7-21-2010

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Louisa Reynolds

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Guatemala: Identification Forgery Raises Concerns about Electoral Fraud

by Louisa Reynolds
Category/Department: Guatemala
Published: Wednesday, July 21, 2010

An investigation by the Ministerio Público (MP) into the alleged forgery of national identification cards (Documento Personal de Identificación, DPI) has raised serious concern about a possible attempt to commit fraud in the 2011 general elections.

The Registro Nacional de las Personas (RENAP) was created in 2007 with the aim of producing a new form of ID card using the latest biometric technology that would replace the "cédula de vecindad," a small booklet containing a citizen’s photograph, fingerprint, and personal information, which can be easily forged and purchased on the black market for up to 8,000 quetzales (US$1,003).

However, the MP’s investigation has revealed that the criminal networks involved in forging cédulas, far from having disappeared, are possibly operating within RENAP.

On March 2, special prosecutor Mario Vinicio Arévalo of the MP’s Fiscalía de Delitos Administrativos confiscated the CPU of a computer belonging to RENAP’s head office in Guatemala City’s Zone 11 and assigned to Ivis Oliva Méndez, a public official in charge of processing notary certificates. The case came to light a fortnight ago when former RENAP officials leaked documents to the Guatemalan daily El Periódico.

Former RENAP director Enrique Cossich, who resigned on May 19, explained that the computer was confiscated as a result of an internal investigation that he ordered, after Méndez’s colleagues warned him that she was entering information into the system and then erasing it. "A false entry was made, it was certified and then erased, but traces were left in the system," Cossich said.

MP spokesman Guillermo Mendoza claims that Arévalo is no longer in charge of the case and has been replaced by Sara Icarit Coronado, who is on sick leave. Mendoza says the MP has failed to make any progress on the investigation. "When we tried to ascertain what information the computer contained we were unable to read the software used by RENAP. We have contacted RENAP to inquire about this and are awaiting their response," says Mendoza.

Manfredo Marroquín, director of Acción Ciudadana, the Guatemalan chapter of Transparency International (TI), says that "this is highly revealing of MP ineptitude" and that for the MP to claim that it cannot figure out RENAP’s software is "simply pathetic."

Election fraud

RENASA was set with replacing cédulas with modern ID cards and creating a database containing a digital copy of all civil registries, which all Guatemalan municipalities were forced to hand over by the end of 2009.

However, the monumental task of scanning thousands of books containing the personal information of 12 million Guatemalan citizens has been far from easy, especially as many municipalities refused to turn over the registries, which in some cases required forceful interventions by the police.
The government initially aimed to replace all existing cédulas with DPIs by the end of this year in time for the 2011 elections, but because of serious delays in producing the new ID cards, it is likely that the elections will be held using both documents.

An even greater concern is that over 900,000 Guatemalans whose DPIs contain mistaken information because of technical errors by RENAP might be unable to join the voters’ registry, says the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE), the government’s electoral watchdog.

Despite the fact that RENAP takes peoples’ fingerprint and photograph and assigns them a unique 13-digit code (Código Único de Identificación, CUI), Maria Natividad Ajanel Shampete, born in the eastern department of Retalhuleu in 1935, has two DPIs. After she lost her first card, RENAP assigned her a new card with a different CUI instead of issuing a duplicate.

The TSE found 900,000 cases of people whose information was recorded incorrectly on their DPI, 118 duplicated birth certificates, and 6,284 people with cards on which the first eight digits of the CUI was duplicated.

Carlos Meléndez, the TSE’s director of information technology, explains that the CUI is made up of 13 digits: a serial number (eight digits), a verification number (1 digit) obtained by applying a logarithm to the serial number, a two-digit department code, and a two-digit municipal code.

Meléndez says the whole point of the serial number is that it indicates a sequence or succession. However, the TSE found 6,284 DPIs with the same serial number and others in which the logarithm was applied incorrectly, resulting in an erroneous verification number. These anomalies were detected in a small sample of DPIs, which means that the total number of faulty ID cards could actually be much higher.

Although the TSE dismisses the possibility of fraud, arguing that it has a foolproof security system that makes it impossible for people to vote twice, Leonel Escobar, director of the Departamento de Inscripción de Ciudadanos y Elaboración de Padrones, admits that people with faulty DPIs might face serious difficulty in joining the voters’ registry.

**Mauricio Radford ousted by Congress**

After the TSE broke the news about the faulty DPIs, executive director Cossich resigned for "personal reasons." However, he later admitted that he was under intense pressure to step down by the tripartite board of directors that controls the institution.

This board includes three representatives: Mauricio Radford, a systems engineer elected by Congress, Patricia Cervantes of the TSE, and Pablo Leal, vice minister of the interior (Gobernación).

The latter is the newest and least influential member of the board because of the many changes in the Ministerio de Gobernación (MINGOB) during the administration of President Álvaro Colom —the ministry has undergone five reshuffles as one minister after another has been forced to step down amid serious corruption allegations.

Radford is regarded as "the power behind the throne" and has been accused of interfering in areas that are the sole responsibility of the executive director, such as selecting personnel.

For instance, he ordered 28-year-old Calvin Illescas to be promoted to the position of "director de procesos," the technical department responsible for managing the biometric technology used.
for producing ID cards, even though he had less than a year’s experience working in a mid-level technical position in RENAP and did not even have a university degree.

At least six lawsuits have been filed against Radford for allegations ranging from nepotism to corruption as he has used his position to secure multimillion-dollar contracts for a number of companies in which he or his family has an interest.

As one scandal after another has hit the headlines, Congress unanimously voted to remove Radford last week and enlarge the board to five members, including representatives of the Asociación Nacional de Municipalidades (ANAM) and the Colegio de Abogados y Notarios de Guatemala (CANG).

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