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Former General Elected President of Guatemala

By DAMIEN CAVE

GUATEMALA CITY — Otto Pérez Molina, a former general during this country's bloody civil war, was elected president on Sunday after promising to tackle rising crime with an "iron fist" and an expanded military.

Mr. Pérez Molina defeated Manuel Baldizón, a young, populist businessman, by nine percentage points, with nearly 90 percent of the vote counted, ushering [Guatemala](#) into new and old territory.

Fifteen years after peace accords ended a 36-year civil war here that was often dominated by military atrocities, voters have pushed a military man into office. Their hope is that he can defeat the forces now tearing this country apart — the interwoven threats of random crime, gangs, [Mexican drug cartels](#) and complicit government officials and companies.

"It speaks to the desperate cry and demands of Guatemalans to deal with the citizen security crisis," said Adriana Beltrán, an analyst with the Washington Office on Latin America. She added that it was far from clear that Mr. Pérez Molina would be able to satisfy the demand for law and order.

"One of the key questions here is what does that truly entail," Ms. Beltrán said, "and what role he envisions for the military."

Turnout was relatively low as many voters appeared too disgusted to cast ballots. Indeed, for every Guatemalan determined to take part, there appeared to be another who described the election as a choice between deadly diseases.

"I want my conscience to be clear, so I didn't vote for either one of them," said Thania Garcia, 18, a student in Guatemala City.

Experts said the comparatively low turnout, which appeared to be just over 50 percent, down from

65 percent in the 2007 runoff and 90 percent in this year's opening round — was a sign of public disgust. Guatemalans are angry, not just with crime, poverty and health indicators among the lowest in all of Latin America, but also with leaders who have failed to inspire confidence in the government or democracy.

“It's a dismal reflection on the state of Guatemalan politics and of the disconnect between parties, political leaders, and the people they're supposed to represent,” said Cynthia Arnson, director of the Latin American program at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars. “That disconnect is problematic throughout Latin America, but in Guatemala it's worse than almost anywhere else.”

Hope was slightly more common here after Álvaro Colom's victory four years ago, but Guatemalans say despair began to mount as he receded from public view and failed to tackle impunity even as Mexican drug cartels colonized towns and much of the northern border. The public demand for a tougher response shaped the campaign — both candidates were conservative by Latin American standards.

Mr. Pérez Molina, a former general who played prominent roles during the war and the peace process, had cast himself as the seasoned realist. Graying, serious and feared by those with horrific memories of the war (his support flagged in rural, indigenous areas hit hard during the fighting), he has said he plans to maintain or expand social programs to address poverty as he adds military personnel and equipment, deploying troops in the fight against organized crime.

Mr. Baldizón — with dark hair, hip glasses and a seemingly permanent smile — ran as the fresh alternative. He placed second in the opening round, but failed in the end to capitalize on an early surge in support drawn from lavish campaign spending from unknown sources, alliances with other parties and a shift toward promises of economic aid. His main policy idea, an extra paycheck for all workers, is still plastered on red posters that are likely to hang around for weeks.

One major concern expressed by voters and experts was that Mr. Baldizón might contest the results if they were close, bringing supporters to the streets. But experts said his silence Sunday night suggested that he had accepted defeat. Voters at the polls Sunday said they just hoped that whoever won would move the country forward, not backward. “We're in a very difficult situation,” said Judith Echeverría, 51, a teacher in Antigua.

The new president faces enormous challenges. In addition to the crime wave, there is the issue of resources: Guatemala has a sizable weight of debt (around 30 percent of the country's G.D.P.) and

no clear path to improving its revenues, as the country's wealthy elite has generally stayed unified against higher taxes. Ideas that showed some success elsewhere, such as a 1 percent security tax in Colombia during its fight against crime, have little support here. "A fiscal reform is desperately needed," Ms. Beltrán said.

However, Mr. Pérez Molina — whose party now has a majority in Congress — has said that before taxes can be raised, the public must have more faith in the government's ability to spend wisely. Increased security, he has said, would increase that faith, but he has not explained how he would pay for the expanded military or the social programs he has promised.

Kara Andrade contributed reporting from Antigua and Guatemala City.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: November 14, 2011

An article last Monday about the presidential victory of Otto Pérez Molina, a former general during Guatemala's bloody civil war, misstated the country's debt load. It is about 30 percent of Guatemala's G.D.P., not 3 percent.

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