Efraín Ríos Montt

General
Efraín Ríos Montt

26th President of Guatemala

**In office**
March 23, 1982 – August 8, 1983

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<tr>
<th>Preceded by</th>
<th>Romeo Lucas García</th>
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<td>Succeeded by</td>
<td>Óscar Humberto Mejía Víctores</td>
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President of the Congress of Guatemala

**In office**
January 14, 2000 – January 14, 2004

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<th>Preceded by</th>
<th>Leonel Eliseo López Rodas</th>
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<td>Succeeded by</td>
<td>Francisco Rolando Morales Chávez</td>
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**Personal details**

| **Born** | José Efraín Ríos Montt  
June 16, 1926  
Huehuetenango, Guatemala |
|----------|--------------------------|
| **Died** | April 1, 2018 (aged 91)  
Guatemala City, Guatemala |
| **Resting place** | Cemetery of La Villa de Guadalupe, Guatemala City, Guatemala |
| **Political party** | Guatemalan Republican Front |
| **Spouse(s)** | María Teresa Sosa Ávila  
(m. after 1953) |
| **Children** | 3 (including Zury Ríos Montt) |
| **Profession** | Clergy, General |

**Military service**

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<tr>
<th><strong>Allegiance</strong></th>
<th>Guatemala</th>
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<td><strong>Branch/service</strong></td>
<td>Guatemalan Army</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Years of service</strong></td>
<td>1951–1983</td>
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José Efraín Ríos Montt (Spanish: [eˈfraɪn ˈrios montˈ], June 16, 1926 – April 1, 2018) was a Guatemalan general, politician, and war criminal[1] who served as President of Guatemala. Born in Huehuetenango, he was a dictator who took power as a result of a coup d'état on March 23, 1982.[2] He was overthrown by his defense minister, Oscar Humberto Mejía Victores, in another coup d'état on August 8, 1983. In the 2003 presidential elections, Ríos Montt unsuccessfully ran as the candidate of the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG). In 2007 he returned to public office as a member of Congress, thereby gaining prosecutorial immunity. He was protected from a pair of long-running lawsuits alleging war crimes against him and a number of his former ministers and counselors during their term in the presidential palace in 1982–83.[3][4] His immunity ended on January 14, 2012, with the end of his term in legislative office. On January 26, 2012, he appeared in court in Guatemala and was formally indicted for genocide and crimes against humanity.[1]

Background

Ríos Montt enrolled in the Military Academy of Guatemala in 1946. He attended the School of the Americas in 1951.[5] In 1954, the young officer played a minor role in the successful CIA-organized coup against President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán.

Following the coup, Ríos Montt rose swiftly through the army ranks, becoming deputy chief of staff in 1968. In 1970, under the military regime of President General Carlos Manuel Arana Osorio, he was promoted to brigadier general and chief of staff of the Guatemalan Army.[6]

In 1973, Ríos Montt resigned from his post at the Washington embassy to participate in the March 1974 presidential elections as the candidate of the National Opposition Front (FNO). He lost the election to a rival right-wing candidate, General Kjell Eugenio Laugerud García, by 70,000 votes. Since Laugerud didn't get a majority, the election was thrown to the government-controlled National Congress, which promptly elected Laugerud. According to some accounts, Ríos Montt appeared to be on his way to a majority when the government abruptly halted the count and manipulated the results to make it appear Laugerud had won by a narrow plurality.[citation needed]

Ríos Montt denounced a "massive electoral fraud", blaming his defeat on a conspiracy from the Catholic Church and the Mayan minority. Ríos Montt especially viewed Catholic priests as leftist agents who had questioned the mistreatment of the Catholic Mayas. Ríos Montt resolved and stated that "he would one day even the score."[7] It is alleged that he was given a payoff of several hundred thousand dollars along with the post of military attaché in the embassy in Madrid, Spain, where he stayed until retiring in 1977.[8]

