



Navigating the Northern Triangle Pt. 2

Democracy! The Podcast

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Adrienne Ross 0:06

Hi, and welcome to *Democracy! The Podcast* that shines the light on some of the darkest challenges facing the fight for democracy around the globe.

Joe Biden 0:16

Democracy will and must prevail.

Adrienne Ross 0:20

This podcast is brought to you by the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening direct from Washington DC, with support from our friends at the United States Agency for International Development through the Global Elections and Political Transitions Award. I'm your host, Adrienne Ross.

It's been 25 years since Guatemala's civil war came to an end, but since then, in this land of spectacular beaches, volcanoes and ancient Mayan ruins, democracy has been challenged. Ahead in the second episode Navigating the Northern Triangle, we'll hear from the former Second Vice President of Guatemala's Congress. Nineth Montenegro talks about what she endured during the country's darkest days, and what serving more than 20 years and Congress has taught her about democracy. But first, we can't talk about Central America without taking a look at immigration. Alix Lawson has more.

Alix Lawson 1:21

Irregular migration is not just a problem in the Western Hemisphere. It is a global crisis that causes health, economic, security and citizenship issues everywhere. But even further south than the southern US border that people often think of for border issues, there are a couple of tiny towns that exist between Mexico and Guatemala, where migration traffic has hit record numbers. The trail of migrants that come to these towns includes 1,000s of individuals who have been returned to their home country via planes and buses after failed attempts to reach the US and Mexico. So far this year, more than 15,000 migrants have been sent from Mexico to the tiny jungle town of El Ceibo in Guatemala. Meanwhile, in Guatemala City, the Congressional Migration Committee has been working to improve oversight of all the Guatemalan institutions which touch migration issues.

Adrienne Ross 2:22

Those members of Guatemala's Congressional Migrants Committee have been getting steady support from one of the Consortium's partners. Today we're joined by the Country Director from the International Republican Institute, Bernardo Rico, and his colleague, Julia Maria Rodriguez, who is the Program Manager on this team. They are both here now direct from Guatemala with more. You have recently returned from the border town of El Ceibo in Guatemala to see the facilities and talk with migrants and officials there. Tell us more about your trip. Who was with you? What did you find? And most importantly, why did you go there in the first place?

Bernardo Rico 2:57

Essentially, we went there to evaluate, to see how the returning migrants are being treated at that particular border point. What ended up happening was, up until recently even, that border point in particular was an informal one. So, it had only recently been made a formal crossing point, both out of Guatemala and back into Guatemala. It's an a very remote part of the Petén jungle, there's virtually no infrastructure. No electricity was there, up until recently, until they put in a diesel driven generator by the Guatemalan government. It's pretty much no man's land. And what had been happening was, starting sometime in mid-August, a lot of returning migrants that were being returned from the United States and from Mexico, were just being left on the Guatemalan side of the border with literally no help at all, from the Guatemalan authorities or others.

Julia Maria Lopez Rodriguez 3:51

We accompany the members of the migrants committee of Guatemalan Congress to the jungle, actually, like Bernardo said to unstable border. The President and Secretary of the committee joined us as well as members from the committee that represent target municipalities due to their higher percentage of the irregular migration, mostly located in the western country.

Adrienne Ross 4:17

You both talk a little bit about working with the Guatemalan members of the Migrant Committee, can you tell us a little bit more about how your work led up to accompany them to the border?

Julia Maria Lopez Rodriguez 4:26

Basically, we've been supporting this commission to address the main or key issues that have been reason from and expressed from what the migrants in the US and Mexico and here in country. Those topics are related to the proposal of reform to the National Council for migrants. We supported the committee last year since then new authorities of El Ciebo were elected and we provided all the platforms of the mechanisms for this process to be seen, you know when we followed the migrants in the US the Guatemalan markets in the US and Mexico and in the western

Highlands, is where we have most of our migrant citizens. There was a need to oversee what was going on, to see if there were protocols to attend the migrants, if the government institutions had a presence.

