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GUATEMALA CITY -- Rights groups condemned a Guatemalan court's decision to let an ex-dictator accused of ordering civil war massacres run for president in November.

"Amnesty International is gravely concerned that human rights protection under a Rios Montt government could deteriorate further still," said Roddy Brett, Guatemala campaign coordinator for the London-based rights watchdog group.

The Constitutional Court, the highest in the land, ruled Monday that retired Gen. Efraim Rios Montt could run for the ruling Guatemalan Republican Front despite a constitutional ban on ex-dictators standing for president.

Magistrates voted 4 to 3 in Rios Montt's favor, agreeing with his argument that the article in the 1985 constitution did not apply, as it was created after his 1982-83 presidency.

Rios Montt headed a government set up by young officers who seized power during a civil war in which about 200,000 people died. A U.S.-backed anti-rebel drive was particularly brutal during Rios Montt's rule. Fighting ended in 1996.

Now gray-haired and bespectacled, Rios Montt denies ordering massacres of suspected guerrilla sympathizers, many of them Maya Indians, during his time in office.

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