In 1978, he left the Roman Catholic Church and joined a Guatemalan offshoot of the Gospel Outreach Church of Eureka, California, an evangelical Protestant sect.[9][10][11] Later Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson became personal friends. Ríos Montt joined the movement and assumed the role of becoming a teacher of the religion. Ríos Montt's brother Mario Enrique Ríos Montt is a Catholic bishop, and in 1998 succeeded the assassinated Bishop Juan Gerardi as head of the human rights commission uncovering the truth of the disappearances associated with the military and his brother.[citation needed]

Military regime

1982 coup

On March 7, 1982, General Ángel Aníbal Guevara, the official party candidate, won the presidential election, universally denounced as fraudulent by opposition parties. On March 23, with the support of fellow soldiers General Horacio Egberto Maldonado Schaad and Colonel Francisco Luis Gordillo Martínez, Ríos Montt deposed General Romeo Lucas García in a coup d'état and seized power, an act which the United States had not foreseen.[1] The trio set up a military junta with Ríos Montt at its head. The junta immediately declared martial law and suspended the constitution, shut down the legislature, set up secret tribunals, and began a campaign against political dissidents that included kidnapping, torture, and extrajudicial assassinations. The coup was described as being composed of Oficiales jóvenes ("young officers").[12] It prevented the scheduled July 1, 1982 installation of Guevara as president.[citation needed]

Ríos Montt was the change that some had sought as his tough approach sought to end corruption, and brought forth his vision of "education, nationalism, an end to want and hunger, and a sense of civic pride" was what some believed Guatemala needed.[7] Because of repeated vote-rigging and the blatant corruption of the military establishment, the coup was initially welcomed. At first there was some expectation that the extremely poor human rights and security situation might improve under the new regime. In April 1982, U.S. Ambassador Frederick Chapin declared that thanks to the coup of Ríos Montt, "the Guatemalan government has come out of the darkness and into the light."[13] Drawing on his Pentecostal beliefs, Ríos Montt invoked a modern apocalyptic vision comparing the four riders of the Book of Revelation to the four modern evils of hunger, misery, ignorance and subversion, as well as fighting corruption and what he described as the depredations of the rich. He said the true Christian had the Bible in one hand and a machine gun in the other. On April 10, he launched the National Growth and Security Plan whose stated goals were to end the extermination and teach the populace about nationalism. They wanted to integrate the campesinos and indigenous peoples into the state, declaring that because of their illiteracy and "immaturity" they were particularly vulnerable to the seductions of "international communism."[citation needed]

Ríos Montt’s changes sparked a number of guerilla factions which then created a guerilla group known as the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity organization (URNG). Ríos Montt’s military junta then began to intensify their efforts and on April 20, 1982 launched an operation known as Victoria 82. Victoria 82 sought first to destroy guerilla bases and forces through counter-insurgency efforts which were "scorched earth" tactics.[14] The plan was most known for its solution to reduce the numbers of the indigenous Mayan people in Guatemala.[15]

Frijoles y fusiles

On June 9, the other two members of the junta were forced to resign, leaving Ríos Montt as the sole leader, head of the armed forces, and minister of defense. Violence escalated in the countryside under the Guatemalan military's plan Victoria 82, which included a rural pacification strategy known as frijoles y fusiles (beans and guns). This was an attempt by Ríos Montt to win over the large insurgent groups to his version of the rule of the law, unleashing a scorched earth campaign on the nation's Maya population, particularly in the departments of Quiché and Huehuetenango, that, according to the 1999 United Nations Truth commission, resulted in the annihilation of nearly 600 villages. One example was the Plan de Sánchez massacre in Rabinal, Baja Verapaz, in July 1982, which saw over 250 people killed. The administration established special military courts that had the power to impose death penalties against criminals and suspected
guerrillas. Tens of thousands of peasant farmers fled over the border into southern Mexico. Meanwhile, urban areas saw a period of relative calm. The June 1982 amnesty for political prisoners was replaced by a state of siege in the following month that limited the activities of political parties and labor unions under the threat of death by firing squad.\[^{16}\]

