

## **Elections Demonstrate Desire for Participation, Sovereignty and End to Impunity: Rios Montt eliminated, Berger and Colom face off in a Second Round**

*By Annie Bird*

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In the November 9, 2003 Guatemalan presidential elections the biggest news is who did not win. The ruling party, the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG) presented Efraim Rios Montt, a former military dictator who presided over the massacre of tens of thousands of unarmed men, women and children in a State-sponsored genocide between 1982 and 1983, as its presidential candidate.

After widespread repudiation during his campaign, having been stoned, protested, and denied entry to towns during his campaign, and even booed while he voted, Rios Montt was eliminated in the first round. In losing his candidacy, Rios Montt will also lose the immunity he has enjoyed during his term as President of Congress, possibly expediting efforts to bring him to trial for the crimes against humanity committed during his rule.

Oscar Berger and Alvaro Colom will face off in a December 28 run off election, given no candidate captured more than 50% of the total vote. Berger is the candidate for the GANA coalition and Alvaro Colom is candidate for the UNE party. Colom had previously run in the 1999 elections for the ANN coalition that included the URNG party composed of the former revolutionary movement. The URNG had little presence in these presidential elections, and their performance may have been further affected due to internal party administrative problems that left at least two mayoral candidates favored to win in Rabinal and San Miguel Chicaj, Baja Verapaz off the ballots.

The millions of Guatemalans who voted did so in spite of tremendous difficulties. Late opening and early closing of voting tables caused unrest. Problems with the voter registry caused mass confusion, with voters waiting in line for hours then being told they had to go to another voting center or were not registered. In Chajul, Quiche two elderly women were crushed to death in line when voters pressed in to the late to open polling center. Some voters had to walk for hours, bus drivers refusing to transport voters in two municipalities known to lack support for the ruling party.

According to the official numbers, virtually every adult Guatemalan was registered to vote. This extraordinarily high number of voters led to suspicion that the ruling FRG party had manipulated the registries. Many suspect that false citizen identification cards were issued, especially given a well-publicized robbery of the blank cards from the national printer over a year ago and the lack of control of the private companies that produce the cards. Others suspect the reason for the high turn out was corrupt use of State resources by the ruling party in conditioning payment for having served as a paramilitary during the war and participation in development programs on voting for the FRG.

There were widespread reports that the supposedly indelible ink that marked people who already voted was easily removed. Several false citizen cards were detained, trucks with ballots marked in favor of the FRG were detained and people intending to vote in municipalities to which they were not residents were stopped. In months leading up to November 9, there were many reports of people carrying two citizen cards and that others were voting in the place of dead people. Though corruption did not bring Rios Montt to power as some had feared, it is unclear to what degree municipal and congressional elections may have been effected.

### **VIOLENCE OVERSHADOWS ELECTIONS – VOTERS WANT END TO IMPUNITY**

Many feared more violence, given that violence has been ever present during the campaign and during the elections. Reported elections-related violence has included killings, threats, violent attacks, rape, kidnapping, rioting and arson. Violence was particularly targeted against journalists, in hopes of limiting citizens' access to information. However, opposition party activists were the principal victims.

Elections day violence was relatively limited; more than 9,000 votes were burned in El Quetzal, San Marcos and 11 tables of votes were burned in Cuyotenango, Suchitepequez by mobs of former Civil Defense Patrolers (PAC) discontent at not having received the promised payment for their services during the war.

Even today, 17 years after the formal shift from military to civilian rule and seven years after the signing of the

peace accords, Guatemala lives in the shadow of the massive State sponsored violence that peaked between 1981 and 1983 with widespread massacres in the highland Mayan villages. More than 200,000 Guatemalans lost their lives, 93% of those as a result of US and western-backed military repression against a largely civilian population in what the United Nations sponsored truth commission called “State-sponsored genocide”, those responsible for the violence continue to hold positions of power in local and national government.

Human rights organizations combat the clandestine networks of occult power which continue to maintain impunity and control resources through corruption and violence. The FRG government has been considered the maximum expression of the marriage of State and mafia and most reporting of these elections has focused on the nefarious role of Rios Montt in the elections.

