

THE ADVOCATE

ACTION AT HOME FOR JUST POLICIES ABROAD

El Salvador & Guatemala's Political Prisoner Problem

By Vicki Gass

Last year saw a rise in the number of political prisoners in El Salvador and Guatemala. Who is being jailed? Human rights defenders, independent journalists, community activists, indigenous leaders, and anti-corruption champions. The Salvadoran government and the Guatemalan Attorney General's are using the judicial system to silence those organizing to uphold justice and accountability, to defend their land or communities, and to protect democratic processes.



Altar at ecumenical event honoring Ruth López in Santa Marta, El Salvador / Credit: [CISPES](https://www.cispes.org)

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The **Latin America Working Group Education Fund (LAWGEF)** mobilizes concerned citizens, organizations, and networks to call for just U.S. policies towards Latin America and the Caribbean. We educate policymakers and the public about the impact of U.S. foreign and immigration policy. We coordinate a coalition of over 50 U.S. organizations and work closely with civil society partners in Latin America to support their human rights campaigns and make sure their voices are heard in the policy debates that take place in Washington, D.C.

LAWGEF TEAM

Vicki Gass
Executive Director

Andrea Fernández Aponte
Senior Associate

Questions? Comments?
Email us at lawg@lawg.org

CONTRIBUTORS

Kim Stanton
Colombia-based analyst and advocate; Former Democratic Staff Director, Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Gabriela Blen
Executive Director, Organización Ayudamos a Honduras (OAH)

Ruth López from El Salvador is perhaps the most well-known. She is Cristosal's Chief Legal Officer for the Anti-Corruption Unit, and her work was critical in exposing corruption in the Bukele government. Ruth was arrested on May 18, 2025, and was first falsely charged with embezzlement and later with illicit enrichment. She has been placed in indefinite pretrial detention, denied access to her legal defense team and her family this whole time. In 2024, the BBC named her as one of the top [100 most influential](#) women in the world. She has also received six international awards in recognition of her anti-corruption work. In 2025 alone, Ruth was awarded the [American Bar Association](#) International Human Rights Award and the [Magnitsky](#) Human Rights Award for outstanding lawyers.

But there are others who also cannot be forgotten. In April, a [report](#) by Cristosal found that there are 86 political prisoners in El Salvador and that 245 people have been politically persecuted since President Bukele first took office. Along with Ruth, there is [Fidel Zavala](#), spokesperson for the Human and Community Rights Defense Unit (*Unidad de Defensa de Derechos Humanos y Comunitarios*, UNIDEHC), jailed by Salvadoran authorities on February 25, 2025. Previously falsely imprisoned, there is [deep concern](#) for his safety and well-being, given his outspokenness on prison conditions.

Another political prisoner is [Enrique Anaya Barraza](#), a renowned constitutional lawyer, scholar, and university professor in El Salvador and Latin America. Enrique has been a vocal critic of the Bukele government for its abuse of power, corruption, and violations of the constitution, especially regarding presidential reelections. Like Ruth, both Enrique and Fidel have been placed in pretrial detention without due process and denied access to legal counsel and family.

In neighboring Guatemala, on April 23, 2025, Indigenous leaders [Luis Pacheco and Héctor Chaclán](#) were detained by the outgoing Attorney General Consuelo Porras' office. They were charged with [terrorism](#) and placed in pretrial detention. If convicted, they could be sentenced to 30 years in jail. These allegations are based on their role as leaders of the 106-day National Strike between October 2023 and January 2024 that secured a peaceful transition of power after corrupt actors threatened to prevent then-president-elect Bernardo Arévalo from taking office. Just last week, the appeals court ruled to extend the [pretrial detention](#) of Pacheco and Chaclán until September 23, 2026—another six months without due process after spending 12 months in custody.

Policymakers are not aware of these cases of political prisoners and so many others. LAWG is working to change that. With partner organizations such as Alianzas Americas, WOLA, Global Exchange, CISPES, and Global Labor Justice, we are organizing three delegations from now through mid-June to meet with members of Congress, the OAS Inter-American Human Rights Commission, civil society organizations, and the press to bring visibility to the issue of Central America's growing political prisoner population. Members of the delegations include Ruth's husband, as well as lawyers and independent journalists exiled from El Salvador.

