

Six thoughts and observations on Guatemala's second round of elections

By Eric Olson and Katherine Hyde

With just days until Guatemala's second round of elections, presidential candidates Jimmy Morales and Sandra Torres are hurriedly shoring up support and getting their messages out to voters. These elections are historic, coming at a moment of disillusionment with the political establishment following the resignation and subsequent arrest of former President Otto Pérez Molina for his alleged participation in a multi-million dollar corruption network. Guatemalans turned out in record numbers in the first round of elections on September 6 and the charged political atmosphere suggests they will do so again. In this electric electoral context, here are some thoughts and observations:

1. Who are the candidates?

- a. **Jimmy Morales:** Jimmy Morales, the TV-comedian-turned-presidential-aspirant, rode his outsider status and personal fame to win the first round of elections with 23.85 percent of the vote. Morales, the candidate of the National Convergence Front party (FCN-Nación), has fashioned himself as the “anti-politician.” Eschewing party alliances and traditional political practices, Morales has drawn a stark contrast between himself and the allegedly corrupt former President Pérez, as well as the entire political establishment in general. Morales, who spent years as a comedic actor, exudes a charisma that endears him to voters and gives him a

natural leg-up in debates. However, his party's roots in the country's historic military establishment remain concerning for some voters.

- b. Sandra Torres:** Sandra Torres, the National Unity of Hope (UNE) candidate, came in second place in the first round of elections with 19.76 percent of the vote. She has run her candidacy as a populist political veteran and Social Democrat who will defend the poor while in office. Unlike Morales, Torres is no stranger to presidential politics. She served as first lady beside former President Álvaro Colom from 2008 to 2011, where she gained popularity for social programs she coordinated in rural areas while running the Social Work Secretariat of the First Lady (SOSEP). She attempted to run for President in 2011, until the Constitutional Court invalidated her candidacy because the Constitution forbids a President's family from running for the office, and Torres was still married to Colom at the time.

2. Morales and Torres rely on very different bases of political support

In general, Morales has a strong base of support in urban areas, while Torres is more popular in rural areas. Torres is remembered in Guatemala's rural departments for social programs that she coordinated as first lady, such as conditional cash transfers. In rural, primarily indigenous areas of Guatemala, where chronic undernutrition reaches nearly 70 percent, such welfare programs were a lifeline. In the first round of elections Torres won handily in the more rural departments of Alta Verapaz, Quiché, and Chiquimula.

For his part, Morales decisively won the state of Guatemala, which includes the capital city, with 35 percent of the vote. This is because the urban middle class, particularly repulsed by the *La Línea* scandal, broadly supports Morales' anti-corruption agenda and anti-politician rhetoric.

Furthermore, the middle class likely remembers Torres more for her 2011 attempt to bypass the Constitution and run for President than her social programs that largely benefitted poor, rural areas.

In terms of political alliances, Torres can also count on a large national party network to support her candidacy. The 13 year old UNE party is one of the largest and strongest political parties in Guatemala, holding 36 of 158 seats in Congress. In contrast, the National Convergence Front has very little political infrastructure and holds only 11 seats in Congress. Despite this lack of infrastructure, or perhaps because of it, Morales won the first round of elections by emphasizing that he is not a traditional politician. Furthermore, Morales, sticking to his “anti-politician” identity, has eschewed all political coalitions. This reinforces the impression of Morales’ as unencumbered and distinct from the corrupt political establishment. Morales also counts on strong backing from Guatemala’s influential business community. While the country’s largest and most powerful business association, known as CACIF has refrained from openly supporting either candidate, bad blood between the organization and former President Colom has likely made the Association wary of another UNE presidency.

