



Language

Panama has long been of key interest to the USA because of the Panama Canal, but in the 1970s the US Administration agreed to transfer its direct control over the Canal to the Panama government – the handover occurred in October 1979. At the time Panama was effectively under the military rule of Omar Torrijos who had promised presidential elections in 1984. After Torrijos died in a plane crash in July 1981, power remained with the military, passing to Manuel Noriega. He bribed the Supreme Court judges to rule that Nicolas Barletta had won the 1984 presidential elections and then later forced Barletta to resign when he proposed to investigate the 1985 assassination (indeed brutal decapitation) of regime critic and former health minister, Hugo Spadafora. Since 1984, opposition groups had begun to cooperate more closely and broaden their base of support, but what triggered public protest in 1987 were the accusations broadcast by the military head of staff – forced into retirement by Noriega – that Noriega was responsible for a bomb causing Torrijos' plane crash, had stolen the presidential elections, and had ordered the murder of Spadafora.

The US government initially backed Noriega, who had been on the CIA's payroll since 1967. They had tolerated his money laundering and links with the Medellin drug cartel, but after he refused to offer sanctuary to Ferdinand Marcos from the Philippines and when he ceased supporting the Contras' efforts to bring down the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, Washington began to seek better options.

There were mass strikes and demonstrations in Panama in February/March 1988, partly prompted by the economic conditions created by sanctions. The opposition parties (supported by US President George Bush) chose candidates to oppose Noriega in the May 1989 elections, and won a large majority. But Noriega refused to go. Troops fired on mass demonstrations in support of the opposition candidates and a general strike called on 17 May fizzled out. The US gave up hope of internal change and invaded in December 1989.

Arias Calderon, Ricardo, [Panama: Disaster or democracy?](#) [1], Foreign Affairs, Vol. 66, issue Winter 1987/88, 1987, pp. 328-347

The President of the Christian Democratic Party discusses the 1987 National Civic Crusade to coordinate the protest movements and formulate its key demands: for justice, removal of Noriega and democratization. Explains background to protests, notes the 1,500 arrests and numerous shootings of protesters, and comments on changing attitudes inside the USA.

Buckley, Kevin, [Panama: The Whole Story](#) [2], New York, Simon and Schuster, 1991, pp. 304

Rather sensationalist account by journalist focusing on events from the 1985 coup to the US invasion, but stressing the role of Noriega and the Panama Defence Force. Includes descriptions of popular resistance as well as elite manoeuvres.

Eisenmann, Roberto, [The struggle against Noriega](#) [3], Journal of Democracy, Vol. 1, issue 1 (winter), 1990, pp. 41-46

Editor of *La Prensa*, Panama's leading daily, looks at the role of Panama's people and the organized opposition, in article written before US invasion.

Koster, R.M. ; Sanchez, Guillermo, [In the Time of the Tyrants: Panama 1968-1990](#) [4], New York, W.W. Norton, 1990, pp. 430



The authors, Panamanian journalists, were both forced to leave the country.

Scranton, Margaret E., [The Noriega Years: US-Panama Relations 1981-1990](#) [5], Boulder CO, Lynne Rienner, 1991, pp. 245

Charts the sharp changes in US policy from collaboration with Noriega 1981-87, and the decisions to oust him, 1987-89, and to invade October-December 1989. Also describes evolving internal politics, including elections and popular strikes and demonstrations.

Weeks, John ; Zimbalist, Andrew, [The failure of intervention in Panama: Humiliation in the backyard](#) [6], Third World Quarterly, Vol. 11, issue 1 (January), 1989, pp. 1-27

Explores from leftist perspective failure of Reagan Administration to overthrow Noriega in spring 1988 and reasons why US turned against Noriega. Argues also that the internal opposition led by isolated upper class elite and 1988 protests indicated limits of its effectiveness. The authors accept that the July-August 1987 demonstrations did mobilize workers and peasants, but suggest that they were responding to the arrest of a popular politician and expressing popular resentment of World Bank-directed economic policies, rather than specifically opposing Noriega.

See also:

Sharon Erickson Nepstad, [Nonviolent Revolutions: Civil Resistance in the Late Twentieth Century](#) [7], ([A. 1.b. Strategic Theory, Dynamics, Methods and Movements](#) [8]), pp. 59-74.

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