



Thelma Aldana (Guatemala) & ***Iván Velásquez*** (Colombia)

“for their innovative work in exposing abuse of power and prosecuting corruption, thus rebuilding people’s trust in public institutions”

Short bio

Thelma Aldana (Guatemala) & Iván Velásquez (Colombia) have been at the forefront of one of the most successful anti-corruption efforts seen anywhere in the world. Since 2014 and 2013 respectively, Aldana and Velásquez have led the Public Prosecutor’s Office and the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), an Independent body established by an agreement between the Guatemalan government and the UN. Through their leadership of these institutions, they have spearheaded the campaign to tackle deep-rooted criminal networks and corruption that have plagued Guatemala for decades.

In a country still reeling from the effects of 36 years of internal conflict, Aldana & Velásquez have demonstrated a historically unique model of joint international and local legal action that sets a benchmark for other countries with similar problems. The cooperation between them and the institutions they have represented has resulted in several high-profile and sensitive criminal investigations, most notably the La Línea corruption case, which led to 60 prosecutions, including the arrest of then President Otto Pérez Molina and his Vice President Roxanna Baldetti.

Aldana & Velásquez have played a crucial role in shaping a defining era in Guatemalan history, while also rebuilding trust in public institutions. As a consequence, they have faced sustained resistance and endured great personal risk. Their courageous and exemplary work has so far resulted in more than 60 criminal structures identified, more than 310 convictions, and 34 proposed legal reforms.

After ending her four-year mandate as Attorney General in May 2018, Aldana has been living outside of Guatemala for security reasons. While Velásquez’s mandate as CICIG’s commissioner runs until September 2019, president Jimmy Morales, on 4 September 2018, banned him from entering the country and urged the UN Secretary-General to propose new candidates for the position. At the moment of this announcement, Guatemala’s Constitutional Court and the UN have supported Velásquez as head of CICIG, and tens of thousands of Guatemalan citizens are taking to the streets in protest.



Long bio

Lifetimes of championing justice

Born on September 27, 1955, **Thelma Aldana** has a Master's degree in Civil Law and Civil Procedure from the School of Legal and Social Sciences at the University of San Carlos of Guatemala. Aldana obtained her degree while studying at night and working as a janitor in a local family court during the day. After graduating, she quickly rose through the ranks of the judiciary. In 2009, she became a Magistrate of the Supreme Court and in 2011, was elected President of the court, a position she held for one year. As president of the Supreme Court, and as the sole woman justice, she promoted the creation of specialised courts for crimes of femicide and other forms of violence against women. Eleven districts now have specialised courts. Aldana was appointed as Attorney General in 2014. In this position, she set out on an ambitious agenda to strengthen the Public Prosecutor's office, investigate institutional corruption, and to promote the protection of indigenous peoples, women and children in the country.

Iván Velásquez was born on May 12, 1955, in Medellín, Colombia. He too is a lawyer by profession, having worked as a prosecutor and judge in his native Colombia, where he investigated cases related to torture, extrajudicial executions and abuses against the civilian population. In 2000, he joined the Supreme Court of Justice as an assistant judge, and between 2006 and 2012, he coordinated the Commission of Investigative Support of the Criminal Chamber, where he investigated the links between members of the Colombian Congress and paramilitary groups. As a result of these efforts, the Supreme Court ordered the investigation of politicians on charges of crimes against humanity. To date, more than 50 members of Congress have been convicted, and more than 130 members have been linked to criminal structures with ties to the so-called "narco-politicians".

Aldana and Velásquez's paths would meet in Guatemala in September 2013, when Velásquez was appointed as Commissioner of the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), at the level of Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations. Its mandate is to support the work of Guatemalan institutions in dismantling clandestine apparatuses and investigating networks that negatively "affect the fundamental human rights of Guatemalan citizens".

Aldana was subsequently appointed Attorney General by then President Otto Perez Molina, in May 2014. As head of the Guatemalan Public Prosecutor's Office, Aldana also gave priority to the investigation and prosecution of cases of assassination and disappearances perpetrated during the internal armed conflict, as well as to dismantling illicit networks deeply entrenched in state institutions. Under Velásquez's leadership, CICIG would provide invaluable investigative resources to assist Aldana in this endeavour. By the end of Aldana's term, she had become one of the most well-respected public officials in Guatemala. As a result of her courageous and sustained efforts to tackle inequality, impunity and corruption, she has been widely recognised at both local and international levels.