We will urge Congress to pressure the Salvadoran government to release all political prisoners and apply alternatives to detention throughout the duration of their judicial proceedings; to guarantee public hearings with full respect for due process; and to suspend any restrictions on communication with legal defense teams and family members while the political

prisoners are deprived of liberty. Finally, we will demand that Congress withhold U.S. financial assistance to El Salvador and Guatemala until progress is made in the liberation of all political prisoners.

You can help too! Call your elected officials and urge them to pressure the Salvadoran and Guatemalan governments to release all political prisoners, guarantee due process, and allow access to their families and legal defense. Echo the words of Ruth, who said to the police who arrested her: “Have some decency, one day this will all end. You can't lend yourselves to this.”

Honduras: Electoral Reform and the Future of Democracy

By Gabriela Blen

From 1982 onward, Honduras' long-dominant National and Liberal parties alternated in power through elections every four years. That fragile equilibrium broke in 2009, when President Manuel Zelaya was removed in a coup backed by the military and factions within his own party after he promoted a referendum widely viewed as opening the door to presidential reelection—explicitly prohibited by the Constitution.

During the Cold War, popular movements in Honduras and across Latin America were brutally repressed, often with U.S. agencies training national military units that later evolved into clandestine death squads—some financed in part by narcotrafficking—according to declassified archives. Measures framed as anti-communist also weakened democratic development by empowering authoritarian rule and crushing grassroots leadership that frequently sought local justice and dignity rather than Soviet-style communism.

The Narco-State Era

After the 2009 coup, Porfirio Lobo Sosa was elected president. His term coincided with Honduras becoming the world's most violent country, as transnational cartels fought for territory through gangs.

Lobo's political backing helped elevate Juan Orlando Hernández (JOH), who became president in 2013 and secured an unconstitutional reelection in 2017 amid military-backed force. During his tenure, Honduras shifted



Lourdes Palacios from COFAPPE confronts Sen. Kaine in Congress about political persecution in El Salvador / Credit: LAWG

from a drug transit corridor to a center of production, while repression of journalists, human rights defenders, and activists intensified and organized crime penetrated political institutions amid rampant corruption. On Valentine's Day 2022, after leaving office, JOH was extradited to the U.S. and convicted for importing massive amounts of cocaine to the United States.

His sentencing brought relief to the Honduran people's thirst for justice—we who, since 2015, have fought in the streets, torches in hand, against the authoritarianism and corruption of JOH's administrations. But our joy was short-lived; the day before the Honduran 2025 elections, Hernández received a full and unconditional pardon from U.S. President Donald Trump, which nullified his 45-year sentence for drug-trafficking conspiracy and led the court to dismiss the charges and close the case—deepening concerns regarding impunity and contradictions in the Trump administration's anti-drug policy—which, while bombing alleged drug traffickers on the high seas, released a convicted drug trafficker.

However, it is not only the National Party that is embroiled in drug trafficking; in September 2024, a [video surfaced](#) in which Mel Zelaya's brother—and Secretary of the National Congress—Carlos Zelaya, appears negotiating with several drug traffickers to receive millions in funding for the campaigns of Xiomara Castro and the Libre Party. And yes, it seems that we Hondurans simply cannot escape the clutches of narcopoliticians.

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The 2025 Electoral Process

Several viewed the 2025 electoral process as biased, and concerns about military interference and a repeat of the 2017 crisis shaped the campaign. The results were not announced for weeks. Many Hondurans still question whether the declared winner truly received the most votes.

According to [WOLA](#), "Honduras' electoral process did not guarantee transparency or legal certainty. The partisan management of electoral institutions, the lack of effective resolution of challenges, and doubts about the functioning of the TREP and special counts contributed to a widespread perception of fraud."

Although the process did not lead to widespread violence, the lack of credibility and public confidence is leaving institutions weakened. All political actors, including those who questioned the process, ultimately accepted the election results, not as an expression of democratic legitimacy, but as a pragmatic solution to the risk of ungovernability.

