



Written by [Daniel Sayani](#) on November 9, 2011

Guatemala Elects Former General as President

Retired Army General Otto Pérez Molina (left) won Sunday's runoff presidential election in Guatemala, seizing on voters' concerns about growing insecurity in the Central American nation. Pérez led with more than 53 percent of the vote, Guatemala's election authority said. His opponent, businessman Manuel Baldizón, garnered 46 percent of the vote. Both candidates had promised to tackle growing insecurity and the presence of Mexican drug gangs in the country, an area of special concern to the Central American nation, due to its prominence as a key transit point for drugs from South America to the United States.



Pérez, a retired army general who pledged to take a tough stand on crime, was the frontrunner heading into the election. He won the most votes in the first round of voting in September. Low voter turnout was reported in Sunday's election, according to the state-run AGN news agency. The issue of security in Guatemala, which has worsened as Mexican drug cartels have stepped up operations in parts of the country, dominated the vote. In a Vox Latina national survey in July, more than two-thirds of Guatemalans said violence was what concerned them most, far outpacing the combined totals for the economy, unemployment, poverty, and lack of education. In a debate co-hosted by CNN en Español this year, Pérez called for "elite units of the army" to play a larger role in the nation's battle against gangs and drug cartels. The retired general pledged to bring a *mano dura* — firm hand — to Guatemala's highest office.

Voter turnout was less than 50 percent. In some regions it was about half what it was for the initial presidential election on Sept. 11, according to analyst Oscar Almengor, who led a team of observers from the University of San Carlos of Guatemala. "The low participation is one of the indicators that worries us because it shows that the people don't support or feel represented by the political options," said Manfredo Marroquin of the non-governmental organization Mirador Electoral, or Electoral Observer.

The election of Pérez offers an alternative to the "Pink Tide" that many political scientists and observers have identified as a rising phenomenon across Latin America. (Analysts say that, on the whole, leftist ideology is on the rise throughout Latin America, because of the 350 million people in South America, three out of four of them lived in countries ruled by "left-leaning presidents" elected during the preceding six years.) A founding member of the country's right-wing, conservative-leaning Patriotic Party (Partido Patriótico), Pérez represents a unique stream of Latin American anti-communism. He graduated from Guatemala's National Military Academy, the Inter-American Defense College, and the U.S. Defense Department-supported School of the Americas, located at Ft. Benning, Georgia (which was established in 1946 as a means of cultivating anti-communist leadership in Latin America during the Cold War).



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In 1993, while serving as Guatemala's chief of military intelligence, Pérez was instrumental in leading a coup against President Jorge Serrano Elias, leader of the country's left-leaning Solidarity Action Movement (MAS), a move backed by the CIA, which saw the socialist as a threat to American interests. (The coup was also conducted because Serrano Elias had imposed censorship, dissolved Congress, replaced all members of the Guatemalan Supreme Court, and suspended the constitution, in his attempted "self-coup.")

Oscar Pérez Molina and Human Rights

Upon Pérez's election as Guatemala's President, many leftist groups signified their concern that such a "right-wing" military general had been chosen. They accused Pérez of complicity in war crimes of the past (including genocide), acts of corruption and connections to organized crime. Perez's military past may weigh more in rural areas, which suffered most during the 1960-1996 civil war. About a quarter of a million people disappeared or were killed. Pérez is the first military man at the country's helm since a return to civilian rule in 1986. He commanded troops and served as the head of the military intelligence unit during the war and there have been allegations that troops under his command committed abuses (he was the general in charge of the Ixil triangle from 1982-83, a time when the government's "scorched earth" policy has been characterized as genocide, and 80-90 percent of the villages in the area were completely destroyed and the inhabitants were massacred).

Nonetheless, he has never been charged, and he dismisses the accusations. "I can tell you it's totally false," he told Reuters on Saturday. He was for long seen by U.S. officials as a progressive officer inside the army and has said he will allow investigations into rights abuses during the conflict. A U.N.-backed Truth Commission found the vast majority of war atrocities were committed by the military. Pérez responds to questions about his own role in the war with a reminder that he signed the peace accords in 1996, which ended the country's 30-year-long civil war.

Similar [accusations](#) against Pérez have been raised by various indigenous groups within Guatemala, which claim he bears responsibility for numerous massacres during the civil war. In July 2011, the Guatemalan indigenous organization Waqib Kej presented a "letter of allegation" to United Nations special rapporteur Juan Mendez, claiming that in 1992, when in charge of military troops in the northern Guatemalan region of Quiche, he oversaw the systematic slaughter of indigenous Indian populations. He is also accused of complicity in the assassination/"disappearance" of Efraín Bámaca Velázquez, a Mayan commander in the leftist Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit, in 1992. (Pérez cooperated with and received material and intelligence support from the CIA in arranging for his disappearance, as revealed by State Department informant Richard Nuccio.) However, it must be noted that although Pérez did command troops in regions of heavy civilian casualties, there is no specific evidence of wrongdoing on his part.

The Iron Fist

Experts say that Pérez's victory is largely attributed to the fact that most Guatemalan voters are primarily concerned with violence and preserving law and order. The newer generation of voters, who came out to the polls in droves, is too young to remember the events of the Civil War, and as such, is more likely to disregard concerns over Pérez's human rights record. His campaign promises of extirpating crime by extending sentences, hiring 10,000 police, expanding video surveillance, and lowering the age of criminal responsibility resonated well with voters. Guatemala's murder rate hovers around 40 per 100,000 people, making it one of the world's most dangerous countries, and with Mexican drug cartels (such as the Zetas gang) terrorizing the north, it is no surprise that voters chose



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the law-and-order candidate, who promised to rule with a zero-tolerance, “iron-fist” approach to crime. However, his specific efforts to uphold the rule of law in [antinomian](#) Guatemala will inevitably be tempered by logistical realities. His iron fists will be tied by a lack of revenue to fund a security overhaul, as prisons are operating at 160 percent of capacity, and there is a need to triple the number of detectives and rebuild the army size to pre-1996 levels. There are also concerns that strong-arm efforts to rule in Guatemala will be met by the same type of failure that these attempts have suffered in other Latin American countries. El Salvador’s frequent experiments with repressive policing have not reduced crime, and Mexico’s murder rate has almost doubled since it began cracking down on drug gangs. In contrast, Central America’s lowest murder rates are found in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, which have opted for preventive, community-based policing.

Additionally, Pérez’s policies would require tax increases. Guatemala’s current tax revenues are among Latin America’s lowest, at 11 percent of GDP, and he says he will raise revenues to 14 percent via a “frontal assault” on evasion and smuggling, a plan that is amenable to the country’s small cadre of business leaders because of its protectionist nature.



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