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## “No Sé”

# *Guatemalan 2007 Pre-Elections Report*

*By Julie Suarez and Marty Jordan*

### • Guatemalan Elections 2007 •

When asked whom he would vote for among the presidential candidates, Gerardo Gomez, our indigenous chauffeur who maneuvered the mountains of Guatemala with decisive turns, gave an indecisive “*No sé*” (I don’t know). A longtime advocate for indigenous rights, he said he was inclined to vote for Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and first ever indigenous, female presidential candidate. However, recognizing her lagging poll numbers, he conceded that he might have to choose the lesser of two evils between the two leading hopefuls.

Guatemalans will head to the polls on Sunday, September 9 to cast their ballots for local, congressional, and presidential leaders, and many are hoping their votes will bring about change. Guatemala, where sixteen people are murdered every day, currently faces the highest levels of violence since the internal armed conflict ended in 1996.

Attacks against human rights defenders mount, while increasing gender-based violence draws international concern as women are raped, butchered, and tossed into the streets on a regular basis. A mafia-like web of criminal groups, including gangs, organized crime rings, drug cartels, and clandestine groups, permeate the police, the judicial system, and many of the politicians who are currently running for office. These illicit groups have gained de facto control throughout most of Guatemala. Their infiltration into the State apparatus has led to an increase in the trafficking of humans, drugs, and weapons. Police investigations are tainted while public prosecutors fail to move cases forward. Impunity abounds for past and present crimes.

Stark poverty remains an insurmountable hurdle as fifty-six percent of Guatemalans eke

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out a living on less than \$2 a day. The poverty index is even higher among indigenous communities. Labor rights have taken a blow as garment factories close their doors to bust unions. The health care system is facing a crisis as hospitals lack running water and adequate funds to treat patients. Furthermore, environmental degradation continues as mining companies bulldoze mountains and pump dangerous chemicals into the water table.

Many Guatemalans planning to vote will mark their ballot with the hope that a new government will purge the corrupt system, stop the violence, and create a climate of peace and stability. Optimism, however, is low.

According to a recent poll by *Mirador Electoral* (Electoral Observer), a group of national organizations dedicated to election observation, 90% of registered voters plan on voting, but the majority do not think any major changes will come about as a result of a new government. Overall, the poll indicated, people are not very interested in the elections or politics in general. As of July 25, 21.5% of the population was still undecided in choosing a presidential candidate.

Not for a lack of choices.

Fourteen candidates are running for the office of President of Guatemala. Of

these, if no one candidate receives at least fifty percent of the vote in September, the two with the highest number of votes will face a runoff on November 4, 2007. None of the top four candidates seem to have enough support to win a majority, making a runoff likely. Many Guatemalans feel that their choice must come down to the lesser of two, or fourteen, evils. Of the fourteen candidates, two are from left-leaning political parties, one is from a center-left party, and the remaining fall on the conservative right. Among the platforms, there is little variety.

### • Six or Half a Dozen: The Candidates •



#### Álvaro Colom: National Union of Hope (UNE)

Colom is the front-runner in the presidential elections with 33% of the vote according to a July

poll. He is well known in Guatemala as he finished second in the 2003 runoff election to current President Oscar Berger. He is also well known for other reasons. Colom's uncle, former Guatemala City mayor, Manuel Colom, was murdered in 1979 by the military and subsequently became a martyr of the left. In 2003, Colom was accused of funneling government money to his campaign, although he was later cleared of all charges.

Colom's left-of-center party, the UNE, has also been linked to wrongdoing. Dozens of UNE candidates have recently been forced out of office due to links to drug cartels. Members of Guatemalan human rights groups say that Colom's entourage is still full of narco-traffickers who run entire towns for him. Colom's platform focuses on security, rule of law, economic and social development, and ending poverty. He believes that a UNE



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victory would be a triumph for the left over neoliberal, free market policies. Despite the rhetoric, however, Guatemalan human rights activists believe that prospects for change with Colom are dim.



**Otto Pérez Molina: Patriot Party (PP)**

Otto Pérez Molina currently holds second place in the polls with 23.1% of the projected vote. Pérez Molina is a military man who

served in the Guatemalan army during the internal armed conflict. His campaign slogan is “*Mano Dura*,” which literally means “Hard Hand” and implies a tough, crackdown policy against crime and violence, usually involving profiling and forsaking due process.

Yet, Pérez Molina has been accused of a variety of crimes himself. As a military officer in Guatemala during a time when hundreds of communities were massacred, many believe that he was connected to those war atrocities. An upcoming book by US author Francisco Goldman accuses Pérez Molina of orchestrating the murder of Guatemalan human rights activist and Archbishop Juan Gerardi in 1998. In addition, Pérez Molina has even been accused of generating the recent violence in Guatemala in order to generate fear and lead people to support his “*mano dura*” policies. Although the candidate says he wants to end poverty, stimulate economic development, and improve health and education, many Guatemalans are not convinced. “We are tired of *manos duras*,” said one woman. “A lot of people have died that way. We want prevention, not persecution.”



**Alejandro Giammattei: Grand National Alliance (GAN)**

Alejandro Giammattei lags far behind the top two candidates with 8.9% of the projected vote. A member of current President Oscar Berger’s party, Giammattei is the former director of Guatemala’s prison system. In the fall of 2006, he orchestrated a siege of the *Pavón* prison, which had been taken over by organized crime members who were running drug, arms, and sex operations out of the prison. Giammattei was heralded for his work, however later evidence revealed that seven prisoners were extrajudicially murdered during the raid. Giammattei’s platform focuses on citizen security, economic, social, and environmental development, and government decentralization. Although he is not likely to win the race, he will give Pérez Molina a battle for second place.



