12-3-2015

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Dean Barrow wins third consecutive term in Belize general elections

by Louisa Reynolds

Category/Department: Belize
Published: 2015-12-03

Belizean Prime Minister Dean Barrow, of the United Democratic Party (UDP), won a record third term in the Nov. 4 general election after his party gained a clear majority in Parliament.

The Elections and Boundaries Department reported that roughly 71 percent (140,105) of the country’s 196,587 registered voters cast ballots. A team from the Organization of American States (OAS) monitored the elections, as requested by opposition leader Francis Fonseca.

In response to fears that the opposition was regrouping and that a generous Venezuelan aid package that accounts for a major part of his administration’s budget could grind to a halt, Barrow, 69, called the vote in late September, more than a year ahead of schedule. The last general election was held in March 2012 and the next vote was constitutionally due in 2017.

This is the second consecutive snap election that Belize has held closer to four years rather than five after the previous ballot. Both Barrow and the opposition People’s United Party (PUP) support lowering the maximum term of the National Assembly to four years.

Barrow’s UDP won 19 constituencies, while the PUP, which campaigned on the promise of “a new beginning, a fresh start, a new team of leaders,” won 10.

Third parties traditionally don’t perform well in Belize, and no third party running independently has finished with more than 1% of the vote nationwide since 1984. Last September, shortly after the election was called, the People’s National Party (PNP) merged with the Vision Inspired by the People (VIP) and other opposition groups to form the Belize Progressive Party (BPP).

The BPP did not win a single constituency. Another minor party, the Belize Green Independent Party, ran a single candidate in Toledo East but only garnered five votes.

Addressing party supporters in Belize City, Barrow said it was “a magnificent victory.”

In contrast to Barrow’s optimism, many Belizean voters expressed apathy and said they saw little possibilities for change regardless of which party won.

Three months before the elections, Barrow, who has led the UDP since 1998, said this election would be his last as party leader.

Barrow calls Jimmy Morales “a neophyte”

Guatemala’s president elect, Jimmy Morales, a former comedian with no previous political experience who won a landslide victory in a runoff with Sandra Torres last October (NotiCen, Nov. 5, 2015), made a series of remarks regarding Guatemala’s border dispute with Belize that irked the Barrow administration.

When Telediario reporter Elsie Sierra asked Morales which event in Guatemalan history he considered the most deplorable, Morales replied: “Everything that goes contrary to national unity
and territorial integrity are things that should hurt us. Something is happening right now, we are about to lose Belize. We have not lost it yet. We still have the possibility of going to the International Court of Justice where we can fight for that territory or part of that territory” (NotiCen, March 9, 2000, Jan. 15, 2009, March 15, 2012, and April 18, 2013).

In response to Sierra’s question regarding whether it would really be worth it for Guatemala to recover Belize, he said: “I think that it is worth anything that is natural resources and of benefit to the nation … anything that is a loss for Guatemala is deplorable.”

In another interview with the Guatemalan media, Morales said that Guatemala wasn’t taking the dispute with Belize as seriously as it should and said that textbooks should show Belize as part of Guatemalan territory. “It is a major topic that should be a priority issue for us. It should be a main subject for the Guatemalan Ministry of Education to educate the students. Why are we drawing the map of Guatemala without Belize, when the position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is that the map of Guatemala should be drawn with Belize included and with broken lines because we have a territorial dispute, and that we should go to the International Court of Justice? It is a national issue that while it doesn’t interest everybody, it should be a national issue.”

He added that he would “recuperate the territory of Belize without using violence or provoking a fight because the territory belongs to Guatemala.”

Morales’ remarks caused an uproar in Belize, with the newspaper Amandala branding them as “disturbing” and “misleading,” while Barrow hit back by saying his administration would not be bullied.

“Mr. Morales is a neophyte, he is a novice … But he will learn that the kind of talk that we heard from him at the start, with respect to Belize, is absolutely unacceptable … To proceed on the basis of respecting Belize’s territorial integrity is the only way to go … We want to live in peace, we want to continue to live in peace, we want to settle problems peacefully, we want to do so by diplomatic means. We will not be bullied and Mr. Morales needs to learn that right quick,” Barrow told LoveFM.com.

On Nov. 28, Morales traveled to Belize and met with Barrow as part of a region-wide tour. The Belizean media described the meeting as “cordial.” Despite the belligerence of his statements, Morales invited Barrow to attend his inauguration in January 2016. Barrow accepted the invitation.

However, Morales’ visit did not sit well with many Belizeans, and he was met by protesters from a local grassroots organization known as Citizens Organized for Liberty Through Action (COLA) as well as the BPP. Some protesters were arrested, including COLA president Geovanni Brackets.

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