

## **Guatemala – Elections, and No Democracy**

Articles by Annie Bird and Emilie Smith

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### **GUATEMALAN ELECTIONS: MONEY, VIOLENCE, AND POLITICAL POWER**

#### **Genocide General Perez Molina expected to win the November 4 Runoff**

(By Annie Bird, Guatemala City, September 11, 2011)

On September 11, 2011 the general elections in Guatemala, which determine mayors, congress members and the president, played out as most recent elections have, with normal violence, denunciations of widespread fraud, and destruction of ballots; the culmination of a political campaign in which at least 35 were killed.

Two presidential candidates go to the run off on in November, the expected winner Otto Perez Molina, of the Partido Patriota [PP] against Manuel Baldizon of the Libertad Democratic Renovada [LIDER].

Multiple public accusations implicate Otto Perez Molina in war crimes of the past (including genocide), acts of corruption and connections to organized crime, leading to the logical question; why do Guatemalans vote for him?

Press reports that Guatemalans, suffering from one of the highest murder rates in the world, are fed up with crime and attracted to Perez Molina's campaign focus on a "hard fist" against crime.

This is a factor but what is much more palpable and widely expressed is a lack of faith in the Guatemalan government and

political system. Many feel that politicians steal government resources and are paid off by crime gangs to shield their violent activities, and denounce a deeply entrenched system of political payoffs or patronage as playing a key role motivating the voter turnout.

In an apparent contradiction with the general lack of confidence in the government and political system, there is also clearly a tremendous desire for political participation. There was an extremely large presence of national electoral observers. A coalition of non-governmental organizations formed the Mirador Electoral which placed a network of approximately 3,500 observers in every voting table. The Human Rights Procurators office deployed 5,000 observers in all 333 municipalities. In addition, each political party placed observers in the voting tables, as did the universities. There were also 86 observers from the Organization of American States.

During the last four elections, between 40% and 50% of the eligible voters actually voted, and it is expected that the turn out in today's elections will be similar. Given the widespread expressions of alienation from the political process, the levels of electoral participation are surprisingly high.

In Guatemala, if no one presidential candidate wins over 50% of the vote, then the two leading candidates go into a runoff. Perez Molina won approximately 36% of the vote, ten points below his showing in the polls, and was followed by Manuel Baldizon with approximately 25% of the vote, both considered right leaning. The two parties identified with progressive sectors together won less than 10% of the vote, Harold Caballeros Encuentro por Guatemala gained 5% and Rigoberta Menchu of the Frente Amplio less than 3%.

COMPLETELY NORMAL ELECTIONS: VIOLENCE, FRAUD AND CORRUPTION

In a Mirador Electoral center for collection of voting data, callers describe armed men blocking villagers from arriving in a voting center; armed men gathered a few blocks from the voting center urging voters to vote for the Partido Patriota; a machete fight in another region; voters burning the ballots from a polling station; a riot destroyed ballots; election workers were kidnapped in another; in four municipalities, electoral observers were forced to leave by death threats; busloads of people were brought to vote from one municipality to another in several areas; over 100 municipalities reported the buying of votes.

These incidents generally were not reported on in the media, and when they were they were dismissed as isolated incidents. Commentators observed that the electoral process was 'completely normal', and in a country wracked by violence, it was.

This was just in the day of the voting.

The violence during the pre-electoral campaign was extreme. The Human Rights Procurator's office reported that 35 people have been killed in elections related violence.

Perhaps the most extreme example was the mayoral race in San Jose Pinula where, on July 5, 2011, Luis Marroquin, the LIDER party mayoral candidate, was charged with the murder of two of his competitors and staging an assassination attempt against himself.

#### LEGACY OF THE GENOCIDE

Moreover, and on a deeper level, the impact of the genocide and State repression of the 1970s, 80s and early 90s, on the electoral process today cannot be underestimated.

