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Alfonso Portillo Wins Guatemala's Presidential Runoff by a Landslide

by LADB Staff

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Alfonso Portillo of the rightist Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG) won the Dec. 26 runoff election, defeating governing Partido de Avanzada Nacional (PAN) candidate Oscar Berger. With nearly all the votes counted, the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) announced that Portillo had taken 68% of the vote. Turnout was 41% of eligible voters, compared with nearly 54% in the first-round election Nov. 7. The lower turnout was attributed to holding the election during the Christmas holidays and to the general certainty that Portillo would win.

Portillo soundly defeated Berger in the first round but fell short of the 50% necessary to avoid a runoff because of third-party votes (see NotiCen, 1999-11-11). However, Portillo's 18-point margin over Berger suggested he would win easily in the runoff. Since Berger improved his performance by just two percentage points in the runoff, Portillo clearly took much of the third-party vote, including the 12% won in November by Alvaro Colom of the left-of-center Alianza Nueva Nacion (ANN). '

Portillo's party will have control of the government since the FRG won 63 of the 113 congressional seats in the November contest. The party also took control of 46% of the nation's 330 municipal governments. FRG president retired Gen. Efraim Rios Montt won a congressional seat in November, and is expected to become president of the Congress.

During his campaign, Portillo softened the right-wing image of the party and Rios Montt, portraying himself as a crusading populist. He promised to reign in the military by eliminating the presidential guard (Estado Mayor Presidencial, EMP) and appointing a civilian defense minister. He also said he would take away the official residence of the defense minister and use it for state functions. "The defense minister doesn't have a right to a [government] residence if the labor minister doesn't have one," Portillo said.

Regarding human rights, Portillo promised to try everyone accused of human-rights violations and to cooperate with the truth commission (Comision para el Esclarecimiento Historico) investigating the military's conduct during the civil war. He promised to respect press freedom, reduce poverty and illiteracy, attack crime and drug trafficking, and slash unnecessary government spending to concentrate resources on social programs. Portillo also promised to clear up the Bishop Juan Gerardi murder case. Church and human rights groups consider members of the EMP prime suspects in the case (see NotiCen, 1999-10-21). [Sources: Agence France-Presse, 12/23/99; Spanish News Service EFE, 12/27/99; Prensa Libre (Guatemala), 12/27/99]

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