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Alonso Portillo Assumes Presidency in Guatemala

by LADB Staff

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Alfonso Portillo Cabrera, 48, began his term as president Jan. 14 amid concerns that retired Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt, leader of the rightist governing Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG), would pull the government further to the right. Portillo presents himself as a unifying, independent figure who will attack the nation's economic ills and curb the military. He and Vice President Juan Reyes López will serve until 2004. The Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) declared Portillo the legally elected president on Dec. 30.

The final count showed he won the Dec. 26 second-round election (see NotiCen, 2000-01-13) with 68.31% of the vote against 31.69% for Partido de Avanzada Nacional (PAN) candidate Oscar Berger. During his first Cabinet meeting, Portillo called upon his ministers to serve with humility, "because we don't have power, the people who elected us have the power." He also called for austerity in government.

In hopes of cutting government expenditures by 10%, Portillo ordered the ministers to present plans to reduce their operating budgets without affecting social spending. "The country can't go on with a rich government and a poor population," he said. Besides spending cuts, Portillo said he would step up tax collection and would investigate the tax-revenue administration (Superintendencia de Administración Tributaria, SAT), which he said had failed to collect taxes owed by big businesses.

Before the second-round vote, Portillo said he would be taking over the presidency at a time when the nation was on the verge of economic collapse. Speaking to reporters before casting his vote, Portillo disputed assertions by outgoing President Álvaro Arzu that he was leaving the country in "infinitely better condition" in 2000 than when he took over in 1996. On the contrary, Portillo said, the legacy of the Arzu years was more foreign debt, more unemployment, and a "general deterioration" of the economy. He promised to deliver a candid report to the nation on the state of the economy.

Before leaving office, Arzu issued a report claiming success in channeling funds into social investment, especially in the areas of greatest poverty. FRG leaders questioned the transparency of those expenditures. Hector Cifuentes, the PAN's secretary general, said "We have left the country with the best highway infrastructure in recent times." But the FRG said the quality of road construction was poor and some of the roads were already deteriorating.

The Arzu administration has also been criticized for its handling of the privatization of Telecomunicaciones de Guatemala (TELGUA) in 1998 (see NotiCen, 1998-10-08). "We haven't even been able to establish who acquired it," said Manfredo Marroquín of Acción Ciudadana. Portillo has promised an investigation of the TELGUA sale. Polls during his final year in office showed widespread public dissatisfaction with Arzu.

In a survey conducted for the daily Siglo Veintiuno, only 32% rated his efforts good or very good. Other polls showed even lower percentages. Arzu received especially low marks for the state of public security and for his economic policies.

Portillo's campaign promises were decidedly populist, emphasizing programs for the poor. He promised price controls on basic market-basket goods and on water, electricity, and telephone services. He also promised not to privatize the Instituto Guatemalteco de Seguridad Social (IGSS) and to hold the line on taxes.

In one of his most dramatic pronouncements, Portillo pledged to solve the Bishop Juan Gerardi assassination case (see NotiCen, 1998-04-30) or resign the presidency. He said that, as commander of the military, he would place military suspects at the disposal of civilian courts. "If the military decides to kill me, let them," he said in an interview in December. "But they will be killing the military....the army will not survive. It has to understand that it cannot cover up for anyone."

Portillo's association with Rios Montt raises questions

The Portillo-Rios Montt axis worries human rights activists. In December, the Comision de Derechos Humanos de Centroamerica (CODEHUCA) said it would carefully watch events in Guatemala. Berta Oliva, the organization's vice president, said Portillo's election was unfortunate because Rios Montt "will be the real power in the new Guatemalan government." Nobel laureate Rigoberta Menchu, who has filed a lawsuit with a Spanish court against Rios Montt for human rights abuses during his bloody 1982-1983 anti-insurgency campaign, said it was lamentable that voters chose a party that represents "obscurantism" when they had other choices.

Portillo recently acknowledged that he has signed a "political pact" with Rios Montt but said it guarantees his political independence from the general. "With Gen. Rios Montt, we have a pact that is not going to lose force because it is solid and has a common objective, which is to move Guatemala forward so that our children will receive a democratic and stable country." He added that if Rios Montt breaks the pact, there would be a "rupture" between them.

Despite the pact, Portillo has tried to distance himself from Rios Montt by choosing a Cabinet weighted with academic colleagues from his days as an economics professor and with only a few associates of Rios Montt. The most striking Cabinet appointment was that of Col. Juan de Dios Estrada Velasquez as defense minister. By choosing a mid-level officer, Portillo forced all of the army's 20 generals who are prohibited from taking orders from a colonel to retire or go on leave. Portillo said the appointment would be temporary and that a civilian would replace Estrada in a few months.

One of the retiring generals is former defense minister Marco Tulio Espinosa, accused of human rights violations during the civil war. "This is a decision that responds to the need to reform the army," Portillo said.

Other Cabinet appointments include: * Interior, Luis Ruiz Wong * Finance, Manuel Maza * Economy, Eduardo Weymann * Foreign Affairs, Gabriel Orellana * Communications, Luis Rabbe * Education, Mario Torres * Agriculture, Roger Valenzuela * Public Health, Mario Bolanos *

Culture, Otila Lux * Energy and Mines, Raul Archila * Bank of Guatemala, Edin Velasquez * Peace Secretariat, Ruben Calderon

The Cabinet is an eclectic mix. Besides FRG leaders, it includes a Rios Montt supporter (Orellana), a former Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) guerrilla (Calderon), and a former member of the truth commission that investigated human rights violations during the civil war (Lux). Rios Montt is now president of the Congress, elected to the post by the FRG congressional majority. He promised that the first order of business in Congress would be legislation to permit the appointment of a civilian as defense minister. [Sources: Notimex, 08/27/99, 12/22/99, 12/26/99, 12/27/99, 12/30/99, 12/31/99; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 01/09/00; Agence France-Presse, 01/14/00; Siglo Veintiuno (Guatemala), 01/04/00, 01/14/00, 01/14/00; La Prensa Libre (Guatemala), 12/27/99, 01/18/00, Reuters, 01/18/00; Excelsior (Mexico), 11/30/99, 01/14/00, 01/19/00]

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