Guatemala Mayor ‘Tres Kiebres’: The Art of Being ‘3 Times Broken’

By Steven Dudley*
The atmosphere was light, almost jovial, as Ipala’s Mayor Esduin Javier turned to the next item on the agenda. The issue was what the people at the municipality’s monthly town hall called a “Boulevard.” Boulevard was perhaps a strong word for most places, but in this town of 20,000, the 12-meter wide street with a natural barrier complete with palm trees more than qualified.

“This would be the boulevard, but it will have slightly different dimensions because we need to leave some room so that when there is a car parked there, a truck has to go by, there road is not blocked,” Javier told the group, which was packed six rows deep on white plastic chairs into the small conference room. “There’s going to be a space of about a meter, a meter and a half where people who like sports can run in the mornings or whatever time they feel like.”

For Javier, who worked construction in the United States before starting his own company in Guatemala, talking about construction projects was familiar terrain. He directed his treasurer to double check how much the cement, stones and sand would cost the municipality.

“Sands and stone ... 300,000 [quetzals],” around $41,000, the treasurer responded.

Javier thought for a second. His nickname is “Tres Kiebres.” Roughly translated, it means “Three Times Broken.” With a barrel chest and a military haircut, Javier cuts a formidable figure. And many mistakenly believe that his nickname refers to the various times political rivals and criminal groups have tried to kill him. But Javier says he actually got the nickname when a carjack, which he had placed on top of another carjack, gave out while he was fixing a truck he had purchased for his then-fledgling transport and construction operations. The truck landed on him, breaking three vertebrae and permanently damaging his spine. He says he still has to take steroids to make it through the day.

Javier says the confusion about his nickname is typical of the “misunderstandings” about him. The same types of “misunderstandings” that have dogged him his whole adult life: like the misunderstanding concerning his relationships with drug traffickers, both dead and alive; or the misunderstanding about his use and abuse of public works projects, which serve as the source of his political and economic power in the region.

But beneath that crude nickname is a keen and savvy businessman.

“It’s just that if we start to build, in less than a month we will need 11,000 bags [of cement],” he said. “So, in less than a month, we need a million and a half quetzals,” around $206,000.

His treasurer confirmed these numbers. The room was silent. The screen with a depiction of the boulevard glowed in the corner.

“What’s going on with the machinery? Do we have enough?” the mayor asked.
“We’ll have to wait for the next round [of funding],” the treasurer responded.

The rumors have a basis in fact. For years, Javier worked with Merlin Yovani España, a man who authorities said was one of the most powerful drug traffickers on the border with El Salvador and Honduras. Later, he battled the Mexican criminal organization, the Zetas, and their fearsome Guatemalan partner, who was known simply as “Baldie” (“El Pelón”). Then he provided information to US counterdrug agents. Throughout, officials say he kept his own nefarious businesses in motion, an accusation that Javier describes as false and offensive.

“I can accept it if you hit me in the face, and you will just mess up my face a bit, but what bothers me is when you call me a narco,” he told me when I first met him. “I’ve never made any money from that. I don’t even like narcos. Do you know why I don’t like narcos? Because I worked my ass off all my life, and then a narco comes, and in one year he has three times what I have, even though I worked 30 years.”

So far, Javier has successfully beaten back these questions. While others around him have been arrested or killed, Javier has avoided formal accusations and charges. He has also provided information to United States counterdrug agents in his fight to stay alive and to keep out of jail. And since becoming mayor, he has employed his own capital to win the municipality’s goodwill.

Back at the town hall, Javier showed why he was popular with the people of Ipala.

“What we’re going to do is to wait until the machinery from the mines is ready and then we’ll use that, at least until the money to pay for it comes,” the mayor said, referring to the movement of his construction company’s backhoes and other heavy equipment from one municipal project to another.

He paused, then moved to the next subject on the agenda.

“Ok, thanks.”
The Birth of 3K

For some mayors, the nickname Tres Kiebres might be embarrassing, a vestige of a crazy life that is no longer representative of a politician seeking to advance the interests of his town. But Javier embraces it. He campaigned on it when he ran for mayor in 2015, and placed it on banners to various entrances of the town after he won.

It is a fitting tribute. “Broken” is written “quiebres.” But in the rough and tumble eastern department of Chiquimula, that became “kiebres,” a perfect homage to a man who walks his town with a slight limp and a handgun with an extended magazine hanging from his belt.