Demonstrating courageous leadership to create change

In close coordination with Velásquez and under the leadership of Aldana, the Public Prosecutor's Office has been able to go after institutional corruption, making it possible to demonstrate the involvement of public officials, politicians, members of the private sector, and powerful individuals in criminal networks that have used state funds to enrich themselves at the expense of the Guatemalan people.

It took both courage and determination to tackle the deep-seated criminal networks that touched all aspects of Guatemalan society. As head of CICIG, Velásquez demonstrated his commitment to justice and a tenacity to uncover and demolish the criminal organisations that have for so long fuelled violence and poverty in Guatemala. Velásquez's experience was instrumental in his efforts to expose the scale of corruption and impunity in the country, and show the urgent need to reform the state apparatus that has allowed corruption to flourish. Aldana, in her role as Attorney General, cemented her enduring commitment to human rights and the pursuit of justice. Her bravery saw her confronting the very political figures who had appointed her as Attorney General, but she never let personal relationships interfere with her goal of bringing those responsible for corruption and abuse to justice.

Targeting corruption at the highest levels

Through their actions, Aldana and Velásquez have demonstrated that the local legal system can function effectively when free from political or criminal interference. With the support of Velásquez & CICIG, Aldana has shown that Guatemala's own laws and courts can be used to investigate highly sensitive cases and bring justice to those once considered above the law. Their work is perhaps best exemplified by the La Línea corruption case of 2015, which exposed a multi-million dollar customs fraud ring and ultimately forced both then President Otto Pérez Molina and his Vice-President Roxana Baldetti to resign and face trial. To initiate a complete overhaul of a political system that has been so entrenched in corruption would have been impossible if CICIG had not been able to find an ally also insulated from political and criminal influence. This momentous occasion was marked by widespread public demonstrations calling for the government's resignation and in support of Aldana and Velásquez. These levels of citizen engagement would have been unimaginable prior to the work of Aldana & Velásquez.

Other cases that Aldana & Velásquez have investigated include the exposure of environmental crimes with the 2016 Lake Atitlán Clean-up case, leading to the arrest of 14 people, ranging from the brother of former Vice-President Baldetti to representatives of an Israeli engineering firm and ex-officials from the Department of the Environment and Natural Resources in Guatemala. In another landmark case, they have uncovered widespread government corruption and bribery stretching back a decade, involving the highest levels of the Guatemalan political structure. One of their most recent cases, before Aldana's term expired, centred on the issue of illicit election financing. This case stretches back to at least 2015 and involves current President Jimmy Morales, who is accused of failing to report funds relating to his presidential election campaign.



Through their work, Aldana and Velásquez have not only contributed to a remarkable drop in impunity rates in Guatemala but have also helped restore people's faith in the justice system and sparked massive citizen mobilisations and greater civic engagement for government accountability. Citizens once fearful of expressing discontent with their government have taken to the streets in massive numbers. Unsurprisingly, Aldana's and Velásquez's efforts have earned them many enemies in the country but, despite the sustained pressure placed on them from those who have for so long been above the law, both have maintained their commitment to accountability and justice.

Future of the fight against corruption in Guatemala

On 31 August 2018, President Jimmy Morales announced at a press conference, flanked by more than two dozen military officers, that he will not be renewing the mandate of CICIG beyond its current term, ending in September 2019. Earlier that day, more than a dozen military vehicles surrounded CICIG's headquarters. This move was widely condemned by Guatemalan & international civil society and resulted in public demonstrations in support of Velásquez & CICIG. Since this decision was announced, Velasquez has subsequently been refused re-entry to Guatemala. The UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, has expressed his "shock" at the decision and reportedly asked Velásquez to continue his role from outside the country for the time being. This move is a serious threat to the progress that has been made, particularly over the last five years, to tackle corruption and impunity in Guatemala. Equally, this act further demonstrates just how effective Velásquez and Aldana have been in exposing and investigating high-profile criminal networks, and highlights the need for this work to continue unabated.