

Ex-general set to win Guatemalan presidency

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Last week, Otto Perez Molina, a former army general during Guatemala's bloody, 36-year civil war, won the greatest number of votes in the country's presidential election, the fourth to be held since the conflict was formally ended in 1996.

Nonetheless, because no single candidate won the required 51 percent of the votes, a run-off election is required. The second round, to be held November 6, will pit Perez Molina and his Partido Patriota (PP) against his closest competitor, the LIDER party's Manuel Baldizón, a wealthy businessman from the northern border state of El Peten.

Both leading candidates have run fear-mongering "law and order" campaigns with promises to open a broad drug war militarization of the country modeled on the policy introduced in Mexico: a massive military deployment that has resulted in an exponential increase in the death toll and systemic human rights violations since its inception in 2006.

Such efforts have been greatly aided by local and international media outlets that have inundated the public with murky and hysterical accounts of drug war violence for the last several years. While violent crime—mostly the legacy of the civil war and widespread, desperate poverty—has long been a problem in Guatemala's major cities and border regions, nearly every instance of violence over the last several years has been attributed to Mexican drug cartels, especially the Zetas, without any factual backing or corroboration.

For his part, Molina—whose party symbol is an iron fist—has won the backing of Guatemala's elite families and the US embassy as the candidate best suited to carry out the country's re-militarization based on his commanding rank during the civil war period in a region that saw some of the worst atrocities.

During the 1980's in his capacity as a general in the Guatemalan army, Molina led countless massacres against largely defenseless indigenous civilians suspected of nothing more than leftist or communist sympathies in the northwestern departments of El Quiche. According to the Mexican daily *La Jornada*, Molina's name was also connected with the assassination of Bishop Juan Gerardi, a human rights activist. Gerardi created the project for the recuperation of historical memory in the 1990s in an effort to expose the crimes of the military leadership, of which Molina was a part, against the civilian population during the civil war.

Molina's reputation was well known in Washington. As the outgoing US Ambassador Stephen McFarland commented: "A former head of military intelligence, Molina is no babe in the woods..." This description, offered in a confidential embassy cable published by WikiLeaks, came after the ambassador personally thanked Molina for helping the US Embassy quash the nomination

of a disfavored candidate for Guatemala's office of public defender.

In the face of his military background and close ties to the US embassy, Molina's competitor Baldizón has exerted himself to establish an authoritarian reputation, vowing to expand the size and power of the military for domestic operations, make greater use of the death penalty (including making executions public) and tear up human rights agreements that may hinder such efforts.

Nonetheless, the bourgeois press has uniformly presented Molina's initial, moderate success as a public referendum of support for an expansion of the drug war and mass deployment of the military.

In an article entitled "Desperate Guatemalans Embrace an 'Iron Fist'", the *New York Times* attempts to attribute the rise of Molina and Baldizón as a reflection of the will of the Guatemalan people. It notes that more than 60 percent of Guatemala's electorate is under the age of 30. "In their eyes," it states, "the war that killed an estimated 200,000 Guatemalan civilians is a vague shadow."

The *Times*'s efforts to blame Guatemalans for Molina's rise to prominence are just a parroting of the drug war propaganda of the well-financed think tanks of US imperialism such as the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, whose Cynthia Aronson told the *Times*, "It's like Colombia in 2001 and 2002, when insecurity and crime and violence were the dominant reality of daily life. ... People want order."

A simple review of the actual polling statistics refutes such claims. With a population of about 14 million, just over 5 million actually voted in the first round of the elections representing about 36 percent of the population. Of those 5 million, only 2,646,352 cast votes for Molina or Baldizón, representing about 19% of the total population. Those who left their ballot blank represented nearly 3% of the total population, taking fourth place in the election. That number doubles to 6 percent of the total population when one adds the votes cast for the left party candidate Rigoberta Menchu—Nobel Prize-winning indigenous author associated with human rights activism.

