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Guatemala Presidential Contest Will Go To Runoff

by Mike Leffert

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Guatemala emerged from a murder-riven campaign season to hold relatively peaceful and orderly unsurprising general elections. At the ticket-tops, Alvaro Colom was the victorious presidential contender, followed, slightly more distantly than the polls had predicted, by Otto Perez Molina. The center-left Colom beat right-winger Perez 28% to 23%. Because he failed to gain more than 50% of the vote in the crowded, 14-horse race, Colom will face Perez in a Nov. 4 runoff.

Foreign election observers were, just days before the election, ruefully predicting a bloody election-day following four months of campaigning that saw more than 50 candidates, their relatives, and activists killed (see NotiCen, 2007-08-30). A much-relieved Wolfgang Kreissl Dorfler, head of the European Union (EU) monitoring mission, told the world on shortwave radio, "In comparison with four years ago, the situation is really quiet. What we have seen is a very well-organized election at the polling stations, especially because the participation of young women and the young people is very high."

The election was to some extent a referendum on the country's endemic violence. The international media rarely miss a chance to remind that, with 6,000 murders in the last year, this country of 13 million or so has one of the highest murder rates in the world. Colom and Perez represent polar opposite approaches to the problem. Perez Molina is a former army general, running under the banner of the rightist Partido Patriotica (PP). His campaign has centered on delivering the country from crime with a return to the death penalty and a 50% increase in the size of the police force.

Colom of the Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE), by contrast, has promised an overhaul of the notoriously corrupt security forces and dysfunctional judicial system.

Other races

These tight results were not seen at other levels in the comprehensive elections. For mayor of the capital, Guatemala City, for instance, Alvaro Arzu of the Partido Unionista (PU) won with more than 55% of the vote, more than twice that of his closest competitor. This will be his third term. Between mayoralties, Arzu served a term as president (1996-2000). He presents himself as a technocrat and has been winning with that strategy for years. "We waged a different campaign from the others, one that is not about offers and inducements but about attainments, works, not words. We've been campaigning for 40 years," he told supporters in a victory speech.

Arzu is a comfortable constant on a continually changing political horizon. His political apparatus has been in place for 20 years and has lasted longer than the political parties with which he has run. He tends to be believed when he tells constituents, "We didn't come three months before to say what we're going to do; we have been saying what we're going to do for years, so our job starts today." Quetzaltenango, the second-largest city in the country, in the western highlands, also went

for continuity and stability, re-electing Jorge Rolando Barrientos Pellicer, candidate of the Gran Alianza Nacional (GANNA).

In the legislature, three parties will dominate, UNE, GANNA, and the PP. UNE will be the major party with as many as 60 deputies; the other two will have between 30 and 40 each. The Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG) took a licking to end up as the fourth-most-numerous delegation in the unicameral 158-seat body. Just one presidency ago it was the dominant force, and during the current administration of President Oscar Berger it had 43 seats from which to wield its influence under the leadership of former de facto president Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983). This time, it will have just 12-14. Ríos Montt will be one of those deputies, ensuring his immunity from human rights abuse charges for another term (see NotiCen, 2007-01-04).

Because they represent no one in particular other than the political bosses and the candidates they run, political parties in Guatemala come and go, and usually fall into decline after producing a single presidency. GANNA, for instance, produced President Berger but was itself formed from the ruins of three other parties, among them the Partido de Avanzada Nacional (PAN), the party that produced the Arzu presidency.

That being the case, it is of interest whenever a new party emerges and elects a credible number of deputies. The honor this time falls to the Partido del Centro de Acción Social (CASA). It could end up with as many as six deputies and would be the only new force in the legislature. The elections give, and they take away. Thus, seven parties could come up empty, among them the Democracia Cristiana Guatemalteca (DCG) and the PAN, both of which have produced presidents in the past, Marco Venicio Cerezo (1986-1991) and Arzu, respectively. They could be slated for disappearance along with other parties like the Unión Democrática (UD), Desarrollo Integral Auténtico (DIA), and Frente por la Democracia.

The parties that do die will become grist for the political recycling mill. The runoff candidates will need them in November. "This means being tolerant and opening the doors to be able to create a national project," said Colom. For Pérez Molina, by contrast, it does not mean being tolerant at all. His party, whose logo is a clenched fist, is looking for people like street vendor José Martínez, who wants members of the infamous street gangs off his street, by whatever means. "I'd like to get the gang members, take them to jail, and leave them there," he said.

This has provided a winning strategy in the past for other iron-fisted candidates. Rampant street crime worked for Ríos Montt when he cleaned up the streets of Guatemala City with extrajudicial executions that were well-tolerated by citizens sick of living in fear. Now Pérez wants to declare Army-enforced states of emergency and liberal use of a death penalty that is still on the books but rarely used after televised executions were botched with the world watching.

In the first, in the 1990s, an entire firing squad managed to miss killing the condemned victim, leaving its commander to approach the hapless victim and empty his pistol into his head as he jerked and thrashed about. Pérez has reason to believe memories are short when it comes to capital punishment, but the former general will have a problem in the highlands and former war zones

among indigenous communities that will not easily forget the massacres. "He is a soldier, and soldiers are brutal; they did a lot here," said Ana Bor from the town of San Juan Sacatepequez, not far from the capital.