Álvaro Colom, Presidential Candidate, UNE



Otto Pérez Molina, Presidential Candidate, PP



**Rigoberta Menchú: Encounter for Guatemala (EG)**

Rigoberta Menchú Tum is an internationally known activist who won the Nobel Peace

Prize in 1992 for her work promoting indigenous rights and exposing the atrocities committed by the Guatemalan military during the civil war. She is most known for her 1987 book *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, which tells the story of her family’s struggle as Mayans in a racist, oligarchic society and the tragedies that befell them during the war. She has also served as a UN Goodwill Ambassador. Her presidential candidacy, while monumental, has failed to inspire the masses. Many had high hopes for her, but found her to be too similar to other candidates. Menchú allied herself with CACIF, the Guatemalan agriculture and



Alejandro Giammattei, Presidential Candidate, GANA



Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Presidential Candidate, EG

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commerce industry, which implied to some that she had turned her back on indigenous campesinos. With a polling percentage of 5.5%, she has also been chastised for not speaking out against free trade, the re-militarization of the country, or attacks on indigenous organizations. Her party's platform includes citizen security, education, health coverage, and tax reform. Although she would not implement the radical reforms that many activists desire, she has said that she will push for economic and social responsibility. A lack of funding in her party has made it difficult for her to spread her message. The fact that an indigenous woman remains a contender for the office of president, however, is something of a victory in itself.

### • Other Candidates •

Other notable presidential candidates include Luis Rabbé from the right-wing Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG) with 3.8%, Mario Estrada from the Union for National Change (UCN) with 2.1%, and Fritz García Gallont from the Union Party (PU) with 2.1%. Leftist candidate Miguel Angel Sandoval from the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union (URNG) party does not have enough support to be considered in the current polls. This lack of support is very worrisome for the leftist alliance URNG-MAIZ, because a lack of elected officials may mean that the URNG would lose its status as a political party.

### • The Ríos Montt Factor •

Another important election to keep an eye on is the

campaign by former dictator General Efraín Ríos Montt for Congress, running on behalf of the right wing Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG) political party. Ríos Montt is notorious for the many massacres that occurred during his reign from 1982-1983 and is currently facing charges brought by Guatemalan victims' families and the Spanish government for the genocide committed under his watch, as well as for orchestrating the burning of the Spanish Embassy in 1980 that killed the father of presidential candidate, Rigoberta Menchú. Menchú has been active in the campaign to bring Ríos Montt to justice, which last year resulted in the issuance of arrest warrants by a Spanish judge for Ríos Montt and seven other former military officers. The tragedy of Ríos Montt's campaign is that, if elected, he will allegedly gain immunity from these charges for the four-year duration of his term. Unfortunately, Ríos Montt is likely to win the Congressional seat. However, human rights organizations such as GHRC will continue to be vigilant and pressure the Guatemalan government to deliver justice.

### • Bloodiest Campaign in History •

Elections are presumably supposed to be a time of hope, determination, and concrete plans for the future. The situation in Guatemala, however, has been one of fear, violence, and murder. Over 60 people have been the victim of political attacks since the campaign season began, at least 38 of which were brutally murdered and 17 critically wounded. The UNE has suffered the most with 18 assassinations, followed by GANA with 5 and the PP with 4. Of those murdered, 7 were Congressional Representatives. As a comparison, 29 murders were registered during the entire 2003 election cycle. Although there are still a few weeks left in the 2007 race, the numbers continue to rise.



This violence is deliberately targeted to inspire fear and demonstrate control, while also paving the way for other candidates to take the place of those who have fallen. People are dying so that other candidates, with connections to organized crime and drug traffickers, can buy off towns without criticism or opposition. Mark Lacey of the *New York Times* called this the “bloodiest campaign in [Guatemalan] history.” Not surprisingly, a recent poll indicated that the theme voters are most concerned with is security. These elections have become an issue of power and people will stop at nothing to obtain just that.

• **Am I Registered to Vote?** •

After the 2003 elections, the Guatemalan Congress decided to reform the Electoral Law for Political Parties. Among these was the decision to install voting booths in places with a population of five hundred or more registered voters. The idea was to bring the centers closer to voters rather than force voters to travel long distances. As a result, one thousand new voting facilities are to be implemented for the upcoming election. These new facilities, however, require trained staff, armed personnel, and will require that voters know where to register. Indigenous communities in rural areas may not have access to voter registration information, particularly if they are illiterate or not Spanish-speaking. Another concern has been that while resources were appropriated to implement the new facilities in isolated areas, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) in charge of implementing the voting booths may not have received the funding on time. The new regulations may create more confusion than clarity.

Another change in 2007 is absentee voting within Guatemala. Voters may now vote from Guatemala City, for example, even if their permanent address is in another department. Guatemalans residing abroad, however, are not

allowed to vote, which eliminates the 1.3 million Guatemalans who live in the US, as well as those living in other parts of the world.

The number of Guatemalans who will vote in these elections remains to be seen. Of those currently registered, 44% are women and 55% are young people ages 18-30, which shows a strong representation of the marginalized population. With one third of the voters still undecided, however, voter turnout on Election Day may not be very high.

• **The Future** •

The 2007 elections are not likely to bring about significant change in Guatemala. The violence, corruption, and networks of criminal entities are so entrenched in the State apparatus that it would take much more than a new set of public officials to remedy the situation. Honest and noble politicians would be a good start, however. Although the differences among the presidential candidates may not be clear, change can also start at the local level. All candidates and political activists have the obligation to uphold the standards of the 1996 Peace Accords and protect the Guatemalan people, honoring the values of justice, peace, and equality. If only they live long enough to get the chance.



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