



COUNTRY PROFILE

A parade of security guards on Guatemala City's Fifth Avenue dangle scary-looking shotguns. What they protect are not banks nor casinos, but humble stationery shops.

Guatemala, once among the world's most violent countries, has halved its murder rate. However, reports of extortion have increased. Business owners, formal and informal, bus drivers, sex workers: few are spared. Extortion is a lucrative business for street gangs, but copycats get their share too. Criminals have allies among the police and judges, and so extortion goes unpunished.

For 12 years, the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) confronted organized crime that had penetrated every level of the state. In 2015, it revealed that then-President Otto Perez Molina led a customs fraud ring that embezzled a fortune. Mass protests forced

him to resign, and he is awaiting trial.

However, the fight against corruption hit a hurdle when the CICIG started investigating the next president, Jimmy Morales, and his family. He shut the commission down in September 2019, just a few months before he handed over power to Alejandro Giammattei, arguing that it

GUATEMALA

had turned into 'a tool for selective persecution and political harassment'.

Guatemala has a long history of serving the interests of its elite rather than the public good, especially in conflicts over natural resources. After independence from Spain in the 19th century, the government had expropriated indigenous people's

land and turned it into large private plantations. President Jacobo Arbenz, who supported land reform, was ousted in a CIA-backed coup in 1954. The struggle for land culminated in a 36-year civil war that left over 200,000 dead or 'disappeared'.

The 1996 peace agreement promised land redistribution, but instead, successive governments encouraged large-scale monoculture, transnational mining and hydropower dams. New evictions followed and local people were often left with contaminated rivers or without water. Their protests have been quashed and some of their leaders killed, while others have ended up in jail on terrorism charges.

Guatemala remains one of the world's most unequal countries. Almost half of the land belongs to just one per cent of the population, while others are landless, or with plots hardly big enough for subsistence farming.



Six in ten people live below the poverty line. Children work in coffee fields, silver mines and firework factories to help feed their families. Every other child is malnourished – something unseen elsewhere in Latin America.

The situation is exacerbated by Guatemala's location in the so-called 'dry corridor'. In some areas, every seed dries out and animals die of heat exhaustion. Climate change has made things worse. 2019 was the driest year in a decade.

Where Ladinos, Guatemalans of mixed descent, struggle, indigenous people are worse off. Long neglected by the state, they are poorly educated, exploited, without proper healthcare. Indigenous people officially make up 44 per cent of the population, but the true number is higher. Deep-seated racism makes many ashamed of their origin. The word 'Indian' is widely seen as synonymous with 'fool'.

Amid the growing famine, exclusion and inequality, Guatemalans weigh their options. More and more emigrate – if they can afford to pay smugglers. Almost 265,000 Guatemalans, 1.5 per cent of the country's population, were detained at the US southern border during 2019. Remittances from abroad sustain over a million families.

The Trump administration has sought to solve the US immigration problem by forcing Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras to take in each other's fleeing citizens under a 'safe third country' deal.

Despite all the misery, Guatemalans keep smiles on their faces. The CICIG may no longer be there, yet many still cherish the hope that things will turn around, and their beloved country will become a great place to live in. Although perhaps not in their lifetime. ●

MIRA GALANOVA

AT A GLANCE

LEADER: President Alejandro Giammattei (since 14 January 2020).

ECONOMY: GNI per capita \$4,400 (El Salvador \$3,820, United States \$63,080).

Monetary unit: Quetzal.

Main exports: Clothing, bananas, coffee, sugar. Agriculture accounts for nearly 10% of GDP and around 31% of the labour force, with most people working in the informal sector. Foreign investment is low, not least because of insecurity, corruption and poor transport. Remittances from overseas accounted for 14% of GDP in 2019.

PEOPLE: 17.3 million. Population annual growth rate 1.9%. People per sq km 161 (UK 275).

HEALTH: Infant mortality 22 per 1,000 live births (El Salvador 12, US 6). HIV prevalence rate 0.4%. Lifetime risk of maternal death 1 in 330 (El Salvador 1 in 960, US 1 in 3,000). Children regularly die of diarrhoea, malnutrition and respiratory diseases. Many Guatemalans in rural indigenous areas rely on midwives and traditional healers, because conventional healthcare is hard to access.

ENVIRONMENT: Guatemala's location leaves it prone to earthquakes, hurricanes and volcanic eruptions. In 2018, the volcano Fuego

killed almost 200 people. Climate change has worsened droughts, extreme rains and coastal flooding. Water contamination, soil erosion and deforestation are other serious problems.

CULTURE: More than 55% are Ladinos, which include people of pure and mixed European origin. Indigenous people (almost all Maya, with a small Xinca minority) make up 44% of the population. There is a small community of Afro-Caribbean descent called Garifunas.

RELIGION: Predominantly Roman Catholic, although in recent years there has been a surge in conversions to evangelical churches. Many indigenous follow the surviving Mayan faith or combine it with Christianity.

LANGUAGE: Although Spanish is the national language, many indigenous people don't speak it. There are 21 official Mayan languages spoken widely in indigenous areas. Two other languages are also used: Garifuna on the Caribbean coast, and Xinca near the border with El Salvador.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX: 0.651, 126th of 189 countries (El Salvador 0.667, US 0.920).



Photos (clockwise from top left): A security guard protects a stationery shop on Fifth Avenue in Guatemala City; 'No more violence against women, no more beatings, no more deaths, no more abuse', reads a sign during the International Women's Day march; Mayan women sell corn tortillas in Zone One of the capital; 'Cucuruchos' carry a float with the image of Christ through the historic centre during Guatemala's world-famous Easter celebrations.

ALL PHOTOS BY MIRA GALANOVA

STAR RATINGS



INCOME DISTRIBUTION ★★☆☆☆

Despite economic growth, poverty has become more widespread. Poverty rates double in rural areas and triple among indigenous people.



LITERACY ★★☆☆☆

81.5%. 25% of children drop out of primary school, indigenous girls even more. A third of Mayan women cannot read or write.



LIFE EXPECTANCY ★★★★★

74 years (El Salvador 73, US 79). Guatemala has the highest rates of child malnutrition and maternal mortality in Latin America, especially in rural indigenous areas where access to healthcare is limited.



POSITION OF WOMEN ★★☆☆☆

Machismo persists, affecting especially indigenous women. The femicide rate is among the highest in the region; domestic and sexual violence is rarely prosecuted. Child marriage still exists.



FREEDOM ★★☆☆☆

Guatemalans live in fear of violence. Journalists, activists and public officials who confront organized crime, corruption or human rights violations risk attacks and lawsuits. Access to justice remains difficult.



SEXUAL MINORITIES ★★☆☆☆

Although homosexuality is not illegal, LGBTQI people are unprotected by law. Trans-women especially suffer from discrimination, violence and police abuse. The pending 'Life and Family Protection' bill is another threat to LGBTQI rights.



POLITICS ★★☆☆☆

For decades, organized crime, the military and the business elite dominated Guatemala's politics. The new president, Alejandro Giammattei, has established a government anti-corruption commission, but it has had little chance to show how effective it will be. Two months after he took office in January 2020, the coronavirus outbreak became his priority. Giammattei acted quickly to limit the pandemic's impact on a country with a large malnourished population, poor healthcare system and fragile economy.

★★★★★ Excellent

★★★★☆ Good

★★★☆☆ Fair

★★☆☆☆ Poor

★☆☆☆☆ Appalling