

LASA demands respect for academic freedom and the 2023 election results in Guatemala

November 2023

The Latin American Studies Association (LASA) strongly condemns the recent unlawful arrests of civil society leaders in Guatemala, including University of San Carlos (USAC) students and professors in the “Toma de la USAC: Botín Político” case by the Public Prosecutor’s Office (MP). It also condemns the politicization of the case in what appears to be an effort to subvert the results of the August 10, 2023 elections.

On the morning of November 16, 2023, the MP unveiled the “Toma de la USAC: Botín Político” case and ordered 31 raids and issued 27 arrest warrants against university professors, administrators, students, lawyers, journalists, and Jordán Rodas, who remains in exile. The MP is accusing them of aggravated assault, plundering cultural patrimony, sedition, and unlawful association.

The case is based on incidents following the May 14, 2021 election of Walter Mazariegos as rector of the USAC. Students and faculty of Mazariegos’ opponent, former Human Rights Ombudsman Jordán Rodas, were blocked from entering voting facilities on May 14th by anti-riot police, leading to charges of voting irregularities and prompting widespread protests. From May 2022 to June 2023, students and faculty occupied the campus to denounce the election process and demand respect for university autonomy.

Five individuals were taken into custody, including Ronald Chang Shum, dean of the USAC’s Department of Veterinary Medicine and Zootechnics; Alfredo Enrique Beber Aceituno, a professor of engineering at the USAC; Eduardo Velásquez Carrera, former dean and professor of economics at the USAC; and Javier de León Gómez, an USAC student of applied physics, and Marcela Blanco, a former Semilla Congressional candidate.

The MP is also seeking to lift the immunity of five current and future opposition members of Congress, as well as President-elect Bernardo Arévalo and Vice President-elect Karin Herrera, claiming that they incited the protests on social media. If their immunity is lifted, they could be arrested and prosecuted.

The international community has denounced a series of efforts on the part of the MP to prevent a peaceful democratic transition in Guatemala. In a [resolution](#) passed on November 15, 2023, the Organization of American States (OAS) denounced “the attempts by the Public Prosecutor’s Office to discredit and prevent a peaceful transition, which undermines the democratic process and Guatemala’s commitments under the Inter-American Democratic Charter.” On November 18, 2023, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [called upon](#) the MP “to cease engaging in actions that threaten the democratic order and the sovereign will of the people.”

The University of San Carlos, the only public university in Guatemala, has played a fundamental role in reflecting the country's social, political, and cultural diversity and promoting access to knowledge and learning for generations of Guatemalans. Because of its role in national decision-making, the political independence of the USAC is critical to holding state institutions accountable. Historically, the USAC student movement has been central to advancing social justice. However, in recent years, its organization and autonomy have been undermined by corrupt actors seeking to consolidate impunity. The arrests of November 16 seek to criminalize those individuals attempting to recover the USAC's historic role.

LASA firmly demands that the human rights and due process rights of those detained and indicted be respected. We also demand the cessation of political persecution against President-elect Arévalo, Vice President-elect Herrera, and opposition members, and reiterate international and domestic calls for the peaceful transition of power in accordance with the law. LASA stands in solidarity with the Guatemalans peacefully mobilizing to resist the dismantling of democratic institutions and to ensure that their will, as expressed at the ballot box, prevails.

About LASA

The Latin American Studies Association (LASA) is the world's largest professional association constituted by individuals and institutions devoted to the study of Latin America and the Caribbean. LASA currently has over 12,000 members from around the world and a committee that defends academic freedom and human rights.

If you wish to interview a LASA Executive Council member, you can contact the LASA communications office at (412) 648-7929 or send an email to lasa@lasaweb.org.

LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION

4338 Bigelow Blvd
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
lasa@lasaweb.org
Tel: 412-648-7929
Fax: 412-624-7145

