



GUATEMALA 2023 ELECTIONS

*A Risk Assessment on the
Online Information Space*



Guatemala 2023 Elections: A Risk Assessment on the Online Information Space

May 2023

Acknowledgments:

The development of this report was made possible through the writing and research of Hui Hui Ooi and Ana Khizanishvili. We thank the many individuals from around the world- named and unnamed- who supported us in the development of this report. Special thanks to IRI's Guatemala team and our civil society partners, who provided invaluable insight from on the ground. Thanks to Katie Harbath, Josh Willard, and Jared Ford for their support and feedback throughout the project.

Copyright © 2023 International Republican Institute. All rights reserved.

Permission Statement: No part of this work may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the International Republican Institute.

Requests for permission should include the following information:

- The title of the document for which permission to copy material is desired.
- A description of the material for which permission to copy is desired.
- The purpose for which the copied material will be used and the manner in which it will be used.
- Your name, title, company or organization name, telephone number, fax number, e-mail address and mailing address.

Please send all requests for permission to:

Attn: Department of External Affairs
International Republican Institute
1225 Eye Street NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20005
info@iri.org

About Us | The International Republican Institute (IRI)

IRI is one of the world's leading international democracy development organizations. The nonpartisan, nongovernmental institute has supported civil society organizations, journalists, democratic governments, and other democratic actors around the world since 1983—in the Americas, Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East—and currently works in over 100 countries with a presence in over 80 worldwide. IRI's Technology & Democracy Team promotes digital democracy, civic and government technology, internet freedom, and information integrity in every region of the world.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Executive Summary.....1
- Country Profile.....3
- Political and Electoral Systems.....4
- Upcoming Election.....5
- Elections in 2019.....6
- Internet Freedom and the Online Regulatory Landscape.....7
- Platform Policies.....7
 - Facebook.....7
 - Twitter.....8
 - TikTok.....8
- Candidate Behavior.....8
- Malign Trends Online.....9
- Citizens Most Likely to Be Targeted.....9
 - Attacks on Journalists.....9
 - Attacks on Human Rights Defenders.....10
 - Vulnerable Groups.....10
- Information Integrity.....10
- Risks for Offline Violence.....12
- Conclusion.....12
- Appendix.....13
 - Methodology.....13

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Guatemala will hold its general elections on June 25, 2023, voting for president and vice president, members of Congress, mayors, councils, and 20 seats in the Central American Parliament.¹ The top two candidates in the presidential race will likely advance to a runoff, scheduled for August 20.²

There are about 30 presidential candidates, but the latest polls have identified four top candidates.³ Some of the top candidates are aligned with and supported by the current administration and President Alejandro Giammattei, who is not eligible to run due to a single-term restriction. Most concerning, the government has used its excessive power over judicial processes to influence decisions and block certain candidates.

These actions have contributed to growing skepticism within the international community regarding the independence of the *Tribunal Supremo Electoral* (TSE, Supreme Electoral Tribunal), the key agency responsible for the election process. Concerns about the TSE's independence raise questions regarding whether the election process is free and fair. Corruption and impunity continue to be serious issues.

Facebook is the most popular online platform, with 7.98 million users in Guatemala. YouTube is next, with 7.64 million users. TikTok is becoming increasingly popular, especially among the younger generation; the platform currently has about 6 million users. Instagram and Twitter are next with 2.85 million and 896,000 users, respectively.⁴ Political ads can only run on platforms approved by the election administrator.⁵

Facebook and Instagram are the only ones approved thus far, and both have activated tools that show a disclaimer on political ads.⁶ Campaigns officially kicked off on March 27, 2023. They will last for two months until the blackout period starts 48 hours before the elections, during which candidates are prohibited from campaigning.⁷

Online narratives before the official start focused on discrediting competition, making criminal accusations, and spreading disinformation. For the next two months, disinformation trends are expected to continue, especially **targeted attacks on journalists, human-rights defenders, women, LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex) persons, and indigenous communities.** Conservative and religious narratives, such as anti-abortion rhetoric, hate speech and populist rhetoric are also expected to surface.⁸

1 Harbath, Katie, and Khizanishvili, Ana. "Election Cycle Tracker." Anchor Change, 2023, anchorchange.com/election-cycle-calendar

2 Cuevas, Douglas. "Calendario de Elecciones Generales 2023 en Guatemala: Fechas y Fases del Proceso Electoral." Prensa Libre, 6 Feb. 2023, prensalibre.com/guatemala/politica/calendario-de-elecciones-generales-2023-en-guatemala-fechas-y-fases-del-proceso-electoral/