One of Guatemala's most recognized academics observed that Guatemala is missing an entire generation of leaders, academics and activists, virtually all identified with the so-called "left", and their presence as political activists is missed.

It is a cynical and illuminating comment on the political impact of the genocide and State repression of the recent past that a retired General (Otto Perez Molina of the Partido Patriota), implicated directly in genocide, torture, etc, is expected to win these elections, and that the progressive parties carried less than 10% of the vote.

#### THE CANDIDATES

Perez Molina had been a leading presidential candidate in 2007; he was the first to register as a presidential candidate in 2011 and entered the campaign with a high level of voter recognition. Perez Molina's two top challengers, Sandra Torres of Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE) and Harold Caballeros, were confronted by legal challenges to their inscription as candidates. In polls, Sandra Torres lagged significantly behind Perez Molina, and was distantly followed by Harold Caballeros.

Torres, wife of the current president Alvaro Colom, obtained a divorce earlier this year to overcome a constitutional ban on relatives of the president from running for office. Her political opponents challenged her inscription, claiming that the divorce should not be recognized. Torres' popularity plummeted and by June 30, 2011 the Supreme Court made its definitive decision that she could not participate in the elections.

Much of Torres' base of support apparently shifted to Manuel Baldizon, candidate from a new political party LIDER who had been elected as congressman in 2007 on a ticket with Colom and Torres' UNE party but who had broken with UNE early on.

Harold Caballeros, a former evangelical pastor, was the candidate for coalition that included Encuentro por Guatemala, a party most recognized for the participation of the progressive reformist Congresswoman Nineth Montenegro. After months of legal challenges related to a prohibition on clergy's participation in elections, on August 17 Caballeros was allowed to remain a

candidate, but his supporters claim the legal challenges had fatally weakened his campaign.

Just three days after Sandra Torres' inscription was blocked, on July 3, Rigoberta Menchu of the progressive political coalition Frente Amplio announced her candidacy, the last presidential candidate to be received.

## MONEY AND ELECTIONS

The use of funds to manipulate the vote has been the illegality most denounced by the Frente Amplio political coalition, one of the only political parties that apparently did not have the patronage of organized crime or the business sector. The Frente Amplio came in with a low showing in the polls, just under 3% of votes, and denounced the unequal footing Mayan political candidates faced given the use of illegal funding.

In July, the press reported that the agency charged with supervising elections, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, believed several political parties had surpassed their spending limits, but the parties refused to submit financial reports they were legally obligated to present. Journalists estimate that in publicity budget leading parties spent more than double the permitted budget.

For many years, elections have been riddled with denunciations of the use of money and employment pressure to manipulate votes, promises of government projects conditioned on votes and seasonal labor overseers escorting villagers they regularly contract to voting centers.

In this election the Frente Amplio denounced discovering cash payments of Q200, about \$25, to voters outside the polls and denounced the use of both illicit funds (organized crime) and promises of government development project funds.

Since the beginning of President Colom's candidacy, rumors had it that first lady Sandra Torres would be UNE's next presidential

candidate. She was in charge of a significant social program, including a cash subsidy to some of the nation's poorest families, which encouraged women in isolated villages to register to vote.

According to Mario Itzep, Director of the Reno'j, a member of the Mirador Electoral observation effort, there has been one significant change in the national register of voters: there has been a significant growth in voter registration of women in the municipalities with over 80% indigenous population, apparently as many as one million newly registered Mayan women voters. Whether the voting tendency of these women is reflected in the polls is hard to say, but they do represent a significant portion of the 7 million registered voters.

#### BEYOND POLITICAL PARTIES: THE DEMAND FOR A POLITICAL SYSTEM OPEN TO PARTICIPATION

Most Guatemalans feel alienated from the political system. Money fuels the political parties, and parties are controlled by economically powerful, be they business sectors with their international corporate and investors partners, or be they drug traffickers whose illicit resources are generated by US drug demand and by the so-called "war on drugs" policy.

