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# Guatemalan Leaders Under Pall in Lawyer's Killing

By [MARC LACEY](#)  
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## Editors' Note Appended

GUATEMALA CITY — An average of 16 murder victims turn up in [Guatemala](#) every day, some shot, some stabbed, some bludgeoned, and only about 3 percent of the cases are ever solved. Even in the rare instances when a killer is arrested, the suspect frequently turns out to be a hit man hired by some shadowy figure who is never identified and gets away to plot again.

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Moises Castillo/Associated Press

Demonstrators in Guatemala City on Thursday carried banners showing the image of the slain lawyer Rodrigo Rosenberg.

But of the more than 2,500 killings on the books this year, one unsolved case has jolted this country like no other. The recent shooting death of Rodrigo Rosenberg, a prominent lawyer, has incited Guatemalans to pour into the streets by the hundreds of thousands and focused all eyes on a [United Nations](#) commission created to prop up Guatemala's ailing judiciary.

The killing of Mr. Rosenberg, early in the morning on Mother's Day, would have been just one more in a long list of mysterious murders — that is, if Mr. Rosenberg had not foreseen his killing and identified the people he believed were out to get him in [a chilling video he prepared days before he died](#).

"My name is Rodrigo Rosenberg Marzano, and unfortunately, if you are watching the message, it is because I was assassinated by President Álvaro Colom," he said, going on to

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also blame the president's wife, Sandra Torres; the president's personal secretary, Gustavo Alejos; and various bankers and businessmen.

In the video and a written statement, Mr. Rosenberg said the president and those around him were involved in a corruption scandal tied to Guatemala's Rural Development Bank and had already killed one of his clients, the businessman Khalil Musa, as well as Mr. Musa's daughter, Marjorie Musa, with whom Mr. Rosenberg was having a relationship. He called the bank "a den of robbers, drug traffickers and murderers."

Mr. Rosenberg offered no proof to back up his allegations, but the fact that he foretold his murder — he was shot by one assailant as he rode his bicycle near his home and then finished off with a bullet to the head by a second gunman — has led to calls for the resignation of Mr. Colom, a leftist leader elected in 2007 on a platform of, among other things, reducing crime.

Now, posters of Mr. Colom, whose campaign symbol was a dove, are going around showing him bare-chested and sporting gang tattoos. "This movement is not for Rodrigo, but for all those who have been murdered," one of the slain lawyer's cousins, Víctor Toriello, said at a recent rally. Mr. Colom has denied having had anything to do with the killings, as have his wife and others mentioned in the video. But the allegations have thrown Guatemala, which has never fully recovered from the civil war that lasted from 1960 to 1996, into a full-fledged political crisis.

"We are living a serious and profound crisis, possibly the most complicated crisis that we have had in the years of democracy in Guatemala," Mr. Colom, looking pained, told a crowd of supporters on Tuesday.

He added: "Look me in the eyes. I don't know the motives of those who made that video. I have my head up and my heart clean."

Besides professing his innocence, Mr. Colom has turned the case over to the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, a United Nations body set up in 2007 to help a judiciary riddled with corruption. The commission is made up of international jurists who do not present cases themselves but support Guatemalan prosecutors, lending an international imprimatur to an institution that few here trust.

Before Mr. Rosenberg's death, the commission filed embezzlement charges against former President [Alfonso Portillo](#) and also laid the groundwork for the arrest of Enrique Ríos Sosa, the chief financial officer of the army during Mr. Portillo's rule. It has also been investigating the drug cartels and other organized crime groups that seem to increase their grip on Guatemala a bit more every day.

But it is Mr. Rosenberg's killing and those of the Musas that have become the commission's biggest test.

"This is like a John Grisham novel, but it's real," said Carlos Castresana, the Spanish

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jurist who leads the commission and helped prepare the indictment against the former Chilean leader Gen. [Augusto Pinochet](#). "This case is important because it affects the governability of the country."

There is plenty of intrigue, and two schools of thought have emerged: that Mr. Rosenberg, in an elaborate setup, was killed by opponents of Mr. Colom who wanted to damage the president; or that he was killed, as the video suggests, by the president's own inner circle because he had learned too much about misdeeds among those in power.

"There are a number of competing ideas that swirl in my head and all sorts of things that don't add up," said Anita Isaacs, a Guatemala expert at Haverford College who was here last week to witness the dual street protests for and against the president. "It's very murky."

### **Editors' Note: June 2, 2009**

*An article on May 22 about a political crisis in Guatemala created by the shooting death of Rodrigo Rosenberg, a prominent lawyer, said that Mr. Rosenberg had been in a relationship with Marjorie Musa, another murder victim. Although people familiar with the investigation into the deaths described such a relationship, longtime friends of Ms. Musa dispute it. The Times should not have stated the assertion as fact without attribution.*

A version of this article appeared in print on May 22, 2009, on page A4 of the New York edition.

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