3 "Intención de Voto para Elección de Presidente en Guatemala." Massive Caller, 10 Mar. 2023, massivecaller.com/files/guatemala.pdf

4 "61% of Guatemalan Population is under 30." USAID, usaid.gov/guatemala/our-approach/youth. Accessed 18 Apr. 2023.; "85% of TikTok Users in the Country are between 18-24." Start.io, start.io/audience/tiktok-users-in-guatemala. Accessed 18 Apr. 2023; Kemp, Simon. "Digital 2023: Guatemala." Datareportal, 13 Feb. 2023, datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-guatemala

5 Najarro, Fátima. "Elecciones 2023: Pago de Pauta en Redes Sociales Deberá ser Desde Guatemala." LaHora.gt, 7 Feb. 2023, lahora.gt/nacionales/fatima/2023/02/07/elecciones-2023-pago-de-pauta-en-redes-sociales-debera-ser-desde-guatemala/

6 "Availability for Ads about Social Issues, Elections or Politics." Meta, facebook.com/business/help/2150157295276323?id=288762101909005. Accessed 18 Apr. 2023.

7 "Human Rights Concerns for Guatemala's 2023 General Elections." Human Rights Watch, 24 Jan. 2023, hrw.org/news/2023/01/24/human-rights-concerns-guatemalas-2023-general-elections

8 Anonymous. Personal interview. 22 Mar. 2023; Anonymous. Personal interview. 24 Mar. 2023.

Note: IRI has opted not to name our interviewees to protect the privacy and security of our in-country partners.

9 "A List of Our Independent Fact-Checking Partners, by Country." Meta, facebook.com/formedia/mjp/programs/third-party-fact-checking/partner-map. Accessed 18 Apr. 2023.; "Safety Partners." TikTok, tiktok.com/safety/en/safety-partners/. Accessed 18 Apr. 2023.

Social media companies have not publicly commented on the upcoming Guatemalan elections, both Meta and TikTok have an on-the-ground fact-checking partner in Agence France-Presse (AFP), part of Poynter's International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN).⁹

Although Guatemalan law guarantees freedom of expression, including freedom of media and press, the government does not always respect this right. **Independent media and journalists have been targeted** for exposing corruption and other crimes. Freedom House rates the level of free and independent media at one point out of four.¹⁰

Elections-related violence has long been an issue in Guatemala. Since its shift to democracy, violent instances have included the assassination of candidates, assaults on election bodies, and voter intimidation. There are higher risks of violence on Election Day after poll closure and during the pre-runoff period.¹¹

Threats of foreign interference have not been identified as an issue.

The assessment indicates that Guatemala is up against a difficult two-month election campaign. The risks identified herein pose a significant danger to the credibility of the electoral process. These difficulties underline the importance of remaining vigilant and emphasize the necessity for a collective effort to tackle the vulnerabilities and guarantee a free and fair election process.

10 "Freedom in the World 2023 Guatemala." Freedom House, 2023, freedomhouse.org/country/guatemala/freedom-world/2023

11 "Preliminary Election Observation Mission Report." Organization of American States (OAS), 2019, oas.org/fpdb/press/EOM-Guatemala-2019---Preliminary-Report-Second-Round-EN.pdf

COUNTRY PROFILE

Population

18,031,570¹²

Mobile Phone Owners

22.47 million

Voting Age (18)

10,933,585¹³

Internet Users

10.86 million

Registered Voters

9,097,439¹⁴ (as of February 18, 2023)

Social Media Users

8.70 million

Map of Central America,
with Guatemala highlighted.



