



ANTIGUA JOURNAL

# In Guatemalan Tourist Haven, Corruption Case Is Talk of the Town



Victor Ruiz Caballero for The New York Times

The central market in Antigua, Guatemala, where people saw themselves as somewhat apart from the nation's troubles.

By RANDAL C. ARCHIBOLD  
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ANTIGUA, Guatemala — The towering Volcano of Fire [came roaring to life recently](#), rattling the ground in this pastel-washed tourist mecca as if a subway train were passing underneath and astonishing visitors with its thundercloud of ash.

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They could be forgiven for missing the other, more subtle upheaval transpiring here that same day last month: At City Hall, the police were marching away the mayor and rounding up nine other people in a corruption case that many view as a major step toward attacking the kind of political malfeasance long taken for granted in Guatemala.

This country is ailing, still recovering from a 36-year civil

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The New York Times  
Guatemala is still recovering from a 36-year civil war.

war that ended in 1996. It is one of the hemisphere’s most violent. It is one of the poorest. Corruption has snaked from the smallest village to the upper rungs of power. (A former president is awaiting extradition to the United States on money-laundering and other charges.)

But here, in this high-altitude, cobblestone wonder of colonial architecture, fine restaurants, language schools and great coffee, residents saw themselves as somewhat apart from the country’s troubles.

“We are aware we created a bubble,” said Elizabeth Bell, a local historian and tour guide who moved here from the United States four decades ago and has helped in the movement to preserve the colonial charm that has made the town a hit destination.

But the placid veneer hid civic turmoil underneath.

The mayor, Adolfo Vivar Marroquín, as well as his brother-in-law, the town’s finance director, were rounded up with eight other people and jailed on charges of fraud, money laundering, abuse of authority, among others.

Mr. Vivar was accused of absconding with millions of dollars in public funds — through overvalued contracts, fake jobs, nepotism, accounting maneuvers — and the allegations were serious enough for a special United Nations team of prosecutors, here since 2007 to tackle impunity and organized crime, to take the case.

Francisco Dall’Anese, the former attorney general of Costa Rica who leads the United Nations group, the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala, said he hoped the case sent a message to local politicians who are corrupt, which he called a widespread problem in Latin America. He said his office, in conjunction with federal prosecutors and the police, was still tallying the financial damage.

“There was no shame,” Mr. Dall’Anese said, adding, “This is a model case to replicate investigations in even more structurally complicated municipalities.”

The attorney general, Claudia Paz y Paz, called the case another step toward holding the public authorities — politicians, the police, the military — accountable in ways they had never been before.

Few believe the case will tarnish the image of the town for tourists; on a recent weekend, the streets were full of people chattering in English, Italian, German and French, passing preserved Spanish ruins from the 17th and 18th centuries. They strolled oblivious to the goings-on at City Hall, an architectural jewel; browsed indigenous handicrafts; sampled locally made chocolates; and snapped pictures of the volcano-framed vistas.

But among Antiguans, the case has caused much soul-searching.

Some see the case as a natural progression of maturing institutions 16 years after peace accords ended a war between right-wing governments and leftist guerrillas that a United Nations commission said left 200,000 people dead.

“This fits perfectly with the birth of democracy,” Ms. Bell, the historian, said.

A few people worry about any blemish on a place they worked hard to nourish and protect,

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fighting off big hotels and other perceived intrusions on the historical ambience — even the McDonald's is discreetly cloaked in a colonial building. But they also say that Guatemala must be a place where crime cannot go unpunished, as it often is.

“I think it could be negative for someone to come to visit Antigua and read the city is corrupt,” said José Víctor Ordóñez, 79, a retired surgeon and Antiguan who is on the board of a civic group, Salvemos Antigua. “But it could also be good. There is corruption everywhere, so it is great that Antigua is trying to do something about it.”

Indeed, corruption is so taken for granted in Guatemala that few question a payoff here and there. But civic leaders found the mayor increasingly intolerable.

Mr. Vivar grew up in one of the poor villages that ring the town and supply its work force. He became a medical doctor, and as mayor, elected twice, he seemed to have a get-it-done spirit that cut through red tape and political annoyances.

Civic leaders cheered him, at first, for fixing up parks and attending the needs of the poorer villages. But in the past year, questions have come up.

Why were the cobblestone streets not being repaired despite all the money approved for it? How did that new condominium project a few miles from downtown get licenses without the required environmental study? Why did the city install off-the-shelf security cameras around town as theft and crime rose when a high-tech system was promised?

Mr. Vivar's personal wealth, meanwhile, seemed to increase vastly.

“We had had a good dialogue,” said Luis Felipe Valdez Soto, the private secretary to the local monsignor and one of several community leaders demanding answers. “Then he stopped talking to me.”

Local reporters began asking questions and writing stories. Prosecutors began an investigation, getting Mr. Vivar stripped of the immunity that often protects elected leaders.

The mayor has defenders, or at least people who believe the case is overblown and suspect it is nothing more than the usual use of the justice system to settle scores among rival politicians.

“He made the mistake of being stupid and left the door open to this and has to be held accountable,” said Pablo Arroyave, a businessman whose family goes back generations here. “But they don't have to come after him with the fierceness they are doing it with.”

The mayor, who remains jailed, could not be reached for comment. But a deputy council member, José Antonio Palomo, a colleague of the mayor, said that he, too, doubted the charges, and he wondered if prosecutors were playing up the case to make international headlines. “Naturally, it is much more notorious that it is the mayor of Antigua, because that resounds more on the international level,” Mr. Palomo said.

But the prevailing view is that Antigua, indeed the country, will be better off when all is said and done.

“Everybody is satisfied,” Mr. Ordóñez said, “that justice may finally be working in Guatemala.”

*Kara Andrade contributed reporting.*

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

**Correction: October 24, 2012**

The Antigua Journal article on Monday, about a municipal corruption case in that Guatemalan town, misstated the relationship between a deputy council member, José Antonio Palomo, and Antigua’s mayor, Adolfo Vivar Marroquín, who is among those arrested and charged in the case. Mr. Palomo, who in an interview defended Mr. Vivar, said he is a colleague of the mayor, not a “close friend.” The article also rendered incorrectly the surname of a retired surgeon who is on the board of an Antiguan civic group. He is José Victor Ordóñez, not Ordoñez.

A version of this article appeared in print on October 22, 2012, on page A8 of the New York edition with the headline: Corruption Case Prompts Soul-Searching In a Tourist Haven.

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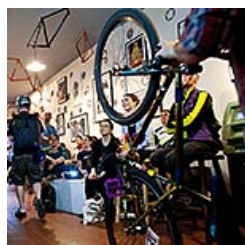


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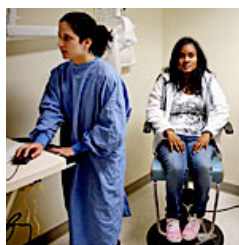
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