3. The *La Línea* corruption scandal has profoundly shaped these elections

Why is it that a political outsider with no firm policy platform and no political infrastructure won the first round of the elections? Morales, whose campaign slogan is “neither corrupt nor a thief,” resonates with Guatemalans angered by the *La Línea* corruption scandal. His victory in the first round of elections underscores the extent of Guatemalan disillusionment with the political establishment and with democracy in general. According to Latinobarómetro’s 2015 study, only 33 percent of Guatemalans prefer democracy to any other type of political system, as

compared with the Latin American average of 56 percent, making Guatemala the worst nation in Latin America for support of democracy.

Many Guatemalans are so frustrated with the political establishment that they would rather vote for a comedian with no experience than a political veteran who may be linked to corruption. And though Morales' lack of governing experience and clear policy proposals have been criticized by some, many in the country see it as a plus. Sandra Torres, on the other hand, has deep connections to the country's political establishment, which may have in some measure contributed to her polling a distant second in the first round of the elections.

The fall of President Otto Pérez Molina has profoundly changed the electoral context. Issues of corruption and impunity have become central in the platforms and campaign promises of both candidates. In their efforts to appear tough on corruption, both Torres and Morales have promised to root out corruption if elected and to support the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), the U.N.-backed body which uncovered the *La Línea* corruption network.

4. This election cycle underscores the antiquated campaign finance laws in Guatemala

While both candidates have vowed to get rid of corruption in the Guatemalan government, they have nonetheless been less than transparent with respect to the sources of their own campaign funding. Although Guatemala's Electoral and Political Party Law requires political groups to provide periodic reports on their campaign funding, there are many loopholes that allow individuals to escape oversight. For example, the law has no oversight over the NGOs, associations, and other businesses that political parties frequently use to fund and execute their campaigns. Furthermore, Guatemala's Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) lacks sufficient

personnel and resources to adequately audit campaign funding as well as non-monetary contributions that individuals and businesses give to political campaigns. These problems in campaign finance were underscored by a July 2015 report from the CICIG that found that while slightly less than 25 percent of campaign funds comes from businesses tied to associations like CACIF, 50 percent comes from different state contractors and the other 25 percent comes from criminal organizations.

5. Morales' military connection raises concerns

The issue of campaign finance is particularly important with respect to Jimmy Morales, whose party has deep connections with Guatemala's military establishment. Memories of the armed conflict, as well as Otto Pérez Molina's military past, have made many Guatemalans wary of any politician who appears too close to the military. Morales' party was formed by retired military members from the conservative Guatemalan Military Veterans Association. Though Morales has insisted that his party no longer has any military connections, a [report](#) from *Plaza Pública* shows that a significant amount the party's funding — nearly 40 percent — comes from five retired members of the military. Furthermore, Morales has signaled that a possible candidate for Interior Minister is Jorge Luis Donado Vivar, who was a close advisor to the head of the National Security Council under ex-President Otto Pérez Molina.

6. Jimmy Morales is the clear favorite to win

Morales has held a significant lead since he won the first round in September. An opinion poll by pollster Felipe Noguera conducted September 23-27 shows Morales with a decisive lead, polling at 64 percent. Torres, on the other hand, is polling at 20.6 percent.

Analysis

These elections are historic, highlighting broad frustration with the political establishment and a growing preference for non-traditional politics. The meteoric rise and likely victory this Sunday of the “anti-politician” are a testament to the depth of frustration with politics as usual in Guatemala. But, will Guatemala’s next President be able to harness this frustration and turn it into a sustainable transformation of the country? Maybe Morales and Torres just used the politically expedient fight against corruption and impunity to bolster their own campaigns. But what seems to be the more likely scenario is that the events of the last two months — the ouster of President Molina and Vice-President Baldetti due to the CICIG and the Attorney General’s investigations — demonstrate that Guatemalan democracy is maturing. If recent history has provided any lesson, it’s that not even Guatemala’s President is safe from justice. If this is the case, the fight against corruption in Guatemala will continue regardless of who is elected on Sunday. In a more democratically mature Guatemala, the individual president in office will matter less in fighting crime and impunity than the overall strength and independence of Guatemala’s judicial institutions.