

Former president arrested in El Salvador amid government default crisis

By Andrea Lobo
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The former president of El Salvador, Elías Antonio Saca (2004-2009), was arrested on Sunday, along with six other functionaries of his administration, on corruption charges. The Attorney General's Office declared the next day that it has proof of the laundering of \$6 million by Saca and his former private secretary, Élmer Charlaix, and their appropriation of \$116 million from the state's coffers. Accountants and other top financial officials are also implicated.

"Initially, there is a general amount of \$246 million that was channeled into a large number of personal accounts (14) in favor of the defendants... some of which can still be justified," stated Attorney General Douglas Meléndez.

The arrests are part of a series of high-level investigations and arrests of top politicians and businesspeople of the Central American Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras). This anti-corruption drive, supported by the US, is tied to the \$750 million Alliance for Prosperity Plan, which is primarily aimed at deterring migrants from traveling to the US and countering the increasing influence of China and Russia in the region.

"Operation Uncovering corruption", the name given to Saca's case, is the first one led by the Group against Impunity (GCI), formed by Attorney General Meléndez with strong political, logistical, and financial support from Washington.

This new organization now joins the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and the Support Mission against Impunity and Corruption in Honduras (MACCIH) as instruments used by US and European imperialism to discipline its client regimes and to provide political cover for further social cuts and repression.

The immediate context of the arrests is the deep economic crisis plaguing the FMLN government, which has reached an "emergency" of "technical default" on its payments. Through letters and meetings with the minister of economy, Carlos Cáceres, the World Bank, the IMF, the Inter-American Development Bank and other credit agencies have pressured the FMLN and the right-wing opposition

ARENA party, which controls Congress, to reach an agreement that solves the state's liquidity crisis.

Standard & Poor's issued a report this month warning that it might have to downgrade the country's credit rating unless fiscal issues are resolved and complaining of "heightened political polarization."

FMLN president Sánchez Cerén and his cabinet have held several unsuccessful negotiations with ARENA to reach an agreement with the IMF. Cerén announced recently that, "in the interest of the Salvadoran people," the government is pursuing a new austerity law and a fiscal responsibility law that embody deep social cuts, a "pension reform" to pay for the deficit and the issuance of new debt bonds. However, ARENA, for its part, has been sending mixed signals, presumably to deepen the FMLN administration's crisis and unpopularity.

The US ambassador to El Salvador, Jean Manes, recently stated: "You must have an honest conversation; a fiscal agreement is key not only to get the funds, but also to send a signal to the international community." While the supply of funds has been historically used by US and European imperialism, i.e., "the international community", to impose its preferred policies, the "anti-impunity" campaigns serve as a means of safeguarding both the investments and political control of finance capital.

The FMLN, the former guerrilla front that in 1992 turned itself into a nominally left political party, has become the most dedicated defender of the interests of US imperialism in El Salvador. It has carried out austerity measures, while steadily expanding its repressive apparatus. Most recently, on October 17, the FMLN government sent police "shock groups" to harass striking hospital workers across the country. Meanwhile, the official rates for total, relative and extreme poverty and unemployment have all increased steadily since 2013, according to household census data.

Saca, who became president heading ARENA, the far-right party associated with the late death-squad organizer Roberto D'Aubuisson, had already been under investigation. His arrest takes place less than two months

after his successor, Mauricio Funes (2009-2014) of the FMLN, sought asylum in Nicaragua to escape corruption charges linked to \$728,000 of unjustified income. Moreover, the investigations against both Funes and Saca were initiated only two weeks after the death of ex-president Francisco Flores (1999-2004), who was on trial for stealing \$10 million from relief donations for the 2001 earthquake victims.

When entering office, Mauricio Funes's government had presented 152 corruption cases against functionaries of past ARENA governments and business people, however only two cases led to prosecutions, including that of ex-President Flores.

In a videoconference on September 14 to announce the creation of the GCI to the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington D.C., Meléndez cynically avoided responding to a question about the 152 cases against ARENA, stating: "It's very difficult to avoid pronouncements from the political class. What they cannot do is to want to direct these investigations."

On several occasions, Meléndez has also said that there is "no international involvement" in his GCI; however, he has travelled to and communicated frequently with Washington to coordinate his investigations.

In Guatemala, former right-wing president Otto Pérez Molina and ex-vice-president Roxana Baldetti both resigned and were prosecuted in 2015 after the CICIG presented undeniable evidence of their participation in a corruption network that embezzled about \$1 million each month. This and dozens of other prosecutions have generated widespread support for the commission in Guatemala, which US imperialism is seeking to replicate in Honduras and El Salvador.

Conversely, the bourgeois politicians being targeted have expressed their strong opposition. Pérez Molina and his Patriotic Party have accused the CICIG and Guatemala's attorney general, Thelma Aldana, of being puppets of the US embassy. Also, the discredited parties related to the "Left turn" in Latin America have rejected the commissions as "interference by the United States," a charge they made in the official resolution of the XXII Sao Paulo Forum held in June.

In a particularly violent case of personal resistance, Pérez Molina's former finance minister, Pavel Centeno, committed suicide last Friday after shooting two police officers who had come to arrest him over a case of money laundering under investigation by the CICIG.

The broader dependence of these elites on US imperialism for private and public investment, including for their repressive apparatuses in the Alliance for Prosperity, have however forced the national ruling cliques to ultimately

accept these forms of imperialist political control.

Somewhat greater resistance, however, has been mounted against the investigation of crimes committed during the Central American civil wars. On July 13, the Salvadoran Supreme Court cancelled a blanket amnesty implemented by a former ARENA government for those involved in crimes related to the civil war. There were 75,000 deaths and 8,000 disappearances between 1980 and 1992 in El Salvador, 85 percent of them attributed to the US-backed security forces. FMLN party leaders described the ruling as a "soft coup attempt" and a "destabilization" of the country, echoing the reaction of the military and the extreme right.

So far, there is only one open civil war case in El Salvador, the massacre of 520 civilians by the Salvadoran army in 1981 in the village of El Mozote. Reflecting the FMLN government's hostility to upsetting the impunity enjoyed by the mass murderers of the Salvadoran security forces, Attorney General Meléndez expressed contempt for the El Mozote investigation, indicating that it's an "expired" case and a "dead process of merit."

Antonio Saca had proven to be a dedicated servant to the US Government, which repeatedly expressed its appreciation for his political subservience, which included sending troops to the Iraq War. He was praised for approving and implementing the Central American Free Trade Agreement with the United States (CAFTA-DR), "especially in the face of the challenge from China," according to US State Department documents.

In a leaked diplomatic cable written to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in 2006, then US ambassador Hugh Douglas Barclay described Saca as having, "a visceral dislike for communism (FMLN, Castro, Chavez), which he blames for having destroyed the country's infrastructure and overall economy during the war years. Saca is proud to say that he smokes only Padron cigars, made by Miami Cubans, and would never smoke a Cohiba."

In December 2009, however, Saca was expelled from ARENA for having mispent \$219 million in government funds to improve his personal image, instead of spending it on health and safety programs. He was also accused of intimidating party members and provoking divisions.

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