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Guatemala Concludes Most Violent Electoral-campaign Season Ever

by Mike Leffert

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Guatemala's just-concluding electoral campaign ends on a historical note. Regardless of outcome, it will be remembered as the most violent in the nation's history. With still more than a week to go until election day, there have been about 48 murders and more than 50 attacks against candidates, activists, family members of these, and people who happened to be in the wrong place.

Political-party headquarters have figured among the wrong places. Front-running presidential candidate Alvaro Colom might have been expected to be upbeat as he looked forward to the Sept. 9 showdown, but, rather than revel in the latest poll results, he called the campaign period he had just been through "reckless and disastrous." He made no accusations as he lamented the 15 party members or members of their families who have been killed since May.

The most recent outrage suffered by Colom's Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE) was the discovery of the corpse of the 14-year-old daughter of legislative candidate Hector Montenegro. She was found, with two others, in the trunk of an abandoned taxi. All three were bound, their throats slit. "I feel distraught, sad" said the father, "but I'm not going to give up my determination to continue working for the people."

Montenegro is associated with a campaign to get pensions for poor elderly people who have no social benefits or income. "I believe that the political issue has something to do with this, because my daughter didn't even know the other people."

If it is unsafe to be a candidate, or a family member of one, it is also unsafe to investigate assassinations of any kind. The bulleted body of prosecutor Martin Tojin was found along a dirt road on the south coast. Tojin worked with the Fiscalia de Delitos contra la Vida. Otto Perez Molina of the Partido Patriotica (PP) is running second to Colom and is expected to be Colom's challenger in a poll-predicted second round. He, as well as third-place Alejandro Giammattei of the ruling Gran Alianza Nacional (GAN), expressed some concern, but neither was willing to say that all the killings were attributable to "political motivations." Neither has upgraded and reinforced party security measures as Colom has done.

Rigoberta Menchu, far behind in the polls, was more willing to call the killings as she saw them. On Aug. 28, Clara Luz Lopez was shot dead while driving home from a campaign event. Lopez was running for a local council seat on the ticket of Menchu's Encuentro por Guatemala (EG). "This is a clear message for our candidates and for us," said Menchu, the first indigenous woman ever to run for the presidency. Even without the complication of an election,

Guatemala has been spectacularly unable to deal with day-to-day murder. The country experiences an average of 16 murders daily, ten times the murder rate in New York City, according to analysts. With inadequate technical and human resources, the Fiscalia and the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) maintain they have no clue as to where the killing is coming from. Said Fiscal General Juan Luis Florido, "The acts give the impression of having political overtones, but we can't affirm this until we have some certainty."

It is not clear that these agencies really want to know. They could find themselves outgunned in a confrontation with forces more powerful than they.

Even the observers are scared

The international community is plainly frightened by the prospects for further violence. Said Jose Antonio de Gabriel of the election-observation mission from the European Union (EU), "The chronic structural problem of violence that Guatemala suffers absolutely does not justify that, since the electoral campaign started, there have been 42 murders."

De Gabriel is clearly put off by the equivocating nature of local official statements like that of Florido. "Without prejudging the different motivations that could be behind these violent acts, our mission is very worried because we are witnessing an acceleration in the number of assaults against this category of persons as the elections get closer," said de Gabriel. "The violence is bad enough, but in the electoral context it is even worse." The number of murders has risen since he made the statement.

De Gabriel is reported to be very concerned because a second round means exposing his delegation through Nov. 4, when the runoff would be held. Comparing the numbers confirms his trepidations. "During the 2003 elections, in the entire campaign there were 28 assassinations of candidates and related persons, while in this [election], just in the first round, the number of deaths has passed 40," said the mission chief.

The EU is not the only observation mission on tenterhooks about this. Carlos Flores of the Organization of American States (OAS) mission is equally timorous, not only for his observers but for voters as well. He said he has expressed his concerns to Guatemalan authorities, for what it was worth, "to guarantee that the voters come to the ballot boxes with security and certainty that all will be well." Vice President Eduardo Stein has confirmed being contacted by both international organizations about their fears. "They have told us informally that they require some kind of special protection in certain zones where they think there could be major conflicts."

