

Guatemala rattled by campaign violence

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GUATEMALA CITY --

Guatemalans, rattled by soaring crime and a wave of campaign-related violence that has claimed about 50 lives, will decide Sunday between a former general who promises law and order and a three-time presidential contender who says he will focus on reducing poverty.

Polls show Otto Perez Molina, a retired general and former military intelligence director with the right-wing Patriotic Party, in a dead heat against businessman Alvaro Colom of the center-left National Unity of Hope Party.

Nobel Laureate and Mayan activist Rigoberta Menchu is among 12 other presidential candidates on Sunday's ballot. If none wins more than 50 percent, the top two will face a Nov. 4 runoff.

But Menchu, awarded the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize for her human rights work following Guatemala's brutal civil war, has gained little support. She's running a distant sixth with 3.1 percent of the vote, according to a poll published Wednesday.

Menchu's presidential run sparked hope for greater political participation by Mayans in Guatemala, which remains deeply divided along racial lines, with a largely white elite ruling an impoverished Indian majority.

But many say Menchu, whose father and brother were killed during the war, lacks political experience and is not seen as capable of running Guatemala's male-dominated society.

"She's just starting, and she'll probably finish last," said Jose Zedillo, a 41-year-old Quiche Mayan who walks the streets of Guatemala City selling textiles woven by his wife.

Zedillo said he will not vote for Menchu but did not discount supporting her in future presidential runs.

"I think she'll be ready in a few years," he said.

This has been Guatemala's most violent campaign, with 49 politicians, activists and their relatives gunned down, stabbed or strangled in the past four months of campaigning to replace the president, federal lawmakers and local officials.

In the latest attack Wednesday, two candidates from Menchu's political party were showered with bullets by assailants who opened fire with automatic weapons as they drove on a rural road 30 kilometers (20 miles) north of Guatemala City.

With more than 5,000 homicides per year, Guatemala is Central America's most violent country.

The country of 12 million is also a main corridor for Colombian cocaine heading to the United States. Compounding the problem is rampant corruption and a culture of violence, a legacy of the 1960-1996 civil war in which the army, police and paramilitary forces killed 93 percent of the 200,000 victims, most of whom were Mayan.

Many say the death squads that operated during the war live on inside the nation's police forces.

Peace accords ended 36 years of civil war in 1996, but Guatemalans have struggled to enforce the rule of law. Only an estimated 1 percent of murder cases result in convictions in Guatemala, according to the Washington Office on Latin America, which promotes human rights and democracy in the region.

Political analyst Gustavo Porras said many of the campaign killings were the work of drug traffickers who tried to force political parties to add them to their electoral roster. Other attacks were aimed at eliminating the contenders of politicians linked to drug traffickers, he said.

"During the war ... the violence had ideological undertones, but now the violence comes from drug traffickers trying to help their candidates or create chaos," Porras said.

Perez Molina and Colom were tied at 30 percent in the poll by Vox Latina, which had a margin of error of 4 percentage points. The face-to-face, nationwide survey using a simulated ballot with 1,200 registered voters was conducted from Aug. 29 to Sept. 3.

Perez Molina, 56, has said he would hire more police officers and use the military to crackdown on criminals. He also said he would push for the death penalty to be instituted.

Colom worked with civil war refugees in isolated highlands and is an ordained Mayan minister. He proposes increasing social spending to fight poverty and overhauling the judicial system.

Tired of the skyrocketing crime, some Guatemalans favor a heavy-handed government.

"I've seen buses being robbed, and the violence is just too much," said Antonio Echali, who sells handicrafts and plans to vote for Perez Molina. "I think we need a strong hand."