizations (**DTOs**) who trade on economic and political power to exert influence over Congress and mayors' offices. This helps to secure government contracts for laundering illicit proceeds and judicial protection.

<b>Traditional economic elites</b>	Families that leverage business monopolies to avoid scrutiny and exert political influence to further economic interests and to debilitate or destroy competition.
<b>Congressional and regional political coalitions</b>	Cross-party alliances between mid-level congressional representatives and mayors who trade votes for access to state contracts and other government bounty; often accompanied by technocrats and bureaucrats who form part of these networks or are operational specialists.
<b>Emerging elites</b>	Prominent businesspeople with extensive political connections who gained prominence by paying commissions to secure state contracts for private companies in the telecommunications, pharmaceutical, and construction sectors, among others.

<b>Illegal Clandestine Security Apparatuses (CIACS)</b>	Clandestine networks of civil-war era military generals and intelligence officers that have penetrated high office to facilitate criminal activity, including drug trafficking and contraband smuggling, and who have expanded economic interests into private security and construction, among others, and formed their own political parties.
<b>Drug trafficking organizations (DTOs)</b>	Criminal organizations who facilitate the movement of illegal drugs and/or precursor chemicals through Guatemala that seek to position allies in state institutions -- particularly Congress and mayors' offices -- to secure access to government contracts (used to launder money) and legal protection.

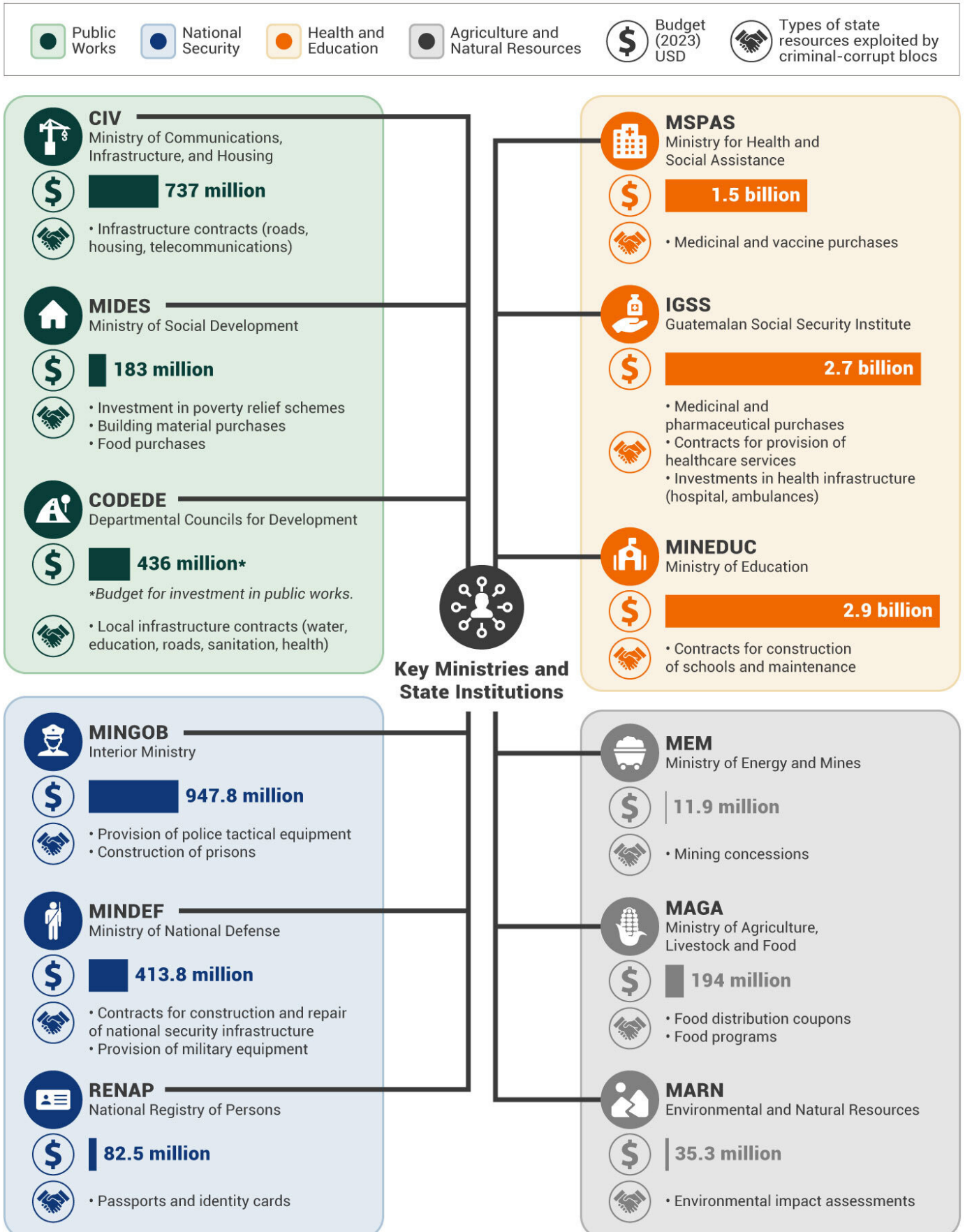
**3. The corrupt-criminal system is like a carousel: Participants pay-to-play and establish a symbiotic relationship with the parts of the state that are most important to their business interests.**

Achieving any kind of harmony between different factions of the corrupt-criminal establishment requires a significant alignment of key state nodes that control government funds, key government appointments, and judicial and regulatory bodies. At the top of this system is the **executive branch**, which sets the parameters of the debate regarding the national budget, dictates ministerial appointments, and can shift regulatory bodies in meaningful ways. The executive thus steers a massive portion of the state contracts and government jobs, which it can divvy among its allies or anyone willing to pay a sizable commission -- a process that has benefitted Vamos considerably in the last three years.

Not all government entities are created equal, and each of these corrupt-criminal elites has different levels of interest in different parts of the government. Traditional elites, for example, seek to access and control tax authorities, patent offices, and banking committees. Congressional and regional political coalitions keep a tight rein on public works. Emerging elites vie for control of the Guatemalan Social Security Institute, the Ministry of Communications, Infrastructure, and Housing, the Ministry of Energy, and the Ministry of the Environment. CIACS seek control of customs offices, the Ministry of the Interior, and intelligence apparatuses across the spectrum. And the DTOs seek to influence public works and local development committees allocating government projects, as well as control over certain parts of the military and police, to launder money and protect their operations, among other interests.

# Key Ministries and State Institutions

This graphic highlights the key state bodies targeted by criminal-corrupt blocs seeking to extract government resources for personal profit or to ensure their criminal activities are not impeded by government officials.



Much of this corruption revolves around **contracts** awarded to companies in legitimate business sectors: construction, infrastructure, communications, health, agriculture, extractive industries, and security, among others. Companies receiving contracts are often owned (indirectly) by congressional officials or (directly) by other affiliates, from businesspeople to drug traffickers. The executive branch also leverages its resources to build support in the country's increasingly fragmented Congress, with contracts traded for votes and coalitions forming around control of ministries and government entities critical to each coalition's economic portfolio.

**Political coalitions** or specific political parties that wield more control over Congress can negotiate and barter with the executive branch for pieces of the economic pie. Such is the case with UNE, which has 51 of 160 seats<sup>2</sup> in Congress and has voted in support of the incumbent government on key legislation following an apparent rapprochement between Torres and Giammattei. Because of Congress' extreme fragmentation, parties with even a few seats can also extract state resources by aligning with the status quo. As a result, the ruling coalition is free to legislate in favor of dubious interests without opposition. Examples include assigning increased funds to ministries pivotal to corruption or passing emergency decrees that loosen rules on government procurement.

The system is **cyclic** and reinforced by the atomized political party system: Government contracts and jobs are handed to companies and individuals linked to representatives and political parties in Congress, among them congressional coalitions, mayors or interests connected to them, emerging elites, and drug traffickers; these actors then pump funds back into political campaigns supporting the re-election of congressional and mayoral candidates. Presidents have traditionally come into power with weak mandates and small voting blocs in Congress. Thus, the heads of major voting coalitions in Congress have become powerful actors capable of extracting further resources by controlling corruption networks in other branches of the state and, as we detail in the next section, by ensuring impunity.

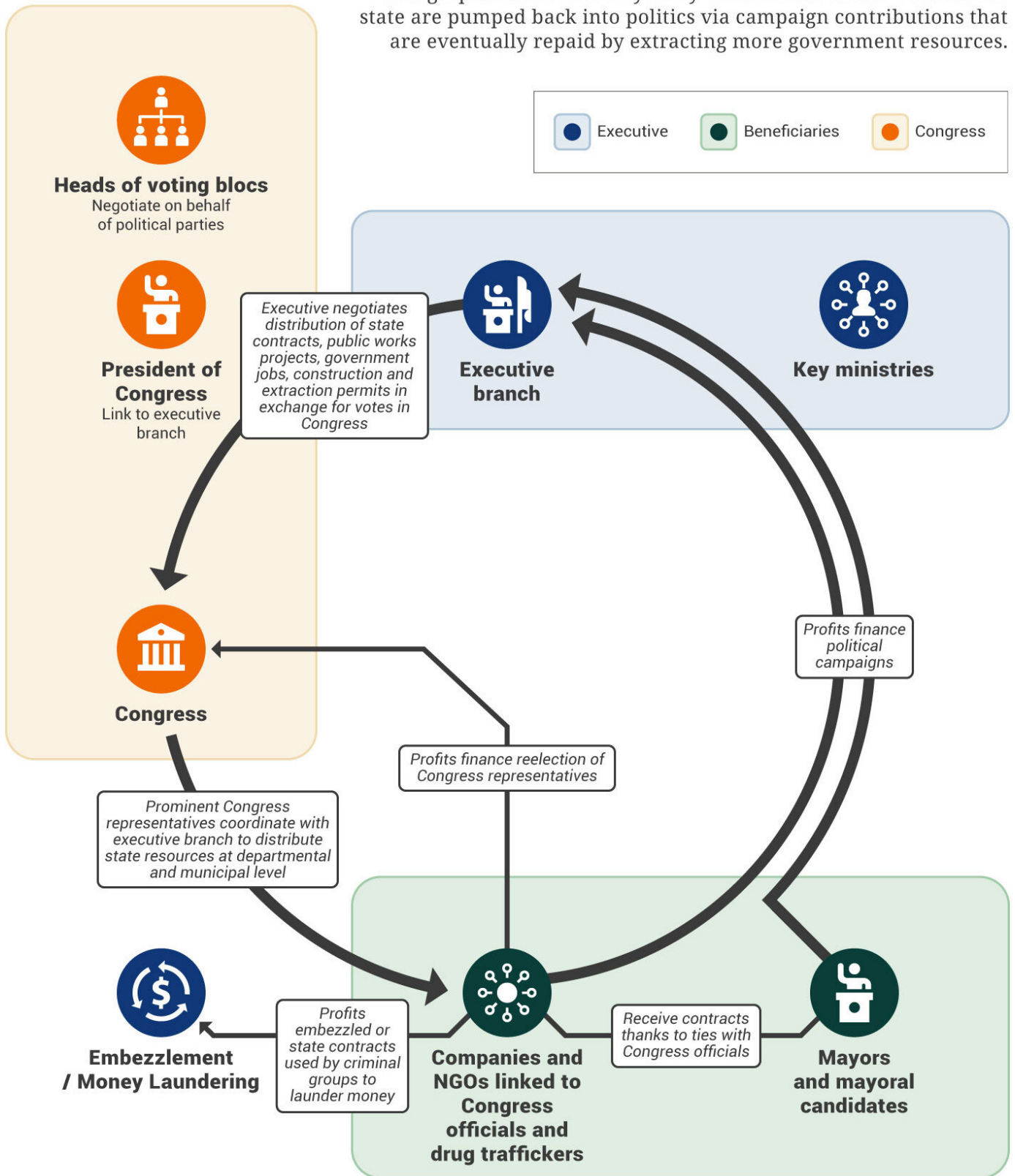
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<sup>2</sup> The UNE party holds 51 seats in Congress but several of the party's representatives defected following an internal rebellion aimed at ousting Sandra Torres in 2021. We estimate there are still 34 UNE representatives loyal to Sandra Torres, based on interviews with political sources.



# The Congressional Carrousel

This graphic illustrates a cycle by which funds extracted from the state are pumped back into politics via campaign contributions that are eventually repaid by extracting more government resources.



May 2023

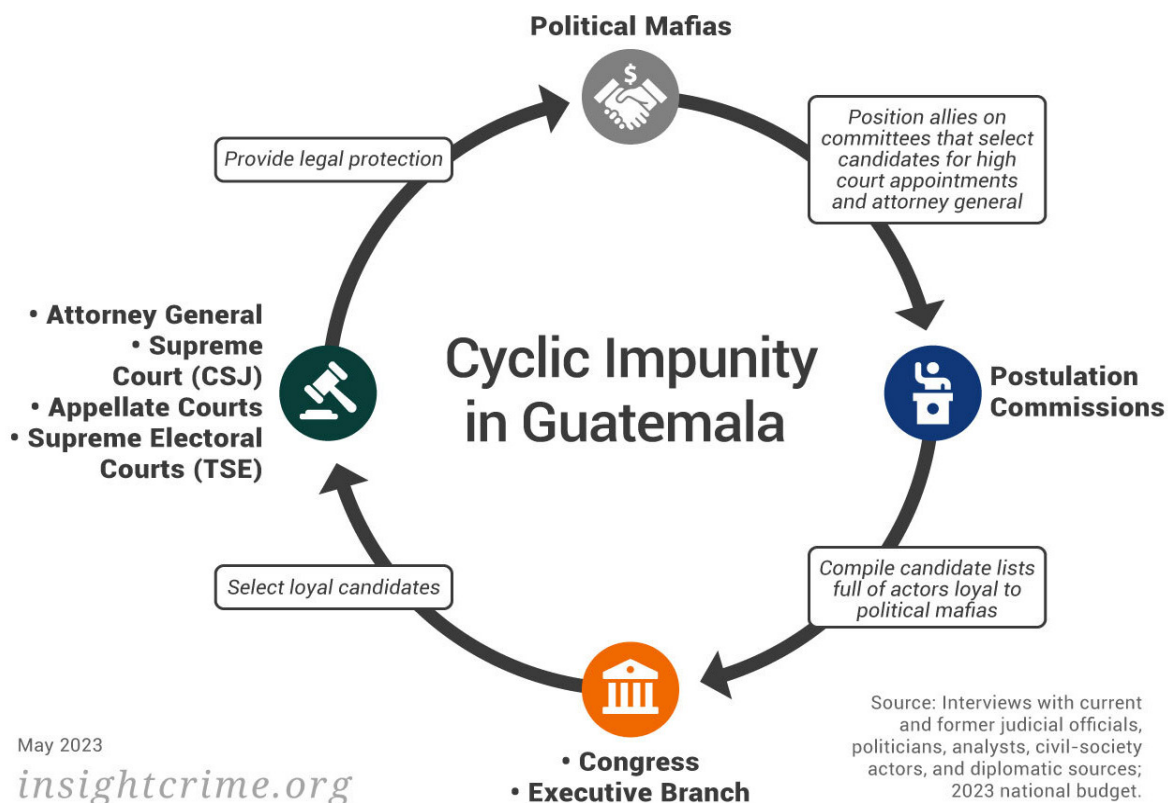
[insightcrime.org](https://www.insightcrime.org)

Source: Interviews with current and former judicial officials, politicians, analysts, civil-society actors, and diplomatic sources.

#### 4. Impunity is the oil that keeps the motor running.

To sustain and protect their money-making schemes, the blocs need access to and control of key nodes within the judicial sector and state regulatory bodies. They obtain this by corrupting the system from its onset. The country’s laws established a mechanism whereby “**postulation commissions**” create short lists of vetted and qualified candidates for the top judicial and regulatory positions before Congress or the president makes the final selections. Ostensibly, the commissions are independent, since many commission members are not part of the government.

But these power blocs have, for more than two decades, configured ways to subvert these postulation commissions, infiltrating them through a combination of overt and covert tactics. Candidates who survive the vetting process are often both unqualified and compromised. This includes not only candidates for the office of the attorney general and high court judges but also those for office of the Supreme Electoral Court (Tribunal Supremo Electoral - TSE). These compromises can last for years and even be renewed, as illustrated by Congress’ decision not to proceed with elections for new Supreme Court (Corte Suprema de Justicia - CSJ) and appellate court magistrates, despite the current crop of judges having long outstayed their five-year, constitutionally-mandated term, which should have ended in 2019.



The **Attorney General's Office** is the most important institution among these judicial and regulatory entities ensuring impunity. The office can block investigations into high-ranking politicians, launch aggressive crackdowns on non-aligned prosecutors and judges -- as they have in recent years -- and target outside actors such as journalists and civil-society leaders. The attorney general can determine which cases get prosecuted and which cases get archived; transfer meddlesome prosecutors to get them away from sensitive investigations; and place less scrupulous and more loyal staff in key posts, often in violation of due process. Loyal staff then execute even more nefarious schemes, including fashioning crime-fighting units into weapons for persecuting political rivals and vaults where corruption and criminal cases implicating corrupt-criminal elites get archived for life.

Co-opting Guatemala's court system is also a key objective for diverse corruption networks. It is an incentives-based system, with different networks of court magistrates and their backers responding to political or financial favors offered by different power groups seeking impunity. This is most notable with country's **Constitutional Court (Corte de Constitucionalidad - CC)**, the ultimate authority for settling legal disputes. The CC previously served as a pivotal counterbalance to corruption but has now become a shield for elites following the election of new magistrates in 2021, many hand-picked by the executive, Congress, and the Supreme Court.

Controlling the **Supreme Court of Justice (Corte Suprema de Justicia - CSJ)** and appellate courts is also pivotal to impunity, as these bodies can block investigations into government officials or overrule convictions for corruption. The current CSJ was selected by Congress from a list made by a postulation commission in 2014. Two architects of that list went to prison -- one in the United States and another in Guatemala -- while a third is in exile in Nicaragua. Yet, as noted, the term of that CSJ has been extended because of inaction in Congress. The magistrates have subsequently blocked investigations into congressional officials and other political operators. This has created a backstop for suspect officials, who have little incentive to shake things up and expose themselves to scrutiny.

Just as it is on the front end of this process whereby outside actors play a key role in the postulation commissions that set into motion the system of impunity, so it is at the backend, where outsiders can play a role in filing criminal and civil complaints and stirring up judicial intrigue that service the political power blocs. Such is the case with the aforementioned FCT. The **FCT** lodges accusations against anti-impunity operators, nearly all of whom worked with or had some connection to cases brought by the UN-backed judicial body. Judges and prosecutors have seized on the FCT's accusations to enact formal legal charges against judges, prosecutors, and journalists, many of whom have fled the country or are facing charges in Guatemala.

## 3

## Background

Today's Guatemalan corrupt-criminal blocs have their origins in the country's civil war (1960-1996). The military ruled the country during most of the war. Its power culminated in March 1982, when General Efraín Ríos Montt took over the government following a military coup. His dictatorship lasted just 17 months, during which the army killed or displaced thousands of civilians.<sup>3</sup>

By 1985, when the government transitioned back to civilian leadership, the military's control had spread to nearly every part of the government, including the finance ministry, customs, the government ID office, the penitentiary system, and all matters of intelligence and security. The military also had its own bank, and numerous military officials had usurped land across the country. They were what are often termed bureaucratic elites,<sup>4</sup> many urban and from the middle class. They were influential inside the government while they served and often continued to exert influence once they left government, sometimes via their support of political candidates or parties.

