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GUATEMALA

Nov Runoff Election to Decide Presidency

Veteran Social Democrat politician Alvaro Colom Caballeros of National Unity of Hope (UNE) and retired Army Gen. Otto Pérez Molina of the Patriot Party (PP) finished first and second, respectively, in Guatemala's presidential election on 9 Sep and will face each other in a 4 Nov runoff election, according to preliminary poll results as of 3:45 pm on 10 Sep, with 90.5% of the ballots counted.

The crime and poverty that ravage this county of 12.7 million people were the central issues heading into the intense political campaign, which was tinged with violence, accusations of corruption and fears that Guatemala may soon return to authoritarian rule after 12 years of democratic presidential elections.

Colom received 28.4% of the vote, followed by Pérez Molina with 23.7%, according to the Supreme Electoral Tribunal's (TSE) website at: <http://www.tse.org.gt>. Of the 14 candidates on the ballot, Alejandro Giammattei of the ruling GANA coalition finished third, with 17.1%. All the other candidates had less than 8% each of the votes cast. The new president will take office on 14 Jan.

The results leave Guatemalans with a clear choice between Colom, a center-left technocrat critical of neoliberal economic policies who ran on a platform of better education and healthcare and stronger public security, and Pérez Molina, a charismatic right-wing conservative who promised a strong-fisted crackdown on crime and corruption, with an emphasis on national security.

The number of Guatemalans registered to vote this year increased by more than 20% over '03, pushing the rolls to nearly 6 million people. The huge increase was propelled by a decision, applauded by international observers, to erect voting centers in rural areas rather than effectively disenfranchising those villagers by obliging them to make long trips to register and vote. Voters were able to cast ballots at more than 13,750 centers, nearly 5,000 more than in '03.

Across Guatemala, millions turned out amid an often festive atmosphere. Frustration with the conservative economic policies of outgoing President Oscar Berger (GANA), who is barred by the constitution from seeking re-election, helped fuel support for 56-year-old Colom, who was the front-runner in most polls for months before the election (Vol. 26, No. 6).

“He has a plan that will make things better for us,” said Francisco López, a 60-year-old farmer, explaining why he voted for Colom.

Colom is the nephew of a former leftist mayor of Guatemala City who was slain during the years of military dictatorship. But Colom stumbled in the final weeks of the campaign after a poor debate performance and an aggressive media campaign by Pérez Molina’s Patriot Party.

Pérez Molina, age 56, a retired former chief of army intelligence, ran on the politically loaded slogan “Vote with a Strong Hand.” The phrase “strong hand” (*mano dura* in Spanish) is synonymous in Latin America with authoritarian policies. Repeated in television commercials and countless campaign posters with the Patriot Party’s clenched-fist symbol, the *mano dura* slogan became a defining element of the campaign.

Pérez Molina promised a tough approach on delinquency and corruption in a nation where murder-for-hire schemes, street crime and drug trafficking are rampant. He said he would hire more police officers, use the military to fight drug gangs, and institute the death penalty.

“When the General came on the scene, my family and I decided he was the one who is going to stop the violence,” said Yolanda Climaco of Antigua, explaining why she voted for Pérez Molina. “We own a business, and we can’t work with the fear and insecurity in the country,” she added.

Colom often warned potential voters on the campaign trail that a vote for the wrong candidate could cause Guatemala to “return to the past,” a reference to the decades of brutal military rule that ended in ’96 with the signing of the peace accords between then-President Alvaro Arzú Yrigoyen (’96-’00) and the leftist Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) rebels.

“We don’t have a dark past, or any bodies in our closet, like others [on the ballot] do,” Colom told a crowd in the southern city of Mazatenango. “Instead, we talk of peace, of development, and of giving the people hope.”

Other candidates picked up on the theme, including ’92 Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú, the candidate of Encounter for Guatemala (EG). Menchú, a Mayan human rights leader, received only 3% of the vote. “We can’t leave the country in the hands of a military man,” Menchú said in a speech in Mazatenango. “Please, we’ve already lived that sad history.” Menchú is the first Mayan woman ever to run for president in this country, where 42% of the population is descendant of the ancient Mayans.

As Pérez Molina cast his ballot in Guatemala City, he lashed out at his opponents. “I have fought for democracy,” he said, reminding voters that he represented the military during the ’90s peace talks. If elected, he added, “There will be a firm hand, but always following the letter of the law.”