Adrienne Ross 5:34

So, what did you conclude from your own evaluations of the situation? And what additional steps do you think the government of Guatemala should be taking to help migrants return to the country?

Bernardo Rico 5:44

Obviously, the acute crisis is how to address and treat the returning migrants. And one of the immediate first measures that was taken by the Mexican and Honduran government and financed by the Mexican government was to put these migrants on buses that were actually very clean and well-kept and whatnot to return them, most of them to Honduras. Part of the challenge and we saw there, and again, that day, we were there, you know, there was a lot of military and National Police security. So, we probably saw a little more an orderly process than is normally the case. So, they would be processed, they would have to kind of get off the bus on the Mexican side, walk across the border or get back on the bus after it was sanitized. Basically, many of them were disoriented, didn't, you know, know where they were headed. So, they had little choice, other than to get on that bus and be driven to the border of Honduras. We found out later after talking to some of UNHCR officials, that many El Salvadorians asked to be dropped off somewhere, you know, in the middle of Guatemala, so they could ideally make a return trip back to El Salvador. One of the main challenges even for attending the returnees is having any Guatemalan institution work efficiently by itself. And I think the challenge to even work together is even greater. Hopefully, it'll happen, and I don't really want to be critical. But it really serves us to just look at how Guatemala has been really the laggard in all Latin America when rolling out the vaccine. Actually, a country like Honduras is doing better than the Guatemala, El Salvador, actually, despite the kind of the challenges with that President, their vaccination levels are approaching that of the United States. And this is even more the case in Honduras, when some of these officials are corrupt themselves and involved in corruption schemes, you know, the most famous being la Linea from former president Otto Perez Molina, which had to do with customs. And I'd probably say just to kind of emphasize what I think is the worst issue, or the worst challenge in terms of building stronger, more resilient, transparent, democratic institutions. And the kind of corruption that gets in the way is that corruption that stems from organized crime and narco trafficking, not everyone wants to talk about it. But it is probably the major issue in these two countries, where 90% of the cocaine that goes to the United States touches Honduras and about 75% of that touches Guatemala, I guess, to put it also in the context of just how grave the situation is for any of these people who make this journey north to try to find a better life. And when I talk about those issues, and the challenges they face, it's hard to kind of argue with them, that there's not a good reason for them to actually make the trek north, although it's dangerous. You know, it really requires an approach by all governments, you know, starting with Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and of course, the United States, we talk about, you know, shared responsibility, but I think more needs to be done and less needs to be said.

Adrienne Ross 8:50

But it is super complicated and it's hard.

Bernardo Rico 8:53

One of the many things that I think is always useful is to remind ourselves as each of these three countries are very different. So, you know, the factors driving out migration from them are often different. I would say, you know, the lack of economic opportunity, particularly in a place like Honduras, along with the lack of rule of law, a very corrupted government, you take a country like Guatemala, and I think, you know, there are certain areas in alti plano or the Northwest highlands of Guatemala, where there is, I'd say a lot of out migration, a lot of it being driven by vaccine theory more, not so much a lack of security, but more lack of economic opportunity. Climate change, driving into does have the ability to, you know, sustain crops and livelihoods. You know, addressing the root causes, and all three of these countries has some worthwhile endeavors in and of themselves or something that needs to happen. We know why people like Julia Maria, and I are passionate about working in development and have worked in development. That said, many of these issues that drive out migration are outside of Honduras and El Salvador and Guatemala's control. There are changes in US policies, policies that are more draconian, that maybe limit migration policies that may appear on the surface more appealing for migrants, to actually give the impression maybe they can get in, that drive migration. The other two other kinds of contentious issues that I think are worth also addressing is when it comes to migration, that some people talk about at least the first one, and that is the remittances they provide. So, all of those hard-working Guatemalans, El Salvadorians, and Hondurans who live in, in the United States and other countries in Spain elsewhere, actually provide some of the, you know, the largest amount of export dollars back to their countries by way of remittances. And then lastly, if you put yourself in position of any one of these governments, often out migration, not only does it provide, you know, export revenue, but it provides a kind of an it's a release, it's a pressure valve release for those who actually need to or feel the need to leave.