They also formed criminal networks, which were bound by their shared experiences of war, office space, and time at the military academy. The model for these networks was known as *La Cofradía*, or the Brotherhood. *La Cofradía* goes as far back as the 1970s, when its members criminalized the customs agency, among other government bodies, having placed it under military rule on the pretext of guarding against arms smuggling into the country.<sup>5</sup> Its name, *La Cofradía*, which signified a commitment to protect one another, came later following the assassination of one of its founders.<sup>6</sup>

3 Archbishop Office of Human Rights in Guatemala, "Guatemala: Nunca Más," April 1998; Christian Tomuschat, et al., "Guatemala: Memory of Silence," Commission for Historical Clarification, presented 25 February 1999.

4 Bureaucratic -- or what are sometimes referred to as administrative or institutional -- elites draw on their official posts to gain influence and power. They are often a hybrid form of elite, deriving power from their status as landholders or businesspeople, but using their control of government posts they have gained -- either via election, appointment, or ascension -- to set the agenda on security, among other issues.

5 Bill Barreto, "De Moreno a La Línea: la huella militar en la defraudación aduanera," Plaza Pública, 22 August 2015.

6 Centro de Medios Independientes, "El padrino de los poderes paralelos: el general Callejas y Callejas," 26 January 2017.



Other corrupt-criminal blocs emerged, including a group associated with Ríos Montt, who would go on to become president of Congress where his daughter, Zury Ríos, would first make her name as congressional representative.<sup>7</sup> A group led by Gen. Otto Pérez Molina known as *El Sindicato* (The Union) would eventually win the presidency.<sup>8</sup> There was also group tied to Álvaro Arzú, the president-turned perennial Guatemala City mayor, who forged ties with several intelligence officials and other military operatives.<sup>9</sup>

The networks would later be called Illegal Clandestine Security Apparatuses (Cuerpos Ilegales y Aparatos Clandestinos de Seguridad - CIACS).<sup>10</sup> The CIACS were more moniker than reality. They were a useful way to understand how some powerful criminal networks were forged and organized, but they fought amongst themselves, switched sides frequently, and would evolve with changing political circumstances. Still, for a time, these original CIACS seemed to take turns running parts of the government at the highest levels. In the early 1990s, for example, General Luis Francisco Ortega Menaldo, the nominal leader of La Cofradía, became the head of the Presidential Intelligence Service (Estado Mayor Presidencial - EMP).<sup>11</sup> The EMP was the CIACS' nerve-center, and Ortega Menaldo used it to institutionalize his corruption and criminal schemes.<sup>12</sup>

Arzú won the presidency in 1996 and forged a peace accord with the guerrillas that year. While he reduced the size of the military considerably, he also established strong ties with numerous powerful military networks, many of which would serve him for years thereafter.<sup>13</sup> Among Arzú's allies while in power was Pérez Molina,<sup>14</sup> who became the face of military progressives who worked to advance the peace process. Pérez Molina also directed a cadre of

7 Steven Dudley, "[The 'Tennis Shoe King' Who Became Guatemala's Gentleman Lobbyist](#)," InSight Crime, 15 September 2014.

8 Carolina Gamazo, "[La doble vida de Otto Pérez Molina que descubrió la CICIG](#)," No-Ficción, 1 March 2021.

9 Juan José Martínez d'Aubuisson and Steven Dudley, "[Reign of the Kaibil: Guatemala's Prisons Under Byron Lima](#)," InSight Crime, 26 January 2017.

10 The CIACS are identified as early as 1994 in official documents related to the peace process: Government of Guatemala, et al., "[Acuerdo Global sobre Derechos Humanos](#)," 29 March 1994. See also: Susan C. Peacock and Adriana Beltran, "[Hidden Powers in Post-conflict Guatemala: Illegal Armed Groups and the Forces Behind Them](#)," Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), 2003.

11 Bill Barreto, "[De Moreno a La Línea: la huella militar en la defraudación aduanera](#)," Plaza Pública, 22 August 2015.

12 Ibid.

13 James Bargent, "[Guatemala's CICIG Takes on Third President with New Corruption Allegations](#)," InSight Crime, 6 October 2017.

14 Pérez Molina emerged as an independent actor when he defied his one-time mentor, Ortega Menaldo, and resisted the ousting of Congress by President Jorge Serrano Elías in a 1993 coup attempt. He later also broke with Arzú after Arzú did not name him defense minister during his administration. Over time, he would come to rely on traditional elites for economic support of his political project, the Patriot Party.

loyal soldiers who worked closely with the presidential guard and an anti-kidnapping unit created by Arzú.<sup>15</sup> Later, when Arzú became Guatemala City mayor, some of these military allies established a sophisticated intelligence apparatus in the basement of a municipal building giving rise to its nickname, *el sótano*. This secretive group helped Arzú establish a virtual lock on the mayor's office for the next two decades and assisted in many of the related corrupt-criminal schemes in the country's economic and political hub.

In 2000, Ríos Montt -- who had created a political party, the Guatemalan Republican Front (Frente Republicano Guatemalteco - FRG) -- became president of Congress. Ríos Montt was polemic but popular: the FRG had the largest single voting bloc, and Ríos Montt's handpicked candidate, Alfonso Portillo, had won the presidency, in part, with financing from Ortega Menaldo's corruption schemes.<sup>16</sup> This corruption soon spread. Some of Ríos Montt's closest allies pillaged the military's pension system. And Ortega Menaldo kept a firm grip on the country's ports and customs offices, where he and his allies in La Cofradía could continue their various criminal rackets.<sup>17</sup>

The Ríos Montt-Portillo government (2000-2004) also challenged the country's traditional economic elites in unprecedented ways. The elites had long run the country like feudal overlords, using their resources from their protected monopolies to exert influence and control of government policy. They channeled these interests through a powerful business association known as the Coordinating Commission of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial and Financial Associations (Comité Coordinador de Asociaciones Agrícolas, Comerciales, Industriales y Financieras - CACIF), which acted as a kind of parallel government, especially in economic matters. Although this was more politics than corruption, the Ríos Montt coalition defied CACIF, opening the door to imports of sugar, chicken feed, and soft-drinks, among other products.<sup>18</sup>

The emergence of the Ríos Montt bloc and its associated ilk pushed the CACIF to forge a strong alliance around their own candidate, Óscar Berger, who won the presidency in 2003, defeating Ríos Montt, among others. From the start, Berger's presidency (2004 - 2008) was a more traditional, elite affair. He delegated Vice President Eduardo Stein, who hailed from a more traditional elite family, to begin talks with the United Nations, former government officials, non-governmental organizations, and prominent judicial reformers to form a

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15 Some of these military personnel were later implicated in the murder of Bishop Juan Gerardi in April 1998, following the publication of report on Guatemala's civil war that pinned the vast majority of human rights abuses and extrajudicial killings of civilians on Guatemala's military. See: Francisco Goldman, "The Art of Political Murder: Who Killed the Archbishop?" (New York, 2008).

16 Steven Dudley, "[Guatemala Elites and Organized Crime: The CICIG](#)," InSight Crime, 1 September 2016.

17 Ibid.

18 Steven Dudley, "[The 'Tennis Shoe King' Who Became Guatemala's Gentleman Lobbyist](#)," InSight Crime, 15 September 2014.

new kind of judicial body to deal with the CIACS.<sup>19</sup> The idea, ironically, had begun under the Portillo administration, and Portillo himself was a proponent. But it had been shelved when they ran into political opposition, and the Constitutional Court blocked it.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, a new type of CIACS emerged, this one more tightly connected to the police and Interior Minister Carlos Vielman, who himself was from a prominent family with ties to the economic elites. The new CIACS took extreme measures against suspected members of street gangs, kidnapping groups, and drug traffickers. In 2006, for example, Vielman and his then-director of the penitentiary system, Alejandro Giammattei, entered a prison with a large contingent of police under the pretense there was a riot. Amidst the chaos, police executed seven inmates under mysterious circumstances. In another case, police killed several members of the Central American Parliament (Parlamento Centroamericano - Parlacen) and burned their car, presumably to steal a large bundle of cash the politicians were carrying. Days later, the suspects, who were all police, were assassinated in prison.<sup>21</sup> (Although initially implicated in the prison massacre, Vielman and Giammattei would later be exonerated.)

The dramatic cases pushed the Berger administration to act. Behind Stein's leadership, and with assistance from the United States government following the murder of the Central American parliamentarians, the administration convinced Congress to pass a provision allowing for the creation of an international judicial body.<sup>22</sup> The body, known as the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala - CICIG), would be sponsored by the United Nations and would work closely with the country's Attorney General's Office. Its mission, as its founding documents made clear, was to go after the CIACS.<sup>23</sup> Many economic elites saw it as an opportunity to debilitate their emerging rivals.<sup>24</sup> They never expected it would one day go after them.<sup>25</sup>

19 Steven Dudley, "Guatemala Elites and Organized Crime: The CICIG," InSight Crime, 1 September 2016.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 One version of the events was that opposition politicians in Congress, incensed because Vielman's police had stolen their money and seeking revenge, were the primary proponents of the CICIG. CICIG would later open an investigation into both the massacre in the prison and the murder of the parliamentarians.

23 United Nations and Guatemala government, "Agreement between the United Nations and the State of Guatemala on the establishment of an International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG)," 2007.

24 Steven Dudley, "Guatemala Elites and Organized Crime: The CICIG," InSight Crime, 1 September 2016; Edgar Gutiérrez, "Guatemala fuera de control: La CICIG y la lucha contra la impunidad," Nueva Sociedad Number 263, May-June 2016.

25 Edgar Gutiérrez, "El contrato roto," elPeriódico, 17 February 2022.

In 2007, the same year the CICIG got its start, Álvaro Colom was elected president, defeating former General Otto Pérez Molina in a tight race. Colom -- a bookish, understated, garment-factory owner -- had forged a different path than other elites. As the first head of the National Fund for Peace (Fondo Nacional para la Paz - Fonapaz), an agency created in the early 1990s to alleviate poverty and inequality, he had worked with the poor and marginalized, mostly in rural areas. In that capacity, he had met his third wife, Sandra Torres, an ambitious, political stalwart in her own right. Together, they had created the National Unity of Hope (Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza - UNE), which remains the only modern-day party to ever win the presidency without winning the popular vote in Guatemala City.

However, other criminal forces were emerging inside the presidential palace and beyond. Colom's chief of staff was a man named Gustavo Alejos, the CEO of one of the country's largest pharmaceutical companies, J.I. Cohen, who had also become a political consultant and financier of numerous political parties, including the UNE. Once in office, Alejos solidified an already tight grip on state-provided medicine contracts, among other schemes. Alejos would later establish himself as a CIACS of sorts from outside of government, fostering corruption and malfeasance inside the Pérez Molina administration.<sup>26</sup>

Colom's presidential guard was headed by Carlos Quintanilla who was later connected to corruption and drug trafficking by the CICIG<sup>27</sup> and linked to the theft of close to \$9 million from the Guatemala City airport.<sup>28</sup> Colom removed Quintanilla after discovering that Quintanilla was spying on him. Quintanilla was later arrested for fraud and coercion,<sup>29</sup> but his legacy remains entrenched in the presidential palace: He had militarized the presidential guard, creating a kind of parallel power reminiscent of the EMP.<sup>30</sup>

Outside the capital, UNE's allies included drug traffickers and politicians. One of these was Otoniel Turcios, who had helped finance Colom's campaign.<sup>31</sup> He was later captured, extradited, and convicted in the United States for drug trafficking.<sup>32</sup> Another was a politician named Manuel Baldizón, a UNE congressman from the northern state of Petén. Baldizón would later create his

26 CICIG, "[Presentación del caso: Red de poder, corrupción y lavado de dinero](#)," 5 August 2019.

27 CICIG, "Ministerio Público y otras instituciones del sistema de seguridad y justicia," presentation, 10 June 2010.

28 Fernando Solís and Luis Solano, "[¿Qué intereses giran en torno a la muerte del capitán retirado Francisco Arana Barreda?](#)" Centro de Medios Independientes, 28 February 2016.

29 Rosa María Bolaños, "[Carlos Quintanilla, exjefe de la SAAS, capturado por estafa](#)," Prensa Libre, 28 October 2017.

30 José Ruben Zamora, "El lado oscuro y 'Los Ángeles de Charlie'," *elPeriódico*, 13 August 2018.

31 Steven Dudley, "[The Zetas, Drug Money and the Colom Campaign in Guatemala](#)," *InSight Crime*, 9 August 2018.

32 *Ibid.*



own political party and, following his own presidential campaigns, serve 28 months in prison in the United States after pleading guilty to money laundering with campaign contributions from drug traffickers.<sup>33</sup>

The CICIG, meanwhile, began helping the Attorney General's Office go after CIACS old and new. This included Vielman and Giammattei for the alleged massacre of the seven inmates. The case would last for years, spread across two continents, and lead to the temporary imprisonment of Giammattei, the future president.<sup>34</sup> Other cases targeted the Ríos Montt bloc, including Portillo;<sup>35</sup> and parts of La Cofradía (although never Ortega Menaldo, who always managed to escape unscathed). Aside from the Vielman case, which the economic elites took as a direct attack against one of its own, the CICIG was working to debilitate the CIACS but also corruption schemes connected to politicians and emerging elites.

Still, the CIACS returned to power, this time with Otto Pérez Molina, who was elected with a near 10-point margin in 2011 over Manuel Baldizón. For years, Pérez Molina had burnished a reputation as a reformer. The former general had, for example, supported the approval of the CICIG and been a proponent of the peace accord with the guerrillas. And after he took office, Pérez Molina left Claudia Paz y Paz, a pro-human rights and pro-CICIG attorney general, in her post. At first, it seemed to play in the president's favor, as Paz y Paz continued several historic cases against the military, including one against General Ríos Montt for war crimes in the 1980s. The case debilitated a competing CIACS and fortified Pérez Molina's image, but it also galvanized ex-military officers and hard-right economic elites, some of whom, at the behest of the general's daughter, Zury Ríos, publicly sided with the embattled former general.<sup>36</sup>

What's more, Pérez Molina's façade as a forward-looking reformer was also starting to crumble. His Patriot Party had, in many ways, created what one crime analyst called "the perfect CIACS."<sup>37</sup> His vice president, Roxana Baldetti, established a team that oversaw the ports and the customs offices.<sup>38</sup> His interior minister, also a decorated, former military officer, monetized the

33 US Southern District of Florida, "[Director of Guatemalan Bank Arrested on Federal Money Laundering Charge and Money Laundering Charges Unsealed Against Former Guatemalan Presidential Candidate](#)," US Attorney General's Office, 12 November 2019; *United States of America v. Manuel Antonio Baldizón Méndez*, Amended Judgement, 2019.

34 Steven Dudley, "[Guatemala Elites and Organized Crime: The CICIG](#)," InSight Crime, 1 September 2016.

35 Ibid.

36 Steven Dudley, "[The War of Paz y Paz: The Victims](#)," InSight Crime, 22 April 2014.

37 InSight Crime interview, crime analyst, 21 December 2022.

38 Felipe Puerta and Steven Dudley, "[Guatemala Politics and the Patriotic Party's Theory of 'Eternal Return'](#)," InSight Crime, 16 August 2018.

ministry with kickbacks on everything from toilet paper to the security cameras.<sup>39</sup> The minister of the Ministry of Communications, Infrastructure, and Housing (Ministerio de Comunicaciones, Infraestructura y Vivienda - CIV) sold his office's standard services for a premium.<sup>40</sup> The president of the board of directors of the Guatemalan Institute of Social Security Institute (Instituto Guatemalteco de Seguridad Social - IGSS) -- also a former military officer -- channeled contracts to unqualified candidates for a price<sup>41</sup> and used the IGSS as a petty cash department to rig the voting of high court judges.<sup>42</sup> Like a Mafia don, Pérez Molina collected a fee for all of it.<sup>43</sup>

The CICIG, under its new commissioner, the Colombian judge Iván Velásquez, was watching. Beginning in 2015, about a year after Velásquez's arrival, the CICIG and its partners at the Attorney General's Office began to reveal a raft of corruption cases they had been building. To the economic elite's surprise and dismay, the cases were not just directed at CIACS -- they were also directed at them and their closest allies in some of the largest industrial, agro-industrial, and telecommunications conglomerates in the country, as well as at banks, hotels, and ports. The surge in judicial action was seen as a sign that justice might finally prevail in Guatemala. Velásquez became something of a folk hero, and the expectations around the weekly announcement of the cases something of a game,<sup>44</sup> typified by a #JuevesdeCICIG hashtag.

Some of the cases were stronger than others, but with each new case announced, the commission appeared to be reaching higher into the corrupt-criminal blocs that had long characterized Guatemala's political landscape. In May 2015, CICIG announced charges against Vice President Baldetti for orchestrating an elaborate corruption scheme in customs houses across the country and asked Congress to lift Pérez Molina's immunity from prosecution. Even prior to the announcement of charges against Baldetti, protesters were beginning to flood the streets, in particular the plaza in front of the presidential palace. Protests culminated in late August and helped force Congress to strip Pérez Molina of his immunity. Pérez Molina resigned, was charged with corruption, and was imprisoned alongside his vice president.<sup>45</sup> It was the apex of CICIG's power.

39 Steven Dudley, "Guatemala's Mafia State and the Case of Mauricio López Bonilla," InSight Crime, 15 December 2016.

40 Felipe Puerta and Steven Dudley, "Guatemala Politics and the Patriotic Party's Theory of 'Eternal Return'," InSight Crime, 16 August 2018.

41 Alex Papadovassilakis, "Social Insecurity: The Case of IGSS-Pisa in Guatemala," InSight Crime, 1 December 2021.

42 Steven Dudley, "Justice and the Creation of a Mafia State in Guatemala," InSight Crime, 15 September 2014.

43 CICIG, "Caso la cooperacha," 11 June 2016.

44 Steven Dudley, "How Colombia's Judge Already Won Guatemala's Elections," InSight Crime, 20 October 2015.

45 Oswaldo Hernández, "From Guatemala's President to Prisoner in Less than 24 Hours," InSight Crime, 9 September 2015.

An interim government held the state in place during the tumultuous elections that followed. The three top contenders were the one-time UNE congressman, Manuel Baldizón; Pérez Molina's CIV minister, Alejandro Sinibaldi; and the former first lady, Sandra Torres. Sinibaldi would soon go on the run because of allegations of corruption;<sup>46</sup> Baldizón would fade, in part because of his close ties to drug trafficking; Torres was strong but had a ceiling. Novelty came in the form of a television comedian-turned political hopeful whose only other foray into politics had been a failed bid to become mayor of a Guatemala City suburb. It did not matter: In October 2015, Jimmy Morales defeated Sandra Torres in the second round by a margin of more than 30 points.

