

8-2-2007

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Recommended Citation

Leffert, Mike. "Guatemalan Elections Near, Colom Increases a Shaky Lead." (2007). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9531>

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Guatemalan Elections Near, Colom Increases a Shaky Lead

by Mike Leffert

Category/Department: Guatemala

Published: 2007-08-02

With just a few ticks left until Guatemala's electoral clock strikes September 9, center-left presidential candidate Alvaro Colom continues to gather momentum toward a first-place finish. One poll, released July 30 shows Colom more than ten points ahead of his nearest rival, the rightwing former general Otto Perez Molina. The Borge & Asociados poll found 33% of voters intending to cast their lot with the Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza's (UNE) Colom. 23.1% intend to go with Perez and his Partido Patriota (PP). Alejandro Giammattei of the governing Gran Alianza Nacional (GAN) trails in third place with 8.9%. Although the Borge poll of 1,008 Guatemalans who plan to vote also gives the edge to Colom in a runoff, Colom is not guaranteed the presidency at this point.

The poll says that in a second round made necessary by Colom's failure to get more than 50% of the vote in the first, he would get 52% to Perez Molina's 38%. But the poll was taken between July 13 and 22, before some things with the potential to shake voter confidence in Colom happened.

UNE caught in a downpour of ugly incidents

The first was that the UNE members of the legislative foreign affairs committee voted to defeat the creation of the Comision Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala (CICIG) (see NotiCen, 2007-07-19). Colom was fervently pro-CICIG, and his inability to bring his own party along was not reassuring to an electorate fed up with can't-do presidencies. The betrayal eventually went for naught, however. On Aug. 1, the full legislature passed the bill creating CICIG. The country will, for at least two years, have a UN-led commission that will look deeply into illegal security groups and clandestine organizations, their structure, their financial sources, their modus operandi, and their links to the state. The state will have the means to dismantle these organizations and prosecute their crimes, and Colom may have a face-saver.

The second blow to UNE confidence came with deputy Cesar Fajardo's expulsion from the party, accused of being linked to organized crime and holding private interests above the public good. Fajardo was a high-level member of the party; he was assistant secretary-general, the party's member on the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE), and holder of the number two position on the party's national list, a virtual free ride to reelection. And, Fajardo is Colom's personal lawyer. As a member of the legislative foreign relations committee, Fajardo and UNE deputy Jorge Giron voted with the opposition bloc led by the Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG), the party of former de facto President Efraim Rios Montt (1982-1983), to sink the CICIG bill.

After the government and human rights organizations denounced those who voted against CICIG as being linked to crime, Colom announced Fajardo's expulsion. It was later reported that Fajardo is under investigation for these connections. The editor of the daily newspaper La Hora, Oscar Clemente Marroquin, accused Fajardo of being behind an attempt to kill his son, Jose Carlos Marroquin, UNE's campaign strategy director.

A third attack on the party that could hurt Colom came from Rolando Morales, ex-friend of Colom, ex-president of Congress, and ex-member of UNE. Morales came forward to accuse Colom of being "corrupt and lacking in political standards." Morales accused him of having used public funds to pay for his security detail, and his wife Sandra de Colom of having solicited money, almost US\$2 million, from a nongovernmental organization.

Prior to this accusation, Colom had long been suspected of honesty linked to integrity, and his party has paid dearly to keep that image clean. Over a dozen UNE members have been murdered since March 2006. Marroquin's cars were bombed and machine-gunned in front of his house, leading him to the observation, "It's going to be a very bloody election."

A fourth and perhaps the worst blow to UNE came with the July 30 announcement from Interior Minister Adela de Torrebiarte that independent Deputy Manuel Castillo was the mastermind in the killings of three El Salvador Parlacen deputies (see NotiCen, 2007-02-22). This is a case of sufficient gravity to threaten relations between the two countries (see other story, this edition). Castillo is a former colleague of Colom, and is an independent deputy because he was kicked out of UNE for his alleged links to organized crime and narcotics smuggling. He is currently running for mayor of Jutiapa, the border town he calls home. He is running under the motto, "Whoever beats me, dies." The catchy phrase got the full attention of his PP opponent, who said he would go into hiding on Election Day.

While the poll was taken too late to capture the effect of most of this activity, it did break ground in some other respects. Commissioned by the newspaper El Periodico, it was the first to use a simulated paper ballot with the pictures of all 14 candidates and their running mates. The newspaper's analysis included projections based on the data. When respondents who said they didn't know whom they'd vote for, or who wouldn't vote for any candidate were excluded, Colom's numbers shot up to 41.2%, still short of a first round victory. Subjected to the same treatment, Perez's percentage rose to 27.9. Third place Giammattei got 10.2% Rigoberta Menchu's faltering fourth-place showing of 5.5% of the total vote ascended slightly to 5.9% with valid votes only. Menchu's vote has diminished since the last poll, while the candidates in the three top spots saw increases in their tallies.

Another recent poll, by Vox Latina for Prensa Libre, had different percentages, but the same order for the top three candidates. Colom was out front with 21.33% followed by Perez with 14.42%.

GANAs Giammattei had 8.17%. This poll had Eduardo Suger of Centro de Accion Social (CASA) in fourth with 2.50%, edging Menchu's 2.42%. Courting youth With a month and days to go, the candidates are still courting votes. The most desirable demographic is the youth vote, which comprises 46% of the total. No candidate seems to have a lock on it.

