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## FEATURED Q&A

# Who Has the Edge in Guatemala's Presidential Race?



Guatemalans go to the polls on June 25 to select their next president. The National Palace in Guatemala City is pictured. // File Photo: Guatemalan Government.

**Q** Guatemala's presidential race kicked off on March 27, a day after the electoral authority finalized its approved candidate list. Critics denounced the authority's disqualification of some candidates while allowing some others to run. The candidate line-up by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal initiated the three-month campaign to succeed conservative President Alejandro Giammattei, who is constitutionally prohibited from seeking a second term. Who are the front-runners of the country's presidential race? What is at stake for the country? Which issues will be key in the campaign, and what factors will most sway voters?

**A** Regina Bateson, assistant professor in the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa: "Elections are usually seen as the cornerstone of democracy. However, in Guatemala this year, the upcoming presidential election could weaken an already-fragile democracy. How is this perverse outcome possible? It starts with Guatemala's electoral authorities, who have taken an aggressive, interventionist and seemingly biased approach to determining who is allowed to run for office in the first place. These actions are harmful for democracy in multiple ways. As the locus of control shifts from the ballot box to behind-the-scenes bureaucrats, voters play less and less of a role in deciding who governs them. In a country long wracked by political cynicism and disengagement, this risks further alienating the very citizens whose engagement Guatemala so desperately needs. But who could blame them? This year the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) rejected the candidacy of the country's most

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## U.S., Cuba to Resume Migration Talks This Week

U.S. and Cuban officials are to resume migration talks this week in Washington. The last round of discussions between officials of the two countries was held in Havana in November.

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## Russia's Diesel Exports to Latin America Increase

Russia's diesel exports to Brazil and other Latin American countries increased in March, the first full month after an E.U. embargo on Russian oil products took effect.

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### POLITICAL

## Lula to Invite China's Xi Jinping to Visit Brazil

Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who heads to China for an official visit this week, said Monday that he will extend an invitation to the country's leader, Xi Jinping, to visit Brazil.

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Xi // File Photo: Chinese Government.

## POLITICAL NEWS

## U.S., Cuba to Resume Migration Talks This Week in Washington

U.S. and Cuban officials will resume talks this week on migration as the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden prepares for the end of pandemic-era border restrictions that have prevented Cubans from entering the United States from Mexico, Reuters reported Monday. The talks in Washington are to begin on Wednesday, following an earlier round of talks last November in Havana. Before that, talks had been on hold for more than a year during the administration of former President Donald Trump. This week's discussions represent "a continuation of our long engagement with Cuba on migration matters as neighboring states and is limited to the topic of migration," an unnamed official at the U.S. State Department said Monday, Reuters reported. "Ensuring safe, orderly, humane and regular migration between Cuba and the United States remains a primary interest of the United States, consistent with our interest in fostering family reunification, and promoting greater respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in Cuba," the official added. In January, the U.S. embassy in Havana resumed full visa processing for immigrants as well as consular services for the first time since 2017 in a move that came amid record-breaking migration from Cuba to the United States, the wire service reported. The resumed visa processing "is welcomed by many Cubans on both sides of the Florida Straits seeking a legal and safe path to reunite their families," Sebastián A. Arcos, associate director of the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University, told the Advisor in a [Q&A](#) published Oct. 17. "Unfortunately, it will not result in any significant change in Cuban migration patterns, which are rooted in Havana's chronic economic incompetence and political intolerance, and dictated by the regime's cynical manipulation of traditional Cuban family bonds and of U.S. compassion," he added. Cuba's government has said it want-

ed migration from the island to be orderly and legal, but it has also blamed the decades-long U.S. embargo of Cuba for hampering its economy and causing Cubans to leave. Some 220,000 Cubans were apprehended for illegally crossing the U.S.-Mexico border in the 2022 fiscal year, which ended on Sept. 30, Reuters reported. The increase was in part due to an increase in enforcement. In January, the Biden administration toughened border restrictions, leading the number of detentions at the border to plunge. At the same time, the Biden administration opened a new legal pathway for legal migration, allowing 30,000 Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans to enter the country each month as long as they have sponsors in the United States.

