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Politically Motivated Crimes Presage Violent Election as Mayoral Candidate in Eastern Guatemala Is Latest Victim

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Two weeks ago, eight people were shot dead in a restaurant in Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado, in the eastern municipality of Moyuta, in a vicious attack against 40-year-old Mayra Lemus, a local politician who intended to run for mayor in next year’s Guatemalan general elections.

Lemus was a likely candidate for the official Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE) party, which will seek re-election next year in tandem with the Gran Alianza Nacional (GANA) party.

Eyewitnesses said that, on Feb. 18, about 20 heavily armed assailants burst into the busy restaurant and fired indiscriminately at the customers. This brutal slaughter is the latest in a series of politically motivated attacks that have mostly targeted local candidates.

A week earlier, on Jan. 24, 20-year-old student Byron Fernando Corado González was shot dead in front of the main campus of the Universidad de San Carlos (USAC), in Guatemala City’s Zone 11.

Corado’s father, Byron Corado senior, served as director of the Departamento de Tránsito of the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC) and now intends to run for mayor with the GANA-UNE alliance in the municipality of Puerto de San José, in the department of Escuintla.

Minutes before the attack, Corado junior called his father as he drove toward the university and said that he was being followed by strangers who he thought intended to kidnap him. He then crashed against a police vehicle that arrived at the scene after gunshots were heard. Seconds later, he was shot in the chest by the attackers who were following him, and he died three hours later in a local hospital.

Corado senior blamed opposition candidate Jorge Rizzo of the rightist Partido Patriota (PP) and said that a fortnight before the attack he had received death threats against his family. However, two days later, he withdrew the allegations and said that he was distraught when he blamed Rizzo for the attack. The police have yet to determine why the young student was killed.

A history of violence

Last year, three local politicians died in similar circumstances.

On Nov. 9, 42-year-old Juan Hernández Fabián, mayor of San Sebastián in the northern department of Huehuetenango, was gunned down by three strangers as he got out of his car near the town hall. His attackers, who used assault rifles and automatic pistols, fled the scene, and the police are still investigating the case. So far, the main line of investigation centers on a political motive.

Hernández had served as mayor of San Sebastián for four consecutive terms and belonged to the official UNE party. Local councilors have blamed a group of community leaders who had expressed dissatisfaction with a number of infrastructure projects and intended to form a civic committee (a
local political organization that is disbanded after a candidate is elected) to oust Hernández from office.

A year earlier, on Dec. 15, 2009, Hernández's son, Juan Rolando Hernández Méndez, a university lecturer at the USAC, was killed while on vacation in San Sebastián.

Three months before Hernández Fabián was killed, Edwin Rolando Vega Pérez, mayor of Coatepeque, a bustling commercial hub in the highland department of Quetzaltenango, was shot dead. Vega Pérez had received death threats from local traders who opposed the construction of a huge market building, which saddled the town with a Q106 million (US$13.6 million) debt and has been largely regarded as a failure.

The construction of the 1-million square meter building began in 1996, two terms before Vega took office, and has sparked a long-standing conflict between traders and local authorities that has left 14 people dead.

One of Vega’s bodyguards, Rudy Gómez Escobar, was recently arrested in the municipality of Flores Costa Cuca, Quetzaltenango, and charged with Vega’s murder.

In another violent episode on Feb. 19, 2010, 56-year-old Delmar González, mayor of La Democracia, Huehuetenango, and two of his bodyguards were killed in a drug-related incident. González belonged to the official UNE party, and days before his murder two of his sons had allegedly been involved in a street brawl with the nephews of a local drug baron with ties to the Sinaloa cartel.

Narcopolitics has become a common feature in municipalities near the Mexican border, and, prior to the 2007 elections, the rival Gulf and Sinaloa cartels tried to impose candidates in the municipalities of Nentón, La Democracia, Santa Ana, Cuilco and La Libertad.

In 2009, two other mayors were killed: Florencio Flores, mayor of El Asintal, in the coastal department of Retalhuleu, and Otto René García Pérez, mayor of Siquinalá, in the department of Escuintla.

**Analysts predict a violent scenario for 2012**

Under Guatemalan law, it is illegal for political parties to spread propaganda before the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE), the country’s electoral-management body, sets a date for the general elections.

However, sanctions against parties that break the law are derisory (around US$100 a month), and, since last year, political organizations have openly broken the law, filling every inch of outdoor space with billboards and launching campaigns in the press and on TV channels and radio stations.

A number of smear campaigns have also appeared, and billboards denigrating rival candidates have sprung up in various parts of Guatemala City.

Under this tense political climate, observers fear the violence will escalate as the 2012 elections draw closer.

The local human rights organization Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM) and the Procuraduría de Derechos Humanos (PDH) published a report last week highlighting Petén, Zacapa, Izabal, Alta

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Verapaz, Jutiapa, San Marcos, and Huehuetenango as the departments where the greatest number of incidents is most likely to occur.

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