Media and political organizations have been appealing to this segment of the electorate in a variety of ways. Prensa Libre will stage a massive Voto por Guate event in the capital, at which nine of the presidential hopefuls will have 20 minutes each to appeal to potential young voters attracted to the Parque de la Industria by several local bands. The event appears to be aimed at university students, with the university-based organization Pilas con tu Voto a co-sponsor. A near-US\$2 admission fee will further define the crowd's characteristics. Giammattei in particular is appealing to this segment of the electorate. "The great challenge is that the voice of youth be heard," he told a recent campaign audience. "It doesn't matter if we are Mayas, Xincas or Garifunas, from the country or the city, the important thing is that the youth in the government of Alejandro Giammattei is going to generate their own proposals," he said.

As far as reporters could tell, however, there is no particular plan behind Giammattei's youth-positive rhetoric, no position papers floating around, no definitive policy statements or speeches. There is, however, data from the Prensa Libre poll showing Giammattei has a slight lead over the frontrunners among people with university degrees. The Prensa Libre-Pilas event is meant to be a get-out-the-vote civic exercise, but there is scant chance, say analysts, that candidates at this late date will be wasting rhetoric on any message other than "vote for me." "The 'ant plan' [the name of the campaign's strategy] has been fortified; that is to say, ask for the vote directly. So for the rest of the remaining time, the central message will be 'here I am, this is what I'm offering, vote for me,'" said Colom's strategist, Marroquin.

The other objective for the candidates is to look past the first round and get an early start on building up war chests for the runoff. Alejandro Sinibaldi, PP campaign manager, said that his candidate Otto Perez would be concentrating on meetings with civil society and business organizations to make direct pitches for money. "After [the first week of August] the final publicity campaign will be launched, in which Perez Molina will be seen closer to the people, appealing directly for votes," he said, but this campaign is, as never before, all about money. The leading UNE and PP have already exceeded spending limits imposed by the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE), according to an Aug. 1 report from the Mirador Electoral (ME), a watchdog agency composed of the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (Flacso), the Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Políticos (Incep), and others. ME spokesman Jose Davila said spending has exceeded the budgets the parties presented to the TSE.

As an example, Davila said the PP had presented the TSE a maximum budget of the equivalent of about US\$5 million, but has already spent US\$7.8 million. UNE and GANA have overspend in like proportion, said the report. The parties have denied the overspending, and the TSE seems too far

behind in its own monitoring to venture an opinion. TSE auditor general Hermelindo Mairén said he did not know the criteria used by the ME, "but in reports we have gotten we see that none of the parties has exceeded US\$2.4million." ME figures are based on monitoring of press, broadcast, and billboard billings provided by a private company, Publisearch.

Seeking maximum quake for the quetzal, the PP campaign will concentrate on populous urban areas of the country. The campaign anticipates spending about US\$2.5 million on billboards alone. The campaigns that have the resources will invest heavily on TV, radio, and print ads. Eduardo Suger's Centro de Accion Social will go for broke, upping expenditures by Q750,000 (about US\$100,000). Those who don't have it will invest time and energy in personal contact. This is how the Menchu campaign will spend the final weeks.

Campaign financing invites criminal participation

The scramble for money has increased anxieties over where it comes from, not just for the presidential candidates, but for the local and legislative candidates as well. Officials and analysts have charged that drug traffickers are supporting candidates at all levels, and particularly for mayorships in towns near the borders with Honduras and El Salvador. That support extends beyond money. More than 50 people have been killed in election-related incidents. "In the east there are at least four candidates up to their necks in links to the narcos," said Vice President Eduardo Stein. Elections monitor Francisco Garcia noted, "There are ambushes with automatic weapons, explosives, killing of entire groups at once. It shows there are mafia groups interested in gaining state power."

The narcotraffickers are seeking much the same thing as any business contributor would want, favorable treatment for their interests. Contributing to campaigns in key smuggling areas allows more trouble-free transport of product from Colombia through Guatemala to Mexico and the major market beyond. Said Iduvina Hernandez of Seguridad en Democracia (SEDEM), "There are candidates across all political parties, although they want to run for the two big parties doing best in the polls, UNE and PP." She said that when the elections are over, more than 25% of lawmakers will have received funding from criminal sources, and 15% of elected officials will be actual members of drug cartels. This comports with Stein's view that, "In some places where organized crime needs to operate with impunity they will finance candidates.

In addition, they want people directly linked to their criminal organizations to run for office." With that level of confidence in the outcome, the traffickers and criminals would seem to have a stake in seeing that the Sept 9 civic exercise goes off freely and fairly. But just in case, the European Union (EU) will be sending observers in response to requests from the government and local authorities. Brussels will dispatch an advance team of eight members to be followed by 48 more observers who

will be assigned to posts throughout the country. They will monitor pre-election campaign activities, and post-election procedures.

Another 50-observer group, composed of members of the European Parliament and diplomats from individual member countries will monitor voting, vote counting, and presentation of results. EU Commissioner for Foreign Affairs Benita Ferrera-Waldner said the initiative "reaffirms our commitment to the stability and development in Central America." It might also give the EU greater insight into whom they are dealing with in the ongoing negotiation of an association accord, read trade agreement, with Guatemala. The EU performed similar duties in Guatemala in the 2003 election.

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