“Mal escrito, pero no make a difference,” (“Spelled wrong, but doesn’t make a difference”), he told me, mixing in a bit of English that he had picked up during one of his many times working construction in the United States.

Javier went to the United States to escape a turbulent childhood. Javier said his father fell from a roof at a construction project in Ipala when Javier was 16. He said his brother was shot and killed during a card game in Ipala when Javier was 12. Another brother died in a construction project in Fresno, California, he told me. In all, of eight siblings, he said that five had died premature deaths.

But Javier also went to the United States to accumulate and prepare for what would be a prosperous career as a government contractor. He had been working in construction since he was seven, and during his first season in Fort Washington, Maryland, he said he cleared $38,000, a minor fortune in Guatemala at the time.

“I was like Al Capone,” he said with a giant smile, pronouncing the legendary gangster’s name slowly so it sounded like “el que pone.” It was a play on the words and on his reputation. He paused, registering my reaction, then continued: “The guy who puts [‘el que pone’] down the bricks, the guy who puts [‘el que pone’] down the concrete, the guy who puts [‘el que pone’] down the paint. Everything.”
Subsequent trips proved equally lucrative, and Javier did not squander his earnings. In New York, he said he lived in an apartment with 16 other people. When he did spend money, it was to get back to the United States. It wasn’t always easy. Javier said he was captured and deported numerous times, mostly along the El Paso-Juárez border. But he simply tried again.

By the time he’d decided to stay in Ipala in the late 1990s, Javier had accumulated enough money to purchase some land, which he parceled out, sold and helped construct multiple homes. He used the money to buy a backhoe and a truck, the same one that would fall on him and lead to his peculiar nickname and later the name of his companies, Constructora 3K and Venta de Materiales 3K.

At first, 3K companies were subcontracted by larger firms, but times were changing. Mayors were taking a more direct role in contracting for public works projects. So Javier, using his personal connections, got certified by the municipality to be contracted directly. Constructora 3K quickly became the Al Capone (“el que pone”) of Ipala, fixing and paving roads, providing concrete for construction projects, and developing drainage and potable water systems.

“That was perfect because they paid us 1,200 quetzales [$165] per square meter. And we spent like 500 quetzals [$69] to do each square meter,” he explained to me in the language in which he is arguably most fluent: construction. “The most expensive part was pumping the water. There were times when we made 50,000 quetzales [$6,900] doing a terrace. It was incredible, incredible.”

3K was part of a slew of new, local companies that formed during that time period that could underbid the larger companies who were based in other parts of the country. There was an economic and political logic behind it, and Javier said he used his relative advantage to push out the bigger players.

“It was easier for us to win the bid from Guatecompras because we were in the area,” he explained, referring to the government’s central public works contracting agency. “Another company -- for them to move their team, mobilize resources and machinery -- their costs went up. We were in the area and could keep costs down, and we would win the contract.”

They also had the contacts. Javier got his first direct contract from longtime Ipala Mayor Roel Pérez, who he had known for years. Other up and coming contractors made similar deals with similar acquaintances. In return for the government contracts, these winning bidders would support the continued political aspirations of these mayors. It was a new merry-go-round of corruption and criminal interests that has proven hard to stop.
3K and the Narcos

One of Javier’s principal partners in these projects was a man named Merlin Yovani España. España was part of a powerful lineage of drug traffickers in eastern Guatemala, Guatemalan and US investigators told InSight Crime. The officials said he was an associate of Byron Berganza, Waldemar Lorenzana and Juan José “Juancho” León. When Berganza, who like Javier came from Ipala, was captured in 2003, extradited to the United States and convicted of drug trafficking, España assumed control of his territory.

Javier had a strong relationship with España, according to foreign and local criminal investigators consulted for this report, as well as government documents. It was a logical connection. España’s companies, like Constructora y Maquinaria España, had construction, maintenance and service contracts with municipal governments in the region, especially in Chiquimula, the capital of the state that goes by the same name. And Javier provided equipment and services for España’s companies.

“He didn’t have any [heavy] machinery,” Javier told me when I asked him about his relationship with España. “He came to me and said, ‘Look, rent me your backhoe by the hour, your tractor by the hour.’ And I said, ‘Okay, for what project?’ ‘This project.’ Ok. And off we went. I provided the [heavy] machinery, we finished the project, he paid me.”

