

Adopting unconventional solutions

PROFILE OF H.E. OTTO FERNANDO PÉREZ MOLINA

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF GUATEMALA

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When Otto Pérez Molina won Guatemala's 2011 elections, many commentators were puzzled as to why a country that had only emerged in 1996 from four decades of civil war that produced a succession of military governments would vote in a retired general as president.

The reason is Guatemalans feared that their country was once again in danger of descending into anarchy, this time caused by the drugs cartels waging a turf war over transshipment rights north to the markets of the United States.

The murder rate had soared to 34 in 100,000, around 50 times higher than the EU average, while the cartels were intimidating and killing local officials, or simply buying control over the country's institutions. At the same time, just five out of every hundred crimes reported were being solved.

President Pérez Molina campaigned on a "mano dura", or "iron fist" platform, promising to tackle the drugs cartels and restore law and order.

After two sustained economic crises and years of Mexican drug cartels muscling their way across the border into Guatemala and Central America, President Pérez had inherited a nation on its knees. The word on voters' lips was "security", and as the former head of military intelligence, he assured them he would deliver by bringing in the army to fight drug trafficking and secure the country's borders.

About 90 per cent of the cocaine entering North America every year now passes through Central America, according to the UN's International Narcotics Control Board, and it has cost Guatemala billions of dollars and thousands of lives.

The problem is relatively recent. Traditionally, the vast majority of Latin American-grown drugs were transported to the United States by plane or boat. But Washington's war on drugs shifted the problem inland, leaving Guatemala in the crossfire between drug-producing countries in the south and drug consumers in the north.

Soon after taking office in January 2012, the Guatemalan President approved the creation of two new military bases in the country, upgraded a third and made it a priority to reinstate a longstanding ban on US military aid to Guatemala – a controversial move since the aid was stopped over concerns

regarding abuses during the country's civil war.

In late August 2012, around 200 US Marines arrived in Guatemala as part of Operation Martillo, an international mission aimed at intercepting illegal narcotics, bulk cash, and weapons being transported along Central America's isthmus. They have been successful in shutting down the drugs traffickers, who have moved to new routes in neighbouring Honduras and El Salvador.

A new approach to tackling drug trafficking

The Guatemalan President says he believes there is no long-term military solution to drug trafficking, and is now evaluating a new approach that includes legalising or regulating some substances. The controversial proposal, the first by an acting head of state – but supported by many former leaders in Latin America and beyond – surprised many, provoking debate within Guatemala and criticism from Washington. However, it also succeeded in getting the international community to discuss Latin America's drug problem, which is no small achievement.

President Pérez Molina's proposals have been welcomed by the London School of Economics, which has organised an event during his historic visit to London when it will present him with its Report on the Economics of Drug Policy, a rigorous independent analysis on current drug control strategy. President Pérez Molina will be receiving the report on behalf of Guatemala and will be taking it to official platforms such as the UN General Assembly and the Organisation of American States. Last year he appealed to delegates at the World Economic Forum in Davos for a new approach to regulating the drugs market.

A clean sweep

At the same time as tackling the drug traffickers by military means, President Pérez Molina has set about overhauling the country's weakened institutions, working closely with the UN's International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, and putting his Interior Minister Héctor Mauricio López Bonilla to work on overhauling the National Civilian Police. Some 10,000 new officers are to be hired, and around \$30 million spent on properly equipping and arming them. The increase will bring the total

number of police officers in Guatemala to 35,000 – one agent for every 400 residents.

Guatemala's police force must be on the same level as the army – not below it Mr Bonilla says. This means that all officers will have access to firearms, as well as the authority to use them. A shortage of guns prevented agents from confronting armed criminals in the past. Guatemala is also acquiring cameras that capture license plate numbers and send signals to police alerting officers of stolen vehicles.

The PNC set up a new high-security task force in early August to tackle crime in the most dangerous parts of Guatemala City.

As well as updating its police uniforms, equipping patrol cars with new technology, two new police academies were set up last year.

The initiatives are modeled on Colombia's police force following a meeting last year between Colombian officers and Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina to discuss police reforms in both countries.

The last two years has seen a number of high profile trials of senior army officers accused of human rights violations during the civil war. Unsurprisingly, President Pérez Molina's record during the conflict has also come under scrutiny.

The President adamantly denies allegations of wrongdoing. "I can tell you it is totally false," he told Reuters on the eve of his election victory, saying he was proud of his role during the war and adding: "I have nothing to hide." Declassified US documents from the civil war years support him, he was one of the Guatemalan army's most progressive officers – and a key figure in moving against General Efraín Ríos Montt, who held power for a year after seizing power in 1982. Some of the worst crimes of the war were committed under his rule. The US documents also show that President Pérez Molina played a key role in the peace process.

"It fell to me to represent the army and take part in the negotiations

and the signing of the peace accords. I had to convince a very tough sector of the army that didn't believe in the peace process," he says.

The legacy question

President Pérez Molina's term in office is now at the half-way point, with elections due in November next year. So what does the president hope to leave behind when his successor takes over in January 2016? Guatemala seems to have turned the corner away from the failed state that many

feared it was heading towards under the previous administration. As well as imposing law and order, strengthening the country's institutions, and providing a more business-friendly environment, President Pérez has arguably used the drugs legalisation debate as a way to alter the long-standing foundations of US relations with Guatemala and Central America more broadly. The six-country region has largely been an afterthought in US security cooperation with Latin America, which has historically centred on the larger economies of Colombia and Mexico.

The legalisation debate has proved a way of putting Central America – and Guatemala in particular – on the United States' radar screen. It is also a way of asserting the country's autonomy from Washington, as his visit to London – the first ever by a Guatemalan head of state – also shows.

In an era of waning American influence in Latin America, he is succeeding in aligning Guatemala more closely with its regional partners, perhaps pulling a country long beholden to the United States out from under its powerful shadow.

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