

Guatemala

Former dictator Ríos Montt found guilty of genocide

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On May 10 a court in Guatemala found former president and army general Efraín Ríos Montt guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity. A three-judge tribunal sentenced the 86-year-old graduate of the infamous School of the Americas to 80 years in prison (50 years for genocide and 30 years for crimes against humanity).

Historic: This is the first time a former head of state in Latin America has been tried for human rights crimes in his/her own country. And he was found guilty!

For seventeen months in 1982–83, Ríos Montt implemented a ruthless counterinsurgency “scorched earth” campaign aimed at eradicating the country's "internal enemy," the armed insurgents and their perceived ideological and logistical supporters among the unarmed civilian population. He was convicted of ordering the deaths of 1,771 people of the Ixil Maya ethnic group. During this bloodiest phase of the war, Ríos Montt turned a blind eye as soldiers used rape, torture and arson against those suspected of supporting leftist rebels. An estimated 200,000 people were killed in Guatemala during the longest civil war in Central American history (1960–1996), the vast majority of them indigenous Mayans.

During the nearly two-month trial—which was beset with delays, legal loopholes and a temporary suspension—dozens of victims gave harrowing testimony about atrocities committed by soldiers. Survivors described horrific abuses committed by the army against those suspected of aiding left-wing rebels.

As she delivered the guilty verdict, Judge Jazmín Barrios ordered Guatemala's attorney general to continue investigating the crimes for which Ríos Montt was convicted. Her directive did not sit well with military and economic elites who opposed the trial and openly denied that genocide occurred.

Ríos Montt's former chief of military intelligence, Mauricio Rodríguez Sánchez, who was on trial with him, was acquitted.

Note:

Given the politically divisive situation, it was unsurprising when on May 20 the Constitutional Court annulled Ríos Montt's conviction and ordered a repeat of the segment of the trial that took place April 19–May 10. The three members of the original trial court said they were recusing themselves, so it is now up to the court of appeals to designate or constitute a new tribunal to re-hear the case. Thousands marched in the streets to protest the Constitutional Court's intervention in the conviction of Ríos Montt, who spent just one night in prison.