In 1982, an *Amnesty International* report estimated that over 10,000 indigenous Guatemalans and peasant farmers were killed from March to July of that year, and that 100,000 rural villagers were forced to flee their homes. According to more recent estimates, tens of thousands of non-combatants were killed by the regime's death squads in the subsequent eighteen months. At the height of the bloodshed under Ríos Montt, reports put the number of disappearances and killings at more than 3,000 per month.\[^{17}\]

### US and Israeli backing

Given Ríos Montt’s staunch anticommunism and ties to the United States, the Reagan administration continued to support the general and his regime, with the U.S. president paying a visit to Guatemala City in December 1982.\[^{18}\] During a meeting with Ríos Montt on December 4, Reagan declared: "President Ríos Montt is a man of great personal integrity and commitment. ... I know he wants to improve the quality of life for all Guatemalans and to promote social justice."\[^{19}\][^20]

President Ronald Reagan claimed Guatemala’s human rights conditions were improving and used this to justify several major shipments of military hardware to Ríos Montt, $4 million in helicopter spare parts and $6.3 million in additional military supplies in 1982 and 1983 respectively. The decision was taken in spite of records concerning human rights violations, and also bypassed seeking approval from the U.S. Congress.\[^{21}\][[22][23][24][25]\] Meanwhile, a then-secret 1983 CIA cable noted a rise in “suspect right-wing violence” and an increasing number of bodies “appearing in ditches and gullies.”\[^{26}\] In turn, Guatemala was eager to resurrect the Central American Defense Council, defunct since 1969, to join forces with the right-wing governments of El Salvador and Honduras in retaliations against the leftist Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

Like Guatemala’s other suppliers of arms, Israel (which had been supplying arms to Guatemala since 1974) continued its aid provisions. The cooperation did not just involve material support, but also included providing intelligence and operational training, carried out both in Israel and in Guatemala. In 1982, Ríos Montt told *ABC News* that his success was due to the fact that “our soldiers were trained by Israelis.” There was not much outcry in Israel at the time about its involvement in Guatemala, though the support for Ríos Montt was no secret. The Israeli link was not lost on the average Guatemalan: at a cemetery in Chichicastenango, relatives of a man killed by the military told Perera, “in church they tell us that divine justice is on the side of the poor; but the fact of the matter is, it is the military who get the Israeli guns.”\[^{27}\]

### Removal by coup

By the end of 1982, Ríos Montt, claiming that the war against the leftist guerrillas had been won, said the government’s work was one of *ofécho, trabajo, y tortillas* ("roofs, work, and tortillas").

Three coups had been attempted since he came to power. On June 29, 1983, he declared a state of emergency, and announced elections for July 1984. On August 8, his own Minister of Defense General Óscar Humberto Mejía Víctores overthrew the regime in a coup (during which seven people were killed).\[^{28}\] The unpopularity of Ríos Montt was widespread, exacerbated by his refusal to grant clemency to six guerrillas during the visit of Pope John Paul II. The military was offended by his promotion of young officers in defiance of the Army's traditional hierarchy. Many citizens in the middle class were alienated by his decision on August 1 to introduce the *value-added tax*, never before levied in Guatemala.

