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Administration of Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina Scores Badly in Recent Poll

by Louisa Reynolds  
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A year and a half after President Otto Pérez Molina came to office (NotiCen, Feb. 2, 2012), a poll carried out by Vox Latina shows that the popularity of the ruling Partido Patriota (PP) is at an all-time low. In the poll, carried out by the government as part of a confidential report that was leaked to Guatemalan newspaper El Periódico, most respondents said they believed that Pérez Molina "lacks enough character to make decisions" and regard the economy as the country’s greatest problem, followed by crime and violence.

A report published by the Universidad Rafael Landívar in January also concludes that the Pérez Molina administration has failed to meet voters’ expectations, has not met its campaign promises, and has not adequately solved social conflicts.

"Generally speaking, the balance is negative; this government raised high expectations but in practice there are many failings. This administration tried to summarize its plan around three major pacts (Zero Hunger, the Fiscal Pact, and the Pact for Justice and Security), but after a year and a half it has proven to be fairly weak and few results have been achieved," says political scientist Renzo Rosal of the Universidad Rafael Landívar.

Crime and violence on the rise

With the aim of fighting crime and violence, the Pérez Molina administration created a series of Fuerzas de Tarea (task forces), police units reinforced with experts in criminal investigation, to fight specific crimes such as murder, femicide, kidnapping, car and cell-phone theft, and extortion. Their mission is to identify criminal organizations, produce analysis and investigations that allow criminals to be prosecuted, and strengthen the police.

A second type of Fuerzas de Tarea was also created to act as a deterrent and prevent criminal activity in some of Guatemala City’s most dangerous neighborhoods, such as Zones 7, 12, and 18.

However, a year and half later, Interior Minister Mauricio López Bonilla admitted that Guatemala’s murder rate during the first six months of 2013 was actually higher compared with the previous year, although it didn’t surpass the average reached in 2011, the last year of the administration of former President Álvaro Colom (2008-2012).

Central American Business Intelligence (CABI) said that, in 2011, Guatemala recorded 39 murders per 100,000 inhabitants, a figure that was reduced by 13% during the following year, averaging 34 murders per 100,000 inhabitants in 2012.

However, the URL report puts these figures in context and points out that Guatemala’s latest general elections took place in 2011, which explains the high murder rate during that particular year. The progressively decreasing murder rate can also be attributed to a series of policies implemented before Pérez Molina took office in 2012, such as the creation of the Dirección de Inteligencia Civil
Poverty is not a priority

Guatemala currently ranks 133rd in the Human Development Index (HDI) of the UN Development Programme (UNDP). Although the country’s income levels per capita have improved, it has some of the worst social indicators in Latin America, after Haiti.

The Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE) says that 53.71% of Guatemalans live below the poverty line, and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) says that 1,052,000 Guatemalan children are undernourished.

The Colom administration implemented a series of social programs to tackle these problems, including Mi Familia Progresa, a conditioned cash-transfer program that gives poor families a monthly allowance provided their children attend school as well as have regular medical checkups (NotiCen, July 24, 2008, and Oct. 22, 2009).

During the previous government, Pérez Molina fiercely criticized Colom’s social programs and argued that former first lady Sandra Torres was manipulating beneficiaries by forcing them to enroll in the official party in exchange for receiving benefits. Instead, he put forward Plan Hambre Cero, which pledged to reduce chronic infant malnutrition by 10%.

One of the first steps taken was creating the Ministerio de Desarrollo Social (MIDES) to run all the government’s social programs and improve transparency. Mi Familia Progresa was renamed Mi Bono Seguro, but the program suffered significant budget cuts. Whereas Mi Familia Progresa was allocated 1,117 million quetzales (US$142 million) in 2010, in 2013 it was allocated 750 million quetzales (US$95.6 million), a 50% reduction.

In June, Vice President Roxana Baldetti delivered presentations on Hambre Cero in Washington and London, even though only 22% of its budget was disbursed during the first quarter of 2013, falling short of the government’s 33% target.

"Social programs are not a priority for this government. The Hambre Cero pact has been trumpeted and has even received international awards, but it has the worst record of the three pacts pledged by the government," said Rosal.

Corruption persists

The Pacto Fiscal para el Cambio pledged by Pérez Molina included five components: 1) transparency; 2) economic growth; 3) fighting contraband and tax evasion; 4) tax modernization; and 5) prioritization of resources.

After Congress approved a fiscal reform, Pérez Molina proposed 11 transparency bills, none of which have been approved. The PP faction in Congress has repeatedly blocked the Ley Contra el Enriquecimiento Ilícito, an anti-corruption bill that would sanction both those who give bribes as well as corrupt government officials who receive them.

"One of this government’s weakest points has been transparency. The government should make a greater effort to improve its image by fighting corruption and securing approval of these bills," says Jonathan Menkos, director of the Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Fiscales (ICEFI).
An example of this administration’s failure to improve transparency was the Pérez Molina administration’s decision to dissolve the Fondo Nacional para la Paz (FONAPAZ), a trust fund that sought to promote peace by improving development and infrastructure in some of the country’s poorest communities, which was dogged by widely publicized corruption scandals for a number of years. FONAPAZ was replaced by a practically identical trust fund, the Fondo Nacional de Desarrollo, a step that has been widely criticized by pro-transparency organizations.

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