#### GANA, IMPUNITY & WAR CRIMES

However, little has been reported on the wide spread presence of military actors implicated in human rights violations in most of the political parties. This includes the GANA coalition which is favored to win. GANA, a party led by the economic elite, has been billed as the “clean” alternative to Rios Montt. However, the GANA coalition includes the Partido Patriota, a new party formed by former military officers, and allies such Otto Perez Molina, who served as an intelligence officer during the genocide. Harris Whitbeck, another PP leader, was in charge of the social programs during the period of genocide which formed the Beans of the “Beans and Bullets” strategy. In this infamous social control strategy, peasants were given the choice of forming paramilitary organizations commanded by the military and receiving development aid, or being massacred. This spawned the widespread support of the FRG by these paramilitaries who still form the party’s principal base.

Unfortunately, the electoral process appears to offer little possibility of ending the impunity enjoyed by the ongoing alliance between the military, the local economic elite and their international business partners.

#### A DEEP DESIRE FOR DEMOCRACY AND SOVEREIGNTY – DENIED

Irrespective of how much violence and corruption have tainted the elections, what was made clear today and in the months leading up to the elections was the tremendous desire by the majority of Guatemalans to participate in the governance of their country, a basic right denied to them throughout Guatemalan history, beginning with the Spanish colonies, followed by the interests of competing colonial-imperial powers and then by a century of constant direct and covert military and economic interventions by the United States.

While civil society struggles to rebuild itself and foster the ability of the people to exercise self-governance, international financing institutions (World Bank, Inter American Development Bank and the International Monetary Fund) have pushed through programs and legislation that weaken Guatemalan citizens’ ability to exercise control over their own nation, its resources, and basic social services such as education, healthcare and energy. These institutions have promoted the privatization of basic services to transnational corporations, the concession of natural resources to multinationals with little or no benefit to the population or control of environmental damages, free trade policies that undermine small producers and destroy local economies and the dedication of State resources to creation of infrastructure needed by corporations rather than investing in promoting local markets, social services, better conditions for small producers, and guaranteeing fundamental human rights.

#### “THE US EMBASSY CANDIDATE”

Both Berger and Colom are promoting agendas favorable to international economic interests. Indeed, Berger is known as the US embassy candidate. Widespread reports indicate that US embassy officials and USAID funding has openly supported GANA through both political support and financial resources for GANA-dominated non governmental organizations which, among other things, have promised easier access to US travel visas for those who participate in their activities.

Guatemala’s ability for self-governance is further undermined given that policies related to two of the largest sources of income for the nation, remittances sent by undocumented workers in the United States and profits from drug trafficking, are entirely determined by the United States. Though very different in nature, migration and drug

trafficking have led to increased militarization and human rights violations. Drug profits appear to be controlled by many of the same mafia that maintain influence in the government, and have led to the increased violence, arms and death squads freely operating in sections of the country. The ability of the United States to act directly in military and policing operations to control drug trafficking and migration has increased, especially in the context of the “War on Terrorism”.

Just how “clean” the elections were is difficult to determine, despite the presence of thousands of Guatemalan elections monitors and many international observer delegations. Over the next few days, much will be reported about the electoral process.

However, there is little discussion of the global structural conditions that undermine self-determination in a small, former colonial nation like Guatemala and the efforts of thousands of organized Guatemalans struggling to make a decent life for their family and their community and in the process build a better nation.

Over the next few weeks, Rights Action will be distributing information related to the possibility of democracy and self governance, impunity and social control, and information produced by volunteers accompanying community based organizations, RA partners, struggling to transform their society and their planet.

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For updates on the Guatemalan Elections, check out the [Electoral Watch Updates](#) by the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA).

Click [here](#) for related articles.

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Annie Bird is co-director of Rights Action, [www.rightsaction.org](http://www.rightsaction.org), a tax-charitable organization that raises fund for community based development and human rights organizations in southern Mexico and Central America.

Currently, Rights Action has a team of international volunteers providing human rights accompaniment in the context of Guatemala’s elections.

RIGHTS ACTION, [info@rightsaction.org](mailto:info@rightsaction.org), [www.rightsaction.org](http://www.rightsaction.org), 416-654-2074:

- \* to invite us to give public presentations on this and other related issues;
- \* to come to Guatemala on fact-finding delegations to learn more about these issues;
- \* to work as a human rights accompanier in Central America;