

6-26-2003

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Guatemalan Electoral Season Begins." (2003). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9105>

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Guatemalan Electoral Season Begins

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Guatemala

Published: 2003-06-26

Efraín Ríos Montt intends to run for president of Guatemala in elections scheduled for November 2003. If he runs for the office, it will be the first time he has run, but the third time he has attempted to run. If he wins, this will be his second presidency, but the first time he was elected. The former general held the office of president from March 1982 to August 1983 following a coup that unseated President Romeo Lucas García (see NotiCen, 2000-03-30). His term ended when he suffered the same fate. Since that time, he has made his way almost to the top of his country's political pyramid; he is now leader of the ruling Frente Republicana Guatemalteco (FRG) and president of the Congreso Nacional.

Twice before, in 1990 and 1995, Ríos Montt attempted to get on the ballot for president (see NotiCen, 1999-03-04), but was turned away by decisions of the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) that found him ineligible because Article 86 of the Constitution forbids the office to one who formerly took power by coup. He argued that the provisions of the 1985 Constitution could not be applied *ex post facto* to his 1982 assumption of power. He has also argued that he did not execute the coup, but rather was appointed by those who did. The courts, as well as the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE), have repeatedly rejected his view of history.

After suffering similar treatment this time around in the lower courts and the TSE, Ríos Montt appealed twice to the CSJ. The court first rejected his petition to overturn the TSE's decision. In a second go-round, the court took up the legality of his candidacy. An anticipated date of June 25 for a decision from the court came and went without word, and now a decision is expected the first week in July. An unfavorable judgment from the CSJ will not end the Ríos Montt campaign. The general can still appeal to the Corte de Constitucionalidad (CC), Guatemala's highest court.

The general's appeal to voters is that he was able, during his short presidency, to end street crime and generalized lawlessness. That he did this with extrajudicial executions and a program of state terrorism was not a concern for many citizens afraid to leave their homes. Guatemala is in similar straits today, and the old soldier sees his prospects rising, even though it is his own party that is in power now. His electoral hopes hinge on a populace that blames his surrogate, President Alfonso Portillo, for the current state of ungovernability (see NotiCen, 2003-01-30).

The campaign so far

The affable septuagenarian gives every indication that he is still as ruthless as ever. On June 14, he made a campaign trip to Rabinal, a town in Baja Verapaz where survivors and relatives of victims of wartime massacre live side by side with former members of the Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil (PAC) who carried out the mayhem. Ríos is popular with ex-PAC members, both because he spawned them in connection with his scorched-earth policies and because he has promised them, though not yet delivered, handsome remuneration for their service. His visit was a typical political

rally complete with banners, balloons, and speeches from a stage raised for the occasion. And it was simultaneous with the ceremonial burial of the remains of 70 victims of the civil war.

These were people killed between 1981 and 1983 and whose deaths are attributed to the regimes of Rios Montt and Lucas Garcia. Ignoring warnings to stay away from the rally, outraged mourners, emerging from an all-night wake, marched the caskets to the front row of the crowd at the rally, and, while FRG members sang their general's praises from the podium, the survivors and relatives yelled "murderers." A scuffle broke out when an FRG deputy, Juan Santa Cruz, and his wife attacked a news photographer after exhortations from their followers to "throw the foreigners out of the country, they brainwash us and steal our children," and the locals ran to defend the assembled press. When calm returned, it was assumed the rally was over, but FRG strategists thought it an opportune time for Rios Montt to speak.

Not surprisingly, the general's discourse further incited the crowd. When he said, "In every war, there are victims. I consider them all my children, but Guatemala is as it is because there is no tolerance," they rushed the podium caskets in tow and began to hurl rocks at the candidate. Bodyguards plucked their leader bodily from the dais, scurried to a waiting car, and sped away.

Among the injured were some attendees and journalists, and Rios himself, who was hit on the head with a stick. Trouble on the campaign trail that day did not end in Rabinal. Bruised but undaunted, the general headed for nearby Cubulco, from where ex-PAC members had been bussed to Rabinal and where Rios expected better treatment. But the PAC men turned against their patron and began to agitate for their promised payment for past services, calling their former leader a liar. Analysts interpreted the day's events as harbingers of things to come and predicted a violent campaign season.

Political leaders said the violence was a manifestation of rejection of the administration. "It is the rejection and repudiation of the population of the official party and its leadership," said Otto Perez Molina, leader of the Gana alliance and himself a former general. Said Democracia Cristiana (DC) presidential candidate Ricardo Bueso, "We can't accept that the Guatemalans react in this way," while secretary general of the Partido de Avanzada Nacional (PAN) Leonel Lopez Rodas opined, "If someone tries to be a candidate in violation of the law, he is also allowing for a lack of respect." Perhaps the most hopeful result of Rios Montt's current pretensions and peregrinations is that on June 25 the Organization of American States (OAS) moved to secure an agreement against violence among the parties for the coming campaign.

OAS coordinator of the Program of Democratic Values Eduardo Nunez said, "It is necessary to diminish the political tensions and stop the confrontation, with the aim of avoiding that the next electoral process become tarnished by violence." The plan is to promote a "nonaggression pact" among the leaders of the parties and try to steer them away from dirty campaigns.

The Nov. 9 exercise will elect not only a president, but also an entire Congress of 158 members and local authorities in 331 municipalities. In total, the TSE says 25,000 candidates will vie for 3,696 offices. There will be at least 10 presidential candidates.

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