

# *MESOAMERICA*

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## **GUATEMALA**

### **Elections, Violence and Toxic Sandwiches**

With the Guatemalan general election just three months away, the presidential candidates are working overtime to get out their message and come out on top.

In the most recent polling, the National Unity of Hope (UNE) candidate, Alvaro Colom, is still in the lead with between 20-26% of the expected vote. He is running on a platform of better education and stronger security for Guatemala.

Trailing behind Colom is the Patriot Party candidate, former Gen. Otto Pérez Molina, with 11-19%, whose principal message is also about national security.

In third and fourth place respectively are Alejandro Giammattei of the incumbent Grand National Alliance party, and '92 Nobel Peace-Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú Tum of Encounter for Guatemala (EG). Menchú was officially chosen by EG delegates as their presidential candidate on 27 May.

On 23 May, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) gave former military dictator Efraín Ríos-Montt ('82-'83), the man that Menchú and many others have been trying to put behind bars, permission to make another bid for a congressional seat. If elected, he will be immune for four more years from prosecution in a Spanish court for alleged crimes he committed during his brief dictatorship in Guatemala.

Also, on 23 May, a report released by the Organization of American States (OAS) articulated its distress over the rising tide of violence related to the upcoming elections. The group is concerned that the violence could interfere with the electoral process, of which the OAS has pledged to monitor.

The Director of the OAS' Observer Mission, Diego García Sayán, stated that during the last elections in '03 there were 29 related homicides, whereas during this current election cycle there have been 43 reported murders of activists and political operatives.

However, according to the OAS report, the violence is not due to political polarization in the election field, but is perhaps due to drug and gang connections to the electoral process.

Also, according to the OAS observers, one of the main challenges during this election will be for the TSE. The OAS is expecting the TSE to promote voting in the towns and countryside, to help explain the mechanics of the voting process, and to make serious attempts at curbing the ongoing violence.

Francisco Garcia of Electoral Watch, a Guatemalan pro-democracy activist group, also reported that drug gangs are using violence to try to intimidate the next administration.

On 26 and 27 May, two people of different political affiliation were victims of the swelling violence, bumping the numbers up to 45 related homicides. The first, Liberaldo Granados, a mayoral candidate backed by Menchú, was shot dead on 26 May in front of his home in the town of Zacapa, near the capital.

The second, on 27 May, a Guatemala Republican Front (FRG) activist working on the campaign for Rios-Montt, was gunned down in the town of Escuintla. FRG spokesman Arístedes Crespo, who did not want to release the victim's name, stated that "there is tremendous insecurity, and it worries us a lot. It could affect the electoral process."

While many contenders for the presidency are having difficulties within their ranks, some supporters of the frontrunner, Colom, had very different troubles.

During a rally for Colom held 20 May, an estimated 120 people suffered from the effects of food poisoning and were rushed to the hospital during the event. In an attempt to lure more people to the rally in Escuintla, the Colom team doled out free ham sandwiches.

According to doctors at the Guatemala City hospital where the sickened supporters were taken, the sandwiches, or more specifically staphylococcus in the apparently over-aged meat, was the culprit.

Colom's UNE party paid for the victims' treatment of hydration therapy and medicines and gave them rides home when they were released from the hospital.

It is quite common for food to be served at political rallies, however some critics see it as akin to vote buying. Police do not suspect foul play in the poisonings.

### **Femicide on Rise in Guatemala**

The Commission of Human Rights of the Congress of Guatemala is considering a new law that would impose tougher sentences for femicide, which by definition is the systematic killing of women simply because they are women.

The new law would modify the Guatemalan Penal Code to specify that the perpetrators of such a crime would receive between 25-50 years in prison. The length of time would be dependent on the mitigating circumstances of each case.

In addition to imposing more harsh punishment for the crimes, the law also would help to create shelters for women that are victims of domestic violence, and grant legal protection in cases of violent crimes. In most circumstances, Guatemalan women have no place to turn to when they have been abused by a spouse. Only recently Guatemalan courts revoked a law that stated a sexual assault or rape was not considered a crime if committed by the husband of the victim.

The Commission, using statistics from a Congressional study on Women in Guatemala, said that in the first quarter of this year there were 156 cases of femicide. The figure for the same period last year is 125.

More figures from the study recount that since '01 there have been at least 900 incidents of femicide in Guatemala and 10,000 other violent crimes against women also have been documented.

According to a 22 May report by Amnesty International, quoting statistics from the Guatemalan Public Prosecutors office, there were an estimated 580 femicides in Guatemala during '06. Out of those 580, only six people were sentenced for the murders, which often involved sexual violence. The report also points out that femicide is not only on the rise in Guatemala but also in El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua.

