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Sandra Torres, wife of Guatemalan President Álvaro Colom, Seeks to Lead Official UNE Party to Second Consecutive Victory

by Louisa Reynolds

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"I have made this decision for a simple reason. It is a powerful reason: you. For my people, for my country. For women, grandparents, the aged, the disabled, those who have been abandoned, orphans, single mothers, widows. For all Guatemalans who are in need." With these words, first lady Sandra Torres de Colom formally announced her intention to run for president in next year’s general elections. Torres is a controversial figure whose political ambitions have divided the electorate.

The fiery speech was delivered in a community hall in Carolingia, a marginal neighborhood rife with poverty and gang violence, in the municipality of Mixco, the country’s second-most-populated urban area after Guatemala City.

Torres has become a prominent political figure, sometimes eclipsing the mild-mannered president, as leader of the Consejo de Cohesión Social (CCS), a body created by the Unión Nacional de Esperanza (UNE) government to manage a number of social programs with resources pooled from various government departments such as the Ministerios de Salud, Educación, and Cultura.

One of the main programs implemented by the CCS is the conditioned-cash-transfer scheme Mi Familia Progresa (MIFAPRO), under which rural families living in poverty and extreme poverty receive Q300 (300 quetzales, US$38) a month provided their children comply with regular school attendance and medical checkups.

Whereas MIFAPRO focuses on the rural poor, two other CCS programs seek to alleviate urban poverty: Bolsa Solidaria, which distributes free monthly food bags to impoverished shantytown dwellers, and Comedores Solidarios, subsidized canteens that offer a meal and a medical checkup for Q3 (US$0.50).

A CCS program that has received less media attention is Escuelas Abiertas, under which all public schools offer free extracurricular activities during weekends, such as music, dance, photography, and art workshops, as well as sports, with the aim of keeping young people off the streets and preventing them from falling into the trap of gang violence.

MIFAPRO, in particular, has been so popular in rural areas that no opposition party has pledged to scrap it, and it has been praised by international financial institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) as a necessary step toward reducing poverty and inequality in Guatemala.

The latest Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Vida (ENCOVI), carried out by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE) in 2006, found that 51% of Guatemalans live below the poverty line, making this one of the most unequal countries in the region.
Independent evaluations by the IDB and Acción Ciudadana, the Guatemalan chapter of Transparency International (TI), have shown that, generally speaking, the program has been well-managed.

Nevertheless, opposition parties and the business sector have repeatedly accused Torres of corruption and have labeled her programs "populist."

During the weeks preceding the official announcement of the first lady's intention to run for office, the UNE party mobilized hundreds of MIFAPRO beneficiaries across the country in an orchestrated show of support for her campaign.

The media has also widely reported accusations that poor families have been coerced into registering to vote and signing petitions to support Torres, under the threat that they will lose their benefits if they do not comply.

**Wikileaks describes Torres as "abrasive"**

On Dec. 15, 2010, the local media published the first Wikileaks document on Guatemala, which refers to Torres as "abrasive" and discusses her political ambitions.

The document, signed by US Ambassador to Guatemala Stephen MacFarland, claims that Torres is "the best administrator under the present government" and describes her as "intelligent" and "hard-working." However, MacFarland also warns that she is perceived by the middle and upper class as "a radical populist" and that misogynist attitudes and class prejudice are behind much of the criticism against her.

MacFarland also mentions the dubious legality of her candidacy, which is at the heart of the current controversy surrounding her political ambitions.

The Guatemalan Constitution forbids a president’s close relatives from running for office, something that Torres' opponents have seized on to argue that she cannot be president.

However, the law is unclear as the Código Civil states that marriage does not constitute a blood tie, which means that, from a legal standpoint, a first lady does not count as a close relative.

The Corte Constitucional (CC) will have the final word on the issue, and, if it rules that Torres cannot run for office, she could file for divorce to annul her family ties to President Colom.

Because of the CC's crucial role in tipping the balance for or against Torres, the election of the CC’s new judges two weeks ago took place under intense scrutiny from various lobbies and civil-society organizations.

Although the official party was repeatedly accused of trying to manipulate the election to ensure that pro-government judges would be elected, most observers were satisfied that the election was transparent and that most of the judges elected have conservative, pro-business leanings.

**Why the animosity?**

Torres was born in Melchor de Mencos, in the northern department of Petén, one of the poorest and most forgotten regions in the country. During Guatemala’s 36-year Civil War, she was involved with the guerrilla group Organización del Pueblo en Armas (ORPA), and she later had a successful career in the textile business, as did her second husband, President Colom.
However, Virgilio Álvarez, director of the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), argues that the conservative elite’s opposition to her candidacy has more to do with economic interests than a real fear that if elected she could usher in a Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez-style regime.

"Colom ceased to be the candidate of the traditional economic groups, which are now determined to prevent that from happening again. The elite does not fear a change in the economic model but rather a change in those who benefit from that model," said Álvarez. "This is a clash among members of the economic elite rather than the political elite. It’s like a train station where all the boxcars are stuck: the sugar producers, the bankers, the arms importers, the cement producers. They are all supporting different candidates and are seeking to expel those who are financing Sandra Torres’ campaign."

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