The Urgency of Electoral Reform

The flawed process left Hondurans disillusioned but also created a consensus: meaningful electoral reform is urgent.

Reforms require a two-thirds congressional majority and approval in two consecutive legislative years. Key proposals include a runoff election system; polling stations staffed by randomly selected citizens rather than party operatives; criminalizing illicit campaign financing; extending statutes of limitations for electoral crimes; increasing penalties (including lifetime bans from public office); lifting banking secrecy so investigations can trace campaign funds; and ensuring greater budgetary allocations and participation mechanisms for women, LGBTQ+ persons, indigenous people, and Afro-Hondurans.

Despite State capture and the weakening of civil society due to reduced international support, Hon-

durans continue to demonstrate resilience and commitment to the defense of democracy. The next 18 months are decisive for mobilizing the citizenry and pressuring the National Congress—considering that more than half of the deputies are new—to enact the necessary reforms; otherwise, the country will face a new crisis.

Why the United States Should Care

U.S. policy has shaped Latin America's democratic trajectory in contradictory ways: at times advancing human rights and institutions, and at others, favoring authoritarian leaders and ultraconservative groups.

Drug consumption in the United States fuels the drug cartels operating in Latin America, leaving behind violence, corruption, and a lack of opportunities for young people, making gangs and organized crime appear to be a more viable option than education or formal employment.

Ultimately, the futures of Honduras and the United States are intertwined: the decisions made in Washington directly impact our political stability and the exodus of Hondurans arriving at the U.S. southern border, as well as the tons of cocaine and other drugs that "we" send them.

As Americans reflect on Honduras, do not forget that there are Hondurans among us who are fighting to reclaim our dignity, which has been undermined by corruption, organized crime, and geopolitical intervention.



Polling station during the general elections in Honduras in November 2025 / Credit: [OAS](#)

Colombia:

2026 Presidential Elections & What's At Stake

By Kim Stanton

Following the March 2026 legislative elections, on May 31, Colombians will head to the polls for the first round of voting to choose a new president. If no candidate wins an absolute majority, a second round will take place on June 21. At stake is whether Colombia renews the pro-peace and social reform agenda of the last four years under President Gustavo Petro or returns to the "mano dura" approach previously tried under former President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), with grave human rights consequences that encompassed the notorious "[false positives](#)" scandal.

There are [13 tickets](#) on the ballot, but all indications are that the race is between Iván Cepeda of the Pacto Histórico, the party currently in power, and one of two candidates running to represent the far right—either Paloma Valencia, official candidate of Uribe's Centro Democrático party, or Abelardo De la Espriella, a self-proclaimed "outsider" who also sought Uribe's backing. Cepeda is the son of Manuel Cepeda Vargas, a Unión Patriótica senator [assassinated](#) in 1994 by paramilitaries in concert with the Colombian armed forces. Now a senator himself, candidate Cepeda co-founded the *Movimiento de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado* and is known for his steadfast commitment to achieving peace and accountability in Colombia. Valencia is the granddaughter of former Conservative Party president Guillermo León Valencia (1962-1966). A leading opponent of the 2016 Peace Accord with the FARC-EP, she has been described as "[la hija política](#)," the "political daughter," of Uribe and has said she will "die an Uribista." De la Espriella, a lawyer with no experience in elected office, [advised](#) the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* during Uribe's paramilitary demobilization process (2002-2005) and admires El Salvador's Nayib Bukele. De la Espriella and Valencia both adamantly oppose Petro's Total Peace policy, an effort to negotiate with the full spectrum of illegal armed groups operating in Colombia.



L-R: Presidential candidates Iván Cepeda, Abelardo de la Espriella, and Paloma Valencia / Credit: [SEMANA](#)

The election is taking place amid heightened debate over security. In its [latest report](#), the *Misión de Observación Electoral* (MOE) identified 435 aggressions against political, social, and community leaders from March 2025 through March 2026, a 25% reduction in comparison with 2022, the last presidential election year. But MOE argues that the decline does not signal a substantive improvement in security conditions; rather, the dynamics of violence have shifted toward territorial control and strategic attacks. Political leaders were the targets of 62.5% of the aggressions, a 13% increase compared to 2022, and assassinations rose from 16 in 2022 to 28 in 2026. The violence is occurring despite preventive actions taken by the Ministry of Interior in the aftermath of the killing of pre-candidate [Miguel Uribe Turbay](#) in 2025, including activating a governmental [commission](#) dedicated to protecting the elections and stepped-up physical protection measures.