Esduín Javier with local workers. Credit: Steven Dudley
3K also won contracts in nearby municipalities. One of his most important projects was in the neighboring department of Zacapa, where his company installed a potable water system. The year he got that contract, 2010, was 3K’s most lucrative. According to the Guatecompras registry, Constructora 3K did close to 40 million quetzals ($5.5 million) in business, all of it from government contracts. But as business boomed, questions emerged and rumors swirled.

The potable water project, for instance, was contracted by a controversial government entity called the National Fund for Peace (Fondo Nacional para la Paz - FONAPAZ). FONAPAZ was created in 1991, as a way to channel much needed federal resources to underdeveloped parts of the country. Its first director was Álvaro Colom, a wiry economic elite who was more social democrat than conservative businessman.

Colom used FONAPAZ as a launching pad to become a major political force. He lost his first bid to become president in 1999, but by 2004, his fledgling National Unity of Hope (Unión Nacional de la Esperanza - UNE) had 32 representatives in congress. In 2008, Colom won the presidency, and UNE won 48 congressional seats, the most of any party.

By then, however, UNE had been connected to dirty money. In a later report on campaign financing, the United Nations-backed International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala – CICIG) highlighted three dubious sources of the party’s financing. Two of them were on the local level where companies like Javier’s 3K enterprises were surging.

“One think that a relationship or when you know someone, whether they are narco or not, does not make you a narco.”

One of these fundraisers was a former UNE congressional representative named Obdulio Solorzano. When he won the presidency, Colom named Solorzano to run FONAPAZ. Solorzano, the CICIG said, had a long-time relationship with Otoniel Turcios, who was later captured in Belize, extradited and convicted in the United States for drug trafficking. The suspected quid pro quo: public works contracts.

Turcios’ daughter was the head of the Desarrollo Rural de las Verapaces, a local arm of FONAPAZ. FONAPAZ became, CICIG says, a means by which drug traffickers like Turcios could launder their illicit proceeds -- and make some money. A separate government investigation into FONAPAZ during Solorzano’s period showed that at least 22 contracts were overvalued, leading officials to believe that it was part of a vast kickback and money laundering scheme.

Solorzano was also the suspected bagman for the Mexican criminal organization, the Zetas. The quid pro quo in the Zetas case was protection from prosecution. Solorzano eventually resigned in 2009, amidst a growing corruption scandal related to the way he had managed FONAPAZ and internal pressure from the government due to his connections to Turcios. He was assassinated in July 2010. Shortly thereafter, the Zetas, from their headquarters in Cobán in central Guatemala, blamed Colom for Solorzano’s murder and accused him of targeting them even after they had given $11.5 million to his presidential campaign.
Questions regarding government contracts with drug trafficking interests persisted beyond those that were occurring with FONAPAZ and Turcios’ interests in central Guatemala. In the west, the government contracted companies owned by interests connected to Juan Alberto Ortíz López, alias Juan Chamalé, as well as companies run by Aler Samayoa and his criminal organization known as the Huistas. In the east, Javier’s region, the government contracted companies owned by the Lorenzana family, as well as companies owned by Javier’s partner, España.

Investigators say Javier eventually became a third-party owner for some of España’s companies, which were a means by which España could camouflage his ownership as he laundered drug proceeds. Javier denied knowing anything about that part of España’s life.

“I think that a relationship or when you know someone, whether they are narco or not, does not make you a narco.” he said. “Why? Because first you have to prove it. In the time that I knew Yovani España, I never saw any drug trafficking, because if I had, I would have said something: ‘Whoa, this guy is in to something bad.’ Never. What I saw was good. For example: cattle, land purchases, a contract to pick up the garbage in Chiquimula … He had a lot of in’s. I’m not going to put my hand in the fire for him either. But from what I could see, he was not a narco.”

When I pointed out that Javier ended up with his companies, summarizing what investigators had told me, Javier scoffed at what he called “rumors” (“chismes”). And when I told him that government documents show that by 2012, Javier was the “President of the Board” (Presidente del Consejo de Administracion) and the legal representative of Constructora y Maquinaria España, he said that was a mistake, that he never signed anything related to that business.

**Tres Kiebres vs. the Zetas**

Javier grew up evangelical, attending a Seventh Day Adventist church, and he spends a lot of time making religious references. He says “praise God” (“primero Dios”) to practically everyone he greets. And in more reflective moments, he talks about the end of his own life.