Those will be fairly extensive stretches of Guatemalan territory. OAS chief of mission Diego Garcia Sayan noted, "At the moment we have encountered ten departments where the conditions are most adverse, but this is not a definitive list." Flores is asking for protection from a state that cannot protect itself.

Delegates of the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) have been threatened and harassed in at least four departments throughout the country. TSE officials have complained of acts against their

workers in Izabal on the Atlantic coast, Zacapa and Jalapa in the eastern part of the country, and Sacatepequez in the west.

Tribunal Magistrate Roberto Valenzuela said delegates have requested transfers from their assigned locations. These workers have told him the threats are coming from party representatives. Valenzuela said the transfers are not possible at this late date because the workers only know their own districts and would not be of use elsewhere. He did not say how many workers were involved. TSE president Oscar Bolanos told the media that coordination with security forces would be stepped up in response to the complaints.

This is likely small comfort to the workers who are aware that, in all the political killing to date, the major candidates have not been targeted, prosecutors continue to hedge that it is "not entirely clear whether all the killings have been politically motivated," and no one has been arrested for any of these crimes. The "not entirely clear" refrain has come up frequently in campaign-mayhem reports, and sometimes the facts have been, in fact, not entirely clear.

On Aug. 28 in Quiche, for instance, one person was shot to death and another wounded in a confrontation between GANA sympathizers and those of the Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG). A police spokesperson told reporters, "We know of one dead and one wounded, both from the FRG, but we have still not confirmed them because the people won't let police or fire department units enter [the town of San Antonio Ilotenango]." A report from witnesses had it that the FRG group started a confrontation with the GANA people. As the situation heated up, an FRG person pulled a gun and in so doing accidentally shot a comrade.

The FRG is the party of former de facto president Gen. Efraim Rios Montt (1982-1983). The party has been associated with violence throughout its existence (see NotiCen, 2003-07-24). Rios Montt is running for deputy, allegedly to gain immunity from prosecution for acts of genocide and atrocities committed during his regime. The party in the past has been strong in the Congress, strong enough to elect him president of the legislature, and he is known to have been incensed by a recent poll showing the FRG with just 2% support among those who intend to vote. "The polls are the worst; the owners of the media do not want us to win the elections because that would damage their economic interests," he said.

Rios Montt has been accused of inciting followers in the past in unsubtle ways with tragic results. He seems to be doing that again, telling the media that citizens "will know how to defend their vote. We don't want to happen what has happened in the past, when the ballot boxes were burned in places where we would have more deputies." The most recent poll gives the FRG just 5.83% of the deputies. This figure would put the party in fourth place in a unicameral legislature sufficiently divided to ensure, say deputies, four years of difficulty in passing legislation.

This poll is the sixth of a series commissioned by the largest daily newspaper Prensa Libre. It puts the UNE, GANA, and PP at the head of the legislative list with 18.42%, 10.83%, and 9.67%, respectively. No one has a majority. At the top of the tickets, the relative positions continue to hold. Colom leads with 37.61%, edging Perez with 29.91%. But in the second round that these results

would necessitate, the race becomes extremely tight. The poll says that just counting the valid votes, with blank and voided ballots eliminated, Colom would win by millimeters, 50.1% to 49.9%.

For many analysts, polarization to this degree portends continued political violence. The poll shifts focus away from this first round to the second. The candidates will have two and a half months to move the spread off the razor's edge. Perez has said he would head for communities that have not heard his message and remain undecided. This would include strongholds of the candidates who will fall away, but, with margins this thin, any vote anywhere is a viable target.

Colom, too, will head for the hinterlands. "We will continue making visits to the provinces, and we are going to give priority to meetings with representatives of different sectors," he said, while Perez "will not rest one minute nor underestimate any meeting

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