

URGENT ACTION

NEW LAW THREATENS NGOs' WORK

On 11 February the Guatemalan Congress enacted Decree 4-2020 (formerly known as Bill 5257). This initiative imposes undue restrictions, controls and sanctions on Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). This poses serious risks for the rights to freedom of expression and association in the country and threatens the work of human rights defenders and NGOs. We call on the President to immediately veto this law.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Sr. Alejandro Giammattei
President of Guatemala

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Dear Mr. President,

I am writing to express my serious concern about the decree 4-2020, recently passed by the Guatemalan Congress.

Several provisions in this decree threaten the rights to freedom of expression and association in Guatemala and the right to defend human rights.

For example, it grants broad powers to authorities to shut down civil society organizations whose activities are considered to "disrupt public order". The use of such an ambiguous term would unnecessarily lead to further harass to people and organizations that are already facing constant attacks and unfounded criminal charges by individuals and authorities who disapprove their important work standing up for human rights in Guatemala.

To protect the rights to freedom of expression and association and to ensure that human rights defenders can continue their fundamental work in Guatemala, I urge you to immediately veto the Decree 4-2020.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Human rights defenders in Guatemala carry out their activities in an extremely hostile environment, particularly those working on rights related to land, territory and the environment. They face continuous threats, intimidation and attacks.

The Unit for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders in Guatemala (UDEFEQUA) reported 467 attacks against human rights defenders in 2019, including 20 murders and attempted murders. Defenders also face stigmatization and smear campaigns by private actors and the Guatemalan authorities, and the criminal justice system is regularly misused to criminalize them, in an attempt to break up movements and organizations, wearing down the defenders and removing them from the public arena.

Amnesty International had fully documented this situation in its reports [“We are defending the land with our blood”: Defenders of the land, territory and environment in Honduras and Guatemala](#) and [“Americas: State Protection Mechanisms for Human Rights Defenders”](#).

In February 2019, Amnesty International alerted on the imminent approval of bill 5257 aimed at reforming the 2003 Law on NGOs, as it would impose excessive controls and onerous requirements for the registration and operation of NGOs in the country, and it would also grant broad powers to the government to permanently suspend the activities of an NGO for reasons such as “disturbance of public order,” an ambiguous term whose interpretation could lead to the arbitrary closure of civil society organizations and worsening criminalization through the imposition of criminal sanctions against the human rights defenders that work in them.

Amnesty International also recently cited Bill 5257 in its briefings [“Last Chance of Justice, Dangerous setbacks for human rights and the fight against impunity in Guatemala”](#) and [“Laws Designed to Silence: The Global Crackdown on Civil Society Organizations”](#), as one of the dangerous examples of a global trend towards using legislation to repress NGOs and human rights defenders.

After several failed attempts, on 11 February 2020 the Guatemalan Congress passed the law, which is now registered as Decree 4-2020.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Spanish

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 13 March 2020

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Human Rights Defenders and Organizations in Guatemala (They, Them, Theirs)

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr34/9933/2019/en/>