But if Guatemala was clamoring for something new, what they got was more of the same. Backing Morales was the National Convergence Front (Frente de Convergencia Nacional - FCN-Nación), a party founded and funded by ex-military personnel and who themselves appeared to be something resembling a CIACS. Many had connections to Vielman's network connected to earlier crimes.<sup>47</sup> One of Morales' closest advisors was General Ricardo Bustamante, who had worked closely with Otto Pérez Molina for years; behind Bustamante was a raft of other current and ex-military officials. What's more, among Morales' financiers were prominent members of the CACIF, among other economic elites, some of whom had allegedly channeled money illegally into Morales' campaign at the last minute.<sup>48</sup>

The CICIG, still riding high from its toppling of the Pérez Molina regime, set its sights on more recent cases. In September 2016, the commission announced it was pursuing a petty corruption case that eventually ensnared Morales' son and his brother that predated Morales' time as a presidential candidate. Both were briefly jailed for the case in early 2017.<sup>49</sup> And while the commission could not prosecute the military backers of Morales, it could go after the CACIF elites who financed him during the second round of the elections, as well as the president himself. The case was relatively small in economic terms but mammoth in symbolic terms, especially when -- even after eight of those accused admitted guilt in a dramatic press conference, including some members of the country's most storied and wealthy families -- the CICIG still charged them with petty electoral financing crimes. In a bid to show that it was prosecuting all political parties, the CICIG also opened up cases against members of Congress, the former UNE president Colom,<sup>50</sup> and Álvaro Arzú, the president-turned-mayor.<sup>51</sup>

46 CICIG, "[Caso Corrupción y Construcción](#)," 14 July 2017.

47 Daniel Villatoro García, "[Los militares que financian a Jimmy Morales](#)," Plaza Pública, 13 October 2015.

48 Héctor Silva Ávalos and Steven Dudley, "[President Jimmy Morales' \(and Guatemala's\) 'Original Sin'](#)," *InSight Crime*, 23 August 2018.

49 CICIG, "[Capturas relacionadas con fraude al registro de la propiedad](#)," 18 January 2017.

50 CICIG, "[Caso Transurbano: Fraude al Estado \(Etapa I\)](#)," 13 February 2018.

51 CICIG, "[Caso Caja de Pandora](#)," 5 October 2017; CICIG, "[Caso: Financiamiento electoral ilícito Partido Unionista](#)," 14 June 2019.

By then, a coordinated public relations campaign to undermine the CICIG in the press and on social media had gained significant traction. This campaign was, in part, led by Ricardo Méndez Ruiz, whose father had been interior minister during Ríos Montt's short stint as president in the early 1980s. Méndez Ruiz was a former businessman who created a non-governmental organization called the Foundation Against Terrorism (Fundación Contra el Terrorismo - FCT) in 2013. The FCT was ostensibly established to defend former military officers facing charges of human rights abuses, but its purview would expand with time. In 2018, a new attorney general, Consuelo Porras, began to disrupt the commission's cases and marginalize its allies in the Attorney General's Office. Morales also installed an interior minister, Enrique Degenhart, who had worked with the Arzú administration in Guatemala City and quickly moved to shut down any cooperation with the commission.

The press called these forces the Pacto de Corruptos,<sup>52</sup> but it was less of a pact than a tacit agreement that they had to work in unison to stop the Attorney General's Office from opening more cases and to shut down the CICIG. Morales declared the Colombian Velásquez persona non grata and began to deny visas for the commission's investigators. In August 2018, in a fiery speech, the president declared that he would not renew CICIG's mandate.<sup>53</sup> A little more than a year later, on September 1, 2019, the CICIG packed the last of its boxes and left the country.

The Pacto de Corruptos has since moved from defense to offense. A coalition, which included prominent members of the CIACS, drug traffickers, corrupt politicians, special interest lobbyists, and a small number of business elites rallied behind the once-jailed former director of the penitentiary system, Alejandro Giammattei, to catapult him to the presidency in 2020. By 2021, the political establishment's efforts to ensure impunity and persecute anyone who had assisted the CICIG began to take shape.<sup>54</sup>

Many others have joined in this campaign, most notably Méndez Ruiz and Attorney General Porras, but also numerous appellate and high court judges, as well as prominent economic elites who discreetly finance lobbying efforts in Washington D.C. What has followed has been a relentless purge of prosecutors and judges, some of whom have fled the country, others of whom are facing criminal charges in Guatemala.<sup>55</sup>

52 Oswaldo Hernández, "Pacto de corruptos," No-Ficción, 2 March 2020.

53 Steven Dudley, Héctor Silva Ávalos, and Parker Asmann, "Guatemala President Announces End of CICIG's Mandate," InSight Crime, 31 August 2018.

54 Edgar Gutiérrez, "Guatemala 2022 y prospectiva 2023," working paper for Diakonía Guatemala, February 2023; Edgar Gutiérrez, "Contrarrevolución en la justicia," elPeriódico, 12 February 2023.

55 Edgar Gutiérrez, "Contrarrevolución en la justicia," elPeriódico, 12 February 2023; see also: Daniella Burgi-Palomino, et al., "When the Dominoes Fall: Co-optation of the Justice System in Guatemala," Latin America Working Group Education Fund, Due Process of Law Foundation, Guatemala Human Rights Commission, and Washington Office on Latin America, October 2022.



It is in this tumultuous environment that Guatemala is heading toward its 2023 presidential election. Its chief objective fulfilled, the Pacto may divide into factions, since each has its own origins, priorities, and means of continuing to influence the judicial system both in its favor and against its perceived enemies. It is some of these factions that we will describe in the next section.

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## 4

## Bloc I: Vamos - The Fight to Stay in the Game

The political bloc surrounding the administration of President Alejandro Giammattei (2020-present) is now the dominant power structure in Guatemala. In just a few years, it has achieved something almost unprecedented in the country's post-war era: the consolidation of power across the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. This centralization of power is not a reflection of Giammattei's popularity -- in a 2022 poll administered by CID Gallup, the Guatemalan president had a 19% approval rating, the joint lowest in the Americas;<sup>56</sup> and his party, Vamos, has a minor voting bloc in Congress. Rather, it is a sign of the bloc's ability to leverage executive powers to trade political favors with traditional and emerging elites and, in doing so, position itself as the central node in a horizontal alliance that seeks to perpetuate power across key branches of the state.

The alliance, which took root during the Morales administration when elites shared an interest in ousting the CICIG, has morphed into a systematic campaign to convert the judicial sector into a shield for nefarious actors and a weapon for exacting revenge on those who once fought against impunity. The result has been a period of corruption and graft, gradually spiraling out of control as key branches of the state sink into ungovernability. The question posed by sources who spoke to InSight Crime was not if Vamos has a chance to win the presidency. It was if this loose coalition would remain intact following the elections.

### Executive Power, Congress, and Mayors

The Vamos bloc's leverage lies in its control of the presidency. The executive branch presides over a near-bottomless trove of state funds, via its influence over the national budget and key ministries, which can be distributed within

<sup>56</sup> @CIDGallup, "Desempeño de los presidentes Latinoamericanos. Los datos corresponden a nuestro último estudio de Opinión Pública realizado en el mes de mayo...", Twitter, 22 July 2022.

the bloc or used to build alliances in sectors pivotal to potential corruption schemes, namely in Congress and the judicial sector. The bloc's main negotiator is Giammattei's one-time chief of staff, Miguel Martínez, according to congressional sources and political analysts interviewed by InSight Crime. Martínez accumulated power and contacts after Giammattei positioned him as director of an opaque presidential commission, known as the Center of Government (Centro de Gobierno), in early 2020.<sup>57</sup> This role allowed Martínez to watch over the entire cabinet and influence the distribution of state funds via key ministries.

### ***How the Executive Branch Divvies up the Pie***

Though Martínez is no longer a government official -- the Centro de Gobierno was shut down at the end of 2020<sup>58</sup> -- he remains an important node for anyone looking to secure public contracts or government jobs at the executive's disposal, according to multiple sources consulted by InSight Crime. Much of this activity related to the Vamos bloc has centered on the Ministry of Communications, Infrastructure, and Housing (Ministerio de Comunicaciones, Infraestructura y Vivienda - CIV). The CIV and its many directorates preside over the country's biggest and most lucrative infrastructure and telecommunications contracts, which have been awarded to companies close to Giammattei.<sup>59</sup>

Other important ministries include the Guatemalan Social Security Institute (Instituto Guatemalteco de Seguridad Social - IGSS) and the Ministry for Health and Social Assistance (Ministerio de Salud Pública y Asistencia Social - MSPAS). Each year these institutions administer billions of dollars in healthcare and pharmaceutical contracts. Particularly in the case of the IGSS,<sup>60</sup> these have long been leveraged to secure political favors or kickbacks.<sup>61</sup>

Funds assigned to the Ministry of Social Development (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social - MIDES), the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food (Ministerio de Agricultura, Ganadería y Alimentación - MAGA), the Ministry of Energy and

57 Pavel Gerado Vega, "[Miguel Martínez, el celador de Giammattei, pierde su centro](#)," Plaza Pública, 6 December 2020.

58 Julio Román, "[Ejecutivo oficializa el cierre del Centro de Gobierno a partir del 1 de enero del 2021](#)," Prensa Libre, 18 December 2020.

59 elPeriódico, "[Contratos de empresa cercana a Giammattei llegan a los Q919.21 millones](#)," 16 July 2022.

60 In 2016, the Guatemalan government signed an agreement with the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) for the UN body to supervise IGSS public procurement procedures. The assistance had helped save over \$300 million in medicinal purchases (long overvalued as part of corruption schemes) by the end of 2022, according to press reports. The agreement terminates in 2023, after which public procurement via IGSS will no longer be supervised by an international body.

61 Steven Dudley, "[Justice and the Creation of a Mafia State in Guatemala](#)," InSight Crime, 15 September 2014.

Mines (Ministerio de Energía y Minas - MEM), and the Ministry of Education (Ministerio de Educación - MINEDUC) can also be operationalized by the executive. The dynamic is largely the same: the executive can distribute poverty relief and food programs, mining permits, and construction contracts for schools, in exchange for political favors and, in some cases, garnering political support in poor areas.

For others, such as the Ministry of Environmental and Natural Resources (Ministerio de Ambiente y Recursos Naturales - MARN), the system is more backhanded. Since this ministry administers and validates environmental conditions and community approval for mining and hydroelectric projects, it can spin this oversight into payoffs, as well as political and economic leverage.<sup>62</sup>

### ***Congressional Quid Pro Quo***

The bloc's control of state funds has seen congressional representatives flock towards the government, allowing Vamos to transform a Congress bloc counting just 17 representatives (out of 160) into a majority coalition spanning at least 13 parties and around two-thirds of the legislature's seats: Vamos (17 seats), UNE (34),<sup>63</sup> the National Change Union (Unión del Cambio Nacional - UCN) (12), Valor (9), the National Convergence Front (Frente de Convergencia Nacional - FCN-Nación)(8), Bienestar (8), Humanista (6), Todos (6), Creo (5), Citizen Prosperity (Prosperidad Ciudadana)(3), PAN (2), Unionista (2), Podemos (1).<sup>64</sup>

Votes from allied parties have allowed the government to pass a series of congressional bills that enable corruption, from increases in the national budget to emergency decrees that weaken scrutiny on public tenders. In this regard, the power lies with the president of Congress, who sets the legislative agenda and provides a link between representatives and executive resources. Over the course of its tenure, the Giammattei administration has positioned two top Vamos operators in the role: first, Allan Rodríguez, and more recently, Shirley Rivera.

<sup>62</sup> Grecia Ortíz, "[MARN: Descontrol, corrupción e impunidad en torno a los recursos naturales](#)," La Hora, 27 February 2016.

<sup>63</sup> Figure refers to estimated number of UNE Congress representatives still loyal to Sandra Torres following an internal party rebellion in 2021.

<sup>64</sup> Estimates based on research conducted by InSight Crime congressional experts and interviews with political analysts and sitting Congress representatives; Congress of Guatemala, "[Gráfica Bloques dentro del Congreso](#)," 2023.



# Vamos: Political Network

This graphic shows a network of actors that support Vamos' goals.



Rodríguez, head of Congress between 2020 and 2022, allegedly offered bribes to representatives to secure votes for a state of emergency bill, according to the US Treasury Department, which sanctioned Rodríguez over the bill and additionally for awarding “construction grants in exchange for financial kickbacks.”<sup>65</sup> Rivera took over from Rodríguez as president of Congress in 2022 after purportedly gaining the confidence of Giammattei and aligned representatives. She now helps manage government jobs, money, and state contracts among the Vamos bloc and allied parties in Congress.<sup>66</sup>

The sway now held by actors like Rivera and Rodríguez is a testament to the steadily increasing clout of congressional coalitions, an emerging political class that has consolidated power by leveraging its influence over the distribution of public funds. The evolution of Congress as a hub for corrupt money-making schemes has helped open the playing field to non-traditional elites, with many players in Congress having toiled their way through the drudgery of mid-level bureaucracy before learning how to leverage their positions to help grow companies that can bankroll their political ambitions. Others may have zero experience in the public sector, having instead used capital from commercial activity and land ownership, or in some cases ill-gotten gains from the criminal underworld, to finance their route into the political arena. These new players appear to be increasingly independent of other powerful players, such as the drug trafficking interests documented below.

### ***Path to Power: Old Mayors, New Allies***

Though the Vamos bloc has accumulated extensive political power, its chances of retaining the presidency in the upcoming elections appear slim. The bloc’s presidential candidate, longtime congressional representative Manuel Conde, is far from a household name and has consistently polled below the frontrunners. Seemingly aware of the candidate’s modest popularity, the bloc’s election strategy has centered on recruiting close to 200 mayoral candidates<sup>67</sup> in the hope of securing enough votes for Conde to make the second round against a candidate with a firm ceiling.

The plan appears to center on the bloc’s access to state resources, with mayoral candidates able to trade political support for increased municipal funds and public work projects. The final months of 2022 saw Congress approve one of

65 US Department of the Treasury, “[Treasury Sanctions Over 40 Individuals and Entities Across Nine Countries Connected to Corruption and Human Rights Abuse](#),” 9 December 2022.

66 InSight Crime interview, former president of Congress, Guatemala City, 7 February 2023.

67 La Hora, “[Con 187 candidatos a alcaldes inscritos VAMOS se encamina a afianzar su estrategia](#),” 3 March 2023.

the largest budgets in recent memory,<sup>68</sup> with significant increases in funds for departmental councils for development (Consejos Departamentales de Desarrollo - CODEDE).<sup>69</sup> The councils are headed by departmental governors, appointed by the executive, who coordinate with mayors and congressional representatives to distribute around Q3.4 billion (\$436 million) annually across more than 2,000 public works projects, spanning education, roads, sanitation, and health.<sup>70</sup> Mayors face little scrutiny when it comes to public spending, as they all enjoy political immunity under Guatemalan law.<sup>71</sup>

Recruiting mayors also opens the door to illicit financing from organized crime. Particularly in border areas, drug traffickers maintain close ties to mayors and contribute political funds in exchange for construction contracts used to launder money. Press reports have flagged links between some Vamos municipal candidates and the drug trade, including one mayor previously linked to a drug ring by Guatemalan authorities and who publicly stated that he was a drug trafficker.<sup>72</sup>

The bloc's election strategy also relies on positioning key allies in Congress, some linked to the drug trade. Winning even a few seats in Congress would ensure the party's political survival -- regardless of the results of the presidential election -- by providing a platform to trade votes in exchange for state resources. In this regard, Vamos has absorbed several former representatives of the National Change Union (Unión del Cambio Nacional - UCN), a political party heavily linked to the drug trade. In 2021, the Supreme Electoral Court (TSE) ordered the party to disband for allegedly breaching electoral financing rules.<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps the most conspicuous UCN deputy to run with Vamos in the upcoming elections is Sofía Hernández, the former vice-president of Congress. Hernández's family is connected to a Guatemalan drug trafficking group, known as the Huistas, based in her home department of Huehuetenango.<sup>74</sup> In early 2021, the Attorney General's Office arrested one of Hernández's brothers on charges related to a money-laundering cover-up involving the drug ring.<sup>75</sup> But there are other former UCN candidates with influence in regions pivotal to the drug trade: Carolina Orellana (Zacapa), Napoleón Rojas (Santa Rosa), and Jaime Lucero (Jalapa).

68 Congress of Guatemala, "[Presupuesto más grande de la historia para el combate de la desnutrición](#)," 10 November 2022.

69 Government of Guatemala, "[Consejos Departamentales de Desarrollo Invertirán Q3 mil 392 millones en 2023](#)," 15 November 2022.

70 Ibid.

71 Guatemala Constitution, art. 258.

72 Lucero Sapalú, "[Alcalde que dijo 'ser narco' buscaría reelección con VAMOS](#)," La Hora, 25 January 2023.

73 Oscar García and Henry Montenegro, "[TSE deja en firme cancelación de la UCN por infracción a las normas de financiamiento electoral](#)," Prensa Libre, 17 October 2022.

74 Shane Sullivan, "[Guatemala's Los Huistas Continue to Build Influence Network](#)," InSight Crime, 17 February 2021.

75 Ibid.

There are also representatives from other parties running for Congress with Vamos in provinces housing drug-smuggling groups, including Boris España (a candidate for the Todos in the Chiquimula province) and Thelma Ramírez (a candidate for UNE in Izabal). The candidates' broad geographical distribution could open the door to potentially game-changing campaign funds. The system is cyclic: state funds accessed by illicit actors are pumped back into election campaigns. Their contributions are then repaid with more contracts, and so on.

## Denying Justice, Destroying Enemies

At the heart of the bloc's efforts has been an orchestrated campaign aimed at undermining the judicial sector from within. By steadily exerting influence over key justice institutions, Giammattei and his allies have seemingly created a shield against prosecution. The bloc's influence over the judicial sector has also allowed it to expel independent prosecutors and judges that once led the fight against high-level graft, part of a calculated effort to remove counterbalances and reverse rule-of-law efforts made during the CICIG era. Giammattei's power is far from absolute. Rather, the president has capitalized on an opportune political moment to foster, reinforce, and synchronize mutually beneficial alliances between diverse networks and top operators in the judicial sector.

### ***An Unholy Alliance: The President and the Attorney General's Office***

The path to influencing the judicial sector begins at the top. The Attorney General's Office holds extraordinary leverage, as its prosecutors can obstruct criminal investigations to protect allies or instead slap rivals with criminal charges. Consuelo Porras is also the ultimate authority when it comes to hiring and firing prosecutors and other officials, allowing her to stack the Attorney General's Office with loyal prosecutors and bureaucrats and, in doing so, possibly manipulate high-profile corruption cases. The Vamos bloc has relied heavily on Porras, whose Attorney General's Office has ruled in Giammattei's and his allies' favor on multiple occasions. This protection has gone hand-in-hand with a broader campaign to dismantle the leading anti-corruption units within the Attorney General's Office.

The primary target in this campaign was initially the Special Prosecutor's Office Against Impunity (Fiscalía Especial contra la Impunidad - FECI). FECI worked side-by-side with the CICIG and took on the commission's work following its departure in 2019. The unit concentrates the bulk of major corruption cases in Guatemala, and in the wake of CICIG's exit continued to ruffle the feathers of



elites accused of corruption. It was FECEI prosecutors, for example, led by the unit's former head, Juan Francisco Sandoval, who in 2021 began investigating Giammattei for allegedly taking bribes from Russian businesspeople.<sup>76</sup> In July 2021, Porras fired Sandoval<sup>77</sup> and replaced him with Rafael Curruchiche.

