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Guatemala's Elections Set; Leftist Alvaro Colom Leads Presidential Pack

by Mike Leffert

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Guatemala's Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) has set Sept. 9 as the date for general elections and Nov. 4 as the date for a second round, if needed. The country will elect a president, vice president, 158 deputies to the unicameral legislature, 20 to the Parlamento Centroamericano (Parlacen), and 332 mayors. Polls indicate that Alvaro Colom of the Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE) is the leading presidential candidate with 26.50% of the intended vote.

In second place is Otto Perez Molina of the Partido Patriotica (PP) with 10.08%, in a technical tie with Alejandro Giammattei of the Gran Alianza Nacional (GANNA) with 9.58%. Trailing badly in the 14-candidate field is Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu, with 2.75. The center-left Colom has picked up ground in this late-April Vox Latina survey for Prensa Libre, the second of ten scheduled surveys.

The first poll in March found him leading right-wing Perez Molina by just 10.71 points. As is frequently the case in the highly stratified society that is Guatemala, voting preference breaks down along ethnic, age, income, and regional lines. Colom is strongest in the rural areas of the north and south, where younger voters, between 18 and 35 years of age, favor him. Indigenous groups and the poor tend toward Colom. Perez Molina finds his most solid support among Ladinos of the better educated, higher paid middle classes, the same demographic to which GANNA's Giammattei appeals, hence the statistical tie. Among supporters for the three top candidates, there were no significant gender differences.

Analyst Fernando Molina, political scientist at the Universidad de San Carlos (USAC), noted that GANNA is showing increasing strength against the PP, and he attributed the narrowing gap to the fact that GANNA, as the official party, is better organized. Among poll respondents, 10.58% thought GANNA was best organized and 8.42% thought it was the PP, while 25.50% gave best-organization credit to UNE. However, 40.41% thought none of the parties had much to crow about on that score.

The leader's campaign strategy

Colom, a center-leftist, was beaten by GANNA candidate Oscar Berger in the 2003 elections. If any candidate can claim a broad base, it is he. Indigenous voters go for him in part because he is a Mayan priest, having studied the indigenous cosmivision under the guidance of the priest Cirilo Perez Oxjal, a respected Quiche leader and former president of the Consejo Continental de Ancianos de America. His wife, Sandra Torres, is a maquila manager.

Last time around, Colom had the support of Rolando Morales, leader of the Organizacion Revolucionaria de Pueblo Armado (ORPA), one of the fighting units of the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional de Guatemala (URNG), and a 1999 presidential candidate. Balancing that, he had several

Army officers including Col. Mario Merida, former director of D-2, the intelligence unit. In the present campaign, Colom is reaching out to the business community, always a significant player in elections and a source of some support in 2003 (see 2003-07-24).

He has taken his plan for governing to the Camara de Comercio de Guatemala (CCG), where he promised no new taxes and laid out a four pronged approach: solidarity, national productivity, governability, and regionality. Colom told this audience that in the first year he would concentrate on improving the quality of investment in the country and, in the second, on fiscal policy. He said that none of his party's legislative deputies would have a place in the executive or in any state agency. He also promised that, if he loses this, his third election, he would not run again.

His first outing was as the 1999 candidate of the Alianza Nueva Nacion (ANN). He fared poorly, finishing with less than 5% of the total vote (see NotiCen 1999-09-23). On security matters, Colom said he had been studying the lack of security that has plagued Guatemala to the detriment of the citizenry and international investment, and he has identified 27 "red zones," wherein he can identify by name and address the heads of organized crime.

He told the CCG members, "We have a daily and weekly plan for the first eight months" of his presidency to deal with them. The CCG members told Colom of their concerns about corruption and transparency in government, the so-called peace tax (IETAP), maritime trade issues, the informal sector, and others. Colom replied, "We have planned a transparency mechanism that is going to make waves, and our plan is to reduce corruption to a minimum." The candidate must tread a fine line here, since corruption is endemic to doing business in Guatemala.

Tailored to that specific audience, Colom's presentation left out some other prongs. At a May 6 party convocation at which he was proclaimed UNE's official candidate, he told thousands of supporters that national reconciliation, security, education, job creation, economic development, and improved health service would be his government's priorities. On hand at the convocation were some luminaries from elsewhere in the isthmus, including from the leftist Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) in El Salvador and the ruling Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) in Nicaragua. Also present were officials of the official Partido Revolucionario Democratico (PRD) of Panama.

In a magazine interview, Colom named the late US President John F. Kennedy and Argentina's Eva Peron as people he admired. He said he favors the death penalty if that is the law and is against abortion. Colom's running mate will be Rafael Espada, a cardiologist.

The vice presidential hopeful told the party members he had diagnosed what ails Guatemala, unjust poverty, corruption, insecurity, infant mortality, malnutrition, hospitals without equipment, empty classrooms, abandoned elderly, and irresponsible authorities. "A firm hand is not needed," he said, "because we have strong hearts."

Probable run off

Though comfortably ahead in the polls, Colom said he does not expect to win in the first round, making Otto Perez Molina and Alejandro Giammattei more formidable than they currently appear. To win in the first round, a candidate must receive 50% plus one votes. He is alert to the possibility of fraud in the election and has said he would field an army of observers to keep the election honest. Colom does, however, predict his party will win 60 seats in the legislature, although it was difficult to decide which candidates would place high on the party's national list, the ones who would be swept in by the percentage of the vote the party gets.

The higher on the list, the more certain the seat. "There was a conflict, elbowing, and personal ambition to occupy the first seats," he admitted. He was especially pleased to point out an exception, Giovanni Tobar, secretary general of the party's youth component. Tobar won 11th position. "When you don't have money or a political pedigree, it is more difficult to occupy a good space, but I feel happy because I got there by work," said Tobar.

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