

## Guatemala demand response

The surprise election of reform candidate Bernardo Arevalo in Guatemala in August 2023, and his struggle with elites who sought to block his January 2024 inauguration and the legal standing of his Semilla political party,[1] casts attention on the struggle of Guatemala as a transit country for illegal drugs and immigration, and the importance of its success as a stable prosperous democracy with healthy institutions, for both the U.S. and the region.

This work examines the security challenges confronting Guatemala, and the efforts of the current administration of Bernardo Arevalo to confront them. It shows that the government and its security forces, with the support of the United States and others, are making a valiant effort against a range of security threats but are severely challenged by the magnitude of the challenge, associated corruption, resource limitations, and divisions within the government itself.

Due to its geographic position, Guatemala has long been a transit route for cocaine produced in Colombia, and later Venezuela, heading for the North American market.[5] Guatemalan authorities seized 5.04 metric tons of cocaine passing through the country and its waters in 2022, far more than in neighboring Honduras and El Salvador, yet relatively small amount compared to the 739 metric tons seized by Colombian authorities the same year.[6]

Once a source country for migrants, Guatemala has also become a transit country for large numbers of migrants from Venezuela, Cuba, Haiti, Ecuador and elsewhere, passing through the Darien Gap and the Central American isthmus toward the United States.[7]

Eventually, the campaign by Mexican security forces against the Zetas in that country, coupled with resistance by well-entrenched Guatemalan groups such as the Huistas of Huehuetenango, pushed the Zetas out of Guatemala,[13] while Guatemalan President Perez Molino was jailed for corruption and association with narcotraffickers.

With time, coca growing, and labs for processing it, have begun to appear in remote areas of the country such as Izabal and Alta Verapaz,[17] reflecting the relative absence of the state in those regions, and incentives for producing cocaine in Guatemala rather than smuggling it in, or purchasing it from Colombia. The relative fertile ground and appropriate growing conditions, particularly in mountainous areas such as San Marcos, help to produce coca leaves of relatively high alkaloid content, producing more product of higher value.[18]

Taking advantage of limited state presence in parts of Guatemalan territory, augmented by the defunding of the Guatemalan military after the end of the 1960-1996 Civil War,[24] the mountainous region of San Marcos, near the border with Mexico, became the primary site in the region for the growing of heroin

poppies.[25]&#160; Marijuana is also grown in sparsely populated areas throughout the country.[26]&#160;

With the expanded operations by the Guatemalan government against narcotraffickers, groups buying the heroin of San Marcos, and marijuana have reportedly decreased, resulting in a withering of production, although coca growing and labs for limited processing it have reportedly expanded.[27]&#160; Experts consulted for this work also expressed concern that areas of Guatemala with limited state presence could also be used to produce synthetic drugs including fentanyl, as the demand for such substances in the U.S. and elsewhere has grown. [28]

As a compliment to the drugs flowing through the region, Guatemala, like neighboring El Salvador and Honduras, have been beset by violent street gangs,[29] particularly Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)[30] and Barrio 18 (B-18).[31]&#160; By contrast to El Salvador and Honduras, where the gang presence has been more widespread, in Guatemala, it has been limited to the marginal outer suburbs of Guatemala City, particularly in the neighborhoods of Villanueva and Mixto,[32] and to an extent, to the urban zone of Escuintla, to the south of Guatemala City.[33]&#160;

The domination of the countryside outside Guatemala City by narcotraffickers and conservative elites has precluded MS-13 and B-18 from establishing a broader presence in the countryside.&#160; Moreover, the two principal gangs in Guatemala have generally respected the territory of each other, minimizing violence from turf battles between the two,[34] yet leaving citizens in the areas dominated by the gangs prejudiced by their extortion.&#160;

Beyond drugs and gangs, Guatemala has increasingly become a transit country for migrants passing through the Central American isthmus toward the United States from Venezuela, Ecuador, Haiti, Cuba and other countries.[38]&#160; Guatemala&#8217;s narrow Atlantic Coast, the &#8220;corner&#8221; of Central America, with Honduras to its East and Belize to the North, has become a key entry point, although migrants are smuggled across the porous border from Belize as well, ultimately crossing into Mexico, frequently near the coast opposite the Mexican city of Tapachula.[39]

Although Venezuelans have been the largest group passing through Guatemala, by contrast to South America, where Venezuelan criminal groups such as Tren de Aragua have exploited and trafficked those migrants,[40] such Venezuelan gangs have not yet created a strong presence in Guatemala.&#160; Experts consulted for this work suggest that this is principally because Venezuelan migrants have not remained in Guatemala long enough, in large enough numbers, for Venezuelan gangs to establish themselves there.[41]

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