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Fighting Crime Is Number-one Challenge for Guatemala’s President-elect

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On Nov. 6, with all votes counted a few hours after the polls closed, Otto Pérez Molina became the first former general to be democratically elected president, beating rival Manuel Baldizón by 53.74% to 46.26% of the vote. This year’s election was the second-largest presidential runoff turnout in Guatemalan history (60.8%).

In January 2012, Pérez Molina of the rightist Partido Patriota (PP) will be the first retired general to democratically assume office, and his running mate Roxana Baldetti will be Guatemala's first female vice president. Baldetti began her career as a journalist and businesswoman and has served as a PP congresswoman for two consecutive periods, becoming one of the official party’s most ferocious opponents.

In a country with over 14 million inhabitants, winning Guatemala City, with two million, proved crucial. Pérez Molina’s campaign pledges focused on security, while Báez, a flamboyant rightist populist, pledged just about anything the voters could imagine, ranging from the death penalty to a flat tax and an extra yearly bonus for all private- and public-sector employees, the controversial "Bono 15."

Baldizón concentrated his efforts in rural areas and attempted to portray himself as a champion of the poor, winning many votes that had belonged to first lady Sandra Torres, who did not run for president because of a legal impediment (NotiCen, July 14, 2011), whereas Pérez Molina drew most of his support from urban middle- and upper-class voters.

In 1982, Pérez Molina was one of the commanders of the Gumarcaj Task Force, stationed in the municipality of Chajul, Quiché, and accused of committing 10 massacres against innocent civilians (NotiCen, Aug. 4, 2011). He has also been accused of involvement in the torture and disappearance of guerrilla combatant Efraín Bámaca (NotiCen Dec. 21, 2000, and May 5, 2011). To this day, Bámaca's spouse, US lawyer Jennifer Harbury, is still fighting a legal battle to bring those involved in his death to justice (NotiCen, July 4, 2002).

Pérez Molina recently appointed Col. Ulises Anzueto as defense minister. In 1995, Anzueto ordered the dismissal of the prosecutor in charge of the Bámaca case, which has led human rights activists to suspect that the president-elect is ensuring that an uncomfortable past will not be brought to light during his administration.

Will Pérez Molina be able to deliver on his mano dura promises?

Political analyst Marco Antonio Barahona, of the Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Políticos (INCEP), names the three greatest challenges faced by the new administration: 1) an unfavorable economic climate resulting from the recession faced by Europe and the US and a fiscal deficit so huge that the state can barely function; 2) a growing population that exerts increasing pressure
on social services such as education and health care; 3) drug-related violence and the increasing presence of Mexican cartels, a problem that requires regional solutions.

Given that Guatemala has one of the lowest tax burdens in Latin America (10%), Barahona emphasizes that the new government’s number-one priority must be to negotiate a fiscal reform with different actors such as the private sector, labor unions, and campesino organizations; otherwise the Pérez Molina administration will lack the necessary resources to deliver on the PP’s campaign promises.

Pérez Molina’s "Agenda for Change" aims to increase Guatemala’s tax burden to 14%, fight contraband and tax fraud, as well as provide greater public-sector transparency and accountability. However, it will not be easy for Guatemala’s new president to seek congressional approval for a tax reform when the PP systematically blocked the Colom administration’s efforts to do this.

The official UNE party and Baldizón’s LIDER party, as well as number of smaller factions, have already forged an alliance that will oppose any motion that the PP tries to push through Congress.

Regarding welfare policies, the new administration will inherit the Colom administration’s conditioned-cash-transfer program Mi Familia Progresa (MIFAPRO) and will face the challenge of purging it of clientelist practices (NotiCen, Mar. 24, 2011).

Pérez Molina has already announced that a new Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, directed by Lucy Lainfiesta, will be in charge of managing the program. In recent interviews with the local press, Lainfiesta has explained that the new administration intends to focus the cash transfers on regions facing extreme poverty and acute food insecurity and that the current list of beneficiaries will be reviewed.

The new administration’s greatest challenge of all will be security. Pérez Molina’s number-one pledge is a tough stance on crime, or "mano dura," and voters will expect him to deliver swift and tangible results.

According to official statistics, 2010 was one of the most violent years in recent history with a total of 5,960 murders (48,000 murders for every 100,000 inhabitants, one of the highest ratios in the world officially at peace), 1,362 disappearances, and 133 kidnappings, as well as 954 break-ins and 281 stolen vehicles.

Guatemala has 25,000 police agents, a ratio of 1.74 agents for every 1,000 inhabitants when the global average is 3 agents per 1,000 inhabitants. Security experts say the country would need one police agent for every 273 inhabitants to significantly reduce crime and violence. Once again, success in delivering on security promises will depend greatly on the new administration’s ability to secure the necessary resources to expand the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC) and improve training.

Mexican drug cartels have increased their presence in Guatemala in recent years, and in May the country suffered one of its worst narco-massacres when the dismembered bodies of 27 campesinos, including two women and two children, were found in Finca Los Cocos, in the municipality of La Libertad, in the northern department of Petén as a result of a brutal vendetta against local drug kingpin Otto Salguero (NotiCen, Oct. 6, 2011). A group that calls itself Z200, a cell of the Mexican cartel Los Zetas, claimed responsibility for the massacre.
As drug trafficking is a regional threat, any strategies implemented by the new administration will require close cooperation with neighboring states.

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