The scars of the US backed military regimes one generation later are deeply felt, and the same sectors that gained control of the nation through brutal repression won the elections.

In past years, the formation of independent municipal Civic Committees seemed a possible route to electoral participation, but are limited only to gaining mayoral elections. This year the role of Civic Committees declined.

#### COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS – REAL DEMOCRACY, FROM 'BELOW'

But over the past four years a massive process of popular participation in political decisions has taken shape in indigenous communities threatened by mines and dams. Hundreds of thousands have participated in community consultations.

Though the Supreme Court (long dominated by the economic elites) has declared the consultations to be 'valid, but non-binding', international law supports them and in any case they have been a massive space for political participation by the population most excluded from participation in the party system.

Another important advance for democracy has been the reform of the Attorney General's Office. Approximately one year ago, a candidate that had the broad backing of civil society was named Attorney General and the advances the office has since made against organized crime are impressive (as well as courageous and risky).

This is a small but significant advance in the consolidation of democracy, even though the impact has been muted by the judiciary which has maintained high levels of corruption and actions outside the framework of the law.

#### TRANSNATIONAL CORPORATE AND INVESTOR POWER

The influence of transnational corporate and investor interests in Guatemala has significantly contributed to the shortcomings of the democratic process. In 1954, the US government plan and helped orchestrate the devastating 1954 military coup and then supported over 30 years of military regimes.

Perez Molina has been seen to maintain especially close ties to the US Embassy, as made clear in Wikileaks cables. Investigators report that Perez Molina was even paid by the CIA when he was head of military intelligence.

US and Canadian corporations are benefiting from the political structure in Guatemala today. The Spanish public relations firm Ostas and Solas ran Perez Molina's campaign, just as they ran the campaign of Mexican President Felipe Calderon and Haitian President Martelly. Ostas and Solas has ties to American lobbyists

like former Ambassador Otto Reich who is widely believed to have participated in the Honduran coup.

International actors have played an active and harmful role in the construction and maintenance of an exclusive and exploitative political system in Guatemala, ... but Guatemalans will re-found it.

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**THE LOUD PARADE TO ELECTED VIOLENCE:  
Guatemala, and the Voting-in of a Strong Man General**  
(By Emilie Smith, Quiche department, September 11, 2011)

[From: emilie smith, [emilietsmith@gmail.com](mailto:emilietsmith@gmail.com), September 12, 2011.  
Dear Friends, I wrote this on Friday morning. This morning we are picking up the pieces and figuring out what to do now ...]

I put the Tallis Scholars on full volume, and it half-blanks out the delirious, happy march of death, that's going on non-stop just two blocks away, in the Parque Central of Santa Cruz del Quiché.

My colleague, don Juan, an esteemed aj'ki'j, or Maya priest, celebrates his burning ceremony in our courtyard, seemingly oblivious to both my music, and the counter pounding bass, the drums, the patriotic shouts and the firecrackers coming from the rally.

We are two days away from the end of the world as we knew it, here in Guatemala, and as we've known it, its always been really bad. Now things are about to get worse.

Elections on Sunday, the disaster day of September 11th, promise to bring into office a General, one of the old boys, from the horror days of the war and genocide.

A VERY UGLY PICTURE



General Otto Perez Molina – Comandante Tito, as he was known in the early eighties, directing operations in the butchering fields of the [Maya] Ixil communities 3 hours north of here – stands at about 42 per cent in the latest polls to win the presidency. Perez Molina is the founder of the Patriotic Party, and his sneering face on billboards, huge and small, the PP symbol of the fighting Iron Fist, their pumpkin-orange flags and banners, and frenetic pounding music are ubiquitous throughout the country, and especially here where I live, in the Maya highlands, the very land where the genocide occurred. (It was determined by the UN truth commission's report, *Memory of Silence*, 1999, that 250,000 people died during the 36-year war and genocide, and that fully 93 per cent of these deaths were perpetrated by state security forces, principally the army.)

