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President, Murderer, or Both?

by *Constantino Diaz-Duran*

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The Guatemalan president's alleged role in a recent murder there shows how Mexico's drug violence is infecting other parts of Latin America—and threatening to destabilize the entire region.

I left Guatemala under duress eight years ago. My work as a journalist had earned me threats, and I believed it was no longer safe for me to live in that country. In the years since, I have grown distant, to the point that I now feel more American than Guatemalan. But every now and then, you come across a story so powerful that you cannot help but be moved. That is the case with the death of Rodrigo Rosenberg, a Guatemalan lawyer who has shocked his country from the grave, prompting a civic uprising that may bring down an increasingly unpopular president.

Rosenberg, a 47-year-old father of four, was gunned down on Sunday while he rode a bike near his home in Guatemala City. The following day, at the funeral, his family released a video recorded by the victim just days before his death. In it, he accuses Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom of planning and ordering the murder. "If you are listening to this message," said Rosenberg, "it's because I was murdered by President Alvaro Colom, with the help of [the president's private secretary] Gustavo Alejos and [alleged drug dealer] Gregorio Valdez."



**Moises Castillo / AP
Photo**

[Click Below to Watch the Victim's Posthumous Video](#)

The Cambridge- and Harvard-educated lawyer was, by all accounts, an honorable citizen. He spent 21 years in private practice and as a professor at Rafael Landivar Law School in Guatemala City. In his posthumous video, he

explains that the government elite put a hit on him because he knew too much about the murder of a client, Khalil Musa, who was killed in April. Musa was a prominent businessman who had been tapped by the Colom administration to join the board of a bank owned in part by the government. According to Rosenberg, Musa discovered a deep web of corruption within the bank, and, wishing to keep his hands clean, asked the president to accept his resignation. Colom and his advisers allegedly feared that Musa would blow the whistle, and decided to off him.

In the video, Rosenberg called the Guatemalan president “a thief, a murderer, and a coward.” He said Colom’s secretary had approached him directly, warning him that he would be killed if he didn’t stop denouncing Musa’s murder. The accusations have prompted two consecutive days of protests in Guatemala. Local media reports thousands of people dressed in black, calling for the president to resign. And a [Facebook group](#) called “United Guatemalans Demanding Alvaro Colom’s Resignation” has drawn over 20,000 members since Monday. “I was very proud to join the protests in Guatemala City,” said [blogger Luis Guillermo Pineda](#) in an interview with The Daily Beast. He added, “We demand the immediate resignation of President Alvaro Colom because he has lost the legitimacy to be the head of government; we also call for the prosecution of first lady Sandra de Colom, as well as Gustavo Alejos, the private secretary of the president, who have been accused of corruption on several times.”

From an American perspective, it is important to understand that the corruption of which Colom and company are accused is not your run-of-the-mill kickbacks from government projects. Corruption in Guatemala must be understood within the context of the growing power of organized crime in Mexico. Guatemala represents the southern border of the Mexican drug lords’ fiefdom. Kingpin Joaquin Guzmán has been known to use Guatemala as his hideout, and it has been widely reported that the cartels have recruited former officers of the Guatemalan army for their private bands of mercenaries. Indeed, Colom has been accused of having links to the drug mafia since at least 2003, when his failed presidential campaign came under scrutiny for donations he received from alleged drug dealers.

American journalist Francisco Goldman, author of several books about Guatemala, says he believes that the current crisis “gives a real opportunity to the Obama administration to strike a big blow against impunity and to open a door into investigating the reach of the narcos in Guatemala.” Ian Vasquez, Director of the Center for Global Liberty at the Cato Institute agrees, saying that “we can certainly consider Guatemala a casualty of Washington’s war on drugs. Mexican drug-trafficking activity has spilled over into Guatemala with all of the negative consequences—increased corruption, increased violence, and the undermining of civil society and liberal democracy. So that’s something that Washington should be worried about if, indeed, it cares about promoting those values.”

Since his election, President Obama has made it a point to rekindle our country’s relations with Latin America. The administration has not yet commented on the crisis, but the president would be wise to lend his support to those who are trying to keep their country from falling deeper into the hands of organized crime. Political instability in Guatemala could easily spread to the rest of Central America. This would allow not only drug lords, but also the likes of Hugo Chavez, whose hatred of America is no secret, to greatly expand their sphere of influence.

The movement that Rodrigo Rosenberg’s message has sparked in Guatemala has the power to dramatically change the future of a country marred by decades of violence. I grew up there in the middle of a 36-year civil war. I left in 2001 because I’d had it with the country’s lack of freedom, and the utter absence of a rule of law. America is my home now, and I have no desire to return to Guatemala. But I hope that Rosenberg’s death is not in vain. I admire his bravery, and understand his frustration when he said: “The last thing I wanted was to deliver this message, knowing that if you’re watching it, it’s because I’m dead, because this won’t make my children any better. But I hope Guatemala will be better. I hope my death helps get the country started down a new path. Guatemalans, time has come.”

Time has come, indeed. Not only for Guatemala, but also for the U.S. to help put an end to the growing power of the cartels that are wreaking havoc in Latin America. An obscure but brave lawyer in a small country has given President Obama the opportunity to take a strong stance against the forces that threaten our southern neighbors. He may do so by calling for a transparent and honest investigation of the involvement of the Guatemalan government in the

crimes alleged by Mr. Rosenberg.

Constantino Diaz-Duran is a writer living in Manhattan. He has written for the New York Post, the Washington Blade, El Diario NY and the Orange County Register.

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