Adrienne Ross 11:03

Do you think that it's possible we could see a more comprehensive approach from the Guatemalan government to help these migrants?

Julia Maria Lopez Rodriguez 11:09

Yes, in the long term, I do see the Guatemalan government coordinating an action plan to provide assistance to turn Guatemalan migrants into Guatemala returnees. Definitely, they are key institutions that are doing their best to coordinate efforts to provide assistance to create economic programs to truly build returnees' capacities to have better opportunities here in the country. Also,

from the Congress, there are strong options being taken from the migrants' community, not just to oversee what the government is doing, but also to promote initiative laws that are oriented to help economic reactivation to promote stronger democratic institutions to promote transparency. But I do want to emphasize this is our long-term journey. And I do see our country going this way.

Adrienne Ross 12:15

Do you see a chance for Guatemala to help Guatemalans in the future?

Bernardo Rico 12:20

Your average citizen is very much interested in helping their fellow man and woman, right? There are some good actors and well-intended individuals in politics, in the Congress, and even you know, the executive branch and the judicial branch who want to help Guatemala. It's just a question of how do you really help Guatemalan institutions to kind of become more effective and efficient and transparent, to kind of address these types of problems? I think the will is there to at least attend this particular crisis of returnees. It's probably like a good opportunity for the Guatemalan government going to one of your original questions, if showing, you know least having an opportunity to show that they can work together to solve this particular problem of returnees and treatment, you know, making sure they're treated well and fairly, humanely, but addressing the issues of out migration, you know, the root causes which, which I've discussed at length already, as Julia Maria said, I like to say it's a, it's a multi-generational endeavor.

Adrienne Ross 13:25

Did you talk to any individuals? Could you tell us a personal story?

Julia Maria Lopez Rodriguez 13:29

We were unable to interact that much with them. However, we did see some sad faces. They were really sad. They were worried. They had no money, no house, they didn't know what their destination will be. The buses took the migrant returnees to the to the border between Guatemala and Honduras with there were, like many Salvadorans, those folks in those buses, and they didn't know how to get to their countries. You know, one of the biggest results of our visit to the border is that the migrant community coordinated a technical roundtable, which includes all the authorities that are related to the migrant issues. The migrant community asked for an action plan to the Guatemala Con Amiga, which is the institution in charge of, you know, providing assistance to the migrant returnee. Since there was no action plan, there is no infrastructure. So, I think this is asking for this action plan is the beginning of a long journey, but at least the first step has been done.

Adrienne Ross

What is the number one thing people should know about migrants in general or Guatemalan specifically?

Julia Maria Lopez Rodriguez

I think Guatemalan citizens, especially in the migrants, are looking for a better future, a brighter future for them and for their families. If you ask them, if they do want to go to the United States, migrate to the United States, they really don't. But that's the only opportunity they see, to help their communities to help their families and to have in her better economic opportunities. They are hardworking people, they are committed people, they have principles and values. They are very kind people. I think we should all learn that migration, it's a right, and we'll have that, and we'll have that right to migrate in we should treat Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorians as individuals with rights and with dreams, in that what they are doing.

Bernardo Rico 16:02

My request would be somehow for this discussion to move beyond the, or at least the understanding of what's going on, move beyond the international development professionals, you know, the US Embassy, other embassies, US Congress, to United States citizens to really try to understand why people decide to migrate what is actually happening to them. So, the question is, how are we going to approach it without politicizing it in the United States and you know, irregular migration looks somewhat different in terms of it's actually people and you know, human lives that are being put at risk to actually try to find a better livelihood. But that issue is not going away. Nor is the issue of illegal drug trafficking.

Adrienne Ross 16:50

Bernardo Rico, Julia Maria Rodriguez in Guatemala, thank you so much for being here today.