Curruchiche's appointment flipped FECEI's role on its head. Instead of prosecuting acts of corruption, the unit now appears to be keeping graft cases off the docket. At the same time, Curruchiche has turned FECEI's gaze towards the prosecutors and judges that once worked on high-profile corruption cases. Dozens of anti-impunity operators have been forced into exile or jailed after facing criminal charges enacted by the Attorney General's Office.<sup>78</sup> Porras has also transferred FECEI prosecutors to other units, while others have resigned or fled the country after receiving death threats.<sup>79</sup> Criminal charges levied by the Attorney General's Office have also succeeded in ousting some of the country's top judges, including the judge presiding over the bribery case implicating Giammattei.<sup>80</sup>

The crackdown has often seen prosecutors seize upon administrative technicalities as the basis for criminal cases that charge anti-impunity operators with obstruction of justice and abuse of authority. The cases are almost always confidential, making it impossible to scrutinize the allegations. Porras' dismissals and transfers have also weakened other branches of the Attorney General's Office pivotal to tackling impunity, including units that deal with general corruption, electoral and administrative crimes, and human rights -- the latter area responsible for prosecuting military veterans accused of crimes against humanity dating back to the civil war.<sup>81</sup> Several prosecutors have been fired without due process. Those who seek to challenge a dismissal via legal channels face a wait of up to five years.<sup>82</sup> Prosecutors now face career-ending reprisals for breaking ranks with Porras, greatly reducing incentives to act independently of corrupt interests. On the flipside, the potential rewards for joining the corrupt establishment appear to be significant.

76 Natalie Kitroeff, "[Biden Faces a Trade-Off: Stop Corruption, or Migration?](#)" New York Times, 24 August 2021.

77 Alex Papadovassilakis, "[Despite Outrage, Guatemala Continues to Bulldoze Anti-Corruption Edifice,](#)" InSight Crime, 25 July 2021.

78 Alex Papadovassilakis, "[Crackdown on Guatemala Prosecutors Intensifies Amid Presidential Corruption Claims,](#)" InSight Crime, 23 February 2022.

79 Jody García, "[Así fue como Consuelo Porras y Rafael Curruchiche desbarataron la antigua Feci,](#)" Plaza Pública, 24 March 2022.

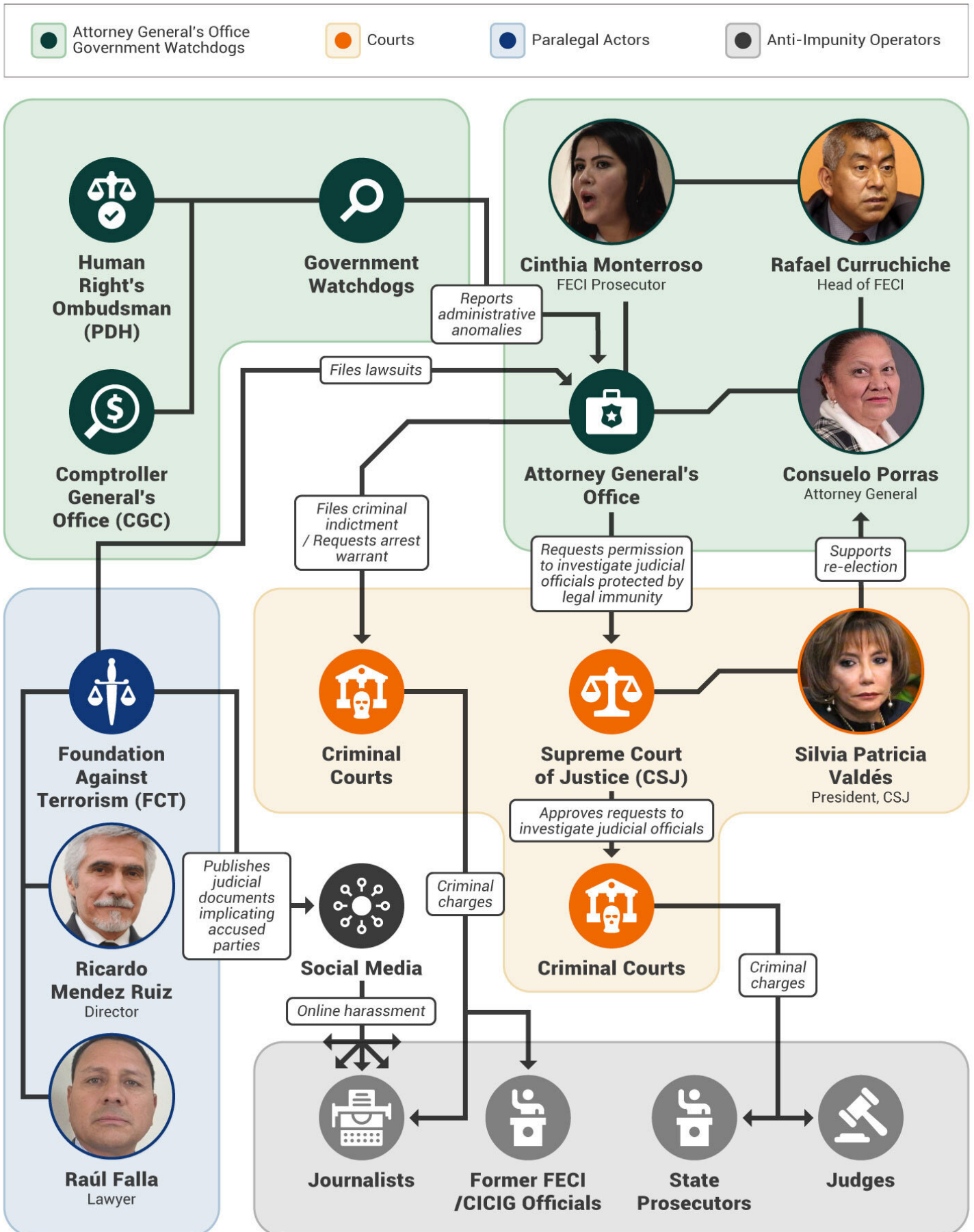
80 Alex Papadovassilakis, "[Anti-Corruption Judge Becomes Next Target of Guatemala Prosecutors,](#)" InSight Crime, 19 January 2022.

81 elPeriódico, "[Porras destituye a la fiscal Hilda Pineda,](#)" 30 June 2022.

82 InSight Crime interview, Alejandro Rodríguez, lawyer, Impunity Watch, Guatemala City, 13 February 2023.

# Vamos: Prosecuting Anti-Impunity Operators

This graphic illustrates how a network of government officials, state institutions, and paralegal actors have prosecuted anti-impunity operators.



May 2023

In 2021, for example, Porras blocked an arrest warrant against Cinthia Monterroso after former FECI head Sandoval accused her of requesting information on individuals not implicated in investigations.<sup>83</sup> Later, when Curruchiche replaced Sandoval, Monterroso was appointed head of a FECI unit handling many of the office's most sensitive cases, including the probe into bribes allegedly paid to Giammattei by Russian businesspeople.<sup>84</sup> Almost all of FECI's major corruption investigations have since stalled under Monterroso, and she has launched investigations into prominent journalists reporting on graft.

The US government has taken note of these developments in the Attorney General's Office. In 2022, the US State Department sanctioned Porras for obstructing and undermining anti-corruption investigations to protect political allies.<sup>85</sup> A year earlier, the State Department sanctioned Ángel Pineda, a top Porras' aide, for obstructing "investigations into acts of corruption by interfering in anticorruption probes" and informing "investigative targets about cases being built against them."<sup>86</sup>

Still, Porras now has enormous power. And the outcome of the 2023 elections does not affect her second five-year tenure, which began in 2022.

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83 Sofía Menchú, "Cinthia Monterroso, la fiscal problemática que acusa a Zamora," *No-Ficción*, 9 August 2022; Jody García, "Así fue como Consuelo Porras y Rafael Curruchiche desbarataron la antigua Feci," *Plaza Pública*, 24 March 2022.

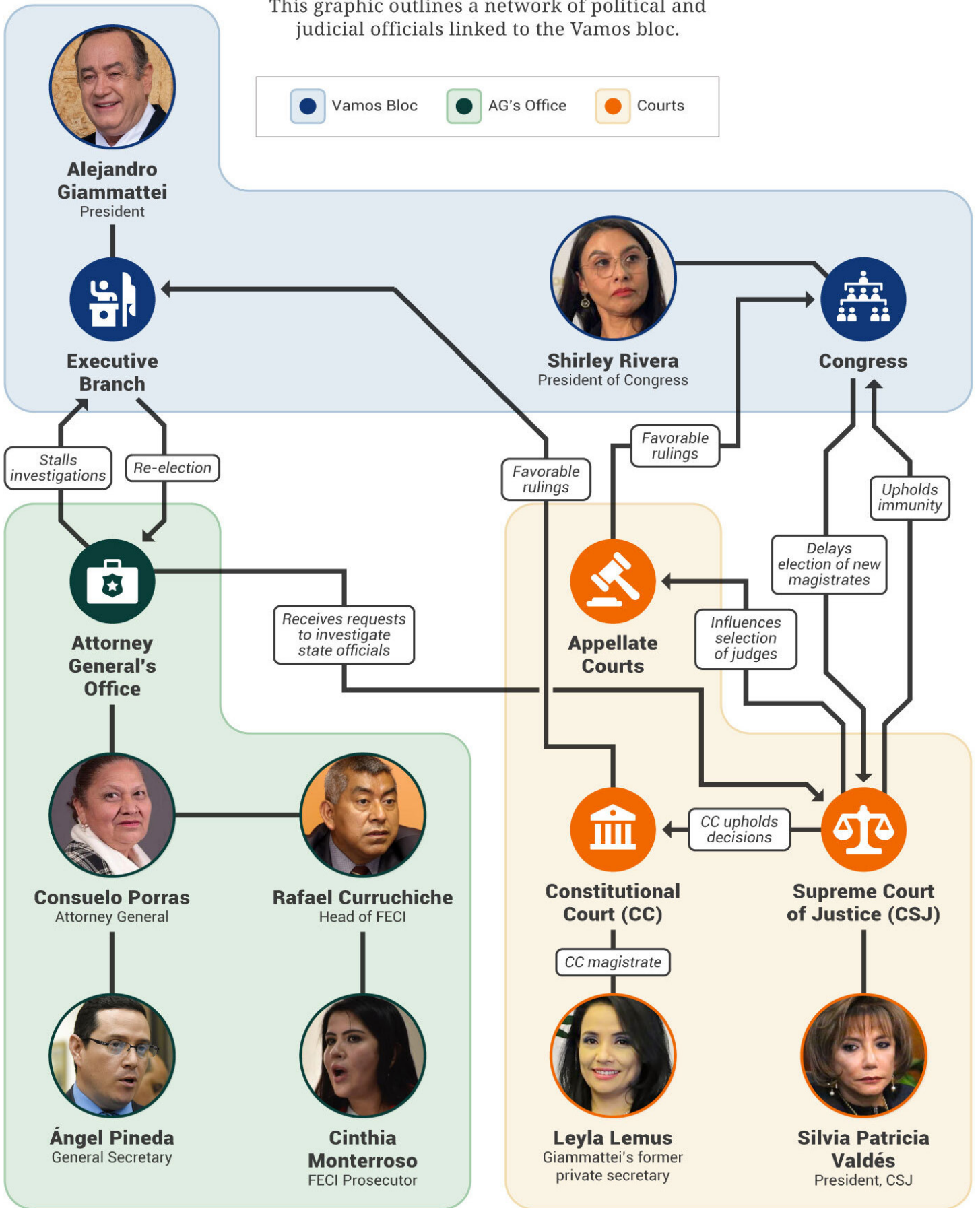
84 Jody García, "Así fue como Consuelo Porras y Rafael Curruchiche desbarataron la antigua Feci," *Plaza Pública*, 24 March 2022.

85 US Department of State, "Designation of Attorney General Maria Consuelo Porras Argueta de Porras for Involvement in Significant Corruption and Consideration of Additional Designations," 16 May 2022.

86 US Department of State, "United States Announces Actions Against Seven Central American Officials for Undermining Democracy and Obstructing Investigations into Acts of Corruption," 20 September 2021.

# Vamos: Judicial Network

This graphic outlines a network of political and judicial officials linked to the Vamos bloc.



May 2023



## **Stacking the High Courts: Part I**

Since coming to power, the Giammattei administration has also brought the Constitutional Court (Corte de Constitucionalidad - CC) -- the country's highest legal authority -- back into the orbit of his political interests. The CC has the final word on high-level legal disputes. During the Jimmy Morales administration it served as a vital counterbalance. When, for example, the former president sought to dismantle the CICIG by expelling its top officials, the court blocked these efforts.<sup>87</sup>

That appeared to change with the election of new magistrates in early 2021. The reshuffle saw candidates -- particularly those put forward by the presidency, the judicial branch (Organismo Judicial - OJ), and the Supreme Court (Corte Suprema de Justicia - CSJ) -- tip the balance of the court in favor of interests seemingly aligned with the Pacto de Corruptos, the Giammattei administration, and the Attorney General's Office.<sup>88</sup> According to Alejandro Rodríguez at Impunity Watch, the court is now an "ally of Porras" and wields its authority to uphold the actions of the Attorney General's Office, as well as pass favorable rulings that have blocked investigations into elites and judicial operators accused of corruption.<sup>89</sup>

Indeed, the CC's realignment has been beneficial to Giammattei's bloc. The CC has, for instance, limited the ability of congressional committees to summon members of the executive for accountability purposes.<sup>90</sup>

The consolidation of power in the judicial sector has also benefitted from a successful effort to stall the election of new magistrates to the Supreme Court and appellate courts. Elections for new high court magistrates were due in 2019, but the CC suspended the process after the Attorney General's Office revealed an alleged plot to stack the high courts with allies. The plot was led by an extensive network of operators that, according to a subsequent FECCI investigation, included congressional representatives and CSJ magistrates.<sup>91</sup> Since then, inaction in Congress has prevented the selection process from resuming.

<sup>87</sup> Evelyn Boche, "CC ampara a personal de la CICIG y suspende revocatoria de visas," *elPeriódico*, 22 December 2018.

<sup>88</sup> InSight Crime interview, Alejandro Rodríguez, lawyer, Impunity Watch, Guatemala City, 13 February 2023.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Julio Román and Carlos Kester, "CC responde a Giammattei y limita la forma en que diputados fiscalizan al Ejecutivo en citaciones al Congreso," *Prensa Libre*, 13 January 2023.

<sup>91</sup> Willam Cumes, Manuel Hernández Mayén, and Edwin Pitán, "CC suspende elección de magistrados de CSJ y Apelaciones en el Congreso," *Prensa Libre*, 26 February 2020; Guatemala Attorney General's Office, "Ministerio Público a través de FECCI presentó 10 solicitudes de retiro de antejuicio por caso Comisiones Paralelas 2020," 8 June 2021.

It has benefited them both. For Congress, which votes on a final list of high court candidates, stalling the elections appears to have helped them maintain their judicial immunity. The current line-up of CSJ magistrates has repeatedly shot down appeals aimed at stripping representatives of the immunity afforded to them by the constitution during their terms in office, including in 2020, when the CSJ shielded 92 representatives who the Attorney General's Office accused of stalling those same high court elections.<sup>92</sup> Congressional representatives, in turn, have repaid the favor by not voting in new magistrates, despite the current CSJ and appellate court judges having overstayed their constitutional term limit by four years.

The CSJ president is Silvia Patricia Valdés. Numerous court-watchers told InSight Crime Valdés is close to President Giammattei. Valdés is the most influential figure within the high courts. The CSJ president has access to a series of financial and administrative functions that can be leveraged to secure political favors. For instance, the CSJ president assign judges to courthouses dealing with high-profile corruption cases, while sending others to remote regions where the courts deal with minor cases. And, as illustrated by the selection process that saw Consuelo Porras reappointed as attorney general, the president of the CSJ plays a crucial role in determining who occupies other, crucial judicial posts.<sup>93</sup>

The CSJ under Valdés has also played a pivotal role in accelerating investigations into top-level, independent judges, some of whom were involved in cases against the president, as well as former military officials accused of human rights violations. In 2022, the CSJ ruled in favor of requests aimed at lifting immunity from two of the country's most experienced anti-corruption judges: Erika Aifán and Miguel Ángel Gálvez. Aifán's office handled evidence implicating President Giammattei in alleged corruption, while Gálvez became a target while presiding over a major case into abuses committed by military veterans during the civil war. Both magistrates went into exile after losing their immunity.<sup>94</sup>

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92 Irving Escobar, "CSJ rechaza antejuicio contra 92 diputados planteado por el MP," Prensa Libre, 30 September 2020.

93 David Toro and Sofía Menchú, "Un amparo para salvar a Consuelo Porras," No-Ficción, 22 April 2022.

94 Jo-Marie Burt and Paulo Estrada, "Las viejas estructuras clandestinas de Guatemala completan la cacería contra el juez Gálvez," WOLA, 15 November 2022; Carlos Maldonado, "La jueza Erika Aifán deja Guatemala debido a las amenazas 'de redes políticas y criminales'," El País, 21 March 2022.

## 5

## Bloc II: UNE's One-Pronged Strategy

The National Unity of Hope (Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza - UNE) is one of Guatemala's most enduring political parties and has long been a powerhouse in the nation's Congress, opening the door to corruption and impunity. The bloc, headed by serial presidential candidate and former first lady, Sandra Torres, leverages its sizable coalition in Congress, where votes can be traded for access to state contracts and government jobs, to build mutually beneficial alliances with other political factions and influential actors in the judicial sector. The latter bracket has shielded Torres and her allies from potentially career-ending corruption charges.

Though holding the keys to Congress makes UNE a coveted ally, the bloc's vulnerability lies in its dependence on trade-offs and the apparent ceiling of its presidential hopeful. Forging alliances that further UNE's interests has required the party, which presents itself as an opposition group, to align with the executive branch and, by extension, the horizontal alliance of emerging and traditional elites that dominate access to state resources. And while Torres has the highest name recognition, retains a solid political foundation, and is expected to make the run-off election, she has never topped more than a one-third of the electorate in a head-to-head competition. Nonetheless, given the unpredictable nature of this race, it is conceivable that this could be the time she breaks that barrier.

### The UNE's Congressional Carrousel

The UNE bloc revolves around a key group of political operators, including Torres, who trade favors with other political factions and position allies in key branches of the state. These negotiations center on a delicate relationship between top UNE officials and the executive branch, in addition to a constant trading of favors between UNE representatives and other parliamentary coalitions.

## **Congressional Powerbrokers**

In recent years, there has been a significant alignment of interests between Torres and Giammattei's respective legislative blocs. This has eliminated any feasible opposition to passing bills in Congress, some of which may have facilitated corruption. The relationship is one of interdependence. Giammattei benefits from UNE's votes -- officially the party holds just under a third of congressional seats,<sup>95</sup> though some representatives have defected to other parties -- and Torres gets help overcoming legal hurdles and surviving a rebellion from within her own party. The détente has paved the way for UNE's top congressional operators to foster mutually beneficial ties with the president and his allies.

