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GUATEMALA

Alvaro Colom Wins Presidency in Runoff Election

Center-left Alvaro Colom Caballeros of the National Unity of Hope Party was elected Guatemala's new president on Sunday, 4 Nov, according to official poll results released by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) on 5 Nov, in a vote that was in many ways a referendum on this country's fragile and besieged democracy.

Colom, an industrial engineer, had been all but written off in Guatemala's political world, where he was mocked because of his speech impediment, sloped shoulders and lackluster campaigning style. A two-time failed candidate, Colom squandered a huge lead in the polls and by the runoff election was trailing retired Gen. Otto Pérez Molina in most polls.

In his victory speech, Colom described the vote as "a 'no' to Guatemala's tragic history." Colom will take over from President Óscar Berger on 14 Jan.

With 97% of the precincts reporting, Colom (age 56) won 52.8% of the vote, compared to 47.2% for his rival, Pérez Molina (also age 56) of the rightwing Patriotic Party, in the nation's runoff election. The point spread between the two candidates was only 5.6% of the votes cast by only 47% of registered voters.

Stunned by nearly empty voting centers in parts of the country, political figures across Guatemala appeared on news programs throughout the day to beg residents to vote. An electoral watchdog group said some polling stations had not registered a single vote three hours after opening. As the day progressed, it seemed that this election might be defined by those who did not vote as much as by those who did.

Also, the climatic conditions conspired against the voters, with rain in some regions and cold weather in others, which contributed to voter apathy along with the threat of violence and a lack of confidence in the campaign promises of the two candidates.

In the first round of voting on 9 Sep, the difference between Colom and Pérez was only 4.7% with 60.4% of registered voters participating and with Colom in the lead (Vol. 26, No. 9).

Across Guatemala, turnout was light for the runoff, after a nasty campaign that centered on a single issue: the crime and corruption that have characterized Guatemala's democratic institutions under civilian rule. Although crime is less of a problem in rural areas, support for Colom was strong in provincial Guatemala and among its Maya population who responded to his promise of improved healthcare and schools for the poor, rural and indigenous population; also, Colom is a convert to Mayan religion. Pérez Molina won handily in Guatemala City, the nation's capital and its largest city, which has a very high crime rate and where his anti-crime slogans resonated in neighborhoods dominated by violent gangs, but lost in 19 of the country's 22 provinces.

During the election campaign, a slew of anonymous fliers and e-mails accused Colom of a variety of mortal sins, including links to drug cartels. He even felt compelled to issue a news release explaining that his study of Mayan religious rites did not mean he was an agent of the devil.

Colom struck back by suggesting that Pérez Molina would trample on civil liberties and return the country to a dark, authoritarian past, a theme that civil rights groups picked up. "It's obvious that the recent civilian governments have failed," said Francisco García of the Central American Institute of Political Studies.

The TSE reported no major incidents on Election Day, which was monitored by thousands of national and international observers.

Now we can come together with all the parties and work for the good of Guatemala," Colom said as he made a triumphant entrance to election headquarters late on election night.

Colom, whose party logo was two hands together shaped like a dove, promised to attack the root causes of crime by attacking poverty and removing corrupt police and judges; and he challenged his opponent's campaign promise of using a "mano dura," or strong hand, to combat delinquency, gang violence and drug-trafficking. Pérez had pledged to use the military in police functions and to declare a "state of emergency" and impose curfews in the nation's worst trouble spots.

The former general claimed that his background as a soldier and intelligence chief would help him take on criminals, while Colom appeared to convince voters that electing a soldier, especially one tainted by allegations of past misdeeds, to the country's highest office would return the country to a dark past when a corrupt military ruled.

Colom, a businessman and economist who directed the National Fund for Peace (a government development agency), countered that confronting violence with violence was short-sighted. "We had a firm hand for 50 years and it caused more than 250,000 victims in a dirty war," said Colom, who spoke of creating jobs and addressing the country's dire poverty, especially among its indigenous communities.

Colom defines himself as a moderate Social Democrat and says he is inspired by leftist presidents Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in Brazil and Michelle Bachelet in Chile. He says his government will not clash with the landowning and business elites of Guatemala, which is a major coffee producer.

Several of Colom's relatives were killed during the civil war, including his uncle Manuel Colom Argueta, a presidential candidate and prominent leftist mayor of Guatemala City ('70- '74), who was assassinated in '79 after being threatened and harassed – allegedly by a rightwing military “death squad.”