With more now, on the day-to-day democracy in Guatemala, former Guatemala Congressman and leading human rights activist Nineth Montenegro joins me from her home in Guatemala City. Nineth survived some of the darkest days in Central America. In 1984, her husband was shot and snatched by government security forces off the streets in Guatemala City. His case became one of the estimated 40,000 people disappeared during Guatemala's conflict, victims of the government's deliberate policy of terror. Nineth responded to the shock by creating one of the country's best known human rights groups, eventually introducing her own political party and serving many years in Congress. She's here now to share a candid assessment of Guatemala's corruption and much more. Thanks to Maria Olga Escobar, for helping us out with the English. For those who don't know much about Guatemala is darker days, can you talk a little bit about what life was like then?

Nineth Montenegro 18:03

There were circumstances in which it was very difficult not only for freedom of expression, but also the freedom to move around every part of the country. The situation was very, very delicate. There was no political participation of opposition parties until the year 1985. When the first transition to democracy took place, I said first, because even if it was civil government, we were in the middle of an armed conflict. And during this first civil government force, disappearance and murders continued, there was a case of 12 students who in 1989 were detained later disappeared. They were cruelly murdered. This is the complexity in which we were at that time.

Adrienne Ross 18:58

What did it feel like to live in a situation like that?

Nineth Montenegro 19:02

It was the 80s at that time in Guatemala, it was really scary. It's scary for me. What happened to me was that my first husband was killed. And for me, that was the horrible thing that happened to me. And that is the time when I decided to go to the street. So, for us, it was very dangerous very hard, because we were demanding justice. But this corrupt structure was within the state of Guatemala. So, for me, it was really dangerous. And that changed my life completely.

Adrienne Ross 19:41

It changed your life completely and you served in so many different capacities for Guatemala. And yet, if we fast forward to 2021, Congress still doesn't have a gender quota for women in Congress. How do you think representation for women in the congressional Government is for Guatemala today?

Nineth Montenegro 20:03

I see that more than a quota of power, we are suggesting parity in the process. Actually, right now we represent 51% of the whole population in Guatemala. So where else that's moving is very important to participating in the decision-making process. We know and as you all know, women receive more pressure, do the work better, and are more qualified to be involved in political processes. So, it is worth bearing more than to strain their knowledge, their capacity, their empowerment, so they can apply to these jobs, but they can do it technically and efficiently as well. So right now, a power quota is not our goal is more clarity. I finished my work in Congress two years ago. And I think the involvement of women in the political process has improved. Now we'll see in the ministries that women are participating more and more, but it's fear, we have a lot to go as well in this process.

Adrienne Ross 21:15

The current Guatemala President's administration has been the target of a lot of criticism and protests. Most recently, the Attorney General ousted Guatemala's top anti-corruption prosecutor, which landed him on the United States corrupt and undemocratic list. You yourself have been a longtime fighter for transparency and anti-corrupt practices. What do you make of the streak of corruption we see throughout the administration right now?

Nineth Montenegro 21:41

Today, in the once elected the board of directors at the Congress, it's the same pattern as the other board of directors in the congress that are corrupt. It just represents how weak institutions are, and how the lack of trust that we have in Guatemala. So, for us, that is mainly that's very hurtful to the country. Also, I want to state that today the Guatemalan society has a lot of fear, and they don't go out in the streets, because they are really fearful of what can happen, the pandemic affected a lot of the Guatemalan society, the economy dropped. Today, their society is more interested in, restoring their neighbor and restoring all the things that they have to manage as families in this society, rather than go to the streets and criticize the government institutions and also to fight for combating corruption. So, for us, it's very dominating to the democratic process. I think we're living in dramatic moments, and what a manner in which the state has been captured. But this is not something new. It is a process that comes from many years ago, even during the armed conflict, a mafia linked to organized crime was created, but there is a more direct participation of mafia and organized groups that finance political convenience and even financed political campaigns, but also have a direct participation in some elected office at this moment that people are now in the edge. And when people are on edge, they are apathic. Obviously, no matter how much worse a situation is getting, this is not going to change. And it's very possible that this is how we will end this government.

Adrienne Ross 23:44

How do you see the problems of corruption contributing to the mass immigration we see leaving Guatemala?