“I would prefer to die a painful death than painless one,” he told me as we driving through the city. “Because when you are suffering is when you are reminded of God.”

Javier no longer goes to church, but he says he adheres to its core tenants, including the idea of the second coming of Christ, in which the true believers are whisked to heaven and 1,000 years of peace follows. Still, he has trouble reconciling his need to carry a weapon and his religious background.

“If you have enemies, and they want to hurt you, it's difficult to hand yourself over to God’s will because at some point, when they are attacking you, you're going to have to defend yourself,” he said.
Javier’s wrestling match with God comes, in part, from the death of those close to him and his own near-death experiences. On June 25, 2010, an armed group intercepted España and killed him and four others. The murder was never resolved, but seemed to be part of a huge shake up in the Guatemalan underworld at the time.

In 2008, the Zetas had ambushed and killed Juancho León, then one of the country’s top traffickers. Later that year, they had attacked the Huistas. And in May 2010, the Mexican criminal organization had gone on a legendary rampage in which they killed León’s brother, Haroldo, and massacred 28 of his workers. A few days later, they had murdered a prosecutor in the headquarters, Cobán, then cut him into pieces and left him in a bag in front of the prosecutor’s office. Then came España’s murder.

Around this time, Javier says he started receiving phone calls from someone identifying himself as “Comandante 200.” Commander 200, he says, asked him for $350,000 “for the company.”

“What company?” Javier said.

“The Zetas,” Commander 200 responded.

“And if I don’t pay?” Javier said.

“I will kill you,” Commander 200 replied.

Javier said the Zeta then referenced the information available on Guatecompras about his government contracts.

“These are very sophisticated people,” he told me later. “They have good logistics. And it was pretty easy to see in Guatecompras who had a big project and who didn’t. And I told him that I wasn’t going to pay.”

"When they started to launch grenades, I can remember my eardrums exploding."

The Zetas had a different strategy. They were not interested in winning government contracts, only in controlling territory, so they could extort from both legal and illegal businesses. And in order to control the border with Honduras and El Salvador, the Zetas had teamed with a local strongman named Jairo Orellana, alias “El Pelón,” or “Baldie.”

Orellana’s ambition outstripped most, as did his reputation for violence. His territory included Zacapa where Javier had his lucrative potable water project. After España’s murder, Javier says one of España’s former partners told Orellana that Javier wanted to kill him, so when Javier and his bodyguards went to check on the project, El Pelón and his entourage of Zetas were waiting for him.

“When they started to launch grenades, I can remember my eardrums exploding,” Javier recalled.

He says the Zetas had about a dozen cars, and that more than 30 armed men were firing automatic weapons. Javier and his own contingent of about a dozen bodyguards
shot back. The fighting continued for a long time -- 40 minutes, Javier said. When he ran out of bullets, he said he hit the automatic locks, slumped down on the floor of his bulletproof car and prayed. Javier said that at some point he grabbed the phone and dialed his wife.

“They’re shooting at us. I think they’re going to kill us. I want you to take care of the girls. Protect them. I’m leaving [this world]. I want to go out in peace...”

He cried. She cried. Then, Javier said, “God appeared.” More precisely, a small contingent of the army that Javier says happened to be coming through the area saw the melee and began firing in the direction of the Zetas who picked up their wounded and their dead, and left.

“The power of God,” Javier told me later. “They had picked up munitions from a cargo in Puerto Barrios. And they arrived, and bam, they started taking fire. And [the Zetas] left us there. There were only three [soldiers]: the guy who was driving and two others in the back.”

Javier survived the attack in Zacapa, but three of his bodyguards were dead. He later blamed the Zetas and Jairo Orellana for the assault. The message was clear, and Javier knew he had to change strategies.

**Tres Kiebres and the DEA**

Javier kept the bulletproof pickup that saved his life. It sits on one of his properties, with the same bullet holes and broken glass that fell on him during those eternal 40 minutes of fighting. But the attack left his reputation in tatters and put him on the run. The Zetas were clearing the path, and he needed to find new allies.

“So, I started to look for help,” he told me. “I looked for help, which was around the time [authorities] were connecting me to drug trafficking, which I didn’t like. So I called a friend in the United States and I asked him to put me in touch with the DEA,” the US Drug Enforcement Administration.