60.4%

Population with Access
to the Internet in 2023

57.25%

Average
Turnout¹⁵

52.9%

Population in
Urban Area¹⁶

31

Political
Parties

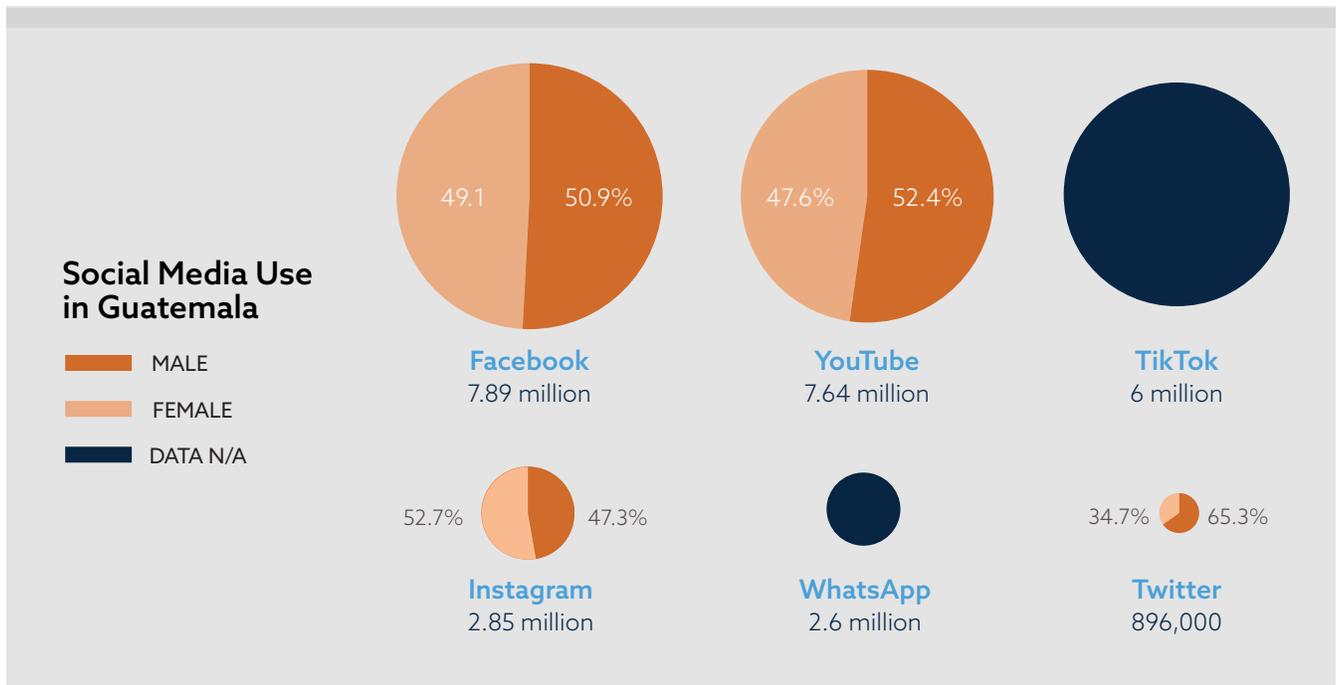
¹² "Guatemala Population 2023 (Live)." World Population Review, worldpopulationreview.com/countries/guatemala-population. Accessed. 6 Apr. 2023.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Number of registered voters as of February 18, 2023. "Republic of Guatemala Election Guide." International Foundation for Electoral Systems, electionguide.org/countries/id/90. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Kemp. "Digital 2023: Guatemala."



POLITICAL AND ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Guatemala has three branches of government: executive, legislative, and judiciary. The president is the head of government and chief of state (current President Alejandro Giammattei was elected in 2019). The executive branch also consists of the vice president and a cabinet of ministers. The country has a unicameral *Congreso de la República* (Congress of the Republic) with 160 seats. Judicial power is vested in the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ, Supreme Court of Justice), which includes 13 magistrates selected by the Congress for five-year terms. The branch also includes Appellate, First Instance and Peace Courts, as well as the Constitutional Court. Freedom House’s *Freedom in the World* report, which assesses the state of civil and political rights, rated Guatemala as partly free in both 2021 and 2022, though the country’s score declined by two points from 51 to 49.¹⁹

The electoral legal framework of Guatemala is governed mainly by the constitution and the Electoral and Political Parties Law (Decree 1-85 and the successive reforms of 1987, 1989, 2004, 2006 and 2016).²⁰ The TSE is the main election administration body. The comptroller general is another key body in the process of ensuring free and fair elections, overseeing the use of public funds and issuing certificates to confirm that those wishing to run for office are not under investigation. The attorney general’s Special Prosecutor’s Office for Election Crimes holds investigative power over infringement of voters’ rights, illegal campaign financing, voter suppression, and other crimes related to the election process. The Supreme Court and the Constitutional Court play an oversight role and, in some cases, make final decisions on candidate eligibility.²¹

17 “Assessment Report Guatemalan Elections: The Role of Misinformation and False Information and the Lack of a Discussion of the Most Oppressive Problems for Society.” Laboratorio de Medios.
 18 “Elections in Guatemala 2019 General Elections Frequently Asked Questions.” International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 11 June 2019, ifes.org/sites/default/files/migrate/2019_ifes_guatemala_general_elections_faqs_final.pdf
 19 “Freedom in the World 2023 Guatemala.”
 20 Castro, Ana. Novales, Hugo. Silva, Gabriel Reyes. Torres, Isabel. “Violencia contra las Mujeres en la Política.” International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 11 June 2019, <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/4540%20NDI%20FOLLETO%20PARA%20WEB.PDF>
 21 Méndez Dardón, Ana María, Juan Pappier, Julia Aikman Cifuentes, and Martina Rápido Ragozzino. “Human Rights Concerns for Guatemala’s 2023 General Elections—Questions and Answers.” Washington Office on Latin America, 24 Jan. 2023, wola.org/analysis/human-rights-concerns-for-guatemalas-2023-general-elections-questions-and-answers/

According to the poll, 34.5 percent are undecided and 19.7 percent plan to vote for other candidates.