The killings continued even after Ríos Montt was eased from office in 1983.\[^{29}\][^30]\ It has been documented that as many as one and a half million Maya peasants were uprooted from their homes.\[^{21}\] and that many were forced to live in re-education *concentration camps* and to work in the fields of Guatemalan land barons. The Maya Indian and campesino population suffered greatly under Ríos Montt’s government. Ríos Montt along with several other men who served high positions in the military governments of the early 1980s were defendants in several lawsuits alleging genocide and crimes against humanity; one of these cases was filed in 1999 by Nobel Peace Prize-winning K’iche’-Maya activist, Rigoberta Menchú.\[^{31}\]\[^{32}\] In early 2008 the presiding judge, Santiago Pedraz, took testimony from a number of indigenous survivors.\[^{32}\] The genocide cases saw little progress due to a climate of ongoing and entrenched impunity in Guatemala.\[^{34}\]

### Attempted political comeback

\[\textbf{This section needs additional citations for verification. Please help improve this article by adding citations to reliable sources. Unsourced material may be challenged and removed. (May 2013)}\]

Ríos Montt founded the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG) political party in 1989. He tried to run for president in 1990, but was prohibited from entering the race by the constitutional court due to a constitutional provision banning people who had participated in military coups from becoming president. He was an FRG congressman between 1990 and 2004. In 1994, he was elected president of the unicameral legislature. He tried to run again in 1995, and was also barred from the race. Future president Alfonso Portillo was named to replace him as the FRG candidate, and narrowly lost.

Guatemalan campaigners on behalf of Maya survivors of the civil war, such as Nobel laureate and Maya human rights advocate Rigoberta Menchú, were amazed, in March 1999, when U.S. President Bill Clinton apologised for U.S. support of Ríos Montt’s regime. Clinton declared: "For the United States, it is important that I state clearly that support for military forces and intelligence units which engaged in violence and widespread repression was wrong and the United States must not repeat that mistake."\[^{35}\]

The same August President Portillo admitted involvement of the Guatemalan government in human rights abuses over the previous 20 years, including for two massacres that took place during Ríos Montt's presidency. The first was in Plan de Sánchez, in Baja Verapaz, with 268 dead, and in Dos Erres in Petén, where 200 people were murdered.

### 2003 presidential candidate

The FRG nominated Ríos Montt, in May 2003, for the *November presidential election*, but his candidacy was initially, and once again, rejected by the electoral registry and by two lower courts. In July 2003, Guatemala’s highest court, which had had several judges appointed from the FRG, overruled the lower courts and allowed Ríos Montt to run for president. Over the years, he’d claimed the ban on former dictators making a bid for the presidency had been written specifically to prevent him from standing.
committed by the army during his rule, but strenuously denied his culpability.

Arredondo Guevara, a Spanish origin. In June 2006, Spanish judge Santiago Pedraz traveled to Guatemala to interrogate Ríos Montt and the others named in the case. At least 15 and 1982 were also indicted. The

In 1999, Guatemalan sentenced due to his age and deteriorating health conditions.

conviction.

and crimes against humanity, and was sentenced to 80 years imprisonment.

and against the indigenous population. Huge numbers of civilians, both indigenous Mayas and mestizo Ladinos, were caught in the crossfire. Up to 200,000 Guatemalans were declared missing or killed during the conflict, making it one of Latin America’s most violent wars.

During tense but peaceful presidential elections held on November 9, 2003, Ríos Montt received just 11 percent of the votes, putting him a distant third behind businessman Óscar Berger, head of the conservative Grand National Alliance (GANA), and Álvaro Colom of the National Unity of Hope (UNE). As he was required to give up his seat in Congress to run for president, his 14-year tenure there ended as well.

In March 2004, a court order forbade Ríos Montt from leaving the country to see if he was eligible for trial on charges related to jueves negro and the death of Ramírez. On November 20, 2004, Ríos Montt had to ask permission to travel to his country home for the wedding of his daughter Zury Ríos Montt to U.S. Representative Jerry Weller (a Republican from Illinois). But Ríos Montt had not at this point been charged with any crime and, on January 31, 2006, manslaughter charges for the death of Ramírez were dropped against Ríos Montt.

