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Otto Pérez Molina Leads the Polls ahead of Guatemala's Presidential Election

by Louisa Reynolds

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Retired Army Gen. Otto Pérez Molina is poised to win Guatemala's general elections on Sept. 11, according to the most recent poll by Borge y Asociados published by daily newspaper El Periódico on Aug. 17. Pérez Molina, of the Partido Patriota (PP), leads the poll with 44.8%, followed by Eduardo Suger, of Compromiso, Renovación y Orden (CREO), with 11.7%, and Manuel Baldizón, of Libertad Democrática Renovada (LIDER), with 10.7%.

The poll did not take two candidates into account: former first lady Sandra Torres, of the official Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza-Gran Alianza Nacional (UNE-GANA) coalition, and former evangelical pastor Harold Caballeros, of the Visión con Valores-Encuentro por Guatemala (VIVA-EG) coalition. Both candidates were banned from participating because of constitutional impediments: in Torres' case, a prohibition that bans a president's immediate relatives from running for office, and in Caballeros' case, a prohibition that bans a member of the clergy from participating in an election ([NotiCen, July 14, 2011](#)).

Both candidates took their cases to the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ). Torres lost, but Caballeros won his appeal on the same day that the poll was published. Borge y Asociados said that, had VIVA-EG been included, it would have reached fifth place.

Born in 1950, Pérez Molina is a retired Army general accused of human rights violations during the armed conflict, who promises to fight crime and violence with a (hard-fist) approach.

Acción Ciudadana, the Guatemalan chapter of Transparency International (TI), says the PP has plastered the entire country with billboards in a costly campaign that is twice as expensive as that of the official UNE-GANA coalition and Baldizón's LIDER party.

Suger, in second place, is a 72-year-old mathematician of Swiss origin and founder of the private Universidad Galileo. He comes from the wealthy Cofiño family and advocates neoliberal economic policies.

Baldizón is a right-wing populist who offers a mix between Torres' social-welfare programs and Pérez Molina's approach, as he favors the death penalty. He comes from the northern department of Petén, and his family's fortune was allegedly built on smuggling Mayan archaeological artifacts out of Guatemala.

With the distance between Pérez Molina and the other contenders, it is possible that the retired Army general could gain a clear majority during the first round of the elections, making a runoff unnecessary.

Elections marred by violence

The Procuraduría de los Derechos Humanos (PDH) reports that 35 people have been killed so far during the run-up to the elections, a number that exceeds the 29 killings reported during the 2003

elections and could exceed the 43 deaths in the 2007 elections if the violence intensifies as Sept. 11 draws closer.

Guatemala has one of the highest crime rates in the region (5,960 murders were reported in 2010, according to official statistics), which often makes it difficult to determine whether all the killings reported during the election campaign were politically motivated and how many can be attributed to everyday crime.

One of the most striking cases of politically motivated attacks was the spate of killings in the municipality of San José Pinula, in the central department of Guatemala, some 15 km from Guatemala City. The inhabitants of this usually quiet town are still reeling from the shock and disbelief caused by the murder of two popular and well-respected community leaders who were running for mayor.

On June 15, Enrique Dardón, candidate for the CREO party, was shot in a barbershop in Guatemala City's Zone 13 after he was summoned for a bogus media interview. Four days earlier, doctor Augusto Ovalle Cabrera, candidate for the Partido Unionista (PU), had been killed while he toured local villages. A nurse who worked in his private surgery and her 16-year-old daughter were also killed during the attack.

A week later, Luis Marroquín, candidate for the LIDER party, miraculously escaped unscathed after his vehicle was allegedly hit by a hail of bullets. But Marroquín's lucky escape immediately raised suspicion, especially when ballistic evidence showed that it was impossible for Marroquín not to have been hit during the attack. On July 4, he was arrested and accused of planning the attack on Dardón and Cabrera as well as the phony attack on his own vehicle. The subsequent investigation revealed that Marroquín was linked to drug trafficking and that his aim was to eliminate his contenders and smooth the way to electoral victory.

The case, which received widespread media coverage, was highly embarrassing for LIDER presidential candidate Manuel Baldizón, who denied that Marroquín belonged to his party even though local newspaper published a photograph in which both candidates effusively shook hands during the launch of LIDER's election campaign in San José Pinula.

As a result of the attacks, CREO and Acción de Desarrollo Nacional (ADN) withdrew from the race and the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) even considered suspending the town's municipal elections. After Marroquín's detention, authorities decided to go ahead with the election process even though San José Pinula is still in mourning.

Local candidates are the main targets

The parties whose candidates have been attacked are not necessarily those currently leading the polls. No PP candidates have suffered deadly attacks even though the party is currently leading the polls (although two former party members and two family members of local candidates have been killed). However, CREO, which jumped from fifth place to a distant third, only after official party candidate Sandra Torres was banned from running for office, has been a major victim in this wave of political violence.

All of the murdered candidates are local. Political scientist Renzo Rosal said municipal candidates are vulnerable because they have a "weak" relationship with the political party under whose banner

they choose to run. These parties, which they regard as "vehicles," do not feel obliged to safeguard their safety.

Virgilio Álvarez, director of the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), adds that local conflicts rather than natural resources, border disputes, or other issues often surface during the elections.

The PDH says that the departments with the highest levels of political violence are Jutiapa, Santa Rosa, Escuintla, Guatemala, El Progreso, Chimaltenango, Zacapa, and Retalhuleu.

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