Javier says that the friend, whom he did not identify, actually did put him touch with the DEA. It is a strange story, and while attempting to verify it, InSight Crime heard another version: that Javier contacted the DEA from jail after he and several others got arrested following the battle with the Zetas in 2010. Court records obtained by InSight Crime show that Javier and three
others were arrested for “illicit association,” homicide and being in possession of weapons of “the exclusive domain of the army.” But they also show that the charges were dismissed. In either case, Javier says that he eventually had a meeting with the DEA. The agent reminded Javier that he had appeared on their radar as a drug trafficker. But Javier was not deterred.

“I told them that I was at their service, that if they needed me to clarify anything, whatever they wanted,” he told me.

“And so,” he paused. “We started to work with them.”

What that meant in practice was meeting with his DEA handlers in the parking lot of the McDonald’s, he says, about a kilometer from the US embassy in one of the swankiest neighborhoods in Guatemala City. There Javier says he provided the telephone numbers, the ones that “Comandante 200” and other Zetas used to call and extort him.

“I started to give them information. And they would intercept telephone calls and grab them [the Zetas],” he told me. “Es un big deal.”

The story would be outrageous were it not for the details that Javier provides. To prove he was telling the truth, he gave InSight Crime the names and contact numbers of his handlers, both of whom were working in Guatemala at the time. InSight Crime contacted the DEA, but it refused to comment. A former high-ranking Guatemalan government official who asked to remain anonymous, however, corroborated at least part of Javier’s account of two high-profile incidents involving the now mayor of Ipala.

In one instance, Javier says he helped them positively identify a Zetas suspect following a raid. (Javier asked that we not use the suspect’s name because he fears retribution.) News reports showed that the suspect was captured at the time Javier said he was; he was wanted in the United States, which asked for his extradition. For his part, the former Guatemalan government official, who also participated in the operation that led to that suspect’s capture, said the DEA did participate using an informant, but he could not confirm that it was Javier.

In another instance, Javier said the DEA asked him to move dollars through Western Union instead of a buying it from a bank, so they could track the movement of money moving through the service, which they believed was being unlawfully used. He agreed, saying he needed dollars anyway to pay off a John Deere tractor he had recently purchased. But after he got the money -- some $12,000 -- Guatemalan authorities stopped him and questioned him about the large amount of cash in his car. Javier said he pleaded with them to call the DEA. And the former Guatemalan official who spoke to InSight Crime about the case said they released Javier following a conversation with their foreign counterparts.
Other parts of Javier’s story were impossible to verify. For instance, he said he signed a contract with the DEA and that the DEA gave him money in chunks of $2,000 or $3,000 for what he called “operations.” But it was impossible to verify the payments, and Javier said he did not have a copy of the contract.

Throughout, he says he kept his family away from Ipala, while he slept in the “mountains.”

Over time, the DEA and the Guatemalan government dismantled the Zetas. Dozens were arrested in Guatemala, including “Comandante 200,” whose real name was Mauricio Guizar Cárdenas.

Javier, meanwhile, prepared for his leap into politics, needling his DEA handlers about the rumors concerning his own involvement in drug trafficking.

“Do you think that I’m so much smarter than you that you can’t get me for drug trafficking?” he said he asked them at one point.

Javier said that they simply laughed.

**Tres Kiebres, the Candidate**

Javier knew politics in Chiquimula was a full contact sport long before he decided to launch his candidacy for mayor in 2015. He was leaving the gym in 2010 when he says several men in an SUV drove by, firing automatic weapons. They missed, he said, because he hid behind his car door, which is bulletproof and absorbed some of the shots.

Javier blamed Baudilio Hichos for the attack. Hichos is a former Treasury Guard turned Guatemalan congressman who had created a fiefdom of sorts in the eastern part of the country during his seven congressional terms. The congressman, Javier said, had hired hitmen from the neighboring municipality to attack him because he was threatening Hichos’ monopoly on cable TV services in the area.

Javier owns a small cable TV and Internet service. It is a dangerous business. Javier says that Hichos killed the former owner of the cable company he now runs. It was one of many unfounded accusations he makes against Hichos, whom he calls “the biggest criminal in history.”

Not surprisingly, Hichos’ power came from his near total control of the government contracts in the area and his penchant for giving important government positions to his relatives. Nine members of his family once held government posts. Hichos was also a key political operative who helped fix judicial bodies in favor of specific interests, including his own. He had connections to suspected drug traffickers, such as Yovani España, and was tied to death squads during the country’s brutal 40-year civil war.
In the Ipala mayoral race in 2015, Hichos and his political party Líder, backed Roel Pérez, a career politician who had been mayor since the early 1990s. Ironically, it was Pérez who had given Javier's company, Constructora 3K, its first municipal contract. According to the government registry Guatecompras, those contracts totaled over 73 million quetzals ($10 million) for 190 projects between 2008 and 2014.