Perez Molina has a both a shady past, linking him to some of these atrocities, and questionable associations with the obscure powers that operate throughout Central America and Mexico. The Washington Office on Latin America, names him as a founder of El Sindicato (the Union), an association of Military Academy graduates from the same year (1973) who at one time made up one of five “hidden power” groups controlling organized crime in the country. According to declassified U.S. National Security Archive documents, many Sindicato associates have been directly linked to the drug trade.

Perez Molina himself states on the PP website that he graduated as a top student from the military school. His career was just beginning. His resume includes: commander of the Gumarkaj Task Force in the genocide zone of the Ixil triangle, during the time when more than 20 massacres occurred; one of the founders of the elite Guatemalan “kaibil” fighting force, directly linked to the worst violence during the war, and now filling the ranks of the drug cartel, Los Zetas, responsible for much of the extreme violence along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico.

(On May 15 of this year, 27 farm workers, including two women and two youth, were murdered and decapitated in Peten, Guatemala. It was part of the drug war. The only ones capable of such extreme acts of violence are the kaibil-trained Zetas.)

Between 1991–1994, Perez Molina was the head of the G-2, the Military Intelligence Unit of the Guatemalan army, and from 1993–1996, he was the director of the Presidential General Staff, the EMP, which operates similar to the US Secret Service, offering security to the President, and also engaging in military intelligence, and clandestine operations.

These two institutions were the principle organizers and architects of a vast apparatus of torture, disappearance and political assassination. The EMP was directly tied in the death of crusading human rights bishop, Juan Jose Gerardi, murdered in 1998, three days after handing in the church's investigation into the war and genocide.

Also, during these years Perez Molina, and Sindicato associates, were implicated in various embezzlement and money laundering schemes, including a high scandal case related to the capture of Sinaloa drug cartel leader Joachin “El Chapo” Guzman. (Guzman later made a spectacular escape, from prison in Mexico, and is still at large. Forbes names him as the Number One on its Most Wanted list, now that Bin Laden is dead.)

After the June 1993 arrest of Guzman in Guatemala, Q23 million quetzals (approximately \$3 million, Canadian) and a fleet of luxury vehicles mysteriously went missing. Perez Molina was at the time the head of the EMP.

It also became known some time later, during the presidency of Oscar Berger, that Perez Molina attempted – unsuccessfully – to have his friend, Giovanni Mendoza, drug cartel leader in eastern Guatemala, appointed as a government official.

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This adds up to a very ugly picture. But Sunday's elections will be fair and open; the military aren't storming into power, guns ablazing as they did in this country, right from the CIA-sponsored coup in 1954, and for more than thirty years thereafter.

Perez Molina will drag into office his checkered baggage from the past, not hiding it, but in fact celebrating it – at least selected parts of the story. He will be claiming that what Guatemala needs, during these days of continued great violence, is an even stronger arm, and an Iron Fist, a bigger gun that will crush all lesser violence. Many, many agree.

From what I can tell, all around me here in the Quiché, the Patriotic Party is wildly popular. I have a pal, Juan Carlos, a shoeshine boy who comes into the city from a nearby village. “Who are you going for,” he asked me. “No one,” I said. “They're all skunks.” “I'm pure Patriotic,” he said smiling widely, and showing me the tell-tale orange sticker on the side of his shoeshine box. Orange is everywhere, coming out of people's mouths, and in places I wouldn't expect. But why on earth? It seems so counter-intuitive to elect a military man, when the country is at last, breaking free from them -- or are they?

Mostly, people are afraid. Guatemala consistently lands in the highest hemispheric statistics for violence. Bus drivers get shot, every single day. Most businesses, large and small, are paying exorbitant protection fees to teenaged extortionists. The prosecution and conviction rate for the average 6500 murders a year, in this country of 14 million, is in the single digit percentages. You want to murder someone and get away with it? Guatemala is the place to come. We are living in a failed state. People are looking for a strong man.