ELECTIONS IN 2019

President Alejandro Giammattei of the Vamos Party won a runoff in August 2019, gaining 58 percent of the votes against Sandra Torres of UNE. Though the results were deemed credible, Organization of American States (OAS) election observers outlined irregularities including disturbances, ballot burning, voter intimidation, and acts of violence.³³

As in 2023, some of the top presidential candidates were disqualified from the race. The Constitutional Court declared two top candidates, Zury Ríos and Thelma Aldana, ineligible to run for office. Ríos was disqualified based on a law prohibiting her former dictator father's family members from running for office. Former Attorney General Aldana was barred and forced to flee the country due to death threats and harassment after famously leading the case against former President Otto Pérez Molina.³⁴ The TSE took Mario Estrada off the ballot after his arrest on drug-trafficking charges in the United States.³⁵

Election observers reported instances of violence both before and after the elections. OAS reported assassinations of nine political actors and four other violent attacks at the pre-election stage. Violence also erupted after polls closed on Election Day, leaving one partisan dead and nine police officers injured.³⁶

³² Cuevas. "Calendario de Elecciones Generales 2023 en Guatemala."

³³ "Freedom in the World 2023 Guatemala."

³⁴ Perez D., Sonia. "Guatemala's Crusading Prosecutor Exits amid Praise, Threats." Associated Press, 7 May 2018, apnews.com/article/caribbean-ap-top-news-latin-america-international-news-otto-perez-molina-3afa9abea9844871a970d1946bf69fd5

³⁵ "Freedom in the World 2022 Guatemala."

³⁶ "Informe Preliminar MOE." Organization of American States (OAS), 2019, <https://www.refworld.org/es/publisher,OAS,COUNTRYREP,GTM,5d0d1e954,0.html>.

INTERNET FREEDOM AND ONLINE REGULATORY LANDSCAPE

There are no restrictions around internet adoption in Guatemala and access to the internet has been rising since 2000, reaching 60 percent in 2023.³⁷ There have been no reports of government manipulation or censorship of online content or monitoring communications beyond legally authorized instances.³⁸

The Electoral and Political Parties Law (LEPP), part of the 2016 elections reform, prohibits campaigns from buying ads directly from the media. According to the new regulation, campaigns are required to purchase media time through the TSE, which divides time equally across the campaigns. The new campaign-financing rule sets the private campaign ceiling at \$1 to fifty cents USD per registered voter. The state contribution is set at \$2 USD for every valid vote that a political party that passed the 5-percent threshold received for presidential and vice-presidential candidates.³⁹ Following the 2016 reform with the agreement 603-2022, the TSE has granted permission for political parties to advertise on two influential social networks: Facebook, which is the primary platform used by internet users in Guatemala, and Instagram.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, candidates need to register their political accounts with TSE's Media Monitoring Unit. Twitter, a platform frequently used by politicians and their supporters, does not have authorization for political advertising.⁴¹

In 2019, candidates relied heavily on their personal accounts to promote their campaigns. The significance of social media was further heightened by the revised regulations for securing media airtime, which stipulated that the TSE would only pay broadcasters 20 percent of the prevailing market rate to air campaign ads.⁴²

PLATFORM POLICIES

1 FACEBOOK

Although Facebook leads with the most users in the country, and its ad reach stands at 44.5 percent of the population in 2023, its potential ad reach in Guatemala has decreased by 5.9 percent (500,000 people) between 2022 and early 2023, according to Meta's own ad tools.⁴³ According to Meta's policy, Guatemala is among the countries that require authorization and a disclaimer to run ads on politics or elections.⁴⁴ Meta's on-the-ground fact-checking partner AFP is part of Poynter's IFCN.⁴⁵ On February 7, 2023, Meta's Latin America team conducted a virtual training for political parties on Meta's policies and guidelines.⁴⁶

37 "Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population)—Guatemala." World Bank, 2021, data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=GT; Kemp. "Digital 2023: Guatemala."

38 "2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Guatemala." U.S Department of State, 2022, state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/guatemala.

39 "Elections in Guatemala 2019 General Elections Frequently Asked Questions."