In reality, the vast majority of the Guatemalan population is socially and politically disenfranchised. Seventy-five percent of the country lives in extreme poverty, suffering some of the highest rates of malnutrition, infant mortality and illiteracy in Central America. Most of the poor are also Native American Indians, many of whom do not speak Spanish. The genocide of the civil war period was focused against this population, further alienating it from bourgeois politics. A declaration of martial law over an entire region of the country by out-going President Alvaro Colom earlier this year was a stark reminder that the class issues that

drove the civil war bloodbath remain unresolved.

Moreover, the elections have been marred by fraud and intimidation: dozens of local and legislative candidates have been murdered over the campaign cycle, a city hall west of the capital was attacked on claims the mayor won through fraud, and several centers of local government were burned throughout the interior of the country because of similar accusations of ballot fraud.

Instead of riding a wave of popular support for militarization of the country, Molina has been hand-picked by Guatemala's economic elite. In a conversation with former ambassador James Derham, Molina bragged that he had the backing of the four richest families in the country: the Castillos, the Novellas, the Herreras and Dionisio Gutierrez. Guatemala's elite, threatened by even the meager welfare programs associated with outgoing president Alvaro Colom and his wife Sandra Torres de Colom—who was barred from the presidency by a Supreme Court ruling—has uniformly thrown all of its weight behind Molina and his iron fist in this election. Moreover, Wikileaks cables reveal that Molina has been in constant and very friendly contact with the US embassy since his failed bid for the presidency in 2007.

More importantly, while the US embassy has courted the ex-general, it has also been expanding direct US military involvement across the country under the guise of the drug war. In a 2009 cable detailing a visit to Guatemala by Lt. Gen. Ken Keen, then Deputy Commander of The United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM)—a subdivision of the US Department of Defense responsible for securing the interests of US imperialism in Central and South America—former ambassador Stephen McFarland reviewed a number of new, joint military operations around the country. These included: “a US Government-trained Guatemalan military/police unit,” a military base set up by the sixth brigade in the northern border town of Playa Grande and a military base in Poptun, El Peten near the Mexican border made up of Guatemalan Special Forces that receive leadership and “actionable intelligence” directly from the US government.

McFarland expressed succinctly Washington's primary concern in a diplomatic cable to Hillary Clinton from September 29, 2009. He wrote: “Guatemala's current electorate is distinct from that of many Latin American countries in that it ranges from center-left to hard-right. However, widespread poverty, hunger, marginalization of the large (but fractious) indigenous minority, and a long history of state neglect of the poor could prove fertile ground for the rise of a new, more radical left.”

In June of this year, just months before the elections, Hillary Clinton visited Guatemala to attend the International Conference of Support for the Central American Security Strategy. The conference brought together Central American political elites to discuss one billion dollars in potential funding “which can be used by each country for its own priorities, and clearly including a security strategy,” according to World Bank vice president for Latin America and the Caribbean, Pamela Cox. The message of the conference couldn't be clearer: aid funds for the impoverished countries of Central America will now be distributed based not merely on the imposition of savage austerity programs, but on a given country's progress toward the new US security agenda.

Ironically, both candidates have also been accused of having ties to the drug trade. Although it is an open secret that every bourgeois politician in Guatemala receives support in one way or another from drug traffickers, Perez Molina's Partido Patriota once included members of the Mendoza family—a drug trafficking group in Guatemala.

The close connection between Perez Molina and the Mendoza family was revealed in 2007 during his first bid for the presidency. It caused such concern that he was invited to the US embassy, and admitted to then-ambassador James Derham that he had a relationship with the “least bad” members of the notorious drug trafficking family. Reporters from the Guatemalan daily *El Periodico* working on an exposure of Molina's ties to drug traffickers in 2007 went to the US embassy to complain that they had received death threats, including a flower arrangement with an invitation to their own funeral.

At root, the return to militarism in Guatemala is the response of the national bourgeoisie to Washington's shift to a militarist security agenda for the entire region, which began with Colombia, expanded into Mexico and now seeks a firm foothold on the Central American isthmus. The militarization project is driven by the global economic crisis that has sharpened imperialist rivalries and radicalized workers around the world. Only a mass movement of workers throughout the region armed with a socialist perspective and leadership can arrest this militarization and resolve the social disaster that has spawned violent drug trafficking.



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