Charges of crimes against humanity

Two Truth Commissions, the REMHI report, sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church, and the CEH report, conducted by the United Nations as part of the 1996 Accords of Firm and Durable Peace, documented widespread human rights abuses committed by Ríos Montt’s military regime. These included widespread massacres, rapes, and torture against the indigenous population in what has been called a Guatemalan genocide. Ríos Montt said there was no government-ordered genocide, and that abuses were only the result of a long, violent civil war. During his time as president, he had close ties to the United States, receiving direct and indirect support from several of its agencies, including the CIA.

Ríos Montt’s military regime was held accountable for constraining the guerrillas through what was known as the ‘guns and beans’ campaign, telling the people “If you are with us, we’ll feed you, if not, we’ll kill you.” Guatemala’s 36-year civil war only ended with the signing of a peace treaty in 1996. The civil war pitted Marxist rebels against the Guatemalan state, including the army. Huge numbers of civilians, both indigenous Mayas and mestizo Ladinos, were caught in the crossfire. Up to 200,000 Guatemalans were declared missing or killed during the conflict, making it one of Latin America’s most violent wars.

Indigenous Mayas suffered disproportionately during Ríos Montt’s rule. It is documented that his government deliberately targeted thousands of indigenous people since many were suspected of harboring sympathies for, supporting, or participating in the guerrilla movement. Under the Cold War-era strategy of containment the Guatemalan state sought to eliminate the spread of Communism inside its borders. The UN-backed Historical Clarification Commission found that the resulting counterinsurgency campaign, significantly designed and advanced during Ríos Montt’s presidency, included deliberate ‘acts of genocide’ against the indigenous population.

On 28 January 2013, judge Miguel Ángel Galves opened a pre-trial hearing against Ríos Montt and retired General José Mauricio Rodríguez Sánchez for genocide and crimes against humanity, in particular the killings of 1,771 Maya Ixil Indians, including children. On 10 May 2013, Ríos Montt was convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity, and was sentenced to 80 years in prison.

On 20 May 2013, the Constitutional Court of Guatemala overturned his conviction. His retrial began January 2015. A Guatemalan court had ruled he could stand trial for genocide and crimes against humanity, but could not be sentenced due to his age and deteriorating health conditions.

In Spain

In 1999, Guatemalan Nobel Peace Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchú presented charges for torture, genocide, illegal detention and state-sponsored terrorism against Ríos Montt and four other retired Guatemalan generals, two of them ex-presidents. Three other civilians that were high government official between 1978 and 1982 were also indicted. The Center for Justice and Accountability and Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos de España are co-counsel in the trial.

In September 2005 Spain’s Constitutional Court ruled that Spanish courts can try those accused of crimes against humanity even if the victims were not of Spanish origin. In June 2006, Spanish judge Santiago Pedraz traveled to Guatemala to interrogate Ríos Montt and the others named in the case. At least 15 appeals filed by the defense attorneys of the indicted prevented him from carrying out the inquiries.

On July 2006 Pedro Chupina Barahona and Pedro Arredondo were also named on the international arrest warrants. For his part, Ríos Montt admitted in a July 2006 press conference that there were ‘excesses’ committed by the army during his rule, but strenuously denied his culpability.
In Guatemala

On January 17, 2007, Ríos Montt announced that he would run for a seat in Congress in the election to be held later in the year. As a member of Congress he would again be immune from prosecution unless a court suspended him from office. He won his seat in the election, which was held on September 9, and led the FRG’s 15-member congressional delegation in the new legislature.

His immunity ended on January 14, 2012, when his term in office ran out. On January 26, 2012, Ríos Montt appeared in court in Guatemala City and was formally indicted by Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz for genocide and crimes against humanity along with three other former generals. During the court hearing he refused to comment. The court released him on bail, but placed him under house arrest pending commencement of his trial. On March 1, 2012, a judge declined to grant Ríos Montt amnesty from genocide charges, paving the way for a trial. This marked the first time a former head of state was tried for genocide in his home country. On 19 March 2013, his trial for the genocide of at least 1,771 members of the Maya Ixils began. But the trial was suspended by Judge Carol Patricia Flores following a directive from the Supreme Court on 19 April 2013. The judge ordered the legal process to be set back to November 2011, before the retired general was charged with war crimes. A judge annulled the genocide trial in April 2013, a ruling that might have forced prosecutors to begin the case all over again.

