

International Institute Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award
Narrative Report:
The Patchwork State: Society-Led State Formation in Contemporary Guatemala

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As a recipient of the International Institute Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award, I carried out six weeks of pre-dissertation research in Guatemala between June 7 and July 19, 2015. During my fieldwork, I was based in Guatemala City, where I conducted a total of 40 interviews with a mix of government officials, private sector leaders, journalists, human rights activists, political analysts, academics, current and former military and intelligence officers, civil society leaders, and representatives of foreign missions and multilateral institutions. In addition to these interviews, I conducted participant observation in two public forums and four national protest events related to Guatemala's recent series of corruption scandals. Finally, I participated in the Guatemalan Scholars Network's (GSN) Third International Conference in the city of Antigua from July 9-11.

When I arrived in Guatemala in early June, the country was in the midst of one of its most serious political crises in recent decades, a development that reshaped my research focus around new questions related to the construction of the Guatemalan state. On April 16, 2015, the Guatemalan public prosecutor's office (MP) alongside the UN's International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) uncovered a massive corruption network operating within the country's port system. The structure, named "*La Línea*" after the telephone line used to illegally negotiate adjustments to import duties, siphoned off over half a million *quetzales* (\$70,000) on a daily basis, according to investigations. *La Línea* operated under the leadership of Juan Carlos Monzón, the private secretary of vice president Roxana Baldetti, who herself was forced to step down and faces criminal investigation.

This criminal structure within the state apparatus was the first in a string of cases to be uncovered by the MP and CICIG in subsequent months, forcing the resignation of all but two cabinet ministers and the criminal investigations of judges, congressional deputies, and other public officials. In addition to the

ports system, corruption networks have been uncovered in the Superintendent of Tax Administration (SAT), Ministry of Energy and Mines (MEM), the Guatemalan Institute of Social Security (IGSS), and the National Civilian Police (PNC). The revelations have set off a wave of urban popular mobilization—unprecedented in Guatemala since the period of authoritarian rule from the 1960s to mid-1980s. In addition to calling for President Otto Pérez Molina’s resignation, protestors have expressed a wholesale rejection of the country’s political party system in the lead up to general elections on September 6.

Based on these developments, I have shifted my research agenda to focusing on these “parallel” structures operating within the Guatemalan state apparatus. In particular, I centered my field research on their operation, origins, and evolution in order to navigate the shifting political and institutional landscape following Guatemala’s transition to democratic rule and peace process. My interviews and preliminary archival research revealed several aspects of these parallel state structures worth noting. First, all of the structures uncovered in recent months include a unique mix of public and private actors. For example, *La Línea* was comprised of customs agents, port administrators, union bosses, retail business owners, two consecutive tax authority superintendents, and the president of one of the country’s major media conglomerates. In this sense, these parallel structures complicate the traditional analytic division between the state and society and reveal vast webs of informal ties that traverse the public and private realms to benefit narrow interests. Second, some of the actors identified in these cases have previously been involved in other criminal operations. For example, one of the leaders of *La Línea* was also captured following the discovery of a similar corruption ring in the ports system in 1996. Additionally, one of the key operators in a scheme to arrange favorable contracts for an international gas company had previously been involved in money laundering activities for former president Alfonso Portillo, who was extradited to the United States in 2013.

In addition to the functioning of these parallel structures, my research also sought to understand their origins. In my interviews with political analysts, intelligence officials, and civil society leaders, there was a strong consensus that the criminal structures embedded in the state today have their roots in Guatemala’s counterinsurgent campaign waged in the 1970s and 1980s. In particular, this period was

cited as contributing to the growth of contemporary parallel structures in three ways: 1) by developing a pool of actors with particular skills (intelligence, espionage, military combat) and knowledge (trade and migration routes, the functioning of state administrative procedures, etc.) that were translated into illicit activities; 2) by creating informal networks of collaboration between state and private actors; and 3) by giving rise to discretionary practices within state institutions carried out under an anti-subversive ideological pretext.

Yet the period of counterinsurgency in Guatemala and the contemporary political context are separated by over three decades, during which time the country transitioned to civilian rule and the military, government, and left-wing insurgency signed a comprehensive series of peace accords. What accounts for the ability of these parallel structures to evolve and persist, adapting to present political and institutional conditions? Most of my interviewees discussed the way in which these structures lost their ideological justifications, but managed to forge alliances with emerging economic elites and take advantage of the widespread privatization of national industries, which weakened the state's regulatory authority. Additionally, the failure to purge state institutions of human rights violators and prosecute abuses of the past have entrenched practices of impunity and facilitated the illicit activity.

In future dissertation research, I plan to continue to pursue these questions about the operation, origins, and evolution of contemporary parallel structures in Guatemala. In addition to semi-structured interviews, I will conduct archival research to triangulate and expand upon my initial findings. I am in the process of devising a research design that will look comparatively at three parallel structures that have been uncovered in Guatemala, which reflect variation in the administrations under which they were dismantled, the state agencies in which they operated, and the particular activities to which they were dedicated. While such structures are not merely confined to the Guatemalan context—they have also been cited in countries as diverse as Pakistan, Serbia, and Peru—Guatemala represents a particularly fruitful case through which to examine this phenomenon because of the wealth of information as a result of the CICIG's investigations.