## Mexico Charges Soldiers in Shooting Deaths of Five Men

Mexican prosecutors formally presented homicide charges against four soldiers in connection to the Feb. 26 shooting of five men in the city of Nuevo Laredo, the Associated Press reported on Monday. The five men who were killed in the cartel-dominated border city, were riding in a vehicle, reportedly unarmed. Last month, the country's human rights agency denounced the shooting as unjustified, the Associated Press reported. The government commission issued a report stating that four of the 21 soldiers on patrol that day opened fire on the pickup, firing a total of 117 shots. The patrol had followed the vehicle on grounds that it was "suspicious" but failed to follow standard procedure, according to the report. "Without giving verbal orders [to pull over], one soldier opened fire into the back of the private vehicle, and three other soldiers did the same to support the first one," the report stated. The civilian court said the four charged men will be held in trial detention at an army base in Mexico City. Mexico has a distinct court system for soldiers, though they must be tried in civilian courts when they involve nonmilitary victims. The court is scheduled to hold an initial hearing tomorrow.

## NEWS BRIEFS

## Lula to Invite China's Xi Jinping to Brazil

Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva said on Monday he will extend an invitation to his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping to visit Brazil, Reuters reported. The announcement came the day before Lula's departure to the Asian country, in a bid to strengthen relations. "I am going to invite Xi Jinping to come to Brazil, for a bilateral meeting, to get to know Brazil, to show him the projects that we have of interest for Chinese investment," Lula said in an interview with state-owned broadcasting company EBC.

## Bank of Nova Scotia Taps Aristeguieta as Head of International Operations

Bank of Nova Scotia, or Scotiabank, announced in a statement Monday that Francisco Aristeguieta has been named the lender's head of international operations effective May 1. Aristeguieta joins the Canada-based bank from State Street, where he was the CEO of institutional services. He had previously worked for 25 years at Citigroup, where he led the Latin America business, among other senior roles. Aristeguieta replaces Ignacio Deschamps, who will retire at the end of the month.

## Petroecuador's Oil Output at Two Blocks Down Due to 'Acts of Vandalism'

Ecuadorean state oil company Petroecuador said in a statement Monday that daily oil production at two blocks in the Amazonian province of Orellana was down by more than 50 percent this month due to "acts of vandalism." Blocks 16 and 67 were among those at which the company declared force majeure in March amid protests from local communities that affected production. The government said it will continue to seek dialogue with residents who have protested at the blocks.

## ECONOMIC NEWS

## Russia's Diesel Exports to Latin America Increase

Russia's diesel exports to Latin America increased in March, the first full month after an E.U. embargo on Russian oil products took effect, Reuters reported Monday, citing recently released figures. Russia sent more than 580,000 metric tons of diesel to the region in March, 440,000 metric tons of which went to Brazil, according to data from Refinitiv. Panama, Uruguay and Cuba also received diesel

**Russia sent more than 580,000 metric tons of diesel to Latin America in March, 440,000 metric tons of which went to Brazil.**

shipments last month totaling 140,000 metric tons. From January to March, Brazil received 663,000 metric tons of diesel from Russia, a sharp uptick from the 74,000 total metric tons received in 2022, Refinitiv data showed, the news service reported. Russia was previously a major supplier for European demand, but it has increased its exports to alternative markets across Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America as an embargo took effect in the European Union on Feb. 5. Last year, the government of then-Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro had said that it was seeking to buy as much diesel as it could from Russia at cheaper prices to shore up its supply with the aim of lowering prices and moderating inflation, the Associated Press reported. Despite the significant uptick in diesel imports from Russia this year, it remains at the lower end of the top 10 suppliers to Brazil, behind the United States, India, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and others, local newspaper Valor Econômico reported in early February.

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exciting, transformational presidential contender, Thelma Cabrera, while allowing others with questionable pasts to run, including Zury Ríos and Sandra Torres. The net result is that Guatemalans are left with the same old slate of uninspiring choices, even less confidence in their country's institutions and a democracy that feels ever more like a façade. Although this year's election was supposed to bring positive change to Guatemala, it may end up reinforcing the notion that the country is ruled by a 'pacto de corruptos,' rather than by the people."