Perez was part of the Army's negotiating team that brokered the end to the 36-year internal war, but he has also been personally accused of atrocities. He is a member of the Kaibiles, the ruthless cult-like elite troops of the Army, and commanded troops in the El Quiche department in the 1980s, the scene of many indigenous massacres. Rounding out his resume, he served as commander of the dreaded Estado Mayor Presidencial (EMP), an infamous military hit squad and presidential guard, albeit under the benign presidency of Ramiro de Leon Carpio (1993-1999).

Candidates different as night and day

It is a stark choice offered the electorate: another strongman who promises a crackdown on crime, or a leftist economist who promises to cure the state of its weaknesses and create an economy in which fewer people will need to turn to crime and violence. The choice could be determined by economic status and geography as much as by anything else. "Here in Guatemala, if you leave your house, only God knows if you're going to come back alive. The general will bring us security," said Eduardo Perez, a businessman from the city of Antigua. "We're hoping for a change, for more work and more jobs. I like the proposals Colom has made," said Jose Emilio Xolix of San Juan Suchitepequez, where there is little crime, but little work.

Colom carried these voters to his five-point victory with his anti-poverty plan, a Program for Government. Colom, who incidentally studied for years to become a Mayan priest even though he is white, defeated Perez Molina in 18 of the country's 21 departments, and in some highlands communities outpolled him by better than 2 to 1. In the urban areas, Perez turned the tables, winning by the same big margins in central Guatemala City among whites and ladinos. They are certain that his EMP credentials and "Mano dura, cabeza y corazon" slogan will have credibility within the criminal classes.

Many analysts credit the extreme violence of this campaign with giving Perez Molina a boost that overcame a Colom lead that at one time amounted to more than 20 points. Now, said political scientist Francisco Garcia, "the small margin will make it difficult for Colom to form alliances and pull in the political parties" that lost in the vote. Garcia believes the GANA and FRG votes will go to Perez. Analyst Victor Galvez said much is riding for Perez on which of several possible narratives the electorate chooses to embrace.

Perez is tainted with the atrocities of the war and has even been implicated in the killing of Bishop Juan Jose Gerardi (see NotiCen, 2001-06-14). But he is also identified with the reformists within the army. He opposed the Fujimori-style auto-coup of President Jorge Serrano Elias (1991-1993) and before that sided with de facto president Gen. Humberto Mejia Victores (1983-1986) in bringing down the Rios Montt presidency. In the end, toughness might provide the most appealing story for an electorate that has lived for decades in fear of whatever their leaders have told them to fear, communism, gangs, narcotraffic, street crime, the many different names for violence and the justification for counterviolence.

Galvez thinks this is the story that will work for Perez. "People are desperate," he said. "Rich, poor, middle class, they're all suffering from this violence. They say, 'This man has the guts for this fight.'" Colom, having seen his lead diminish as the country loses faith in the prospect of civil governability, has moved quickly to make alliances with those who fared poorly in this election. He, too, can count on a fear dividend.

A return to military rule is still a frightening thing in Guatemala, and there is plenty of concern for this most fragile of democracies being ground beneath the heel of a jackboot. Galvez says of Perez Molina, "Half the things he's proposed doing, he can't do, because it's not 1982 anymore. People are expecting drastic and quick solutions, but you just can't declare a state of siege to fix the crime problem."

Colom also has some advantage as populations exchange old fears for new ones. The brutal campaign to install the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) has engendered an anti-capitalist tide that does not yet rival anti-communism but is showing signs of tender new growth. Colom has said, "Capitalism is good at creating wealth but is bad at distributing it," and he has admonished, "The capitalists or the bourgeois are slaves to their wealth, and the poor are slaves to their poverty." Though substantially less free-market friendly than the general, Colom is conceding nothing and started his pre-runoff campaigning aggressively seeking support wherever he could find it.

Within 24 hours of the election, he had met with several new opposition mayors about switching allegiances. He has reportedly added GANA's Nito Palencia of San Jose del Golfo, Tulio Meda of Fraijanes, and Jorge Punay of Churranchito to the 97 mayoralties UNE has won around the country. He pointed out to the media that he will be getting support from other mayors who will not change parties. Municipal officials are permitted this kind of split partisanship.

The biggest prize among the mayors, of course, would be Arzu. Colom has already met with him, but no deals have been reported. Arzu has denied any formal alliance between his Partido Unionista and UNE, but it is commonly held that Arzu has respect for Colom's abilities and has praised his tenure as head of the Fondo Nacional para la Paz (Fonapaz) during Arzu's presidency.

Figuring in any possible deal would be a PU alliance with UNE in the legislature. Perez has also gone to see the mayor and is said to have offered him a number of inducements. "There are many things that can be done together, we believe in a more visible police force, a community police, as well as a minister who works together with the mayor's office," said Perez. But no deals have been cut. Perez came away from the meeting saying that Arzu would not support either candidate in the second round.

GANAs leader and third-running presidential candidate Alejandro Giammattei has also met with the two winners. While GANA's business base would seem to favor Perez, there is also the matter of continuity with GANA programs already in process in the Berger administration. Giammattei said GANA would use its position to press these and to further its legislative agenda. He said a committee had been formed to deal with the question of whom to support.

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