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Comedian Jimmy Morales Wins Sweeping Victory in Guatemalan Elections

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Jimmy Morales, an actor who quit television comedy to run for office, promising to stamp out corruption, won a landslide victory in the Oct. 25 presidential election.

With 100% of ballots counted, Morales had 67% of the vote, compared with 32% for his rival, former first lady Sandra Torres, of the Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE). This is the largest margin of victory in a presidential election since Guatemala returned to democratic rule in 1985 after 36 years of authoritarian military rule.

The outcome tallies with the result predicted by Costa Rican polling firm Prodatos and published by Prensa Libre on Oct. 21, which gave Morales 67.9% of the votes and Torres 32%.

Initially, voter turnout was low but gradually gathered pace before the polling stations closed at 5 p.m. Preliminary results indicated that only 54.37% of those registered to vote decided to do so, a significantly lower turnout than in the first round on Sept. 6, in which 71% of those registered cast their vote.

Morales’ landslide victory came six months after former President Otto Pérez Molina (2012-2015), his former vice president Roxana Baldetti, and a cohort of top government officials were involved in a massive customs fraud scandal known as La Linea. In a separate scandal, Edgar Barquín, the vice presidential candidate of Libertad Democrática Renovada (LIDER), which had been predicted to win the first round, was accused of involvement in money laundering when he served as president of the Bank of Guatemala (NotiCen, April 23, 2015, and Aug. 6, 2015).

The magnitude of these scandals prompted an unprecedented wave of protests demanding Pérez Molina’s resignation that finally forced him to step down on Sept. 1 and led to a record-high turnout during the first round as many voters were hopeful that the elections would bring about change (NotiCen, Sept. 3, 2015).

By the time the second round took place, however, the momentum generated by the protests had died down and had been replaced by a deep sense of apathy and disaffection with the two finalists.

Among those who decided to stay home was 40-year-old personal defense instructor Jorge Mario Marroquín, who says this is the first time he hasn’t voted since he turned 18. "Even though I live less than a block away from the polling station, I decided it was a waste of time; people are fed up with politics as usual," says Marroquín. "I was really happy when I saw people outside Congress demanding Otto Pérez Molina’s impeachment, but my hopes were crushed after the first round. The debates were a joke and voting for the least-worst candidate is not a solution."

A real outsider?
With the slogan "neither corrupt nor a thief," Morales exploited voters’ rejection of the political establishment in the wake of the La Linea scandal, portraying himself as an outsider. "Jimmy hasn’t got a tainted past. Personally, I feel I can trust him," says 33-year-old student Ruby Hernández.
However, his critics highlighted that his party, the Frente de Convergencia Nacional (FCN), was founded by military hard-liners who belong to the Asociación de Veteranos Militares de Guatemala (AVEMILGUA), such as Roberto Pirri Cruz and Victor Augusto Quilo Ayuso. Given that ousted president Pérez Molina is a retired Army general, Morales’ critics argue that he is no outsider and that voting for him means choosing more of the same.

Morales’ critics also say that his pledge to clean up Guatemalan politics rings hollow as his likely Cabinet includes a number of individuals with a tainted track record such as Jorge Luis Donado Vivar, mentioned as a likely interior minister. Vivar unsuccessfully attempted to run for the position of attorney general but was struck off from the candidates’ list after it was proven that he had plagiarized his proposals.

Morales’ running mate is former dean of the state-funded Universidad de San Carlos (SAC), Jafeth Cabrera. His Cabinet also includes figures who played a key role in the administration of disgraced former President Pérez Molina, such as businessman and Deputy Emmanuel Seidner, the architect of the government strategy for the Partido Patriota (PP).

The president-elect’s pledge to not seek alliances with other parties also sounds unrealistic given that the FCN only won 11 seats in Congress (of 158), which will force the party to seek alliances with LIDER, the UNE, and other parties, although the balance of forces in Congress might change in the coming months as many LIDER and PP deputies are expected to defect to the FCN, a common practice in Guatemalan politics known as transfugismo.

No clear policies
Morales, who describes himself as "a Christian nationalist," is socially conservative. Throughout the campaign, he advocated reinstating the death penalty, he stated that he opposes gay marriage, that genocide was not committed against the Mayan population during Guatemala’s armed conflict, and that corruption is the result of parents’ failure to educate their children. Some of his more outlandish proposals include forcing schoolteachers to wear GPS devices to monitor their whereabouts and giving every Guatemalan child a smartphone.

Morales has said a 1% royalty on metals mining is "an injustice," without specifying what he would do to change that. He also said he would wait until the 2016 budget is approved to determine how he would finance a projected deficit of 1.9% of GDP. Although his economic policies are unclear, the private-sector lobby, Comité Coordinador de Asociaciones Agrícolas, Comerciales, Industriales y Financieras (CACIF), surprisingly praised Morales as a candidate who offers "concrete solutions for specific problems."

During a televised debate a week before the elections, Torres attacked Morales for planning to scrap a fertilizer program for rural farmers and limit the scope of social-welfare programs, such as the conditioned-cash-transfer program Mi Bono Seguro (NotiCen, Dec. 6, 2012), inherited by the Pérez Molina administration from his predecessor, former President Álvaro Colom (2008-2012), which was formerly named Mi Familia Progresa (NotiCen, July 24, 2008). Scaling back social-welfare programs is likely to exacerbate conflict in rural areas.

"He [Morales] doesn’t appear to have a coherent governing plan or to be a statesman who can effectively lead the country after the governance crisis it has recently experienced," says political analyst Anabella Rivera of the DEMOS electoral observation mission.