Guatemala's New President Otto Pérez Molina Promises to End Violence and Hunger

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As retired Gen. Otto Pérez Molina was sworn in for a four-year period (2012-2016) on Jan. 14, he delivered a 47-minute speech in which he promised to rid Guatemala of violence and hunger and proposed "a fiscal pact to bring about economic development."

A tough stance on crime was Pérez Molina's number-one campaign promise, and he strove to portray his predecessor former President Álvaro Colom (2008-2012) as weak and ineffective in tackling urban gangs and organized crime.

When the national anthem was played, Pérez Molina clenched his fist as he placed his outstretched arm across his chest rather than placing an open hand on his heart in line with tradition. The clenched fist is the symbol of his rightist Partido Patriota (PP), and the gesture was meant to symbolize the new times of firm action against crime that his government is supposed to usher in.

The day before the ceremony, Congressman Óscar Valentín Leal Caal was gunned down along with his brother and bodyguard within blocks of the Legislative Assembly where the new parliament took office, a stark reminder of the huge challenges that lie ahead for Pérez Molina in reducing the country’s spiraling crime rate, which will require a lot more than hardline rhetoric.

Days before he was murdered, Leal had defected from the opposition Libertad Democrática Renovada (LIDER) party to Pérez Molina’s PP and had reported death threats. The PP won 58 seats in the 158-member unicameral Congress, enough to form the largest bloc but insufficient to gain the two-thirds majority needed to ensure the swift approval of the new government’s policies.

Under the Colom administration, the PP (then the main opposition party) used its muscle in Congress to block practically every single proposal put forward by the social-democrat Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE), including a much needed fiscal-reform package.

Now Pérez Molina has put forward his own fiscal-reform proposal, which is almost identical to his predecessor’s, and the opposition—which comprises UNE, LIDER, and an array of minor political forces—are now bent on revenge and have already started to block the PP’s proposals. Well aware of the dangers that lie ahead, Pérez Molina has tried to lure opposition congressmen to his party.

The new Cabinet

Political parties in Guatemala tend to lack a coherent ideology and are usually a vehicle designed to take a leader or caudillo to power. The PP, the party created with the purpose of bringing Pérez Molina to power, is no exception. It is therefore hardly surprising that the new government contains a heterogeneous mix of retired army commanders, business people, and former presidential candidates who competed against Pérez Molina during the first round of elections but joined his "national crusade" when he ran against Manuel Baldizón, a populist businessman from the LIDER party, during the second round (NotiCen, Sept. 22, 2011, and Dec. 1, 2011).
Former Lt. Col. Mauricio López Bonilla, the PP’s campaign strategist and one of the president’s closest collaborators, has been appointed interior minister, and retired Gen. Ricardo Bustamante, who worked side by side with Pérez Molina during the early 1990s when the now president served as director of the G2 intelligence service, has been appointed director of the Consejo Nacional de Seguridad (CNS).

The CNS is supposedly in charge of setting out security policies and strategies and includes the president, vice president, interior, defense, and foreign ministers as well as the attorney general and director of intelligence. It was created in 2008 with the approval of the Ley Marco del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad as a means of improving coordination between the different government bureaus that deal with security and defense issues.

However, in practice, it has never delivered any results because the new structures created by the law were never given the financial resources needed. One of the PP’s campaign pledges was to rescue the CNS from oblivion and use effective intelligence to fight organized crime.

Another military figure in the new Cabinet is Ulises Noé Anzueto Girón, former director of the Adolfo V. Hall army school in Chiquimula, who has been appointed defense minister.

Former opposition candidates appointed to the new Cabinet include Harold Caballeros, former leader of the El Shaddai neopentecostal church and founder of the Visión con Valores (VIVA) party (NotiCen, Sept. 1, 2011), who now serves as foreign minister, Efraín Medina, former director of the government funded Universidad de San Carlos, VIVA’s vice presidential candidate, who now serves as minister of agriculture, and Adela de Torrebiarte, former leader of the minuscule Acción de Desarrollo Nacional (ADN) party, who now serves as commissioner for police reform.

Although the poorly funded ADN party, a newcomer during the 2011 elections (NotiCen, Aug. 18, 2011), carried little or no political weight, De Torrebiarte played an instrumental role in thwarting the presidential aspirations of former first lady Sandra Torres, Colom’s successor as leader of the UNE party, by lodging a string of appeals against her candidacy. With Torres out of the race, Pérez Molina sailed to victory.

De Torrebiarte also served briefly as interior minister in the administration of former President Óscar Berger (2004-2008), after Carlos Vielmann was forced to resign after he was accused of ordering the extrajudicial execution of suspected criminals.

The Police Reform Commission was set up under the Colom administration for the purpose of purging the police of corrupt officers and improving training and standards. Under the previous government, it was led by renowned human rights activist Helen Mack, who stated that for Guatemala to have an effective police force, the new administration must double its budget from Q2.5 billion to Q5 billion (US$322 million to US$644 million).

Pérez Molina’s Cabinet includes several women, which is unusual in a male-dominated society, rife with misogynist prejudice, where women have to overcome huge obstacles to follow a career in politics.

Roxana Baldetti, a former congresswoman and one of the founders of the PP, has become Guatemala’s first female vice president. One of Pérez Molina’s closest aides, she is one of the most influential figures in the new government.
Other female appointments include Minister of Education Cynthia del Águila, Minister for the Environment Roxana Sobenes, and Luz Lainfiesta, who will continue the social welfare programs created by Sandra Torres under a newly created Ministry for Social Development.

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