UNE's main broker in Congress during this time period has been Estuardo Vargas, who until recently headed the party's voting bancada, or voting bloc. Vargas maintains an amicable relationship with Giammattei's principal advisor, Miguel Martínez, according to two congressional representatives interviewed by InSight Crime.<sup>96</sup> The UNE bloc also has outsized influence in the legislature's working commissions, which decide whether or not a proposed legal initiative makes it to the floor of Congress for a vote. UNE representatives now head 11 of 37 working commissions,<sup>97</sup> seven more than any other party, giving the bloc significant bargaining power in state sectors associated with corruption, such as housing, electoral affairs, food security, labor, and the office that issues national IDs (known by its acronym RENAP).

## **Controlling the Ports**

Vargas previously headed the state-run port of Santo Tomás de Castilla in Izabal and today his contacts are thought to include notorious businessman Axel Arturo Samayoa Camacho, alias "Castor." Samayoa's multiple shipping companies have been awarded millions of dollars in state contracts to provide services crucial to verifying shipping containers -- including video surveillance -- in Guatemala's state-run and private ports.<sup>98</sup> The US Treasury has sanctioned Samayoa for "colluding with public officials and paying bribes to ensure his companies won lucrative port contracts."<sup>99</sup>

95 Congress of Guatemala, "[Gráfica Distribución Diputados en Bloques](#)," accessed 17 June 2023.

96 InSight Crime interviews, congressional representative (a), Guatemala City, 22 February 2023; congressional representative (b), Guatemala City, 22 February 2023.

97 Congress of Guatemala, "[Comisiones Ordinarias](#)," [no date].

98 elPeriódico, "El "big brother" que ve todo lo que pasa en los puertos," 28 October 2019.

99 US Department of State, "[Section 353 Corrupt and Undemocratic Actors Report](#)," 2021.



Contacts in the ports can manipulate port infrastructure -- including scanners, cameras, and power supply -- to allow select shipping containers, filled with drugs or contraband, to pass through the ports unchecked.<sup>100</sup> Vargas' authority in the ports also extends to state contracts and government jobs, which can be leveraged for personal profit and to boost his political standing. To be sure, the US Treasury department sanctioned Vargas in 2022 for alleged corruption.<sup>101</sup> The sanctions appear to have knocked Vargas back a notch. He is not running for Congress in the upcoming elections. Instead, he is seeking a seat on the Central American Parliament (Parlamento Centroamericano - Parlacen).<sup>102</sup>

Lining up to fill Vargas' shoes is Ervin Adim Maldonado, an influential congressional operator who has joined UNE's ranks for the 2023 elections. Maldonado's family owns a network of cable companies that operate in over 200 municipalities (two of these firms were awarded state contracts by the TSE to broadcast campaign material during the 2019 elections).<sup>103</sup> The companies allow the family to promote certain candidates; the investment may be a means of securing power in Congress.

Maldonado previously served as a deputy for FCN-Nación, the party of former president Jimmy Morales. He now tops the list of UNE congressional candidates for the June elections. If elected, he will likely head the party's congressional coalition and become what one congressional representative called, "the new Vargas."<sup>104</sup>

100 The most infamous port corruption scheme was known as La Línea (The Line), a fraud network that reached the presidency of Otto Pérez Molina. See: CICIG, "[Caso La Línea](#)," no date.

101 US Department of the Treasury, "[Treasury Sanctions Over 40 Individuals and Entities Across Nine Countries Connected to Corruption and Human Rights Abuse](#)," 9 December 2022.

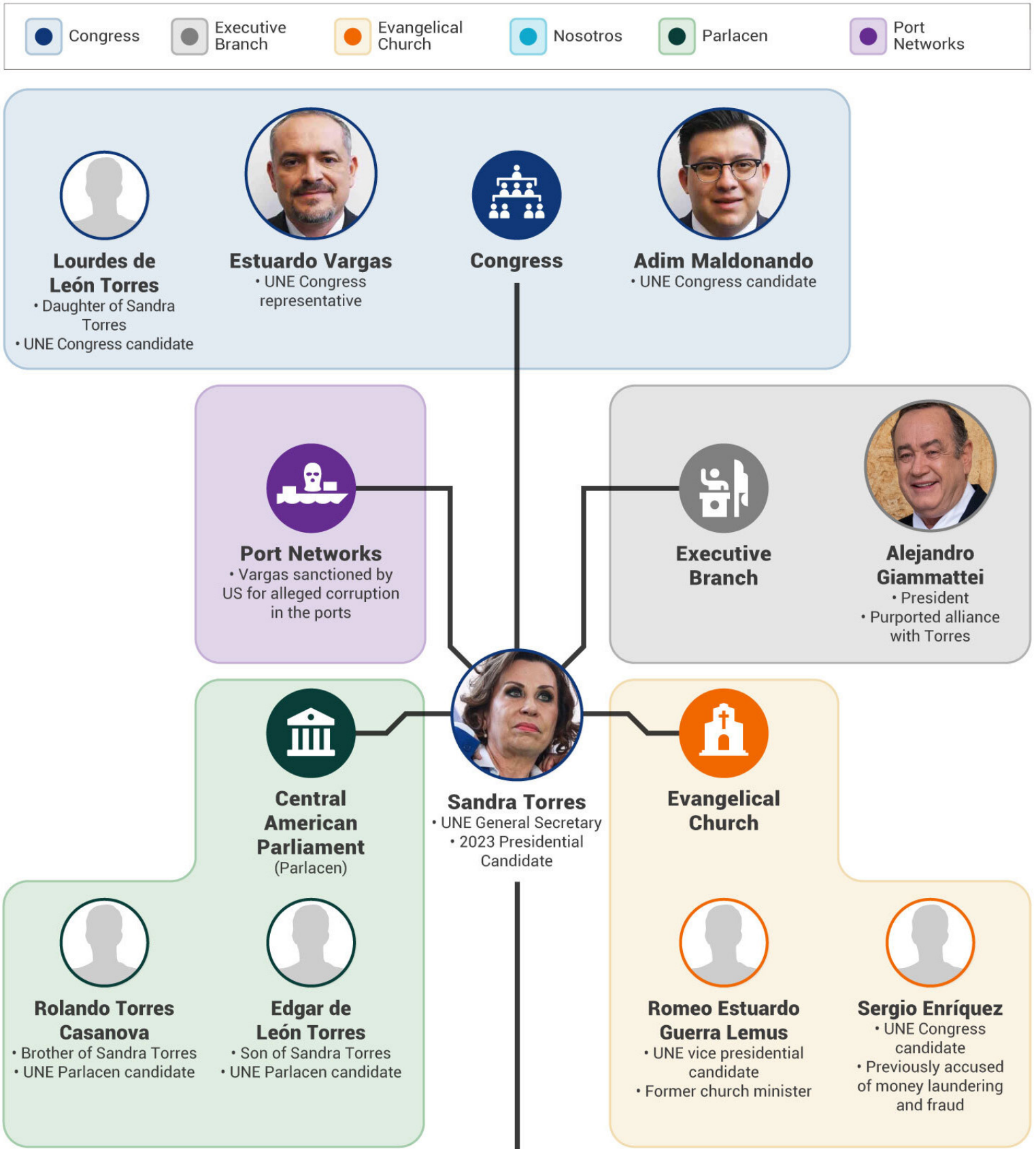
102 Denis Aguilar, "Registro de Ciudadanos avala inscripción de diputado de la UNE sancionado con Ley Magnitsky," *elPeriódico*, 27 February 2023.

103 Bill Barreto, "[Sandra Torres: patriotas, pastores y vínculos narco para reconstruir la UNE](#)," *No-Ficción*, 22 March 2023.

104 InSight Crime interview, congressional representative (a), Guatemala City, 22 February 2023.

# UNE: Political Network

This graphic shows a network of actors that support UNE's goals.



## ***Caciques, Elites, and Evangelical Churches***

UNE has also historically relied on a network of regional operators, also known as caciques, to mobilize funds for campaigning outside of Guatemala City. UNE's approach dates back to the 2000s, when party operators reportedly formed ties with regional caciques and drug traffickers -- including members of Mexican drug trafficking organization, Zetas -- to finance the winning campaign of former president, Álvaro Colom (2008-2012).<sup>105</sup> The party's electoral viability appears to rest on its ability to deliver state resources to these caciques, often seasoned members of Congress or prominent mayors, who seek contracts and government jobs as repayment for financing political campaigns.

The bloc's most conspicuous ties to the traditional elites come via Torres' son-in-law, Rudy Guzmán. Guzmán is presidential candidate for political party *Nosotros*, registered with electoral authorities in 2022, whose congressional candidates include Torres' daughter -- and Guzmán's wife -- Nadia Lorena de León Torres.<sup>106</sup> Guzmán owns private security companies that have been awarded millions of dollars in state contracts; he is reportedly *Nosotros*' main financier, according to local press and sources interviewed by InSight Crime.<sup>107</sup>

Other members of Torres' immediate family are also part of the political project, including her daughter Lourdes de León Torres (UNE Congress candidate) and son Edgar de León Torres (UNE candidate for Parlacen).

Torres' choice of running-mate, a former evangelical pastor, represents a departure from the party's center-left ideological stance. On the surface, the move appears to be aimed at winning over conservative voters in the capital, where UNE has historically underperformed. But beyond securing votes, the network of evangelical churches can help fund the party's electoral campaign. The alliance also raised eyebrows because evangelical churches have been used to launder money. Sources pointed to Sergio Enríquez, an UNE Congress candidate previously accused of money laundering and fraud.<sup>108</sup>

105 Steven Dudley, "The Zetas, Drug Money and the Colom Campaign in Guatemala," InSight Crime, 9 August 2018.

106 Fátima Najarro, "Hijas de Sandra Torres son inscritas como candidatas a diputadas con distintos partidos," La Hora, 2 March 2023.

107 elPeriódico, "Contratista asume Secretaría del partido Nosotros," 6 June 2022; InSight Crime telephone interview, strategic consultant, 21 December 2022.

108 César Pérez Marroquín, "Sergio Enríquez Garzaro enfrentará juicio por lavado de dinero en el caso Chicamán," Prensa Libre, 9 October 2020.

## Judicial Protection and Political Survival

The UNE bloc's interactions with the judicial sector are mainly geared towards securing its own political survival rather than leading the way in debilitating the country's anti-impunity edifice. The bloc has benefitted from favorable court rulings in high-profile corruption cases and appears to have leveraged its political alliances to mount legal blockades aimed at quashing internal party rebellions.

### ***Trading Favors: The Courts, Attorney General's Office, and Congress***

UNE presidential candidate Sandra Torres has been at the center of this political power bloc's efforts to secure judicial protection. The UNE leader was jailed in September 2019 after the CICIG accused her of failing to report millions of dollars in campaign contributions for the 2015 elections.<sup>109</sup> She has since benefitted from a series of favorable rulings. In January 2020, she was put under house arrest.<sup>110</sup> In October 2022, the judge that sent Torres to trial, Claudette Domínguez, revoked a measure barring her from political campaigning and granted her conditional liberty, facilitating her return to political life.<sup>111</sup> Then, a month later, Domínguez closed the case against Torres and UNE's alleged illicit campaign financing, freeing Torres of criminal charges just weeks before she registered as a presidential candidate for the 2023 elections.<sup>112</sup>

109 CICIG, "Illegal Electoral Contributions to the UNE Party During the 2015 Political Campaign," 7 February 2019.

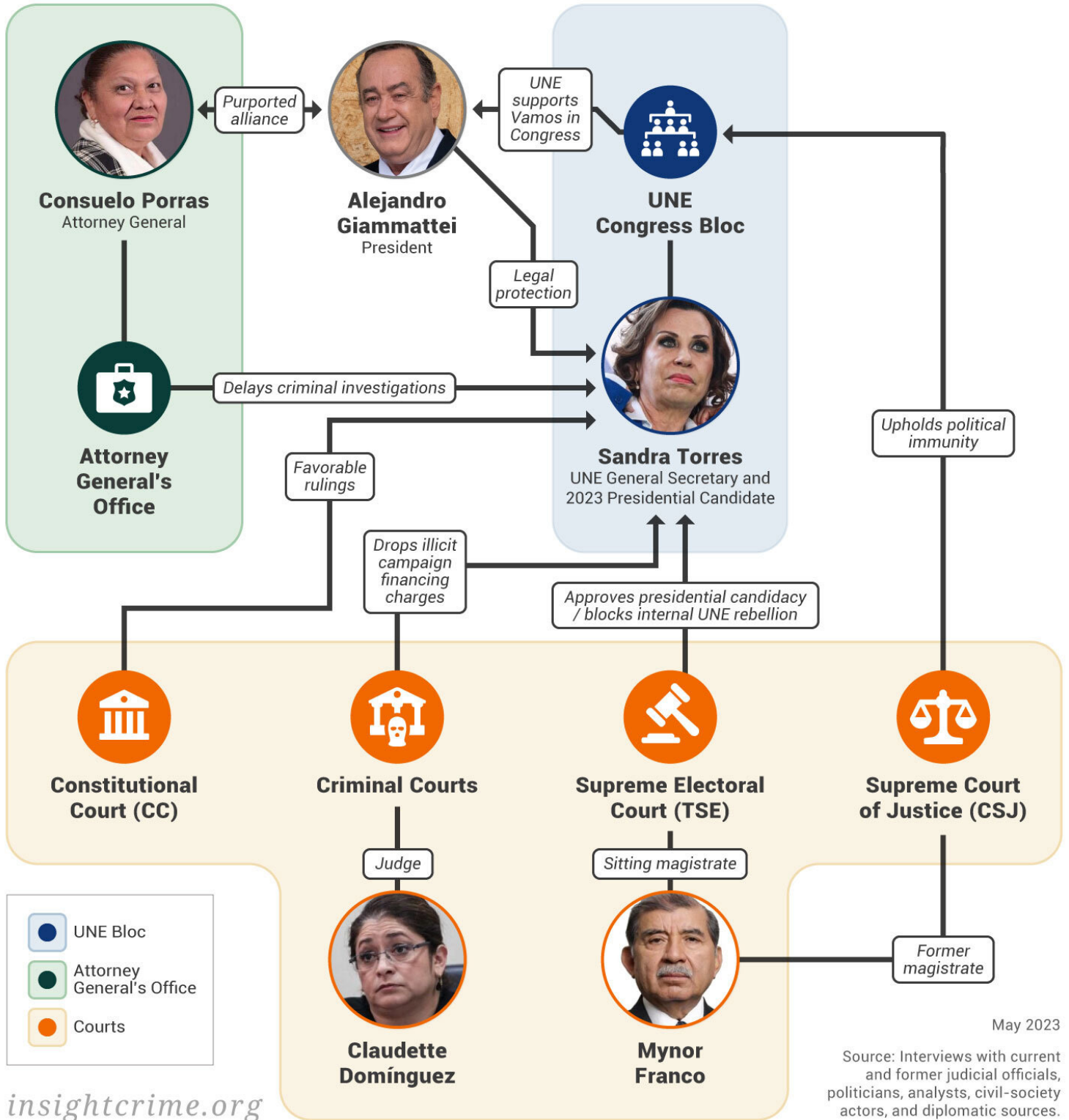
110 Edwin Pitán and Irving Escobar, "Saldrá de la cárcel: Sandra Torres recibe arresto domiciliario," Prensa Libre, 8 January 2020.

111 La Hora, "Tras apoyos al oficialismo, justicia le empieza a sonreír a Sandra Torres," 17 October 2022.

112 César Pérez Marroquín and Edwin Pitán, "Jueza Claudette Domínguez beneficia a Sandra Torres y cierra el caso Financiamiento UNE," Prensa Libre, 29 November 2022.

# UNE: Judicial Network

This graphic outlines a network of political and judicial officials linked to the UNE bloc.





Domínguez, who presides over high-impact corruption cases in Guatemala's top-level criminal courts, has previously ruled in favor of military elites and high-level politicians accused of corruption.<sup>113</sup> And her decision to drop Torres' case came just weeks after votes from UNE representatives helped Giammattei's bloc achieve key goals in Congress, including the re-election of Vamos operator Shirley Rivera to president of Congress<sup>114</sup> and the passing of a beefed-up national budget for 2023.<sup>115</sup> The legal precedent used to justify the decision came from the Constitutional Court, which in late 2021 unanimously ruled that Torres could not be prosecuted for failing to register 2015 campaign contributions, as this was not a crime under the country's penal code at the time of the alleged wrong-doing.<sup>116</sup>

The Attorney General's Office has also ruled in favor of the UNE bloc. In 2019, Attorney General Porras delayed prosecutors from levying additional charges against Torres for illicit campaign financing, giving her time to register as a presidential candidate and therefore gain political immunity, according to a former FECI prosecutor who later accused Porras of abusing her authority.<sup>117</sup> Prosecutors have not appealed the decision to close the illicit campaign financing case against her.

### ***TSE: Getting on the Ballot***

Torres has also benefited from favorable rulings in the country's Supreme Electoral Court (TSE). The TSE ordered UNE to reinstate Torres as leader following an internal rebellion that threatened her control of the party.<sup>118</sup> UNE officials claimed the TSE's decision formed part of a pact between Giammattei and Torres to ensure the re-election of the then-president of Congress, Allan

113 Sara Solórzano, "[Los controversiales fallos judiciales de la jueza Domínguez](#)," Prensa Libre, 9 January 2023.

114 Oscar García and Henry Montenegro, "[Diputados reeligen a Shirley Rivera como presidenta del Congreso de la República](#)," Prensa Libre, 19 October 2022.

115 Congress of Guatemala, "[Aprobación de la redacción final con el fondo de revisión incorporado del proyecto de decreto que dispone a abrobar la iniciativa del Ley 6135](#)," 11 September 2022; Fátima Najarro, "[Giammattei agradece por aprobación de presupuesto; un paso más en la estrategia de Vamos](#)," La Hora, 10 November 2022.

116 Douglas Cuevas, "[“Yo me defendí de la mano de Dios”: Sandra Torres agradece a la CC por retirarle delito electoral](#)," Prensa Libre, 23 December 2021.

117 Jody García, "[Exfiscal: Consuelo protegió a Sandra Torres y este audio contiene preguntas inusuales del caso](#)," Nómada, 15 October 2019.

118 Oscar García and Douglas Cuevas, "[TSE ordena que Sandra Torres retome el cargo de secretaria general del Partido UNE](#)," Prensa Libre, 12 October 2021.

Rodríguez (Vamos).<sup>119</sup> Since the split, some of the rebels have gone on to form another political party (Voluntad, Oportunidad y Solidaridad - VOS), while the remaining UNE representatives have tended to vote in line with the president's coalition.

The TSE and the CSJ have also rejected appeals aimed at blocking Torres from running as a presidential candidate in the 2023 elections on grounds that her running mate was a church minister (the Guatemalan constitution bans ministers from running for office).<sup>120</sup> It is a reversal of fortune for Torres. Back in 2011, the TSE and CSJ barred her from the elections, citing a constitutional prohibition on the spouse of the current president running for office.<sup>121</sup>

CSJ magistrates have shielded other UNE officials from prosecution as well. For example, they voted down a 2019 injunction that sought to strip Estuardo Vargas of his congressional immunity and allow prosecutors to investigate him for alleged illicit campaign financing.<sup>122</sup> One congressional representative said the bloc's main contact in the TSE appears to be Mynor Franco, one of five permanent magistrates on the court.<sup>123</sup> Franco previously sat on the CSJ, and, in 2011, was the only magistrate to vote in favor of allowing Torres to run for office.