But politics had, quite literally, become war in Chiquimula. In 2015, Javier gathered some of his childhood friends and others from the area. They created a political vehicle they called the Ipala Free and Active Movement ( Movimiento Ipalteco Libre y Pensamiento Activo – MILPA), a clever connection to the Spanish word for corn, the staple of Guatemala’s diet and, for many, their spiritual life.

The idea was to influence the political process through civic engagement. But Javier says that people begged him to go beyond activism and run for mayor. Many saw Pérez as just an extension of the corrupt Hichos’ fiefdom. Pérez had been mayor five times before becoming governor of the Chiquimula department in 2013. Javier and others accused Pérez of corruption and said the municipality was in debt because of a bloated budget, which included a large payroll full of patronage jobs.

During the campaign, Pérez struggled to get his footing in part because of problems in his political party. The Patriot Party (Partido Patriota - PP) -- which controlled the presidency -- imploded in May 2015, when accusations of corruption against Vice President Roxana Baldetti led to her resignation. President Otto Pérez Molina resigned a few months later.
Roel Pérez switched parties to Líder, but it too faced questions and eventually charges of money laundering at the highest levels. Javier, on the other hand, surged once he officially entered the race. His slogan -- “Delivering, Not Promising” (“Cumpliendo, No Prometiendo”) – was cliché but effective.

On June 3, Pérez dropped from the race. In a Facebook post, he blamed it on security concerns.

“Beginning a few weeks ago, I started receiving death threats,” Pérez wrote. “For my family’s welfare, especially my children, I have made this difficult decision.”

Pérez finished the social media missive by thanking Hichos for his support. InSight Crime reached out to Pérez, but he did not respond to our request for an interview.

For his part, Javier denied that he had threatened Pérez. He said Pérez dropped out because he knew he was going to lose.

“I had a fight with him,” Javier told me. “I just wanted to run for office. It’s a duty we have as citizens. You can’t take that away from us. But he was jealous, and he knew he was going to lose. So he dropped out because of the momentum I had, and then he said I was trying to kill him.”

Things soon got uglier. In July, the CICIG published a report on illicit financing of political campaigns. The report highlighted Hichos’ criminal network, as well as the connections between Pérez and Hichos’ party, Líder, and an accused money launderer who went by the nickname “Chico Dólar,” or “Francisco Money,” and was connected to the party’s candidate for vice president.

However, the report also mentioned Javier to illustrate how criminal groups have moved beyond simply wanting political connections for protection from prosecution to wanting political connections -- and power -- to help them bolster their businesses, particularly “construction companies” that can benefit from public works projects. To be sure, Javier was only one of many would-be mayors with political and business ties to the municipalities. A report by elPeriódico after the 2015 elections showed that 78 of the 338 mayors elected in 2015, had received government contracts at some point.

But Javier got most of the attention and infamy. A government intelligence report obtained by InSight Crime showed Javier in the middle of an elaborate network of drug traffickers operating in Guatemala and Honduras.

“Well, I’m not sure what’s going on,” he said, returning to the word ‘narco.’ “To me, that’s a harsh word. Here, you have money, and you are a ‘narco.’”

Media reports said four other candidates also dropped from the Ipala race. Javier got 78 percent of the vote and became mayor. Hichos was indicted for corruption and went on the run.
Tres Kiebres: The Reality Show

Javier is still largely a local figure, but not for lack of trying. Just prior to the elections, a photo surfaced showing him with current Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales when neither was a politician. Javier said his cable company had brought Morales to town for an event when Morales had his variety television show with his twin brother.

“There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s not like it’s illegal,” Javier told me when I asked him about it. “What’s wrong with the fact that I met him when he was a comedian?”

President Morales, of course, has since had his own run-in with the CICIG. In August, the UN-backed commission announced it and the Attorney General’s Office were investigating possible illegal contributions to various campaigns in 2015, including that of Morales. Morales responded by trying to expel CICIG Commissioner Ivan Velásquez, who is Colombian, from the country, but the Constitutional Court blocked the president.