On May 10, 2013, Ríos Montt was convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity. He was sentenced to 80 years in prison (50 years for genocide and 30 years for crimes against humanity). Ríos Montt is the first former head of state to have been convicted of genocide by a court in his own country. Announcing the ruling, Judge Iris Yassmin Barrios Aguilar declared that "the defendant is responsible for masterminding the crime of genocide." She continued: "We are convinced that the acts the Ixils suffered constitute the crime of genocide... [Ríos Montt] had knowledge of what was happening and did nothing to stop it." The Court found that "the Ixils were considered public enemies of the state and were also victims of racism, considered an inferior race... The violent acts against the Ixils were not spontaneous. They were planned beforehand." Judge Iris Yassmin Barrios Aguilar referred to evidence that 5.5% of the...
ixil people had been wiped out by the army.

Ríos Montt’s lawyers said he would appeal.

On May 20, 2013, the Constitutional Court of Guatemala overturned the conviction, voiding all proceedings back to April 19 and ordering that the trial be ‘reset’ to that point, pending a dispute over the recusal of judges.

Ríos Montt’s trial resumed in January 2015. The court decided, due to his alleged senility, that a closed door trial would begin in January 2016 and that if he were to be found guilty, a jail sentence would be precluded, given his condition.

Death

Ríos Montt died in Guatemala City on April 1, 2018, of a heart attack at the age of 91. The government of Guatemalan president Jimmy Morales lamented his passing.

In media and popular culture

Pamela Yates directed When the Mountains Tremble (1983), a documentary film about the war between the Guatemalan Military and the Mayan Indigenous population of Guatemala. Footage from this film was used as forensic evidence in the Guatemalan court for crimes against humanity, in the genocide case against Efrain Rios Montt.

Granito: How to Nail a Dictator (2011) by Pamela Yates, is a follow-up to When the Mountains Tremble.

The University of Southern California’s Shoah Foundation, funded by director Steven Spielberg, is undertaking an extensive analysis of the genocidal Guatemalan civil wars, documented by hundreds of filmed interviews with survivors.

See also

- History of Guatemala
- Guatemala National Police Archives

References

30. Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio, Comisión para Esclarecimiento Histórico
Further reading

Efrain Rios Montt

at Wikipedia's sister projects

- Media from Wikimedia Commons
- Data from Wikidata

- Biography by CIDOB (in Spanish)
- Efrain RIOS MONTT, Legal Procedure in Spain, Trial Watch, TRIAL
- Efrain RIOS MONTT, Legal Procedure in Guatemala, Trial Watch, TRIAL
- Guatemala Human Rights Commission
- The Spy Who Told On Me
- Indicted for Genocide: Guatemala’s Efraín Ríos Montt: U.S. and Guatemalan Documents Trace Dictator’s Rise to Power
- Site monitoring trial against Rios Montt in Guatemala

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<th>Preceded by</th>
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Heads of state of Guatemala

direct central rule, 1823–24
- Díaz*
- Barrundia

direct central rule, 1826–27
- J. Estrada*
- de Aycinena
- Zenteno*
- Barrundia
- Molina
- Márquez*
- Gálvez
- Valenzuela*
- Rivera*
- Salazar*
- Rivera*
Efraín Ríos Montt was born on June 16, 1926 in Huehuetenango, Guatemala as José Efraín Ríos Montt. He was married to María Teresa Sosa. He died on April 1, 2018 in Guatemala City, Guatemala. José Efraín Ríos Montt (Spanish pronunciation: [efraˈin ˈri.os ˈmont]; born June 16, 1926) is a Guatemalan politician who was President of Guatemala from 1982 to 1983. An army general, his time in office was marked by the
état