40 "Acuerdo Número 603-2022.;" Najarro. "Elecciones 2023: Pago de Pauta en Redes Sociales Deberá ser Desde Guatemala."

41 "Acuerdo Número 603-2022."

42 Pallister, Kevin. "Digital Caudillos: The Use of Social Media in Guatemalan Presidential Campaigns." *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 2021, journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1866802X211010319

43 Kemp. "Digital 2023: Guatemala."

44 "Availability for Ads about Social Issues, Elections or Politics."

45 "A List of Our Independent Fact-Checking Partners, by Country."

46 Najarro. "Elecciones 2023: Pago de Pauta en Redes Sociales Deberá ser Desde Guatemala."

2 TWITTER

Journalists interviewed by IRI have expressed concerns regarding the use of Twitter for targeted hate speech and attacks. While in the process of revamping its policies and practice toward elections, Twitter currently does not have a special reporting mechanism for elections-related content. Thus, Twitter has directed Guatemala's election administration inquiry to its regular reporting systems to address content removal.⁴⁷

3 TIKTOK

Although TikTok prohibits political ads, its misinformation/disinformation prohibition policy still plays an important role due to the high-level engagement from candidates on the platform.⁴⁸ Young people are moving to TikTok in increasing numbers.⁴⁹ Due to a lack of regulatory oversight over its use, TikTok has been utilized by politicians using personal accounts and influencers.⁵⁰ TikTok's on-the-ground fact-checking partner is AFP.⁵¹ The platform also cooperates with local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other partners to identify content that might violate TikTok's community guidelines. Additionally, TikTok works with the TSE to understand the electoral system, and is planning to launch a search tool that will direct users to authoritative information around the election.

Civil society and media organizations have expressed skepticism regarding social media companies' willingness to put resources into improving their platforms' online environment in Guatemala. They believe it is important to implement robust verification tools and have rapid-response mechanisms or channels for reporting inauthentic or malign behavior, as platforms often respond after the damage has already been done.⁵²

CANDIDATE BEHAVIOR

Due to the lack of regulation around TikTok, candidates have been transitioning to the platform and unofficially starting their campaigns before they are legally allowed to do so. The narrative before March 27 (the official start of campaigning) was mostly concentrated toward undermining competition, by spreading rumors and criminal accusations in an attempt to influence institutions to disallow candidates from running for elections. The government's influence over judiciary and election institutions has led to barring three of the five top candidates from running, thus stifling fair and competitive elections in which a diverse set of candidates can run.

Although the final candidate narratives and behaviors will become clearer as the campaigns progress, it is safe to assume that major narratives—such as corruption, lack of transparency, and attacks on journalists, women, and LGBTQI+ and Indigenous persons—will continue. With two of the three top candidates being female, growth in sexist and misogynistic rhetoric is expected.⁵³

47 Anonymous representative from Twitter. Email exchange.

48 "Government, Politician, and Political Party Accounts." TikTok, support.tiktok.com/en/using-tiktok/growing-your-audience/government-politician-and-political-party-accounts. Accessed 18 Apr. 2023.

49 Anonymous representative from TikTok. Email exchange.

50 "Assessment Report Guatemalan Elections."

51 "Safety Partners."

52 Anonymous. Personal interview. 24 Mar. 2023.

53 Ibid.

MALIGN TRENDS ONLINE

The backsliding of democracy, and attacks on and weakening of democratic institutions, has been a growing trend since President Otto Perez Molina's term (2012–2015), when the country's largest corruption scandal to date forced both Molina and Vice President Roxana Baldetti to resign before completing their terms. Corruption continued under President Jimmy Morales (2016–2020) and intensified under the current Giammattei regime. Harassment and online and offline attacks have grown with the closure of the CICIG, which was charged with investigating illegal security groups and clandestine security organizations under President Morales. The main targets of these attacks are journalists, human-rights defenders, women, Indigenous people, and LGBTQI+ groups, and attacks have intensified further in the past two years.⁵⁴ Conservative rhetoric has also been identified as one of the main tools for targeting these groups. The conservative and religious agenda has been widely used to promote anti-abortion, sexist, and anti-LGBTQI+ narratives. The ruling elite often uses derogatory names to refer to some of these targeted groups.⁵⁵

CITIZENS MOST LIKELY TO BE TARGETED

Attacks on Journalists

As identified through numerous reports and interviews with local civil-society and media organizations, journalists are primary targets of attacks from the government and pro-government forces. Both major and smaller media outlets, including independent and rural ones, have been subject to attacks from top-level officials in the Guatemalan government, including President Giammattei. The president has publicly accused journalists of soliciting private information about COVID-19 patients, questioned their reporting, and limited their access to government press conferences and events.⁵⁶ Interviewed journalists from Laboratorio de Medios have confirmed being denied public information on presidential candidates for the 2023 elections. Although laws regulating these issues are progressive, the influence of the executive branch over the judiciary, including the Constitutional Court, gives the government unchecked power over these activities.⁵⁷