This year's entire election campaign was marred by violence, with more than 50 political party activists or candidates for Congress or local elections killed. Colom's party was hardest hit with almost 20 party members murdered since last year (Vol. 26, No. 9).

“It is incredible to me that a general was even running,” said Rigoberta Menchú, who won a Nobel Peace Prize in '92 for drawing attention to the military's role in human rights violations during Guatemala's civil war ('60-'96).

With more than 5,000 killings so far this year—one of the highest murder rates in Latin America—the country today is anything but peaceful, with drug-traffickers, gang members, clandestine “death squads” (allegedly members of the public security forces) and other outlaws acting with impunity. Guatemala is considered a major transit route for cocaine going from Colombia to the US, and there is strong evidence that drug-traffickers have infiltrated the country's military, police and justice system (Vol. 26, No. 8).

“Guatemala is in dire shape today, with extreme poverty, failing institutions and ruthless mafias that have been growing virtually unchecked for over a decade,” said Daniel Wilkinson, deputy director for the Americas at Human Rights Watch, a New York-based NGO.

Dr. Rafael Espada, Colom's vice-presidential running mate who is a cardiovascular surgeon, said that a victory by Pérez Molina would have been a blow to the country's fragile democracy. “I can't live with another military regime in Guatemala,” he said, referring to the possible election of Pérez Molina. “His job was to kill people. Now he says he has no blood on his hands.”

Now, Colom must confront the powerful forces of corruption, drug-trafficking and repression that are entrenched in the nation's military forces and political parties.

Misery, poverty, illiteracy, exclusion, discrimination, violence (especially against women) and organized crime are some of the problems that face the new Social Democratic government after decades of mismanagement by neoliberal, right-wing governments.

Colom's administration must strengthen public institutions in their role as servants of the people, such as the Ministry of the Environment and the National Council of Protected Areas. He must seek to pass new and modern water legislation and to strengthen the mechanisms of control over the nation's environmental protection policy and production activities in the shadow of the new Free Trade pact with the US, known as DR-CAFTA.

According to press reports, this year's presidential campaign was the most expensive in the nation's history, costing more than 150 million Quetzals (\$19,578,411) for all political parties combined.

New President Assumes Great Burden

Alvaro Colom awoke on Monday, 5 Nov, to the realization that an entire country of predominantly poor and desperate people was depending on him. Having won Guatemala's presidential election Sunday night, Colom will inherit a series of seemingly intractable problems when he takes office 14 Jan.

Guatemala is one of the most troubled societies in Latin America. Thousands of its citizens emigrate to the US in search of work each year. Organized-crime groups have infiltrated many key government institutions.

In a news conference and subsequent interview with *The Los Angeles Times*, Colom said his government would undertake a series of efforts to improve the lives of the country's Maya population. Long Guatemala's poorest residents, the Mayas voted overwhelmingly for Colom.

"We have a historic debt with our indigenous people," Colom said. "Our government will be one with a Mayan face."

Colom said he also planned to reach out to the millions of Guatemalans who live in the US. The Guatemalan government will work to provide more services to its citizens who live abroad, including assistance to families that wish to return the bodies of those who die far from home.

The Guatemalan consulate in Los Angeles, which serves hundreds of thousands, will be expanded, Colom said. And he will back a measure to provide Guatemalans abroad with the right to vote in their homeland.

"The level of civic activism of the Guatemalans in the US is much higher than it is here," Colom said.

Colom won Sunday's presidential election in the rural villages where more than 20 different Mayan ltry as a threat. But it's a resource and source of strength."

Analysts said that Colom would face a series of challenges as he attempts to rule this country of 13 million people.

"One day, the US is going to stop the flow of migrants," said Edgar Gutiérrez, director of a human rights think-tank in Guatemala. "If Colom doesn't develop a regional strategy that seeks an immigration reform in the US, and if he doesn't invest in the problem of unemployment, he's going to have serious problems."

Colom said investment in the rural economy was desperately needed to stop emigration. He said he would implement a little-used provision of the '96 peace accords that ended Guatemala's civil war, one that allows the government to buy property to redistribute to landless farmers.

The president-elect also proposed the creation of a fund tied to the millions of dollars in remittances that Guatemalans send home each year from the US. Many community groups in the US pay for schools and other projects in their Guatemalan hometowns with remittances. The government should match those contributions, Colom said.

“We have to close the spigot that is producing emigration,” he said. “Our dream is to generate the conditions so that people don’t give in to the temptation to migrate.”

— Clifton L. Holland