There is some good news: fears that violence would impede the March legislative elections proved largely unfounded. The [interim report](#) issued by the OAS Election Observation Mission highlighted the Ministry's efforts, cited dialogues with illegal armed groups that may have persuaded them to respect electoral guarantees, and concluded that authorities ensured the security conditions needed for voting to proceed. But in recent weeks, [Cepeda, Valencia, and De la Espriella](#) have all reportedly received death threats that could play into the hands of the government's opponents.

The Right's success in recent elections in Latin America, boosted by the Trump Administration's [overt partisan intervention](#), has informed predictions of a victory in Colombia as well. But that outcome is not a foregone conclusion. In the

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March elections, the Pacto Histórico won 4.4 million votes to 3.2 million for the Centro Democrático, securing the [largest number of seats](#) in both the Senate and the Chamber of Representatives, although not a majority in either body. Polls indicate that Cepeda has steadily increased his share of the intention to vote, [reaching 44.3%](#) in the Invamer survey published on April 26, which also showed him prevailing against either right-wing candidate in a second round.

To win, Cepeda must continue to broaden his alliance. In April, Movimiento Libres and Alianza Verde, two parties with congressional representation, joined his campaign; former presidential candidates [Clara López](#) and [Luis Gilberto Murillo](#) suspended their campaigns to join Cepeda; and [sectors](#) of the Liberal and Conservative parties also support him. His decision to name Senator Aida Quilcué as his vice-presidential candidate may also [boost turnout](#) among historically excluded indigenous and rural communities.

Will the Trump Administration seek to derail a Cepeda victory? While tensions between the U.S. and Colombia [eased](#) after Trump and Petro met in February, Secretary of State Rubio and Republican [members of Congress](#) continue to communicate their antipathy towards the Petro government. The reported threats against Valencia and De la Espriella merited [U.S. condemnation](#), but those against Cepeda have been met with silence. In an unusual action, the State Department will send its own delegation of [election observers](#) in May. That the delegation will include [Senator Bernie Moreno](#) (R-OH), an outspoken opponent of Petro, clearly signals political intent. It will fall to the [European Union](#), the OAS, and the Carter Center to provide serious, fact-based analysis of the conduct of the elections.

Boat Strikes: Extrajudicial Killings Continue

By Vicki Gass

From September 2 to May 8, the Trump administration has launched [58 attacks](#) against fishing boats in the Caribbean and Pacific oceans. At least 193 people have been killed, including 12 missing and presumed dead, with only four known survivors. Alarming, the frequency of these boat strikes is accelerating – in April, there were seven attacks within a short period.

No proof that those bombed were drug dealers. No due process. Your tax dollars at work.

The White House [claims](#) that these killings are legal. [Legal experts](#), [UN officials](#), and [human rights organizations](#) disagree. Under U.S. and international law, the military cannot target civilians who do not pose an imminent threat of violence. It is simply not possible that these small fishing vessels with fewer than half a dozen people on board pose a violent threat to this country. People cannot be murdered based on suspicions alone.

Disturbingly, media coverage of the boat strikes is waning, raising concerns that these events are being normalized. If this becomes standard practice, it could be used anywhere and in different contexts. We cannot let that happen. This cannot be normalized.

LAWG is working with a broad coalition of legal, policy,

Latin American, and human rights organizations in D.C. to prevent these extrajudicial killings from disappearing from the public eye. We are meeting with allies in Congress to strategize and plan public events, but we need your help.

We need you to call your elected representatives and voice your concerns that this administration is using your tax dollars to carry out extrajudicial killings off Latin American coasts. Urge them to speak out against these strikes and demand that those who gave the orders be held accountable for their actions. Congress must assert its constitutional authority for oversight and investigation.