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119 Ibid.

120 Agustín Ortiz, "TSE rechaza recurso de nulidad contra binomio presidencial de la UNE," *Prensa Libre*, 5 February 2023; Engelberth Blanco, "CSJ niega amparo de TODOS y permite que binomio de la UNE siga en elecciones," *La Hora*, 15 February 2023.

121 EFE, "La Corte Suprema rechaza la candidatura de la ex primera dama de Guatemala," 31 July 2011.

122 Bill Barreto, "Sandra Torres: patriotas, pastores y vínculos narco para reconstruir la UNE," *No-Ficción*, 22 March 2023.

123 InSight Crime interview, congressional representative (a), Guatemala City, 22 February 2023.

## 6

## Bloc III - Valor and the Ghost of the CIACS

Zury Ríos (Valor) is consistently near the top of the polls making her one of the frontrunners in a crowded and unpredictable campaign. Part of her appeal is recognition. She is the daughter of Efraín Ríos Montt, the prominent general who took over in a military coup in 1982. He subsequently became president of Congress (1995-1996, 2000-2004). His daughter served as a congresswoman with his political party for the latter term, one of four served. Ríos has been an outspoken advocate for women's rights, among other causes, and effectively worked across the aisle to push her agenda.<sup>124</sup>

But she also has ties to ultraconservative domestic and international religious and civic groups. Among her backers are former military officials with connections to the CIACS who have long exerted significant influence on the government's security and intelligence agencies. She has also forged an alliance with the Unionist Party (Partido Unionista - PU), which has its own legacy of CIACS and has controlled Guatemala City and its government-related business for decades. She has secured support from former members of Jimmy Morales' administration and has important social and political allies in pro-life sectors of the Catholic and evangelical churches, as well as connections to Opus Dei. Finally, she has allies in the high courts and a judicial guard dog, Ricardo Méndez Ruiz, the head of the Foundation Against Terrorism (FCT), who has been supporting her for years.

### Three Pillars

Ríos' coalition depends on three pillars of support, each of which has different business interests that they seek to protect or expand, in addition to varying power bases and goals.

<sup>124</sup> Claudia Méndez Arriaza, "Zury Ríos Campaigns to Lead Guatemala's Faltering Democracy," *America's Quarterly*, 11 January 2023.

## **Pillar I: The Old Guard**

The first pillar is made up of remnants of her father’s network, many of whom were members of the FRG party at one stage or another. This includes former military officers, congressional representatives, and prominent lawyers. Sources told InSight Crime, for example, that among the former military officers who support Ríos is Gustavo Adolfo Padilla, a former colonel who now helps run a private security firm that has benefitted from government contracts.<sup>125</sup>

Private security is one of the main types of business set up by former military officers, and it is one of the largest lobbies in the capital, since both local and federal government agencies frequently contract these firms for everything from personal bodyguards to camera surveillance to private detective work. It is a business that also puts them at the crossroads of numerous other businesses, thus positioning them for money-making opportunities, where the line between legal and illegal gets fuzzy.

In Padilla’s case, his company, Serseco, has reportedly created “paramilitary structures” to help protect hydroelectric projects from local opposition groups.<sup>126</sup> In 2018, Padilla himself was connected to corruption but never charged. Padilla’s connection to Ríos is direct but not firmly established. His son, Kenneth Müller, runs Valor’s videography department<sup>127</sup> and has made revisionist documentaries about Guatemala’s war.<sup>128</sup> But some sources said he is not well connected with ex-military officials like he once was.

Other parts of the campaign are not from the military but have the right conservative credentials and historical connections. Valor’s communications team, for example, includes the Costa Rican Alfred Kaltschmitt, an influential right-wing columnist, communications specialist, university dean, and owner of Radio Infinita. Kaltschmitt worked with Ríos Montt’s government in 1982-83, as part of the softer side of the counterinsurgency effort in the Ixil Triangle.<sup>129</sup> More recently, Radio Infinita cut ties with Con Criterio, a popular radio program, which has been openly critical of efforts to undermine the justice system. Kaltschmitt reportedly has health problems and may not be as active as he once was.

125 See: [Guatecompras registry](#).

126 Centro de Medios Independientes, “[Empresa de seguridad de militares protege hidroeléctricas en Ixquisis](#),” 19 February 2017.

127 Sofía Menchú, “[Zury Ríos: una ‘nueva historia’ con figuras recicladas](#),” No-Ficción, 10 March 2023.

128 Centro de Medios Independientes, “[‘Septiembre’: memoria histórica desde la derecha extrema](#),” 24 May 2017.

129 Alejandra Gutiérrez, “[‘Digo absolutamente la verdad y Dios está de testigo’](#),” Plaza Pública, 18 April 2013.

Yet, even if his current role may be limited by his health, Kaltschmitt has long been an important interlocutor for Zury Ríos. When the Attorney General's Office prosecuted Ríos Montt for genocide in 2013, Kaltschmitt reportedly got Ríos an audience with numerous traditional economic elites.<sup>130</sup> The meeting began a process that eventually smoothed over some tensions lingering from the FRG government of the early 2000s, during which Ríos Montt's party had vilified the elites and cut into their business interests.

Some elites later joined Ríos' efforts to malign the government trial against her father, and Ríos maintains many of those relationships. In fact, some media have asserted she is receiving funding from prominent families with stakes in important companies tied to construction, agro-industrial, and extractive industries, as well as those in the service and food industries.<sup>131</sup> Nonetheless, InSight Crime's sources say the funding efforts may be limited with all candidates after high-profile business elites were investigated for allegedly contributing funds illegally to Jimmy Morales' 2015 election campaign.<sup>132</sup>

Outside Guatemala City are several former FRG caciques. As outlined in the section on Sandra Torres' UNE bloc, these caciques play a key role in gathering votes on the local level in return for government contracts at the national level. Some of them have already been flagged for corruption. Carlos López, to cite just one example, was once a congressman for FRG and is a congressional candidate for Valor in Quiché. Notably, he was implicated in a case known as Plazas Fantasma (Ghost Jobs), brought by the CICIG, which alleged congressional representatives were establishing dozens of phantom jobs. In 2022, a judge dropped the case.<sup>133</sup>

## **Pillar II: Unionistas**

Ríos' second pillar is the Unionist Party. The two parties officially allied in 2022. They are aligned ideologically: They both have conservative, God-fearing, anti-communist platforms. They have a shared CIACS-genealogy. An example of this is the lawyer Moisés Galindo, who made his name from his strident defense of some of the most infamous military defendants, among them Ríos Montt

130 Martín Rodríguez Pellecer, "Los militares y la élite, la alianza que ganó la guerra," Plaza Pública, 21 August 2013.

131 Juan Luis Font, "#VotaConCriterio: ¿Quién es la candidata del gran capital?" Con Criterio, 15 July 2022.

132 CICIG, "Ligan a proceso a cinco empresarios por financiamiento electoral ilícito FCN-Nación," 6 June 2018.

133 La Hora, "Plazas Fantasma: cierran caso contra expresidente del Congreso y ex diputado," 23 September 2022.



during his genocide trial, as well as others, such as Byron Lima, who had strong ties to the Arzú CIACS.<sup>134</sup>

What's more, the Unionistas have effectively run Guatemala City for two decades (formerly under the banner of the Partido de Avanzada Nacional or PAN). The Unionista Party has controlled Guatemala City via a combination of grassroots committees, strategic media and business alliances, and el sótano (the basement), the euphemism to describe the elaborate intelligence and counterintelligence apparatus. But its lock on the city is not guaranteed.

For the PU, the alliance would mean access to the presidency and -- if they can win Guatemala City -- continued control of the city. To be sure, their candidates are natural conduits between city and central government power hubs who understand how politics works. Ríos' vice-presidential candidate, for example, is Héctor Cifuentes Mendoza, a Unionista who was Álvaro Arzú's secretary general in Guatemala City for years and was later implicated in corruption during the Pérez Molina administration in a case called Caja Pandora (Pandora's Box).<sup>135</sup>

The PU is also trying to position itself better in Congress. One candidate is Álvaro Arzú Escobar, the son of the former president and mayor, Álvaro Arzú, and a longtime congressional representative. In 2017, he helped push through legislation that prohibited prosecution of lawmakers for illicit campaign financing.<sup>136</sup> He later became president of Congress (2018-2020) and started a "Truth Commission," during which CICIG "victims" could testify and was part of a campaign to vilify then Human Rights Ombudsman and anti-corruption crusader, Jordán Rodas.<sup>137</sup>

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134 Lima was a special forces officer and member of the anti-kidnapping unit and presidential guard for then-President Álvaro Arzú in the late 1990s. He was later convicted, along with his father and a fellow soldier, for covering up the killing of a Guatemalan archbishop in 1998, whose office had fostered a report condemning the military for its atrocities during the war. Galindo and Arzú maintained close contact with Lima, even while Lima built an army inside prison and became a powerful underworld figure until his dramatic assassination in 2017 inside jail.

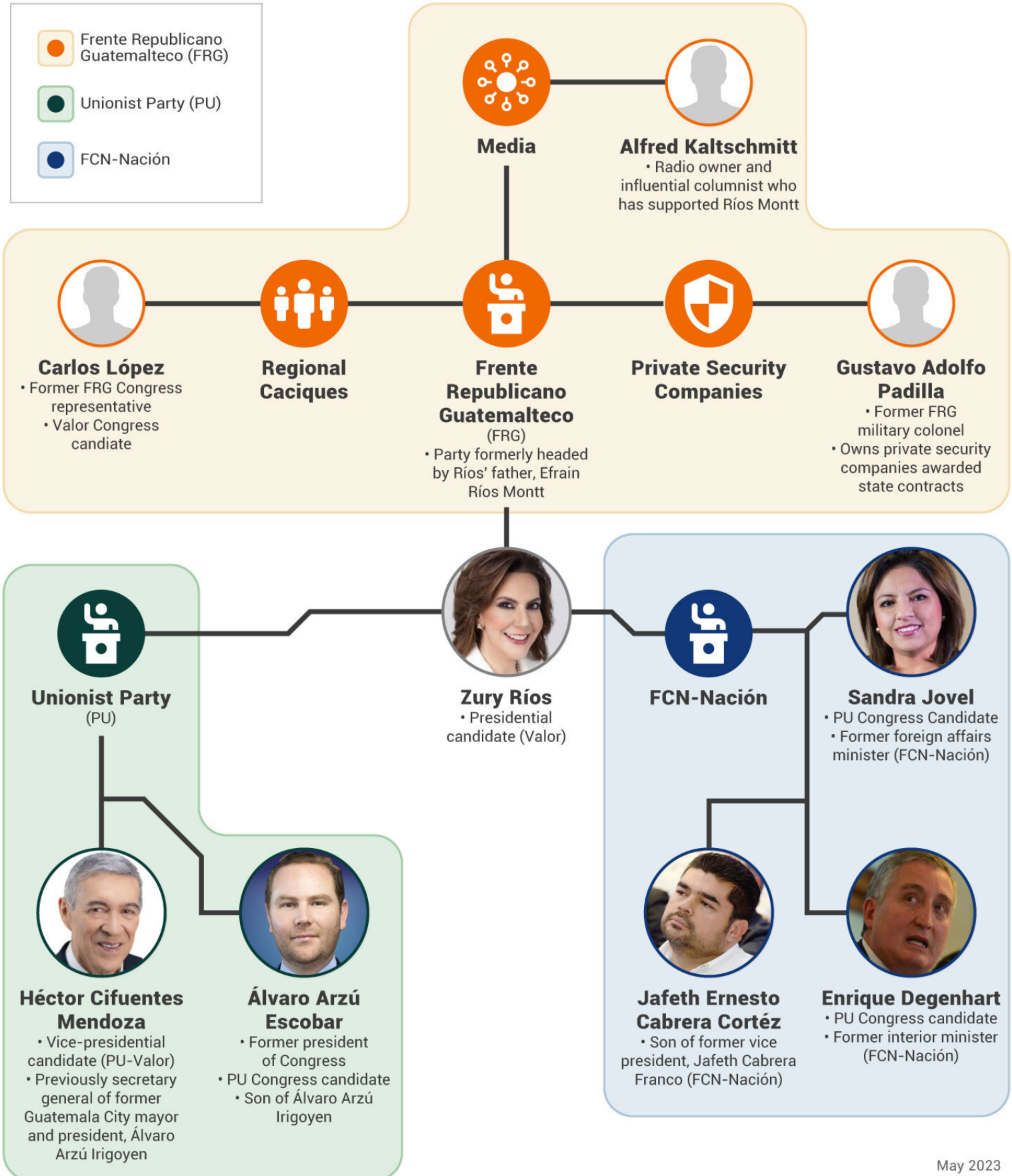
135 elPeriódico, "FECI pide ligar a proceso a dos funcionarios ediles capitalinos capturados," 24 June 2019.

136 Steven Dudley, "[#BlackWednesday: Guatemala Takes Another Step to Institutionalize Corruption](#)," InSight Crime, 14 September 2017.

137 Oswaldo Hernández, "[Pacto de Corruptos](#)," No-Ficción, 2 March 2020.

# Valor: Ríos' 3 Pillars

This graphic shows a network of actors that support Valor's goals.



May 2023

Source: Interviews with current and former judicial officials, politicians, analysts, civil-society actors, and diplomatic sources.

### **Pillar III: FCN-Nación**

Other important PU congressional candidates include Enrique Degenhart, Sandra Jovel, and Jafeth Ernesto Cabrera Cortez, all three of whom provide a good bridge to the third pillar of the Ríos candidacy: Jimmy Morales' administration.

Degenhart is the second-in-command of the PU and a former mid-level customs official for the Colom administration, where he carved out a reputation for himself as a crime-fighting official.<sup>138</sup> The reality was quite the opposite. The Attorney General's Office investigated his brother for money laundering,<sup>139</sup> and, as interior minister for Morales, he systematically undermined the CICIG by, among other things, extracting the police from their CICIG-related posts and replacing police commanders working with the CICIG with others who opposed its mission or were at least willing to undermine it.<sup>140</sup>

Like Degenhart, Jovel worked in tandem with the presidency to isolate CICIG. She ensured Colombian Judge and then-CICIG Commissioner Iván Velásquez could not secure re-entry into the country once he had been named *persona non-grata* by Morales in 2018.

Cabrera Cortez may be the closest link the campaign has with drug trafficking. In 2018, a soon-to-be-extradited drug trafficker, who himself was former military, allegedly testified that Cabrera requested \$1 million for his father's vice-presidential campaign in 2015.<sup>141</sup>

The affinity between the Ríos and Morales camps is due, in part, to their shared roots and their shared interests. Morales' party, the FCN-Nación, was founded by former members of the military, including several who later funded Morales' candidacy for president and were connected to human rights violations, criminal activity, and corruption.<sup>142</sup>

138 Sebastian Rotella, "A Gunfight in Guatemala," ProPublica, 2 June 2016.

139 Mariajosé España and Edwin Pitán, "Hermano de ministro Degenhart es investigado por la Fiscalía de Lavado de Dinero," Prensa Libre, 15 October 2019.

140 State Department officials were infuriated with him, especially since they had extracted him from the country when he was in mortal danger. But Degenhart is an adept politician who knows how to play US administration officials off each other. When the high courts in Guatemala blocked an arrangement for Guatemala to serve as a third country for migrant processing in 2019, Degenhart brought a high court judge to Washington, who assured White House officials the courts would comply with their wishes. The next day, the court reversed its decision. See: @Jonathanblitzer, "Tomorrow in Guatemala, a judge named Dina Ochoa faces a vote to be re-elected to the country's Constitutional Court..." Twitter, 1 March 2021.

141 James Bargent, "Revelations Add to Guatemala President's Corruption Woes," InSight Crime, 23 September 2016.

142 Daniel Villatoro García, "Los militares que financian a Jimmy Morales," Plaza Pública, 13 October 2015.

These former military remain interconnected in personal, social, business, and government affairs. Their interests include controlling the large budgets of the interior ministry, as well as crucial nodes of power in customs and tax offices, among others, so they can fleece private businesses and public officials alike.

For her part, Ríos does not have a reputation of corruption on a personal level but documents leaked from the State Department said she attended a meeting in which she and her father's political party, the FRG, personally thanked one of the corrupt donors to Portillo's presidential campaign.<sup>143</sup> It is also notable that she has long been surrounded by numerous operators and politicians -- including her current husband<sup>144</sup> -- who have pillaged the state or repurposed it for their own ends, and many of whom come from the same world she does. In the affairs of justice, however, Ríos has shown a capacity and a willingness to be much more hands-on.

## Political Power, Impunity, and Judicial Vengeance

Ríos' interactions with the judicial system have been centered on securing access to the country's highest courts, namely the Constitutional Court (CC), where her allies have benefitted her on a personal and a professional level. She also has a powerful ally outside of the judicial system, one that plays the dual role of guard dog of impunity and attack dog for those who feel aggrieved by the efforts of the CICIG and its judicial allies.

### ***Swaying the Postulation Commissions***

Ríos has long understood that the judicial system was a fundamental tool of power in Guatemala. In the early 2000s, as part of the most powerful legislative bloc in Congress, she voted to expand participation of members of the country's bar association in voting for representatives of the so-called postulation commissions.<sup>145</sup> The postulation commissions selected the final candidates for attorney general, the country's high courts, and the TSE, among others. The bar association selects up to 11 members of each commission, so expanding participation had widespread and immediate consequences in the selection of the attorney general and these judges.<sup>146</sup>

143 Rodrigo Véliz, "Otto Pérez sabía de las mafias de aduanas desde 1992 (y las dejaba operar), según desclasificados," Centro de Medios Independientes, 5 June 2015.

144 Guillermo García, "Empresa vinculada a esposo de Zury Ríos debe US\$1.5 millones en regalías al Estado," *el Periódico*, 14 February 2021; Alejandro Esquite, "Zury Ríos se prepara para su quinto matrimonio," *El Hit Guate*, 10 September 2020.

145 Carlos Arrazola, "Retrato del alfíl al que todos llaman rey," *Plaza Pública*, 29 September 2014.

146 Steven Dudley, "Justice and the Creation of a Mafia State in Guatemala," *InSight Crime*, 15 September 2014.

One of the promoters and beneficiaries of this new law was Ríos husband at the time, Roberto López Villatoro. Dubbed “El Rey del Tenis,” or “Tennis Shoe King,” by journalists because of the millions he had earned by selling knock-off tennis shoes imported from abroad, López soon positioned himself as the de facto campaigner and vote-getter for the FRG in the bar association. The result was a historic turn inside the halls of justice in Guatemala. What was once the purview of the country’s traditional economic elites was now a battleground where the FRG, UNE, and other fledgling representatives of the emerging elite like López Villatoro began to supply their own, hand-picked judges and high-level judicial operatives.<sup>147</sup>

### ***Stacking the High Courts: Part II***

This type of backroom haggling has proven fundamental for Ríos both personally and politically. In 2013, after her father, Ríos Montt, was convicted of genocide by a special Guatemalan court, she and her cohorts turned to the CC. There, she had a strong ally, Roberto Molina Barreto, a magistrate on the court who immediately authored the counterargument that overturned Ríos Montt’s conviction nine days after the historic ruling. Zury Ríos would later choose Molina to be her candidate for vice president during her 2019 presidential campaign. Molina has served as a permanent and substitute magistrate on the CC since 2006.