In the ’80s, Pérez Molina commanded troops in the western Quiché region during the civil war against leftist rebels. Human rights groups said army troops in Quiché committed atrocities against the predominantly Maya population. Pérez Molina was never charged with war crimes, however.

The recent electoral campaign was marked by violence. More than 47 politically-motivated murders have occurred since May when the campaign began. Some charge that drug traffickers who have attempted to infiltrate some campaigns are behind some of the assassinations.

However, on 9 Sep, the vote appeared to go smoothly, with only isolated reports of irregularities. People waited patiently in long lines. In a country where people have grown used to malfunctions, voters successfully and peacefully cast their ballots. That was a victory in itself.

"Healthcare has been neglected, infrastructure too, and the highways—everything," said Ramiro Cojón, a doctor, as he waited to vote in a San Raimundo community center. "We come here with the hope we can make all that better."

Former President Arzú Re-elected Mayor of Guatemala City

Álvaro Enrique Arzú Yrigoyen (born 14 Mar '46 in Guatemala City) was re-elected for a third term as Mayor of Guatemala City on 9 Sep. Previously, Arzú was Mayor of Guatemala City from '86-'90 and from '04-'07.

Arzú studied Social and Legal Sciences from Rafael Landívar University. In '78 he became the director of the Guatemalan Tourist Institute (INGUAT) and served in that position until '81 when he was elected Mayor of Guatemala City under the banner of the Guatemalan Christian Democrat (DCG) party. When Army Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt took power in a coup in Mar '82 he annulled the election results. The new government offered Arzú another job working for the municipality of Guatemala City, but he refused it. In '86 he became Mayor of Guatemala City under the umbrella of the Civic Committee Plan for National Advancement in a national election that saw the DGC sweep to power, with Marco Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo becoming President.

In '89 the Civic Committee Plan became a formal political party called the National Advancement Party (PAN), and in '90 he was their presidential candidate, coming in fourth place with 17.3% of the vote. The winner, Jorge Serrano Elías, made Arzú his foreign minister, but he then resigned on 21 Sep '90 in protest against Serrano's decision to normalize relations with Belize, over most of whose territory Guatemala has long-standing claims. On 13 Oct '90 he became PAN's Secretary General, a position he resigned on 25 June '95 in order to concentrate on being PAN's candidate in the Nov '95 presidential elections. He won that election and served as President of Guatemala from '96 to '00.

Ríos Montt Wins Legislative Seat

Retired Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt, the controversial military ruler of Guatemala ('82-'83) during one of the bloodiest periods of the nation's history who has been charged with the crime of genocide by a Spanish court, won a congressional seat under the banner of the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG), which gained 13 seats in the Legislature for the period '08 to '12. His legislative seat will assure him of judicial impunity for the next four years and will protect him from extradition to Spain.

According to the latest TSE data, UNE (Colom) won 43 legislative seats, followed by 31 seats for GANA (Giammattei); PP (Pérez) with 27; FRG (Ríos), 13; Unionist Party (Cruz), 7; PAN, 5; Union for National Change (UCN), 4; Center for Social Action (CASA, Suger), 3; EG (Menchú), 3; URNG (Sandoval), 2; and UD (Conde), 1. Nineteen seats are still to be decided by the TSE. Eighty votes will be needed to have a simple majority in the new legislature, which will be inaugurated on 14 Jan.

A Relatively Fair and Peaceful Election Day

An estimated 20,000 police officers and 11,500 soldiers were deployed for election-day, and there were many foreign observers across the country.

Only one person was reported killed and two were injured in election-day violence, as residents of the town of Tucuru, in the province of Alta Verapaz, clashed with police. Residents were complaining about the re-election of the mayor.

Calm mostly prevailed during the election, although minutes before polls closed about 3,000 people set a voting booth on fire and burned ballots in the town of El Cerinal, accusing the mayor of bringing in people from neighboring El Salvador to vote.

The Organization of American States Election Observer Mission congratulated Guatemalans “for your high civic spirit” demonstrated in the election, and “for the maturity demonstrated by the candidates” who participated.

Guatemalan Vice President Eduardo Stein called the relative lack of violence “an extraordinary thermometer of the dedication and responsibility of the citizenry.”

—*Clifton L. Holland*