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Unprecedented Political Crisis Leads to Surprise Result in Guatemala’s First Round of Elections

by Louisa Reynolds

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Jimmy Morales, a comic actor who once starred in a slapstick comedy as a cowboy who ran for president, is the surprise winner of the Guatemalan elections held on Sept. 6.

Morales, of the minuscule Frente de Convergencia Nacional (FCN), is running for office in the midst of the greatest political crisis in the country’s recent history and has successfully portrayed himself as an outsider. However, his critics have warned that most of his party members are right-wing Army veterans and that, given the country’s recent history of authoritarian military regimes, Guatemala could be heading for a repeat episode.

Morales won 23.99% of the vote, while the second place was a tight race between Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE) candidate Sandra Torres, with 19.75%, and Manuel Baldizón, of Libertad Democrática Renovada (LIDER), with 19.38%. Since none of the candidates secured more than 50% of the vote, Morales and Torres will face off on Oct. 25.

Eleven municipalities in seven departments will have to repeat the mayoral elections on Oct. 25 after angry mobs stormed the polling stations and set fire to the ballots. The first round was marred by outbreaks of violence as parties accused each other of shuttling poor voters to the polls in exchange for meals or food bags. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the elections were fraudulent, as claimed by Baldizón.

Baldizón, a right-wing populist who promised to reinstate the death penalty and impose a flat tax, had been leading the polls for more than a year. But five months before the elections, revelations that former President Otto Pérez Molina and his former vice president Roxana Baldetti were involved in a massive customs fraud network known as La Linea (The Line) set off a nationwide wave of protests and led to widespread disaffection with the political system (NotiCen, May 28, 2015).

The scandal was uncovered by the Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala (CICIG), a UN-supported investigatory body.

As a result of the scandal, President Pérez Molina was impeached in Congress and forced to step down on Sept. 1. Both Baldetti and Pérez Molina have been charged with customs fraud, illicit association, and bribery and are currently under preventive detention awaiting trial (NotiCen, Sept. 3, 2015).

Six weeks after La Linea scandal broke, CICIG uncovered the money-laundering and politics scandal, tainting Baldizón’s running mate, Edgar Barquín. A former president of Guatemala’s central bank, Barquín is accused of involvement in laundering US$937 million from drug-trafficking activities, resources that were later pumped into the LIDER and Gran Alianza Nacional (GANA) parties’ campaign coffers in the 2011 election (NotiCen, Aug. 6, 2015).
CICIG says that 25% of the money fueling Guatemalan politics comes from criminal organizations, mainly drug trafficking. In the past three decades, says CICIG, organized crime has used money and violence to infiltrate political parties, while wealthy businesses have privately funded candidates and political parties in exchange for lucrative public works contracts and other political favors.

The scandal fueled voters’ rejection of the political system. While Baldizón’s popularity plummeted, Morales, whose campaign slogan is "neither corrupt nor a thief," began to rise steadily. "Jimmy hasn’t got a tainted past. Personally, I feel I can trust him," says 33-year-old student Ruby Hernández.

Baldizón’s refusal to take part in televised public debates with other candidates as well as a recording leaked to the press a week before the elections in which he urged his mayoral candidates to mortgage their properties and cars to shuttle voters to the polls and said his party would use votes to "kick his opponents’ asses" exacerbated voters’ anger.

Morales: the dark horse in the race
The last poll, published by Prensa Libre newspaper 48 hours before the elections, revealed a dramatic shift: 25% of those surveyed said they would vote for Morales, who had displaced Baldizón as the front-runner in the race. Prensa Libre’s prediction proved to be accurate.

As Guatemala heads for the face-off between Morales and Torres, the two finalists have come under greater scrutiny. Given that disgraced former President Pérez Molina is a retired Army general, for Morales’ critics, that his party, the FCN, was founded by right-wing Army veterans has set alarm bells ringing.

Torres, on the other hand, is the ex-wife of former President Álvaro Colom (2007-2011). As first lady, she was in charge of implementing the government’s social welfare programs, which gave her an important following in rural areas. However, she lacks popularity in urban areas and the business elite does not trust her (NotiCen, Aug. 18, 2011).

Morales describes himself as a "Christian nationalist," and at times his discourse veers toward the far right. He denies that genocide was perpetrated against Guatemala’s indigenous population during the armed conflict, and he advocates reinstating the death penalty.

"Guatemalans have a skin-deep sense of nationalism. They think it’s about putting a little flag on your car. He’s exploiting that, talking about nationalism when people are unaware of the implications behind that word such as the regimes of Hitler, Franco, or Mussolini," says semiotologist Ramiro MacDonald.

Since the FCN lacks a coherent set of policy proposals, Guatemala’s conservative business elite appears eager to fill that void, creating a military-business alliance that looks startlingly similar to Pérez Molina’s Partido Patriota (PP).

"The party is like an empty shell. Since Morales doesn’t have a shadow cabinet behind him, the business elite will try to fill that void; it’s a similar alliance to the one that was made with Pérez Molina," says Sandino Asturias, director of the Centro de Estudios de Guatemala (CEG).

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