According to the 2022 U.S. State Department report on Guatemala, numerous journalists have disclosed being subjected to harassment and prosecution or were forced to leave the country after publishing critical work about influential individuals. Journalists have reported facing pressure, threats and retaliation from both public officials and criminal groups over their reporting. Independent journalists and media outlets also endured online attacks throughout the year. "These included hacking journalists' private social media accounts, publishing stolen or falsified personal information, and conducting coordinated attempts to undermine specific journalists and media," the report found.⁵⁸ In the first six months of 2022 alone, "The Journalists Observatory of the Association of Journalists of Guatemala registered 66 cases of abuse of freedom of expression, including violence and restrictions against journalists. The Unit for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders—Guatemala (UDEFEQUA) registered 51 attacks against journalists and communicators during the same period."⁵⁹

54 "Under Assault in Guatemala: Journalists & Indigenous & Human Rights Activists." Washington Office on Latin America, Oct. 2022, wola.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Under-Assault-in-Guatemala-F-3-1.pdf

55 "Situación de los Derechos Humanos en Guatemala." United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Guatemala, 22 Mar. 2022, issuu.com/oacnudhgt/docs/informe_anual_2021_-_web; "Under Assault in Guatemala."

56 "Guatemala: Free Press Under Attack." Human Rights Watch, 18 Feb. 2021, hrw.org/news/2021/02/18/guatemala-free-press-under-attack

57 Anonymous. Personal interview. 24 Mar. 2023.

58 "2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Guatemala."

59 Ibid.

Attacks on Human-Rights Defenders

During the first two years of Giammattei's government, UDEFEGUA registered 2,057 attacks on human rights defenders and organizations, showing a dramatic increase from previous administrations.⁶⁰ The crackdown on human-rights defenders and organizations has intensified after the new NGO law (Ley de Organizaciones no Gubernamentales para el Desarrollo y del Código Civil) passed in 2021. The law requires NGOs to re-register with the government, requires NGOs and independent media to provide information regarding their funding sources and, through vague rules, gives the government considerable power to close and prosecute NGOs. Instances of digital harassment and surveillance are widespread, frequently perpetrated by trolls and bots linked to the government and private organizations like the Foundation against Terrorism (FCT). Online attacks are often laced with misogyny targeting women's rights advocates. During the first six months of 2022, 45 percent of the attacks reported by UDEFEGUA against human rights defenders in Guatemala were directed toward women, a considerable increase from previous years.⁶¹

Vulnerable Groups

Conservative rhetoric perpetuated by the ruling forces and their supporters targets women, Indigenous persons, and the LGBTQI+ community. Journalists and human rights defenders falling into those categories are victims of even more scrutiny. Both reports and interviews confirm disproportional attacks against these groups offline and online. Online targeting is often used to undermine these groups through racial slurs, sexist statements and homophobic and transphobic comments.⁶² According to the local journalists interviewed, as well as a U.S. Department of State report, NetCenters—collections of social media accounts that appear independent on the surface but work under one umbrella with the primary goal of spreading disinformation, manipulating online discourse and threatening individuals—are used for harassment and fat-shaming hate speech against women.⁶³ Indigenous persons, in particular, face multiple forms of harassment, including disseminating false information and cultural appropriation online. LGBTQI+ individuals are often subjected to hate speech and threats online. The National Observatory for LGBTQI+ Rights reported 29 killings motivated by hate on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity.⁶⁴

INFORMATION INTEGRITY

Government disinformation and political polarization are on the rise in Guatemala.⁶⁵ Disinformation and smear campaigns are frequently used during elections. Candidates use platforms like Facebook and TikTok to attract supporters and discredit candidates by using influencers.

The groups most influenced by disinformation are those over 65 and under 23, as these groups are thought to lean toward a certain ideology and tend to fall under the influence of messaging curated to their interests. Campaigns are also believed to concentrate their disinformation efforts to further activate their supporters, as opposed to trying to change the minds of other voters.⁶⁶

60 "Situación de Personas, Organizaciones y Comunidades Defensoras de Derechos Humanos." Unidad de Protección a Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos de Guatemala (UDEFEGUA), Jun. 2022, [undefegua.org.gt/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/INFORME-UDEFEGUA-2021.pdf](https://www.undefegua.org.gt/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/INFORME-UDEFEGUA-2021.pdf)

61 "Under Assault in Guatemala."

