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Guatemala’s Presidential Election Goes to Second Round in November

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After a tense election day on Sept. 11, during which there were riots and disturbances in some parts of the country, on Sept. 12 at 1:30 a.m., Otto Pérez Molina, candidate of the right-wing Partido Patriota (PP), gave a press conference in which he said that he was pleased because no other candidate in recent history had managed to surpass the second-place candidate by more than 15% of the vote.

The latest poll, conducted by Canal Antigua, a national cable TV channel, a week before the elections, had predicted that Pérez Molina would obtain 52% of the vote, enough to break Guatemala’s historic trend, according to which no presidential candidate since the country began to hold democratic elections in 1986 had achieved an outright victory in the first round.

However, the PP fell short of the predicted result, obtaining 36%, while Manuel Baldizón of the Libertad Democrática Renovada (LIDER) won 23.27%. Pérez Molina will now face Baldizón in a second round on Nov. 6, and both candidates are already courting other parties across the political spectrum in search of support.

Two days after the elections, Pérez Molina announced that he would set up two commissions: one to negotiate alliances with other parties and another to secure support from the elected mayors so that they mobilize their supporters on election day. "It is time for a deep change; I urge all of those who love this country to come together in a national crusade to face the country’s problems," he said.

So far, the PP has held talks with Compromiso, Renovación y Orden (CREO), which came in third in the first round, and the Visión con Valores-Encuentro por Guatemala (VIVA-EG) coalition.

Baldizón also talks about a "great national crusade" against the PP and has held talks with the official Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza-Gran Alianza Nacional (UNE-GANA) coalition, as well as former candidates Mario Estrada of Unión del Cambio Nacional (UCN), Juan Gutiérrez of the Partido de Avanzada Nacional (PAN), and Adela de Torrebiarte of Acción de Desarrollo Nacional (ADN).

Even before the first round, there was intense speculation about a possible alliance between UNE-GANA and LIDER, a party that rose spectacularly in the polls after the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) banned the official-party candidate, former first lady Sandra Torres, from participating because of a constitutional prohibition that prevents a president’s relatives from running for office (NotiCen, July 14, 2011).

LIDER is a splinter party that broke away from UNE in 2008, and Baldizón is a right-wing populist who combines Pérez Molina’s tough (hard-line) approach to crime with the social programs implemented by the UNE party, such as the conditioned cash-transfer program Mi Familia Progresa (Mifapro), which gives families in extreme poverty US$45 a month provided that their children attend school as well as have regular medical checkups.
Torres has already said that UNE will definitely not support the PP in the runoff but is considering an alliance with LIDER.

Could UNE-GANA, which won 47 seats in Congress, tip the balance in Baldizón’s favor? "It’s quite likely. There are similarities between both parties as well as a common enemy: the PP. The UNE party has demonstrated its political strength, and this could make up for LIDER’s shortcomings as a new party," says political scientist Renzo Rosal of the Universidad Rafael Landívar.

**Baldizón and the anti-military vote**

Pérez Molina is a retired army general who had already participated in the 2007 elections, losing to President Álvaro Colom of UNE by a narrow margin. He signed the Peace Accords in 1996 but has been accused of serious human rights violations during Guatemala’s 36-year-long armed conflict (NotiCen, May 5, 2011) and (Aug. 4, 2011).

During the early 1980s, under the dictatorship of Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983), he was the commander of a counterinsurgent task force, the Fuerza de Tarea Gumarcaj, that operated in the municipality of Chajul, where 26 indigenous villages were wiped out in what the UN-sponsored Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH) described as "an act of genocide."

"Prove to me that genocide was committed," was the defiant answer Pérez Molina gave to online magazine when he was questioned on the issue in an interview published a month before the elections.

During the campaign, Baldizón has tried to woo the anti-military vote and win over the rural populations that have not forgotten the massacres. "The people only have one candidate; I don’t want to return to the past when children were abducted from their homes and taken to military barracks. We only have one path and that is the LIDER party," he said on Aug. 19, when he addressed a crowd of sympathizers in Sacapulas, Quiché, one of the worst affected highland departments during the armed conflict.

Rosal believes that Baldizón will increasingly resort to this anti-military discourse as the runoff approaches. "The anti-military vote could have a significant impact. Baldizón is promoting himself as a young candidate who represents a new middle class versus Otto Pérez Molina who represents the past."

Last week, Baldizón announced that he had hired two well-known Republican Party strategists, Tim Clark and Ron Nehring. It remains to be seen how they will exploit Pérez Molina’s dark past in Baldizón’s favor.

Baldizón was born in 1970 in Flores, Petén, Guatemala’s largest but most neglected department in terms of development. Its geographic proximity with the Mexican border and a general state of lawlessness have made Petén a crucial point for drug trafficking and other illegal activities.

A report published by US think tank InSight Crime on Aug. 1 said Baldizón’s family, which owns transport companies, hotels, gas stations, and shopping malls throughout the department, built its fortune by smuggling Mayan archaeological artifacts out of the country, across the Mexican border.

In 2003 he was elected as a PAN deputy and later migrated to the UNE party. He was re-elected in 2007. In 2004, he made headlines when he pushed through a law that gives everyone over 65 years of age without social security a state pension.
However, UNE expelled the controversial congressman in 2008, when he was accused of putting forward a series of bills without consulting party leaders. Eleven UNE deputies joined him and formed the LIDER party.

With a wide range of proposals from bringing back the death penalty to a series of social programs similar to those implemented by the outgoing Colom administration, Baldizón has been described by sociologist Virgilio Álvarez as a right-wing populist, whose campaign slogans are "only the people can save us" and "only a united family can save Guatemala."

"Sooner or later we are doomed to have a president like Baldizón," says Álvarez.

-- End --