In addition to Molina, in March 2021, Congress selected Luis Alfonso Rosales Marroquín, a former Valor congressman who also worked on Ríos’ father’s defense team, to be an alternate on the CC. These allies may have played key roles in changing her political fortunes. Although Ríos’ 2019 campaign was halted when the CC ruled that Article 186 of the Guatemalan Constitution prohibited close relatives of coup leaders from the presidency,<sup>148</sup> her 2023 campaign was greenlit by a reshuffled set of CC magistrates.<sup>149</sup>

147 Steven Dudley, “The ‘Tennis Shoe King’ Who Became Guatemala’s Gentleman Lobbyist,” InSight Crime, 15 September 2014.

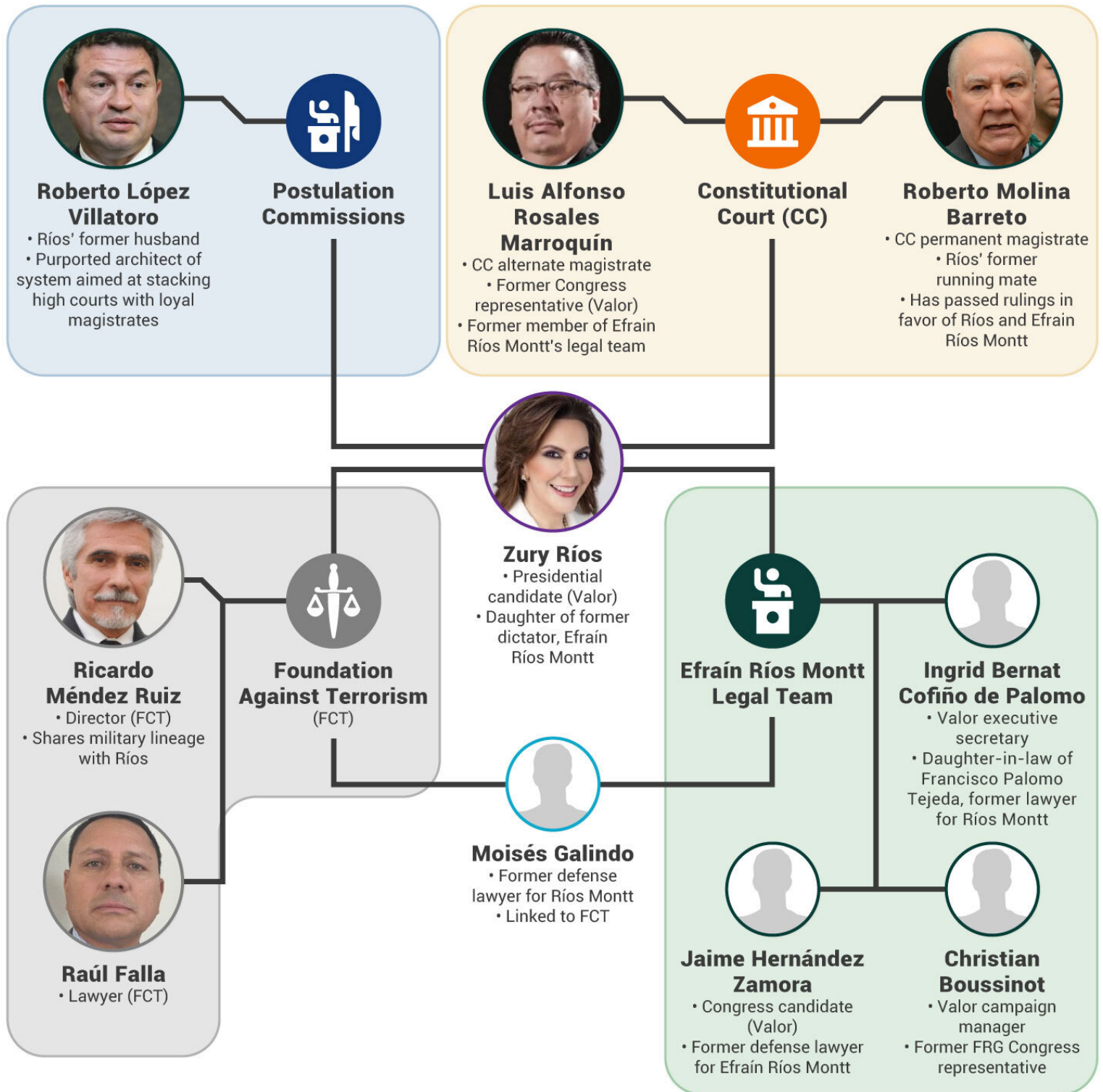
148 Manuel Hernández Mayén, “Inscripción de Zury Ríos vuelve a quedar anulada por resolución de la CC,” Prensa Libre, 12 March 2019.

149 Jessica Gramajo, “CC rechaza amparo de CABAL contra la inscripción de Zury Ríos,” Soy 502, 2 March 2023.



# Valor: Judicial Network

This graphic shows a network of judicial actors linked to the Valor bloc.



May 2023

Source: Interviews with current and former judicial officials, politicians, analysts, civil-society actors, and diplomatic sources.

The courts have also ruled against potential rivals. Thelma Cabrera, a presidential candidate for the left-wing Movement for the Liberation of Peoples (Movimiento para la Liberación de los Pueblos - MLP), who came fourth in the 2019 elections, has been barred from running. The TSE rejected the inscription of MLP vice-presidential candidate and former human rights ombudsman, Jordán Rodas, on technical grounds.<sup>150</sup> The decision automatically excluded Cabrera from running for president. The CSJ and CC then rejected appeals lodged by the MLP.<sup>151</sup>

The TSE also revoked the inscription of another potential rival, Roberto Arzú -- the wayward son of Álvaro Arzú. Electoral authorities had greenlit Arzú's participation but then ruled in favor of a petition lodged by members of FCN-Nación aimed at annulling his candidacy on grounds that he had engaged in political campaigning prior to the official start of elections.<sup>152</sup> As in the MLP's case, the CC rejected appeals against the TSE ruling lodged by Arzú and his party, Podemos.<sup>153</sup>

The CC has also benefitted Ríos in her own run for president by rejecting a legal challenge aimed at blocking her candidacy.<sup>154</sup> The challenge centered on the same constitutional prohibition that bars children of former presidents that came to power via a coup d'état from running for president (as her father had in 1982). The CC also threw out a case against her vice-presidential candidate, Héctor Cifuentes, who was facing charges for illegal campaign financing.<sup>155</sup>

Presidential candidate Edmond Mulet of the Cabal party was also put on notice by the TSE after the Attorney General's Office accused him of interfering in an investigation into a prominent journalist jailed on money laundering charges.<sup>156</sup> It came after Mulet filed the unsuccessful legal challenge aimed at invalidating Ríos' candidacy.

150 Jody García, "MLP bloqueado: Contraloría y PDH presentaron la misma denuncia con horas de diferencia," Plaza Pública, 7 February 2023.

151 Pavel Arellano and Henry Montenegro, "CSJ niega amparo presentado por MLP contra el TSE que buscaba revertir rechazo de inscripción de binomio presidencial," Prensa Libre, 13 April 2023; @CC\_Guatemala, "Comunicado-002-2023," Twitter, 2 May 2023.

152 Engelberth Blanco, "Revocan inscripción de Roberto Arzú; TSE da la razón a FCN-Nación," La Hora, 6 February 2023.

153 @CC\_Guatemala, "Comunicado-006-2023," Twitter, 25 May 2023.

154 César Pérez Marroquín and Raúl Barreno Castillo, "CC deja en firme candidatura de Zury Ríos, impugnada por Cabal," Prensa Libre, 18 May 2023.

155 @J\_AlexValdez, "CC beneficia a Héctor Cifuentes," Twitter, 17 October 2022.

156 Dulce Rivera, "TSE amonesta a Edmond Mulet tras denuncia del jefe de la FECCI," Soy 502, 20 April 2023.

Mulet appears to have survived the period of injunctions, petitions, and other means by which candidates have been excluded. As of May 25, the deadline for printing ballots, Mulet was officially in the race for president. What's more, he appears well positioned to take advantage of the chaos. Recent polls have him making it to the second round, along with Sandra Torres.<sup>157</sup>

### ***Seeking Vengeance From the Outside In***

Ríos' allies outside of the formal justice system may be stronger than those on the inside. In addition to Moisés Galindo, Ríos counts on support from other members of her father's former legal team, which includes Jaime Hernández Zamora. Zamora defended both the general in the genocide case and a current Valor campaign manager, Christian Boussinot, himself a former congressman who was implicated in the Plazas Fantasma case. Valor's executive secretary is Ingrid Bernat Cofiño de Palomo, the daughter-in-law of Francisco Palomo Tejeda. Palomo Tejeda was also on Ríos Montt's legal team, before being brutally assassinated just blocks from his office in Guatemala City under mysterious circumstances.

For his part, Galindo is one of Ríos' interlocutors with FCT. FCT's director, Ricardo Méndez Ruiz, also has military lineage and a long personal history with Ríos making him more loyal to her than any other candidate, a fact he has made clear on social media platforms. What's more, the FCT's core mission -- to defend former military officers for human rights abuses -- neatly aligned with those who were trying to undo the justice system's crackdown on corruption.

Since 2011, Méndez Ruíz, and later the FCT once it was formalized in 2013, have presented formal complaints to the judicial system. By Guatemalan law, judges can dismiss these complaints, and, for a long time, they uniformly rejected the FCT's formal complaints. But after the composition of the courts changed and the CICIG left the country in 2019, numerous complaints against judicial operators who worked with the CICIG have been referred to the Attorney General's Office for investigation.

The system also has legal and social safety valves. On the legal side, anyone who files a complaint that a prosecutor rejects can appeal to a judge, who, after finding cause, can assign the case to another prosecutor. On the social front, the FCT launches sustained campaigns to vilify the accused via social media with its small army of followers.<sup>158</sup> Often, it will signal who is the next person to be targeted with some social media posts. These attacks are personal, persistent, and can have a devastating impact on their own, even if no judicial investigation is opened.

<sup>157</sup> CID Gallup, "Estudio de opinión pública Guatemala #98: Intención de voto," May 2023.

<sup>158</sup> Guatemala Leaks and Connectas, "El francotirador de los referentes de la lucha anticorrupción en Guatemala," 2022.

Ríos' relationship with FCT and Méndez Ruiz could become a problem. Méndez Ruiz, Galindo, and a lawyer with the FCT, Raúl Falla, have all been named on the Engel List.<sup>159</sup> But as long as these actors remain outside of government, she can keep them at arm's length even while benefitting from Méndez Ruiz's Twitter-Molotov cocktails and the looming threat of criminal complaints that can target potential rivals.

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159 US Department of State, "[Section 353 Corrupt and Undemocratic Actors Report](#)," 2021.

## 7

## Bloc IV - Cabal: Caciques and Compromises

Through a combination of luck, persistence, and dubious legal challenges lodged against other candidates, Edmond Mulet and his political party, Cabal, find themselves at the precipice of power. With spurious investigations and questionable court rulings eliminating a series of presidential challengers, the door to the top office is now open for Mulet, the lawyer-turned-politician-turned-diplomat-turned-presidential-frontrunner.

Mulet's party, however, is less of a bloc and more of an alliance of convenience. Cabal, founded in 2022, houses candidates that come from 21 other parties.<sup>160</sup> Many of the parties have a questionable past, and many of the candidates have faced accusations of corruption and other crimes. Mulet touts a “new beginning,”<sup>161</sup> but the makeup of his party suggests he will be carrying baggage from Guatemala's sordid past.

### The Candidate

Mulet is often described as a diplomat, but his domestic political career dates back to the 1980s. As a young man, he was a militant in the National Liberation Movement (Movimiento de Liberación Nacional - MLN), a virulent, anti-communist group that was said to refer to itself as “the party of organized violence.”<sup>162</sup> As a political party, the MLN traced its roots to the 1954 overthrow of then-President Jacobo Árbenz. The party co-ruled the government through the late 1970s with the army high command, which maintained power via a series of fraudulent elections.

<sup>160</sup> Kimberly Rocío López, “Edmond Mulet, un nuevo comienzo, pero de la mano de la vieja política,” Plaza Pública, 8 June 2023.

<sup>161</sup> Kimberly Rocío López, “Edmond Mulet, un nuevo comienzo, pero de la mano de la vieja política,” Plaza Pública, 8 June 2023.

<sup>162</sup> Mario Sosa, “El espectro del anticomunismo,” Plaza Pública, 17 July 2019.



Mulet was part of a dissident faction of the MLN, which moved towards center-right politics and eventually created a rival party, the National Renovation Party, (Partido Nacional Renovador - PNR). The PNR participated in the 1982 elections, with military approval, where Mulet was elected to Congress, but these elections were annulled following a coup led by the military faction of General Efraín Ríos Montt. Thereafter, Mulet drifted further towards the ideological center. He was elected as a congressman for the Union of the National Center (Unión del Centro Nacional - UCN) during Guatemala's transition back to democracy in 1985.

Mulet secured his re-election in 1990 and became president of Congress in 1991. In 1993, he was named Guatemalan ambassador to Washington by President Jorge Serrano Elías (1991-1993). But just weeks after Mulet's appointment, Serrano engineered a self-coup, trying to dissolve Congress and concentrate power in his hands. Mulet publicly rebuked the coup, which ultimately failed. The events marked the end of Mulet's time in Congress. Instead, he embarked on a diplomatic career, serving as ambassador in Belgium, Luxembourg, and the European Union. He later joined the United Nations as the head of the stabilization mission in Haiti in 2006.<sup>163</sup> Mulet remained in the UN until the end of 2016, serving as chief of cabinet to the secretary general and assistant secretary of peace keeping missions. He was later called to head a panel investigating the use of chemical weapons in Syria.<sup>164</sup>

Mulet returned to Guatemalan politics in 2019, when he ran for president under the banner of the Guatemalan Humanist Party (Partido Humanista de Guatemala - PHG). Although he finished third, he garnered nearly 500,000 votes -- no small feat in Guatemala's deeply fragmented party system.<sup>165</sup> He did not appear to be among the frontrunners during the early stages of the election but emerged from the pack after a series of rulings and investigations disqualified rival candidates.

Now, he appears well positioned to compete for a place in the second round, in part because of his party's strong regional caciques, some with past connections to corrupt party politics. What's more, Mulet himself has had his own legal troubles. Below, we outline some of the more troubling parts of the Cabal bloc, which have led local press to question whether Mulet can escape Guatemala's "old politics."<sup>166</sup>

163 Sofia Menchú, "Mulet: entre ser 'cabal' y prolongar la vieja política," No-Ficción, 15 April 2023.

164 United Nations, "Mr. Edmond Mulet of Guatemala - Head of the independent panel to lead the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) on the use of chemicals as weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic," 27 April 2017.

165 Tribunal Supremo Electoral, "Elecciones Generales y al Parlamento Centroamericano 2019," 2019.

166 Sofia Menchú, "Mulet: entre ser 'cabal' y prolongar la vieja política," No-Ficción, 15 April 2023.

## A Fragile Coalition and Lots of Red Flags

Cabal has cobbled together a robust coalition of candidates throughout the country, though the party's numerical ranks are stronger in western Guatemala.<sup>167</sup> Many candidates are experienced politicians who have held public office as mayors or in Congress. Some of Cabal's top candidates also have experience in government, including his running mate, Max Santa Cruz, once chief advisor to former vice president, Eduardo Stein.<sup>168</sup> Stein spearheaded efforts to create the CICIG in the mid-2000s.

Mulet supported the CICIG during his 2019 election campaign and has deep ties to the United Nations that backed the commission. But he has since changed tack: "CICIG never again in Guatemala," he tweeted in May, adding "CICIG is the past" in an accompanying video.<sup>169</sup> The shift is intimately related to the way support for the commission is seen in Guatemala. What was once a badge of honor has become a political liability largely due to the near permanent public relations campaign by the CICIG's enemies.

But the shift is also part of Mulet's pragmatic approach to politics and the elections. He seems to understand the trade-offs in Guatemalan politics needed to gain power, something abundantly clear from his party's candidate list. Cabal is made up of numerous castoffs and suspected criminals from parties with troubling leaderships. Among the more notable parties represented in Cabal's list of candidates are Sandra Torres' UNE (27), Otto Pérez Molina's Partido Patriota (12), Manuel Baldizón's Líder (10), Efraín Ríos Montt's FRG (8), Álvaro Arzú's PU (4), Jimmy Morales' FCN-Nación (2), Alejandro Giammattei's Vamos (2), and Zury Ríos' Valor (1).<sup>170</sup> One of his principal advisors was health minister during the Pérez Molina administration, while a top congressional candidate was finance minister for Jimmy Morales.<sup>171</sup> Another congressional candidate was an aide to Allan Rodríguez,<sup>172</sup> the former president of Congress (Vamos) who was sanctioned by the US government.

167 Kimberly Rocío López, "Edmond Mulet, un nuevo comienzo, pero de la mano de la vieja política," Plaza Pública, 8 June 2023.

168 Sofía Menchú, "Mulet: entre ser 'cabal' y prolongar la vieja política," No-Ficción, 15 April 2023.

169 @Edmondmulet, "Nunca más la CICIG en #Guatemala," Twitter, 25 May 2023.

170 Kimberly Rocío López, "Edmond Mulet, un nuevo comienzo, pero de la mano de la vieja política," Plaza Pública, 8 June 2023.

171 Sofía Menchú, "Mulet: entre ser 'cabal' y prolongar la vieja política," No-Ficción, 15 April 2023.

172 Fátima Najaro, "Partido Cabal postula como candidato a diputado a exasesor de Allan Rodríguez," La Hora, 14 February 2023.

With so many “old school” parties in the background, it is perhaps not surprising that Cabal’s roster is filled with mayoral and congressional candidates, as well as political advisors, who have faced accusations of corruption and criminality. Some have been jailed, including Mulet. One advisor and a congressional candidate were investigated by the CICIG for the Plazas Fantasma case;<sup>173</sup> another advisor was named in a CICIG investigation into vote-buying in Congress.<sup>174</sup> One Cabal congressional candidate was cited in 2017 for conflict of interest because he had been a beneficiary of a government contract while serving in the legislature for a different party.<sup>175</sup> Several mayoral candidates were investigated for abuse of power, domestic abuse, and other crimes.<sup>176</sup> These cases were mostly dropped, archived, or the defendants exonerated, often in the aftermath of the departure of the CICIG and during the systematic dismantling of the justice system.

Mulet’s case was notably different. He was arrested briefly in the early 1980s for allegedly helping to facilitate illegal adoptions.<sup>177</sup> He was quickly released, and he strenuously denies any wrongdoing. What’s more, he does not appear to be enmeshed in today’s corruption schemes. His status as an outsider to the system has its advantages and disadvantages. An advantage is that he could try to overturn the system. In an interview, for example, he insinuated that he would remove Attorney General Consuelo Porras should he be elected.<sup>178</sup> And while he has eschewed the CICIG, he has made crusading against corruption a centerpiece of his campaign.