62 Ibid.

63 "2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Guatemala."

64 "Amnesty International Report 2022/23: The State of the World's Human Rights." Amnesty International, 27 Mar. 2023, [amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/5670/2023/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/5670/2023/en/).

65 "Democracy Report 2023: Defiance in the Face of Autocratization." V-Dem Institute, Mar. 2023, [v-dem.net/documents/30/V-dem_democracyreport2023_highres.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/documents/30/V-dem_democracyreport2023_highres.pdf)

66 "Assessment Report Guatemalan Elections."

The use of influencers, bots, and organic characters to spread fake news and disinformation is considered a serious issue, especially for the credibility of traditional and independent media and political actors with opposite views and interests.⁶⁷ WhatsApp is also used to spread disinformation in certain communities. For example, in the Q'eqchi area, WhatsApp voice messages were used to spread disinformation in the Mayan language to reach people with low literacy levels.⁶⁸ (Per WhatsApp policies, using the chat for election campaigns without permission can cause account bans, and the business version of the platform cannot be used by political candidates and campaigns).⁶⁹

In 2018, after Facebook, Instagram and Twitter removed millions of accounts in connection with spreading disinformation, certain groups have started engaging public figures who share similar views (usually conservative ones) to advance their agendas.⁷⁰

As mentioned, both IRI-interviewed organizations and the U.S. State Department report highlight the existence of NetCenters targeting journalists, independent judges and prosecutors through fake accounts on top social media platforms. NetCenters played a key role in intimidating journalists who reported on corruption in 2022, and remain a crucial part of the election process to discredit the media.⁷¹

Independent media outlets lack the resources to keep up with the rapid response needed to address disinformation. Due to this, false narratives have become the way citizens are informed. Nevertheless, the alliance of independent media outlets has launched La Linterna, a collaborative journalism investigation project that works to counter misinformation and disinformation.⁷²

Another organization, Plaza Publica, is running ConPruebas and a new fact-checking project that monitors candidates' discourse on TikTok.⁷³ It is aimed at analyzing candidates' proposals and debunking disinformation and populist narratives. The project concentrates on large narratives, such as the death-penalty initiatives, providing free money to citizens, and false labor/economic opportunities. Although results are shared on all social media platforms, the organization is concentrating on candidate information disseminated through TikTok, as the platform has become more popular among candidates and has become a major source of information for persons between the ages of 16–29.⁷⁴

The Association for Development, Organization, Services and Sociocultural Studies (Doses) is another organization working to combat disinformation and ensure transparency around elections. Doses is committed to measuring traditional and social media trends and overseeing the TSE's Media Monitoring Unit over equity in media access. Doses is also part of the Electoral Observation Mission (MOE-Gt), a consortium of seven nonprofit organizations dedicated to conducting independent validations of election results.⁷⁵

Organizations have expressed their interest in collaborating with social media platforms to provide data on accounts that are engaging in inauthentic behavior and spreading misinformation and disinformation.⁷⁶

67 "De-Formation Trend Assessment Report." Universidad Rafael Landívar. VRIP. Plaza Publica

68 "Assessment Report Guatemalan Elections."

69 "About WhatsApp and Elections." WhatsApp, faq.whatsapp.com/518562649771533/?helpref=hc_fnav. Accessed 30 Mar. 2023.

70 "De-Formation Trend Assessment Report."

71 "2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Guatemala."

72 "La Linterna Cinco Medios Contra la Desinformación." OCOTE, 15 Mar. 2023, agenciaocote.com/blog/2023/03/15/la-linterna-cinco-medios-contra-la-desinformacion/

73 "ConPruebas." Plaza Pública, plazapublica.com.gt/category/tipo-de-nota/conpruebas. Accessed 18 Apr. 2023.

74 Anonymous. Personal interview. 22 Mar. 2023.

75 "Elecciones Generales Guatemala 2023: Qué es la Misión de Observación Electoral de Guatemala (MOE-Gt)." Asociación DOSES, 22 Feb. 2023, asociaciondoses.medium.com/elecciones-generales-guatemala-2023-que-es-la-mision-de-observacion-electoral-de-guatemala-e16d0b3118e8

