

A Look Back at South Florida's First Female United States Attorney

By: Maria A. Fehretdinov



At the end of Women's History Month, U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Florida Ariana Fajardo Orshan stepped down "as is commonplace when a new president enters the White House," she stated. Her past two and a half years leading prosecutions in South Florida were not only ground-breaking in the cases that she oversaw but also in that she was the first Senate-confirmed woman ever to lead the Office. Attorney Orshan's challenging term started on September 18, 2018, after being nominated by former President Trump and just before the longest federal government shutdown in history, only to be followed by the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2019. When she spoke to the Florida Chapter of the Women's White Collar Defense Association, Attorney Orshan discussed how her unconventional background (as she has never been a federal prosecutor) primed her for the challenges at her new position as she felt compelled to surround herself with capable, long-term career attorneys at the office that could guide her, along with diverse executives that represented the community she oversaw. In the end, Attorney Orshan oversaw some of the most noteworthy prosecutions, including obtaining a guilty verdict and life prison sentence for the Mexican drug cartel leader Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman; uncovering a \$1 billion investment pyramid scheme; and charging various foreign politicians with corruption and money laundering, including the Economics Minister of Guatemala, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Venezuela, and Venezuela's Minister of Electrical Energy. Her office seized \$450 million in currency and assets from foreign corrupt actors alone. She also faced the deadly violence at the nation's capital on January 6 and two Miami FBI agents who were tragically killed in the line of duty. During her term, she hired over 90 new prosecutors, including the first Haitian Americans to serve in the office. The COVID pandemic not only made the integration of new attorneys more difficult but the Justice Department's policy that forbids attorneys from taking home their office computers with sensitive information also made the transition especially challenging. Finally, she created a new money laundering section to investigate the millions flowing into South Florida's banking and real estate sectors from foreign corruption and embezzlement.

While Attorney Orshan is still weighing her options for where she can best "contribute next," she may return to the judicial bench.

With Mr. Juan Antonio Gonzalez leading the office as the Acting U.S. Attorney, the search is now underway to find a replacement at a time where rampant fraud, prompted by significant federal disbursement of COVID relief funds, and a backlog of criminal trials, on account of the court closures, await the next U.S. Attorney. The list of possible successors includes Matthew Dates, of Stearns Weaver Miller, P.A., along with Jacqueline Arango, Markenzy Lapointe, Andres Rivero, Cristina Perez Soto, David Buckner, Michael Hantman and Dave Aronberg.