The disadvantage is that he will have to make deals with some combination of the other political blocs in order to govern. And, in an interview with Plaza Pública, Mulet admitted as much. “To win votes in Guatemala, we have to recognize that there are caciques, and if a cacique is not with you, they’re with your rival,” he said. “I have had to speak with caciques to ask for their help. If these caciques are not with you, they will go with someone else, and we don’t win the elections.”

173 CICIG, “[Capturan a diputados y exlegisladores vinculados en caso plazas fantasma](#),” 22 March 2017.

174 CICIG, “[Caso: Subordinación del poder legislativo al ejecutivo, una expresión de la captura del estado](#),” 6 May 2019.

175 Henry Estuardo Pocasangre and Jessica Gramajo, “[MP pide antejuicio contra diputados de Creo y FCN](#),” Prensa Libre, 27 March 2017.

176 Kimberly Rocío López, “[Edmond Mulet, un nuevo comienzo, pero de la mano de la vieja política](#),” Plaza Pública, 8 June 2023.

177 Pilar Crespo, “[La increíble historia de Edmond Mulet y los niños que ‘exportaba’](#),” Plaza Pública, 30 January 2015.

178 Mónica Obando, “[Mulet aborda en entrevista los temas espinosos de la campaña](#),” La Hora, 8 June 2023.

Mulet may have had to make similar deals to secure financial support for his campaign. Among his purported financial backers are some of those caciques. Of note is Tomás Córdova, who is running for reelection to Congress with Cabal and whose family owns an array of construction companies and gasoline stations in the Alta Verapaz province.<sup>179</sup> Many have received government contracts in recent years.<sup>180</sup> Then there is Julio López Villatoro, also running for congressional reelection, and whose brother, Roberto, as noted, has long helped engineer postulation commissions and, by extension, the judicial system.<sup>181</sup> But in addition to the support he has gained by recruiting prominent caciques, sources say Mulet is also courting traditional elites who view him as a more viable, ideologically-aligned partner than Sandra Torres, who many believe he will face in the second round.

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179 Raúl Barreno Castillo, “Cabal, el nuevo partido de Edmond Mulet con las estrategias y las ideas de viejos políticos,” *Prensa Libre*, 4 May 2023.

180 See: Guatecompras, “Grupo COMAR,” 16 March 2020; Guatecompras, “Combustibles del Norte,” 16 July 2022; Guatecompras, “Constructora SERTAC,” no date; Guatecompras, “Edgar Tomás Córdova Molina,” 13 February 2020; Guatecompras, “Francisco Alejandro Córdova Molina,” no date.

181 Steven Dudley, “The ‘Tennis Shoe King’ Who Became Guatemala’s Gentleman Lobbyist,” *InSight Crime*, 15 September 2014.

## 8

## Case Study: Citizen Prosperity - Wild Card Meets Status Quo

There are few better illustrations of the battle for control of the Guatemalan state than the candidacy of Carlos Pineda Sosa, who was disqualified from elections weeks after topping the polls. His surge and subsequent snub, and that of his political party, provide a window into the power of emerging elites on the periphery, and the ability of certain actors to thwart anyone who does not conform to their rules.

The emergence of Pineda as a presidential frontrunner in the 2023 Guatemala elections took most, including the establishment, by surprise.<sup>182</sup> A political novice and emerging-elite businessman whose popularity derives from his anti-establishment rhetoric and a sizable following on social media, Pineda had no clear ties to the alliance orbiting around the Giammattei administration or to private-sector elites. His sudden arrival sounded the alarm among political blocs that feared his election could disrupt the synchronization of power between key branches of the state. The courts later eliminated him and his party from the elections.

But while Pineda may be an outsider, the same could not be said of his party, Citizen Prosperity (Prosperidad Ciudadana - PC). The PC election roster was stacked with candidates who have questionable ties to corrupt interests and the narcotics underworld. There were also signs that prominent members of the more influential Vamos bloc had a stake in Citizen Prosperity.

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182 Carlos Pineda topped two national opinion polls published by Nuestro Diario (April 28) and Prensa Libre (May 2), which gave Pineda 28.3% and 23.1% of the vote respectively.



## Carlos Pineda: A Wild Card

Carlos Pineda differed from the other presidential candidates outlined in this report insofar as his candidacy was self-reliant. His campaign was driven by his immense popularity on social media rather than traditional campaigning -- as of the publishing of this report, Pineda had over one million followers on TikTok,<sup>183</sup> dwarfing all other candidates. He also appeared to be financially self-sufficient thanks to a considerable personal fortune stemming from his family's business exploits.

Pineda derives his hefty financial capital from a regional conglomerate of transport, port logistics, agricultural, and gasoline companies, operated by the Pineda family from its base in northeastern Guatemala. Pineda's fortune was no secret, and it appeared to be part of his appeal. His rise on social media stemmed partly from viral videos documenting his efforts to distribute aid to hurricane victims using a personal helicopter back in 2020.<sup>184</sup>

The origins of the family's wealth can be traced back to Pineda's father, Carlos René Pineda Rossell. Pineda Rossell claims to have joined the security detail of a military commander named Carlos Manuel Arana Osorio, who was largely based in the eastern Zacapa province during the Guatemalan civil war.<sup>185</sup> Arana Osorio, who was known as the "Butcher of the East" (*Chacal del Oriente*) for his brutal exploits during the war, became president in 1970 and appointed Pineda Rossell to the highly prestigious presidential guard.<sup>186</sup>

These war-time connections provided a stepping stone for Pineda Rossell. He mounted a freight company -- Transportes Pineda Rossell<sup>187</sup> -- that has long moved bananas and other produce for US fruit exporters, including the United Fruit Company and Del Monte. Today, the family conglomerate has diversified and expanded throughout Central America and Mexico, sustaining the family's wealth and providing an expansive fleet of trucks capable of moving various types of products throughout the region.

183 See: [https://www.tiktok.com/@cpineda\\_72](https://www.tiktok.com/@cpineda_72)

184 Carlos Pineda, "Recuerdo de los rescates Eta Iota," Facebook, 2023.

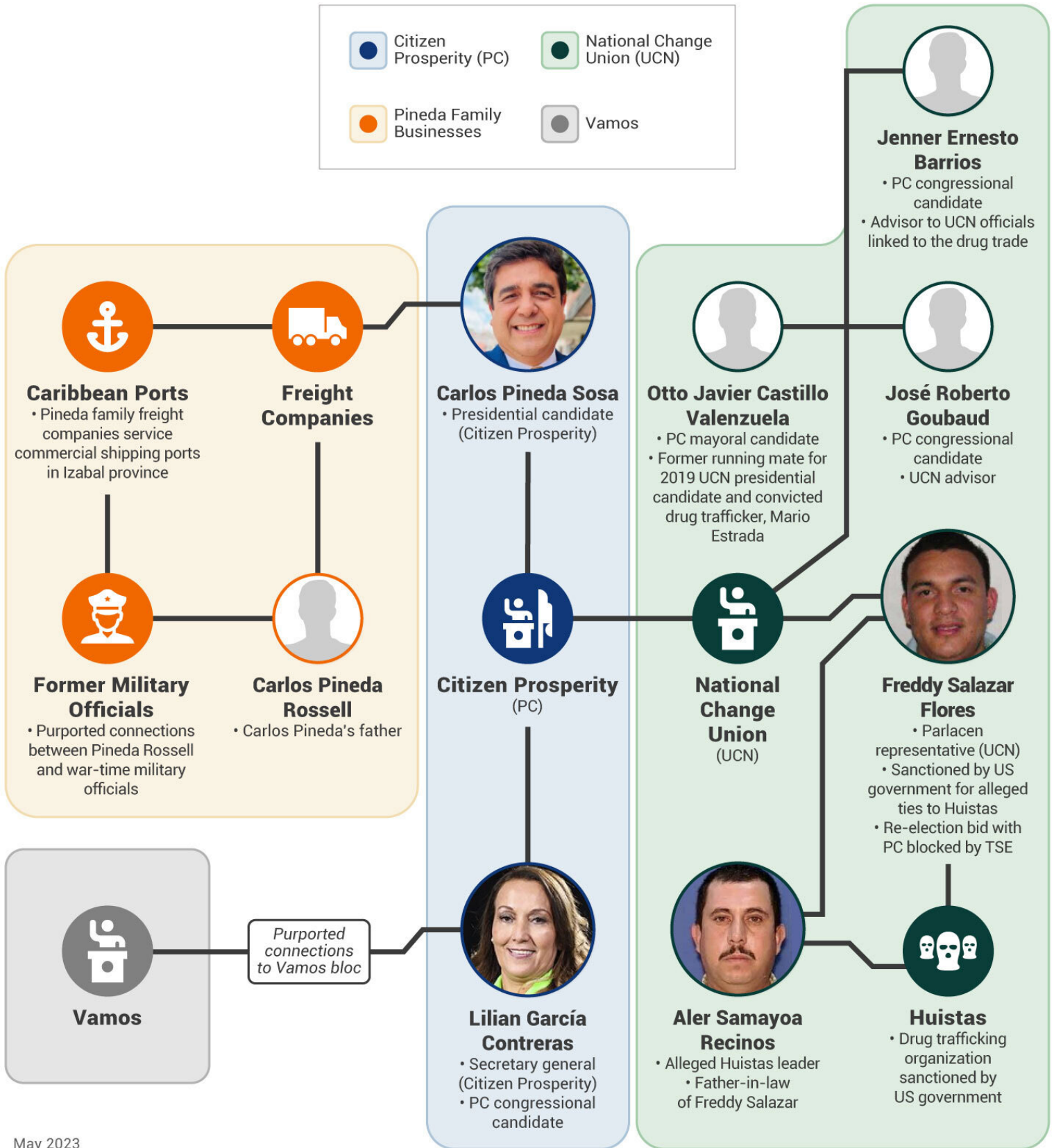
185 Juan Luis Font, "El Outsider, Carlos Pineda," Con Criterio, 14 April 2023.

186 Sofia Menchú, "Carlos Pineda: el finquero y empresario que rompió la política tradicional desde Tiktok," Prensa Libre, 19 May 2023.

187 See: "Transportes Pineda Rossell"

# Carlos Pineda: Political Network

This graphic shows a network of actors linked to Citizen Prosperity presidential candidate, Carlos Pineda Sosa.



May 2023

Source: Interviews with current and former judicial officials, politicians, analysts, civil-society actors, and diplomatic sources.

[insightcrime.org](https://www.insightcrime.org)

Pineda's political allies, past and present, raise questions. Prior to becoming the PC's presidential candidate, Pineda was set to run for president with Cambio, a party formed in 2022 by the sons of former presidential candidate and convicted money launderer, Manuel Baldizón. Cambio also became a vehicle for other suspicious candidates, including Esduin Javier Javier, alias "Tres Kiebres," a mayor and now congressional candidate who Guatemalan authorities have linked to the drug trade.<sup>188</sup> Pineda left the party in January, after Baldizón returned to Guatemala and purportedly attempted to stamp his authority on the party.

Notwithstanding his departure from Cambio, Pineda's PC candidacy could have provided a path to power for actors linked to the drug trade. Like Vamos, a notable contingent of the now-defunct UCN party -- previously branded a narco-party by the US government<sup>189</sup> -- gravitated towards Citizen Prosperity. The UCN also provided a key pillar of support for Vamos in Congress during the Giammattei administration.

Prominent UCN officials with Citizen Prosperity included Freddy Salazar Flores, a member of Central American Parliament (Parlacen) who was sanctioned in 2022 by the United States for "transporting and storing cocaine" for a Guatemalan drug ring called the Huistas.<sup>190</sup> Salazar's bid for re-election with Citizen Prosperity was rejected by the TSE. Instead, his mother and wife occupied the two top spots of the PC candidate list for Parlacen. Salazar's wife, Danury Lizeth Samayoa Montejo, is the daughter of alleged Huistas leader, Aler Samayoa, one the most high-profile, Guatemala-based drug traffickers wanted by the United States. Salazar's sister, Elisa Judith Mejía Salazar de Rozotto, is reportedly married to another alleged Huistas leader, Juan Bautista Rozotto López,<sup>191</sup> and was running for Congress with Citizen Prosperity.

Other Citizen Prosperity congressional candidates with ties to the party included José Roberto Goubaud, a UCN advisor and former director of Guatemala's largest commercial shipping port, Puerto Quetzal.<sup>192</sup> There was also Jenner Ernesto Barrios, PC congressional candidate and former advisor to Vivian Preciado Navarijo, a UCN Congress representative whose family is heavily linked to the drug trade on the country's Pacific coast.<sup>193</sup>

188 Steven Dudley, "Guatemala Mayor 'Tres Kiebres': The Art of Being '3 Times Broken'," InSight Crime, 11 October 2017; Guatemala Attorney General's Office, "Fiscalía de Delitos de Narcoactividad develó caso denominado 'narcotráfico municipal,'" 16 March 2021.

189 Ronan Graham, "Guatemala Political Party Branded 'Narco' by US: WikiLeaks," InSight Crime, 1 September 2011.

190 US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Guatemala's Los Huistas Drug Trafficking Organization with Ties to Mexican Cartels," 18 March 2022.

191 Parker Asmann, "Guatemala Elite's Criminal Links Highlight Country's Political Vulnerability," InSight Crime, 8 November 2018.

192 Raúl Barreno Castillo, "Qué relación tienen candidatos de la UCN con Prosperidad Ciudadana, el partido que postula a Carlos Pineda," Prensa Libre, 2 May 2023.

193 Shane Sullivan, "Familial Fiefdom: Ocos, Guatemala and the Preciado Navarijo Legacy," InSight Crime, 12 March 2021.

Pineda may also have had ties to the UCN. Prior to the 2019 elections, reports in Guatemalan press suggested he would run as the party's vice-presidential candidate.<sup>194</sup> But this was never made official, and Pineda denied the link. During that campaign, the UCN presidential candidate, Mario Estrada, was arrested by US authorities on suspicion of drug trafficking and later pleaded guilty to conspiring with Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel to traffic drugs using Guatemalan state infrastructure.<sup>195</sup> Estrada's running mate for that campaign, Otto Javier Castillo Valenzuela, also joined Citizen Prosperity as a mayoral candidate for Villa Nueva, one of Guatemala's largest and most coveted municipalities with a bountiful municipal budget.

## Wild Card Meets Status Quo

From the beginning, Pineda's relative financial and political independence represented a threat to the status quo. Though the precise origins of Pineda's wealth are hazy, he appeared to have more than enough capital to rebuff private campaign contributions and to avoid backdoor electoral pacts that often compromise presidents once in power.

The tensions were somewhat mitigated by the presence of the PC's secretary general and congressional candidate, Lilian García Contreras. Prior to joining Citizen Prosperity, García Contreras served as a Congress representative for UNE (Alta Verapaz), which, as noted, has worked closely with the Vamos bloc in Congress and the presidency.

García Contreras' proximity to government circles suggested the party's congressional bloc could remain loyal to the establishment regardless of Pineda's anti-establishment rhetoric. At first, it seemed like a win-win. PC officials, including García Contreras, appeared to have spotted an opportunity to hitch a ride into power on the Pineda bandwagon. And although Pineda had little control over his congressional candidates, he had a vehicle he could ride to the presidency.

Nonetheless, tensions arose. Although PC was seemingly connected to official circles of power, Pineda remained a wild card. In other words, a Pineda presidency signaled a possible reconfiguration of the status quo, granting a new power bloc control of the executive branch and its many political and financial spoils, while weakening the leverage of the establishment.

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194 Manuel Hernández Mayén, "21 partidos políticos se preparan para nominar a candidatos," *Prensa Libre*, 3 January 2019.

195 Héctor Silva Ávalos, "What Does Mario Estrada's Guilty Plea Mean for Guatemala?," *InSight Crime*, 26 October 2019.

In early May, Pineda's former party, Cambio, filed a legal injunction citing irregularities in one of Citizen Prosperity's pre-election assemblies, held in late 2022, with a view to tanking the party's campaign.<sup>196</sup> And on May 19, an administrative court provisionally suspended Pineda's candidacy as well as all the PC candidates.<sup>197</sup> Pineda and Citizen Prosperity lodged separate appeals to the Constitutional Court in the hope of reversing the administrative court's decision. But just days later, García Contreras withdrew the PC's appeal, leaving Pineda on his own.

On May 26, the CC denied Pineda's appeal, officially excluding him from the elections.<sup>198</sup>

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196 Jessica Gramajo, "Amparo pone en riesgo la candidatura presidencial de Carlos Pineda," Soy 502, 6 May 2023.

197 Jessica Gramajo, "Sala suspende provisionalmente la candidatura presidencial de Carlos Pineda," Soy 502, 19 May 2023.

198 Mike LaSusa, "Guatemala Elites Flex Muscle, Excluding Leading Presidential Contender," InSight Crime, 26 May 2023.





## Methodology

The aim of this project is to map the current configuration of political power blocs in Guatemala in the run-up to general elections in June 2023, with a particular emphasis on how these networks manipulate and undermine the country's judicial sector. To do this, we have focused our analysis on four of the most prominent blocs competing in the elections whose corrupt activities exemplify broader power dynamics in the political and judicial sectors.

To conduct our research, InSight Crime formed a team that was made up of a project coordinator and an investigator in Guatemala City, a project investigator in Mexico City, and a project director in Washington D.C. Combined, the team has more than 50 years of experience investigating organized crime and corruption in Guatemala.

The team began by combing through open-source information -- including press stories, academic and policy reports, judicial cases, and more -- to gain an initial understanding of the country's main political power blocs and the most prominent election candidates. We were able to draw from a trove of previous InSight Crime reporting spanning multiple decades. As an organization, InSight Crime has more than 13 years investigating organized crime and corruption in Guatemala.

The team also completed an initial round of qualitative interviews from our respective bases. Based on our initial findings, we were able to single out three political blocs with outsized influence in politics, judicial affairs, and the elections: Vamos, UNE, and Valor. These blocs are not exhaustive, considering the depth of corruption in Guatemala, but the expansive scope of their membership and criminal activities permits a broad analysis of systemic elite corruption and impunity. Later, when Mulet became a more viable presidential contender, we added Cabal to the list of blocs.

After defining the parameters of our research, the team conducted a second round of qualitative interviews, including a field trip to Guatemala. In total, we conducted over 65 interviews with a wide range of sources, including political analysts, government officials, prosecutors (including former FECCI and CICIG officials), judges, private sector actors, civil-society representatives, defense lawyers, and diplomatic sources.

The team's geographical distribution allowed us to access key stakeholders in Guatemala, as well as Mexico and the United States, where many judicial operators are now living in exile. Where possible, we have qualified the sources in the report to allow better assessment of the authenticity of the information provided. Most sources requested anonymity because of security or legal concerns. We sought to corroborate the statements of all the interviewees with other sources of information and interviews.

Based on our research, we divided the report into four main sections. The first includes an executive summary and major findings, which contain a synopsis of key dynamics as it relates to the current situation of corruption and impunity in Guatemala. The second section provides historical context, helping to explain the roots of corruption in Guatemala and the origins of the main blocs analyzed in the report.

The third includes a detailed analysis of the four main political power blocs selected for study, exploring their operations and efforts to undermine the judicial sector. We have used mapping software to illustrate connections between the different blocs and broader networks, as seen in the graphics provided in the report. To deepen our analysis, we also conducted a case study that illustrates how the main blocs leverage their political capital to influence the elections by disqualifying non-aligned presidential candidates from the race.

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