**A** Donald J. Planty, president of Planty & Associates and former U.S. ambassador to Guatemala: "The candidate lineup for Guatemala's June 25 presidential election represents the continuation of the 'old guard' and business as usual in Guatemalan politics. None of the candidates will bring to office the political, economic and social reform program that the country so desperately needs. This is particularly true of the rule of law sector where Guatemala needs to enact basic changes to root out embedded corruption and dysfunction. Guatemala does not have a well-developed political party system that can bring in 'new blood'—young, inspired leaders who might break with the worn-out policies of the past—and therefore meaningful change is unlikely. Guatemalan national elections are usually won by the candidate with the widest name recognition. This fact would favor candidates like Sandra Torres and Zury Ríos who seem to have the strongest popular following. Edmond Mulet, a perennial candidate who has a lower profile, will probably not succeed. In campaigns that are essentially popularity contests, pressing public policy issues usually take a back seat. Guatemala's systemic corruption and the ongoing marginalization of the Mayan community need to be addressed, but neither Torres nor Ríos has the ideas needed to break with the past. Therefore, we are likely to see more of the same widespread

institutional corruption if either candidate wins the presidency. Guatemalan national life is controlled by a small, powerful economic-political elite that pursues a narrow, self-centered agenda that excludes most of the country's Indigenous Maya population of some nine million people. Unless fundamental change comes to Guatemala, the country will stay firmly ensconced on its downward trajectory."

**A** Mike Allison, professor and chair of the Department of Political Science at The University of Scranton: "After eight years of democratic backsliding, Guatemalans return to the polls in June. While they might hope to turn the page on a difficult few years, the pre-campaign and early days of official campaigning provide little evidence that will be the case. Under outgoing President Alejandro Giammattei, anti-democratic forces intensified their assault against courts, prosecutors' offices, human rights defenders and the media. Dozens of highly trained professionals have gone into exile to escape further persecution. Those who did not seek sanctuary abroad, like senior anti-corruption prosecutor Virginia Laparra and El Periódico owner and founder José Rubén Zamora, linger in the country's prisons on dubious charges leveled against them for working to hold public officials accountable. They add to a long list of Guatemalans who have abandoned the country. Like previous campaigns, Guatemalans will be looking for candidates with attractive solutions to worsening levels of insecurity, economic deprivation, governance and corruption. Leading presidential candidates across the conservative spectrum include Edmond Mulet (Movimiento Cabal), Zury Ríos (Partido Valor), and Sandra Torres (Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza). Guatemalans, however, are right to have little confidence in the process given the corruption in the Supreme Electoral Tribunal and its highly questionable ruling that prevented the strongest leftist alternative in the race,

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Thelma Cabrera and the Movimiento para la Liberación de los Pueblos (MLP), from participating. In all likelihood, clientelistic networks will drive a sizable share of the electorate to vote, UNE will win a plurality of Congressional seats, and Rios and Torres will advance to a runoff.”

**A** Joséphine Lechartre, Ph.D candidate in peace studies and political science at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame: “As

of early April, the front-runners of the Guatemalan presidential race, all experienced politicians, are Sandra Torres (UNE), Edmund Mulet (Cabal), and Zury Ríos (Valor). Each of the candidates’ platforms emphasize law and order against organized crime—the issue dearest to Guatemalan voters—anti-corruption action and social programs, including the development of basic infrastructures and better job opportunities. In spite of a general climate hostile to traditional elites, it is unlikely that outsider candidates will advance to the second round. The dire state of the economy, endemic corruption and disinformation campaigns targeting anti-corruption personnel have significantly eroded Guatemalans’ support for democracy, and more than half of the country’s citizens value a decent living standard more highly than a healthy democratic system (accord-

ing to a 2021 Americas Barometer survey). On that matter, Torres emerges as the grand favorite. She boasts more than 20 years in politics, and the 2023 race is her sixth rodeo, including the campaign she organized for her then-husband Álvaro Colom. As a first

“It is unlikely that outsider candidates will advance to the second round.”

— Joséphine Lechartre

lady (2008-2012), Sandra became the face of the popular ‘Mi Familia Progresá’ program, a mix of direct cash transfers and food distribution, which became one of the most powerful clientelistic networks of modern Guatemalan politics. Unsurprisingly, one of Torres’ campaign points for 2023 is the re-activation of the social program. Prior to the official beginning of the race, the UNE ostensibly updated lists of potential beneficiaries of the social program in several locations, predicting an important—and decisive—female vote in favor of Sandra.”

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta.*

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