### **The Door Opens for Ex-President Portillo**

On 1 June, Mexican authorities granted former Guatemalan President Alfonso Portillo ('00-'04) permanent asylum in the country and thereby invalidated his pending extradition process.

At virtually the same time, the Guatemalan Constitutional Court ordered that the embezzlement charge and warrant for Portillo's arrest and extradition be dropped. Reportedly the judge in Guatemala's Fifth Criminal Court had originally ordered the warrant and extradition before submitting a formal charge. Consequently, the court has dismissed the case against him.

Portillo, who is accused of embezzling \$15.8 million from the Ministry of Defense budget, has been living the good life in a posh Mexico City neighborhood since Feb '04, where he fled mere hours after his political immunity was revoked in Guatemala.

In Mexico City, Portillo's attorney David Abbott gleefully stated "the Mexican courts have ruled absolutely in favor of the ex-President of Guatemala and against the extradition request by Guatemala." Adding that "we have always stressed that there were no crimes committed by the transferences."

The money Abbott referred to was transferred from the Ministry of Defense and was deposited into a bank account held by a close friend and associate of Portillo, José Armando Llort, of Crédito Hipotecario Nacional de Guatemala, a government-run bank, and was not recovered.

Many others in the Portillo administration were convicted of crimes in connection with the embezzling, although at this point Portillo will remain a free man without a criminal record in Mexico.

## **Evangelicals and Politics**

On 27 May, the evangelical church known as the Christian Brotherhood (Fraternidad Cristiana) inaugurated its new *Mega Fráter* or “megachurch” in the city of San Cristóbal, a suburb of Guatemala City, after seven years of construction.

The new church facility, which was built at a cost of about \$30 million (\$10 million over-budget), is reportedly the largest of its kind in Latin America and the main auditorium can hold slightly more than 12,000 people. Christian Brotherhood, founded by pastor Jorge López in '78 with just 22 parishioners, is notably one of the larger evangelical congregations in Guatemala, with more members than the maximum capacity of the new building.

For centuries a country dominated by Roman Catholicism, Guatemala is experiencing a surge in evangelical church growth and is said to have the largest evangelical following in Latin America. According to the most recent studies, Protestants in Guatemala who universally identify themselves as evangelicals represent about 30% of the nation's total population of about 13 million people.

In recent decades evangelical groups have gained popularity both in the countryside and in the cities. However, Guatemala City has a slightly lower percentage of evangelicals than the interior, 25.1% and 27.8% respectively. Often the difference in numbers is based on socioeconomic levels, with the largest percentage of evangelicals in the lower/middle class and the smallest percentage in upper/upper and lower/upper classes.

Public opinion polls for decades have documented the decline of Roman Catholic parishioners in Guatemala and the steady increase in evangelical membership, as well as an increase in those who now claim to have no religious affiliation.

“In the last 30 years Guatemala has seen more growth in the Evangelical Church than anywhere else in the world,” claimed Protestant minister Rodolfo Mendoza.

Evangelical groups also are reported to own or control many radio and television stations in Guatemala. This is evidenced by the communication empire of pastor Cash Luna of the House of God Church (Iglesia Casa de Dios) who has at least 25 broadcasting outlets and has his own mega-church in the works to rival the Christian Brotherhood's new building.

The political power and influence of the Christian Brotherhood was made obvious by the attendance of Guatemala's President, Óscar Berger, and other officials such as the both the presidents of the Congress and Judiciary and the ambassadors of Taiwan and Israel at the megachurch's inaugural services on 27 May.

Politics have played an important role for many evangelicals in Guatemala, such as popular megachurch leader Harold Caballeros, who is making his bid for president. Caballeros, who resigned his pastorate in Dec '06 to run for public office, previously had founded his own large congregation, Iglesia El Shaddai, with satellite churches in many low on the list of presidential hopefuls.

“Not everybody here is going to vote for him; we are one church but in politics each person thinks differently,” said Jorge Ramos, during the opening ceremonies of the new Christian Brotherhood church. “In the United States, since the time of the founding fathers there has been a manifestation of Puritan beliefs in politics,” said Caballeros. “Here, the evangelicals think [participation in] politics is a sin.”

However, as the Caballeros political movement grows, it is making attempts to distance itself from its past with retired Gen. Efraín Rios-Montt, a former military dictator and a controversial evangelical politician who has served in Congress and wants to make another run for the nation’s presidency. During his time in the executive office (’82-’83) his weekly televised speeches were blended with both political and biblical messages, but he is more universally known for his “scorched earth policies” against Mayan leftists during the bloody civil war when tens of thousands of *campesinos* were massacred by Guatemalan military forces and allied Self-Defense Patrols (Vol. 26, No. 2).

—Jason Howd