

Retired military general leads in Guatemala presidential election

Otto Perez Molina is the front-runner in the Guatemala presidential election after Sunday's first round, though he did not garner enough votes to avoid a November runoff.

By Kara Andrade, Contributor, Sara Miller Llana, Staff writer / September 12, 2011



Guatemala's Patriot Party presidential candidate Otto Perez Molina has his thumb inked as proof of having voted in Guatemala City on Sept. 11.

Edgard Garrido/Reuters

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NEBAJ, GUATEMALA, AND MEXICO CITY

A right-wing retired military general in Guatemala promising to use an "iron fist" to wrest control of the country from criminals has taken the lead in the country's presidential race.

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With 90 percent of ballots counted, Otto Perez Molina of the Patriot Party captured 36 percent of votes. His margin of victory shows a wearied public seeking stability, but he did not garner enough support to avoid a run-off.

He will face businessman Manuel Baldizon, who won 23 percent of the vote, in a run-off in an early November, according to preliminary results. Eduardo Suger finished third place, ahead of seven additional candidates, including Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu on the left. She captured just 3 percent of votes.

"We are confident that in the next round, the second round on November 6, we will win again and win by a strong margin," Mr. Perez Molina was quoted by Reuters as saying

Monday morning.

Guatemala has been wracked by violence, and many voters looked to Perez Molina as the candidate most able to regain a sense of order, even in areas at the heart of the country's 36-year civil war where allegations of state abuse are rampant.

"He has the leadership to normalize the crime here," says Gasper Utuy, from Chajul in the mountainous Ixil region. "I am not scared of the past returning because it can't return. We had a war because of the guerrillas and now they're not there. Now we have narcos and the Patriot Party can take care of that."

Guatemala has suffered one of the worst homicide rates in the region. But its crime problem has been compounded recently by increasing viciousness tied to Mexican drug criminals, who are both expanding into Guatemala and increasingly using Central America as a transit route. This spring, in the northern area of Peten, 27 people were found murdered at a ranch. The massacre was blamed on the Zetas group, based in Mexico.

Perez Molina has promised to rely on his intelligence savvy from his military days to combat increasing lawlessness. But some worry about the impact that his military past, including swirling allegations of human rights abuses, will have on the future of democracy in Guatemala.

"One has to vote with memory," says Gregorio Cuyuch Baten, who works with the Association of Development for Mayan Communities. "And we're talking about the memory of the past so that we don't vote for what scorched the earth and caused genocide. It must be remembered that it's about searching for persons who caused all these crimes."

Perez Molina's campaign was buoyed by a Guatemalan court decision to ban Sandra Torres, the former wife of outgoing President Alvaro Colom, from the campaign. The court ruled that despite the couple's divorce, her candidacy would violate the constitution, which bars family members from running for office. Their party then failed to field a candidate, causing many in Guatemala to lament their ballot options.

Alvaro Velasquez, a professor of social sciences and political analyst at FLACSO in Guatemala, says this is the least competitive election in Guatemala's history. It is a race "between the authoritarian right and the populist right," he says. "Neither alternative is real or favorable for the people."

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