My friend Isabel, a community activist, says: “It's like a woman living in an abusive relationship. We all shake our heads when she goes

back to him, after a beating. But she feels safer with the horror she knows."

The wild rally over in the parque shows no sign of winding down. People are excited; they want to be on the winning side, for once. Manipulative campaigns of disinformation, and deep forgetting, or confusion about the country's past and its violent legacy, all play a roll in why Comandante Tito stands to win on Sunday. So does deep set apathy. Nothing will ever really change, for the poor, I hear over and over again.

Opposition is weak, and one-sided. There are 10 candidates for the presidency, all but one from the right, or the extreme right. Second in the polls, after Perez Molina, is Manuel Baldizon, whose sinister toothy grin has been haunting us all year – his party's lead campaign promise: the implementation of the death penalty.

The candidate who may have had a chance against the PP was Sandra Torres, the current president's wife – well ex-wife actually. In a cynical move to override a constitutional rule where family members of sitting presidents may not immediately run for office, Torres divorced President Colom in March. Widely spurned by much of the public for her manipulative maneuverings, the constitutional court also rejected her application to stand as candidate, leaving a wide vacuum.

Progressives, after years of divisive bickering, and disappointing results at the polls, have come together, in the Broad Coalition of the Left, and have posted as presidential candidate the capable Rigoberta Menchu, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate of 1992. The Broad Coalition is putting on a good fight, and while there is no chance what-so-ever at the national level, there is lots of hope that small battles can be won across the country, in races for the congress, and, most of all, for mayor (In Guatemala, in a special kind of madness, ALL political offices are voted on and change on the same day.)

In August, I made visits, with various groups of Canadians, to different communities in rural Guatemala, to Cunen, and Zacualpa, in the department of El Quiché, and to Quixayá, and San Lucas Tolimán, in the department of Sololá, around the lovely blue Lake Atitlán. In Cunen, we roared around with Osmundo, waving flags with stalks of corn hand-painted on them. In Zacualpa, we met with doña Katerina, and a couple of hundred furious citizens, and we heard, over and over again, about the corruption and abuse of the current mayor. Maybe, just maybe, these two might win the race for mayor.

Down on the lake, things are stirring all around, and years of steady, honest community-building by groups like the Campesino Committee for the Highlands (CCDA) are starting to bring in a harvest. Maybe not this round . . . but people are organizing, as they haven't since the silencing and the horror of the genocide.

Now it is evening, the rally has shut down. The rules are that 36 hours before the election begins, all campaigning has to end. It had started to pour anyway, in the afternoon, with the season's daily deluge. I hear that Tropical Storm Nate is blowing wild up north in Mexico. Evil thoughts flood my mind, maybe the whole election could just get washed away. But no. On Monday morning, Guatemala is going to wake up orange. There are going to be four more years of lying, stealing and violence begetting greater violence.

In the courtyard don Juan attends to another family, now that the rains to have come and gone, and they have their sacred fire. Guatemala is nothing if not a land of survivors. The original Spanish invasion, the 1871 German coffee invasion and the massive theft of communal land, the gringos and their railroads, and their bananas, then the CIA invasion in 1954, leading to the war, and then the genocide.

Canadian mining companies raping and pillaging across the land. But still, here they are, the Maya majority. Finding a way, in every

generation for the preservation of identity. Don Juan counts, and prays in the courtyard. The flame roars – a brighter shade of orange.

Afterwards:

General Otto Perez Molina, 31.13%. In Guatemala, if no one comes out with more than 50%, they go to a second round. On November 6th, Perez Molina and Baldizon will face off.

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## **WHAT TO DO**

### **TO MAKE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS**

for indigenous and campesino organizations working for human rights & justice, democracy and development in Guatemala & Honduras, as well as in Chiapas & El Salvador, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

UNITED STATES: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887

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