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## Hand-Picked Candidate of Gen. Rios Montt Leads Polls in Guatemala

by LADB Staff

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With the presidential elections six weeks away, the governing conservative Partido de Avanzada Nacional (PAN) is having difficulty establishing its candidate as a front runner against a challenger who has admitted committing a double homicide and evading arrest. Meanwhile, the left, hoping to reach the goals of the 36-year civil war through the ballot box, is imploding because of internal differences.

The PAN campaign got off to a slow start. In February, Guatemala City Mayor Oscar Berger renounced his nomination as the PAN's presidential candidate. He said that he was resigning for personal reasons and that his decision was "irrevocable." Rumors spread that the real reason had to do with internal party disputes and differences with President Alvaro Arzu.

Two weeks later, Berger reversed himself and accepted the nomination after discussions with party leaders. The decision ended what had become a party crisis since the PAN had no other candidate of Berger's political stature to run.

Retired Gen. Efraim Rios Montt, former military head of state (1982-1983), decided not to run this time. The Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) ruled him ineligible in two previous campaigns because he came to power through a coup (see NotiSur, 1995-07-21, 1995-08-11).

Instead, he selected Alfonso Portillo as the presidential candidate of his ultra- right Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG) in January. The party is the PAN's chief opposition and came in second in the last two elections.

### *Candidate admits killing two in Mexico*

In early September, Portillo's campaign was jolted by his admission that he shot and killed two men and wounded a third in a 1982 fracas near Chilpancingo, Guerrero state, Mexico. At the time, Portillo was a professor at the Universidad Autonoma de Guerrero in Chilpancingo. He said that he had been assaulted in a dispute over university politics and that he fired his pistol in self-defense. Portillo and two companions were charged with the homicides.

An order for his arrest was issued but not executed. Portillo said he fled Mexico fearing he would be unjustly accused. When the local press broke the story Sept. 6, Portillo said Guerrero authorities dropped the case against him in 1995. But replying to a Guatemalan government request for information, the Guerrero state attorney general said the case had not been closed.

Giving more ammunition to Portillo's opponents, a spokesperson for the Mexican university said that Portillo had never produced his credentials for the faculty position and that his file had recently "mysteriously" disappeared.

The spokesperson speculated that the disappearance was related to Portillo's visit to Guerrero in July. Portillo accused the PAN of revealing the details of the case to the press to damage his campaign, but said he did not expect the news to hurt his election chances. TSE Judge Mario Guerra Roldan said the case pending against Portillo in Mexico would not affect his legal right to run for office.

In a preference poll conducted in August, Portillo led Berger by 3.7 percentage points. In the poll, Portillo was favored by 30.2% of respondents; Berger by 26.5%; Alvaro Colom of the left-of-center Alianza Nueva Nacion (ANN), 4.4%; Francisco Bianchi of the Accion Reconciliadora Democratica (ARDE), 1.7%; and Acisclo Valladares of the Partido Libertador Progresista (PLP), 1.3%. The poll was taken before the Portillo scandal broke.

Another poll, taken a few days after Portillo publicly admitted the killings, showed he had opened a 7.5-point lead over Berger. The mid-September poll showed him ahead with 37.4%, Berger second with 29.9%, and Colom still a distant third with 6.1%.

Portillo's increased margin, reflected in all parts of the country, suggested that the double-homicide incident had done him no harm so far. The left splits. Meanwhile, the left has been badly damaged by its inability to unite behind a coalition candidate.

Early this year, four left-of-center parties formed the ANN, comprising the Unidad de Izquierda, Desarrollo Integral Autentico (DIA), Unidad de Izquierda Democratica (UNID), Frente Democratico Nueva Guatemala (FDNG), and Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG).

Announcing the alliance in February, URNG leader Pedro Monsanto said the purpose was to create "a new nation" based on the 1996 peace accords. "The alliance is a historic step in the effort to present our people with a political alternative capable of confronting and resolving their most important needs," said the statement, signed by the leaders of all four parties.

The ANN selected Colom as its candidate in April. Colom was director of the government's Fondo Nacional para la Paz (FONAPAZ) during the administration of president Ramiro de Leon Carpio (1993-1996). He is the son of former presidential candidate Alvaro Colom who was assassinated in 1982, reportedly by the Guatemalan army.

In July, FDNG secretary general Rafael Arriaga was expelled from the alliance in a dispute about the list of alliance candidates for congress. Explaining the expulsion, Colom said Arriaga was trying to load the list with his own supporters.

Arriaga accused the URNG of trying to monopolize the candidate list. He said the URNG tried to impose a list that included only three FDNG candidates out of a total of 14, "when we are the biggest party in the Alliance." The alliance fractured in mid-August when the FDNG defected over which presidential candidate to support. Arriaga announced that his party would support its own presidential candidate, Catalina Soberanis.

Since the split, the ANN and the FDNG have continued their bickering and have accused each other of tearing down their campaign posters. Arriaga's defection also split the FDNG. Nineth Montenegro, an FNDG leader and congressional deputy who opposed Arriaga's decision, said one FDNG group would support Colom and the other the Soberanis ticket, but both will remain in the Frente.

Political analysts and pollsters say the election will turn on which of the major parties' strongmen Arzu or Rios Montt has more influence with the voters. While respondents tell pollsters Arzu is a better president than Rios Montt was, Berger might be suffering from the voter perception that Arzu is not able to resolve the economic and public-safety issues that concern voters most.

Rios Montt, on the other hand, has stayed out of the political limelight since the last presidential election, and his image as a "statesman" could help Portillo's chances. Lost in the campaign frenzy is debate about how to address issues related to the peace process, says Colom. After a trip to Washington and talks with US leaders, Colom said the international lending and donor nations might lose interest in supporting the peace process if candidates do not begin to discuss the challenges of meeting the peace-process goals. [Sources: Spanish News Service EFE, 02/18/99; Notimex, 01/27/99, 02/07/99, 02/12/99, 04/22/99, 06/20/99, 07/22/99, 08/10/99, 08/11/99, 08/24/99; CNN, Spanish News Service EFE, 09/08/99; El Nuevo Herald, 09/09/99, La Prensa Libre (Guatemala), 09/07/99, 09/08/99, 09/22/99]

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