Javier does not appear to have any role in the Morales case, either as funder or informant. But he has continued to offer his services to law enforcement. The DEA, he says, has rejected his more recent overtures. Representatives of the Interior Ministry told me Javier had also offered the use of his fiber optic network to install government security cameras in Ipala. Renting security cameras to the federal government is a lucrative business, but the ministry rejected Javier’s offer as well.

However, it is on the local level that Javier shines. In the town hall meeting, the participants peppered the mayor with complaints about roads, traffic accidents, water supply, food programs and corruption in the capital city. Javier listened, and responded with patience and understanding. He was not playing a politician. He is a natural.

“I would be lying if I told you that I was going to be able to fix 100 percent of the roads,” he confessed at one point.

Crime, drug trafficking, and violence were not part of the agenda. And no one seemed to be genuinely worried about it or about the accusations against their
mayor. After the meeting, one woman said it did not bother her, and that it was none of her business anyway. Another said it wasn’t an issue, that the attacks were about “jealousy” because of Javier’s success in business.

A third person, one of Javier’s childhood friends who helped him form the political vehicle MILPA and is now a city councilman, said the attacks on Javier were part of a campaign of defamation. Another of his allies decried the hypocrisy and wondered why the CICIG was targeting him and not the prior governments that stole the money from the municipal coffers.

“This guy we have as mayor has done more in a year than all the others did in 25 years,” Armando Rodríguez Guerra, a neighborhood association leader, said.

The municipality filmed the town hall meeting and transmitted it via Javier’s local cable television company. He has placed cameras all over city hall. The images are shown on a rotating basis on the same cable access channel that broadcast the meeting. One camera sits just over the shoulder of the treasurer.

“Well, your whole life is broadcast,” Javier told me after the meeting.

He says there have been no complaints so far.

“If you have a wife, and you know she is right behind you, you’re not going to cheat on her. You’re going to act like a good little boy. And if a woman tempts you, you just going to glance at her, nothing more,” he said. “So this is a way to pressure people to do what they need to do.”
The cable company was the only one Javier says he still runs. He says he sold half of his machinery and shut down Constructora 3K, although a review of Guatecompras shows the company is still listed as “active.” Javier said the registry never really shows when a company stops its operations.

In essence, Javier has made the mayor’s office a construction company. It is does not do an open bidding process through Guatecompras. Instead, it contracts the personnel from architects and engineers to drivers and bricklayers; it buys the materials; it rents the machinery; it executes the project. He calls it “la empresa municipal.” And Javier claims he has done projects for one-fifteenth of what it have normally cost and in a fifth of the time.

“I am saving money for the municipality. I am starting more projects, working five times harder. To lay a cubic meter of pavement via Guatecompras cost 600 quetzals,” or about $82, he explained, returning to his lingua franca, construction. “We can do it for 145 quetzals [$20], even with the sand and rocks, and everything else we use.”

During the two vists I made to Ipala, the mayor took me to see some of his office’s public works projects, which included a housing unit, a drainage system and a bridge. Throughout, Javier continued to throw out numbers and calculations for cement and machinery and labor. The conclusion was always the same: “I am like a hero,” he told me without a hint of irony.

As we walked around the town, people approached from all sides, shaking his hand, asking for his help, and offering him their services. For being a suspected drug trafficker, Javier does have a self-deprecating and very welcoming way about him. He carried a weapon, but he did not have any bodyguards the two times I saw him. On the contrary: he says he provides protection, that distraught wives call him at all hours of the night, asking for help when their husbands come home drunk and violent, or requesting assistance to buy medicine or milk for their children.

“I have a great way with people. I am polite. Above all, I am a person who is very, very polite. Respectful,” he told me.

Back at the town hall, in front of the large crowd six deep, Javier’s assistant showed a promotional video in which residents of Ipala were inaugurating a paved road. In the video, the residents pay homage to Javier, who thanks them in return. The narrator then says the event ended with soft drinks, music and dancing.
At one point, Javier appears on the screen dancing with an elderly man. The crowd burst out laughing.

“The old-timer asked me where all the women were,” Javier told the crowd. “And he wanted to dance with me, and I couldn’t refuse.”

The promotional video ends as the narrator says, “Ipala city hall, working for the people.”

A huge smile spread across the mayor’s face.

* This investigation was done with the assistance of Sweden. Additional reporting by Felipe Puerta. This is part of a three part series on mayors in the Northern Triangle.
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