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Guatemala: Deposed President Rios Montt Becomes Viable Candidate For 1990 Elections

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On Sept. 2 the Guatemalan media reported that Gen. Jose Efrain Rios Montt will be competing for nomination as the National Unity Front's (FUN) presidential candidate in the November 1990 elections. He joins a dozen candidates and potential nominees of some 20 political parties. Rios Montt established himself as president in a 1982 coup, and was deposed 16 months later in August 1983. During his regime of terror, thousands were killed and additional thousands fled the country. A 1982 report by the New York-based human rights monitor group, Americas Watch, said that under Rios Montt, bullets were not wasted on women and children. Instead, soldiers choked them, smashed their skulls and hacked them to pieces with machetes and bayonets. According to Lindsey Gruson of the New York Times in an article dated Aug. 26, several polls show Rios Montt leading in Guatemala City, and second over all. On Sept. 2, Notimex reported that the most recent issue of the Guatemalan weekly, Cronica, said the newest polls show Rios Montt in third place in Guatemala City. Gruson suggests that many Guatemalans are convinced that the country needs a "strong" no-nonsense president to stem the tide of rising crime and perceived anarchy. The general is officially retired from the military. Exacerbating the situation is a split within the Christian Democrat Party. Alfonso Cabrera, party general secretary and close friend of President Vinicio Cerezo, won the presidential primary in August. Rene de Leon, a party founder and runner-up in the primary, has claimed fraud and threatens to leave the party. Rumors continue about Cabrera's opulent life style which is allegedly financed by drug trafficking. He is also said to be detested by the Army. Montt's campaign is based on nationalistic rhetoric, law and order, and his characteristic morality sermons. Recently he told the Guatemalan magazine 7 Days, "A government for the people, by the people is no more than a French idiocy that's never happened." The Cronica mentioned that it will be "difficult to forget" the excesses, bloodshed and bizarre behavior of the general during his tenure as president. An example noted by the magazine was Rios Montt's lectures on moral principles broadcast nationwide every Sunday at 9 p.m. (Basic data from Notimex, 09/02/89; New York Times, 09/03/89)

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