Nineth Montenegro 23:50

I believe that corruption affects a whole country in every way. And when state money is not used in a state public policy to combat poverty, inequality, and tuition or for entrepreneurship and citizens of a country do not find options, they leave their country for lack of opportunities. About 3 million Guatemalans live abroad, especially in the United States. And now that exodus of Guatemalans has grown so much that the largest number of people leaving the country are women and children under 18 years old, and precisely because the most vulnerable population is the one that suffers from political opportunities that the state does not provide. There are more than 2 million school aged children outside the school system and 1.9 million preschool children's also

outside the educational system. And it's believed there are around more than 4 million children suffering from poverty and extreme poverty. This problem multi-dimensional.

Adrienne Ross 24:58

Do you think that the Guatemala government It should be doing more to help people who are fleeing the country?

Nineth Montenegro 25:04

The migration crisis is a state crisis, it affects our national security as well as the state. The role of coyotes, in these countries, the coyote is for people and for many of the population, is a very low the person. Because they will provide this opportunity to leave the country and to be in the United States. But also, right now, that coyote has been linked to the agreement and structures of the guns and drug dealers. So right now, that is a very dangerous situation that is affecting children, women and youth. The coyote will charge each woman, man or adolescence that is leaving for the United States around \$1,000 to go to the United States. That price is very expensive for a country that is living in poverty, if that person will return to Guatemala having been deported, they have invested this money to the coyote, they have no home, no work. So, the pay that they have to give to the coyote, in order to stay in Guatemala, sometimes it will be his or her life. It is the state together with the private initiative and sectors of society who have to look for solution. For me, this being fighting corruption, training people to learn, to demand accountability from their leaders, learning to social audit, for the use of resources, especially at the local level, where many mayors' office do not have a huge need for access to information. With respect to coyotes, this is a big problem. Because just as many people love, yes, love the coyote because they get them to the United States, there are also some coyotes that have already been discovered developing links with drug trafficking and organized crime on the borders. Where in exchange of being allowed to continue operating, they have taken over people for those who to use the poor people who are fleeing the country and end up being used to transport drugs or contraband, and they are even kidnapped. Another important point is that the coyote has reached a point where he charges more than \$10,000. People get into that with bands, long shirts, and sell their properties. If they manage to get to the United States, they obviously paid the debt after many maybe argue but they're but if they do not get there, they are forced to pay when even people are killed. Because of the debt. That means a very dangerous situation for our country.

Adrienne Ross 28:08

What is your greatest hope for the future of Guatemala?

Nineth Montenegro 28:11

My greatest hope is that one day we will go from being sleeping citizens to being citizens in the whole exercise of our own brains with comprehensive security, food security, job security, security, entrepreneurship and, obviously, personal security, justice, equality, equity. However, to be able to be a citizen in the first, it is necessary to eradicate poverty, so people have access to education and having access to education, get some better opportunities for the future, and those better opportunities for the future gets the opportunity to satisfy their basic needs. And when they are satisfied, they can already exercise their citizenship. It seems impossible given the current situation. But I believe that we can start with more or less than 30% that represents a middle class, which can exercise its citizenship and start fighting against corruption and impunity through the supervision of how the budget is executed, demanding accountability and training other people until the population is empowered to understand that public funding comes from the taxes of the citizens. I believe that there is already a group of people to start trading those people who live in remote places so that they can exercise their true citizenship that will really improve the conditions of the country, and in at least in 10 years, eradicate extreme poverty and later all poverty. Accountability is the only tool that we have a tool against corruption. To empower us as citizens. Thank you.

Adrienne Ross 30:03

Thank you so much for your time. We really appreciate you joining us today.

Coming up on the next episode of *Democracy! The Podcast*, it's what every independent nation wants: democratic resilience. Find out what it takes to get a country like Sudan started on the path to prosperity and lasting independence, then stick around, NDI's President Ambassador Derek Mitchell shares his personal stories from the frontlines and the fight for democracy, from Tiananmen Square to the Golden Lake era in Burma, you won't want to miss it. That's all ahead on our next episode of *Democracy! The Podcast*.

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