

Five of Salvadoran president's allies accused of corruption

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Nayib Bukele, including his Cabinet chief, have been included in a list of senior officials in Central America deemed corrupt by the US State Department [File: Jose Cabezas/Reuters]

San Salvador, May 19 (RHC)-- A U.S. State Department report on Central American officials "credibly alleged" to be corrupt includes five Salvadoran officials (PDF) with ties to President Nayib Bukele, six sitting Honduran lawmakers and two Guatemalan legislators, according to a list released (PDF) by the office of US Representative Norma Torres on Tuesday.

The list emerged less than a week after the US special envoy for Central America, Ricardo Zuniga, visited El Salvador and met Bukele amid a push from the administration of US President Joe Biden to confront corruption and bolster the rule of law in the region.

The U.S. has made strengthening democracy one of the pillars of its policy towards Central America, saying that rampant corruption is one of the root causes of illegal immigration. “We cannot expect the people of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to thrive at home while their elected officials are more focused on self-enrichment than serving the public.”

Torres, a California Democrat who chairs the Central America Caucus, said in a statement on Tuesday. “This list is a strong step, but it is only the first step towards holding those officials accountable.”

Bukele’s fledgling New Ideas party swept February legislative elections by a landslide, taking control of the unicameral congress and immediately voting this month to remove the corruption-fighting top prosecutor and several high court magistrates who had blocked the president’s agenda.

While Bukele remains wildly popular at home after decades of corrupt rule that followed the end of the country’s bloody civil war, his critics in the U.S. say that in concentrating power he is undermining already fragile institutions.

The most prominent official on the list is Bukele’s cabinet chief, Carolina Recinos, who has worked alongside the president since he entered politics as a small-town mayor for the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front created by left-wing rebels following the end of the civil war. There were no details of Recinos’s alleged wrongdoing.

The most prominent official on the list is Bukele’s cabinet chief, Carolina Recinos, who has worked alongside the president since his entry into politics [File: Jose Cabezas/Reuters]
Also named is Rogelio Rivas, who last month was replaced as minister of security and justice. The State Department said Rivas allegedly awarded his own construction company several non-competitive, unadvertised contracts to build police stations and other buildings that fell under his official capacity and then inflated the cost of materials.

Also included is lawmaker Guillermo Gallegos, a founder of the GANA party that broke with El Salvador’s bipartisan system to support Bukele’s presidential run in 2019. Two former FMLN lawmakers – Sigfrido Reyes and Jose Luis Merino, the latter a former vice minister of foreign relations in the FMLN government that preceded Bukele’s administration – are also included.

Bukele, who has accused the U.S. of heavy-handedness, used irony to dismiss the report, a copy of which circulated earlier Monday on social media. He said he was shocked that El Salvador’s “friends” after checking their archives could not find a single instance of corruption inside the conservative ARENA party – a frequent target of his.

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