76 Anonymous. Personal interview. 22 Mar. 2023.

RISKS FOR OFFLINE VIOLENCE

Guatemalans have been suffering from election-related violence since the country's shift to democracy. These instances have included the murder of candidates, assaults on election bodies and voter intimidation. These issues have long affected voter turnout and undermined the integrity of election processes. If electoral bodies are perceived as lacking credibility, accusations of electoral fraud by political contestants can easily inflame tensions and fuel acts of violence. According to journalists interviewed, Guatemalans have been actively participating in the first round of elections with an average turnout at 57 percent for decades. But the journalists worry it will not be the case this year, as the current political environment has caused doubts about the credibility and authenticity of the election process. Outbreaks of violence occurred following the first round of elections in 2019, primarily due to technical issues in the transmission of election results and inadequate communication with the public while these problems were being resolved.⁷⁷ According to the sources on the ground, there is a high chance of offline violence around Election Day and after. They note the existence of criminal groups (drug traffickers and cartels) linked to candidates, which causes a high level of intimidation, skepticism and fear, and other forms of voter suppression, and possibility impacts people's choices.

CONCLUSION

This assessment has brought to light several vulnerabilities that threaten the upcoming June elections in Guatemala. These vulnerabilities fall into four main categories, each of which poses a significant risk to the integrity of the democratic process and could exacerbate polarization and destabilization within the country.

Misuse of political power, weakening of democratic institutions, and corruption continue to rise in Guatemala. The dismantling of the UN-backed anticorruption organization CICIG by former President Morales marked the beginning of the weakening of these institutions, which has allowed the current administration to abuse its power with greater impunity. The government's recent actions regarding candidate elimination for the 2023 elections have created widespread skepticism and distrust in the election administration, further eroding public confidence in the democratic process.

The growing trend of **attacks against journalists, human-rights defenders, women, Indigenous populations and LGBTQI+ persons** poses severe threats to election integrity and beyond. These attacks are often perpetrated by government officials, politicians and criminal organizations, and have profoundly impacted the independence of the media, which plays a crucial role in ensuring free and fair elections. The flight of journalists and human-rights activists has further emboldened malign actors and undermined democracy in the country.

The rise of social media and the weakening of independent media have led to serious concerns about **information integrity** in the election process. Misinformation and disinformation have become common tactics used by candidates and their supporters, including using fake accounts and bot farms to target vulnerable groups and spread false information about opponents. Finally, there is a worrying trend of **offline violence**, particularly on Election Day and in the following weeks. Distrust in government institutions and the legitimacy of election results has led to violent incidents in the past, posing a serious threat to public safety and the country's stability.

⁷⁷ Buril, Fernanda. "Tackling Electoral Violence on Several Fronts in Guatemala." International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 27 Aug. 2019, ifes.org/news/tackling-electoral-violence-several-fronts-guatemala

APPENDIX

Methodology

Overall, the assessment findings suggest that Guatemala is facing a challenging two-month election campaign. The identified risks pose a significant threat to the integrity of the electoral process, particularly in the online space, where vigilance will be crucial. These challenges underscore the need for a concerted effort to address the vulnerabilities and ensure that elections are conducted freely and fairly.

In order to ensure evidence-based information around the pre-election political environment and digital ecosystem in Guatemala, and to create a helpful tool for stakeholders (civil society, tech companies, international organizations, and others) IRI conducted an assessment between March-April 2023 by performing a desk review, interviewing IRI's country team and local stakeholders, and sharing questionnaires with tech partners.

The desk research involved a review of relevant documents and materials such as country reports, previous human-rights situation analysis, election-reform assessments and demographic datasets. To fill the gaps identified during the desk review, the assessment team conducted interviews with local partners, including civil society, media organizations and journalists. The interviews had a structured approach to cover all relevant issues and validate information gathering during the desk research for greater accuracy.

Based on the desk review and interview results, the team conducted analytical work to evaluate existing data and new information received from the partners. Further, the assessment team performed quantitative analysis of demographic data to identify trends between 2019 (the last election) and 2023, including demographic and internet-penetration changes since 2022.⁷⁸

These findings were used to develop a report that identifies valuable and reliable information on the pre-election information environment and digital ecosystem in Guatemala. It provides an overview of political systems, online trends, malign risks, the state of information integrity and the most vulnerable groups affected in the process.

Overall, the assessment aims to provide an understanding of Guatemala's current pre-election online information space two months from Election Day. The report serves as a tool to inform local stakeholders, technology partners and other interested parties to encourage informed decision-making and programming gaps to better prepare for the upcoming elections and manage risks and threats.

⁷⁸ A quantitative dataset comparison was done only with the available data from the same research sources and methodology. Due to the complexities associated with the speed at which demographic changes and internet penetration evolve, figures might be higher than they appear in the assessment.



INTERNATIONAL REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE

IRI.org

P: (202) 408-9450

@IRIglobal

E: info@iri.org