Screenshot from video showing strike on vessel on November 15 / Credit: U.S. SOUTHCOM

Cuba in the Crosshairs: Preventing Another U.S. Military Invasion

By *Andrea Fernández Aponte*

Since January, the Trump administration has waged an escalating campaign of economic and political pressure against Cuba. On January 29, it issued an executive order declaring Cuba "[an unusual and extraordinary threat](#)" and imposing an [oil embargo](#) on the island. Since then, Cuba has been completely cut off from the oil markets. The consequences for ordinary Cubans have been devastating.

When I traveled to Cuba in March as part of the [Nuestra América Convoy](#), I witnessed the early effects firsthand: skyrocketing energy and transportation costs, crops rotting in fields because there is no fuel to harvest them, and long blackouts that spoil refrigerated food. Cuba's once celebrated public health system is now in [shambles](#). Cancer and dialysis patients are going without treatment. Doctors have had to close up patients mid-surgery when the lights go out. Babies on ventilators are dying.

The Cuban government recently [announced](#) that it has completely run out of oil. And with summer fast approaching and temperatures rising, the energy crisis will only worsen conditions on the ground.

Despite [warnings](#) from the international community about the [humanitarian impact](#) of the current U.S. policy, the Trump administration, under the leadership of Secretary of State Marco Rubio, has since doubled down on its pressure campaign. Another [executive order](#) was announced on May 1st, the same day as Cuba's [May Day](#) celebrations. The new order expanded sanctions against Cuban entities and foreign companies doing business with Cuba, with potentially [devastating](#) consequences for the Cuban economy. On May 7th, Rubio [announced](#) further sanctions targeting senior officials and state-owned entities.

But the escalating economic pressure is only part of the picture. Following a playbook we have seen before — most recently in the lead-up to Venezuelan President Maduro's [capture](#) — the administration is seemingly manufacturing the conditions for a military intervention on the island.

The signs are unmistakable. The hawkish rhetoric alone signals something more than diplomatic pressure. In recent months, the Trump administration has repeatedly framed Cuba as a [national security threat](#), accusing Havana of supporting terrorism. When CIA Director Ratcliffe

traveled to Havana to meet with senior Cuban officials, he brought along a [paramilitary operator](#) involved in the capture of Maduro and reportedly introduced him to the Cubans as the one who killed their people in Venezuela.

On May 20, in an attempt to foment discontent, Rubio addressed a [video message](#) to Cubans on the island, denying the existence of the energy blockade and ascribing their woes to their government.

That escalating rhetoric and propaganda has been matched by U.S. military positioning. The USS Nimitz Carrier Strike Group [entered](#) the Caribbean Sea last week. Surveillance flights around Cuba have also intensified, with unnamed administration officials acknowledging they are meant to send a message: we're watching. Rubio has met with SOUTHCOM leadership on multiple occasions, and recently posted an [ominous photo](#) from one meeting in front of a map of Cuba.

Meanwhile, an Axios report [claimed](#) that U.S. intelligence believes Cuba has acquired over 300 military drones from Russia and Iran and that Cuban officials discussed possible attacks on Guantánamo Bay and U.S. naval vessels. The selective leak is eerily reminiscent of the intelligence manipulation that preceded the invasion of Iraq. This past week, the administration [indicted](#) 94-year-old former Cuban leader Raúl Castro for his alleged role in the 1996 Brothers to the Rescue [shootdown](#), which mirrors the legal campaign waged against Maduro before his capture.

At LAWG, we have been working with a broad coalition of organizations to prevent this from escalating further. We led a civil society [letter](#) signed by over 40 organizations calling on Congress to reverse the administration's Cuba policy, including the energy embargo. We have also been working to advance War Powers Resolutions ([H.Con. Res.106](#) and [S.J.Res.193](#)) that would prevent U.S. armed forces from taking military action against Cuba without congressional authorization.

The time to prevent another U.S. military intervention in Latin America is before it happens, and if this administration follows its own pattern, that window is closing fast. Call your members and urge them to act now.



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