

Guatemalans to vote for security

National elections on Sunday are shaped by one of the world's highest murder rates.

The Christian Science Monitor
September 7, 2007

Guatemala City - The campaign slogans and portraits of political candidates that hang over Guatemala's capital offer a glimpse of hopes and expectations ahead of Sunday's elections, in which a president, legislature, and local authorities in over 300 municipalities will be selected.

But the front-page headlines offer a grimmer view: nearly 50 political candidates, leaders, and activists have been killed as of Sept. 3 – turning it into the deadliest election season in recent memory. Two campaign workers in Nobel Peace laureate Rigoberta Menchu's flagging election effort were murdered Wednesday, a party official said.

The political violence mirrors the insecurity spreading across the country. More than a decade after peace accords brought 36 years of civil war to an end here, Guatemala remains one of the most dangerous countries in the region. The numbers of those murdered has continued to grow since 2000, according to statistics from the National Civil Police, rising to almost 6,000 last year. That is over 10 percent more than the year before.

Unlike other elections in Latin America, Guatemala's has little to do with the leftward shift that has marked races from Nicaragua to Ecuador. In fact, many here see little difference in the leading candidates' ideologies. The central debate about who can make the country safer – from the gang members known as the Mara Salvatrucha, who plague both US cities and Central America, to the drug traffickers shipping cocaine and heroine to the US.

"What Guatemala faces today is the combination of the old unresolved issues of poverty and exclusion, with new threats from drug trafficking," says Anders Kompass, head of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Guatemala. "The killings during the election is not just a struggle between the parties; it is a reflection of the situation that Guatemalans live each day."

A tie for first place

The two front-runners are Alvaro Colom from the center-left National Union of Hope and retired Gen. Otto Perez Molina from the conservative Patriot Party. Mr. Colom has been leading the polls for weeks, but the latest, published Wednesday in the Prensa Libre paper, put the two at a virtual tie: Mr. Perez Molina has 31.8 percent and Colom 31.7 percent. Other candidates include former director of prisons, Alejandro Giammattei, of outgoing President Oscar Berger's Grand National Alliance party, and Rigoberta Menchu, who won

the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize for her work with the nation's indigenous, which make up half of the population.

Nearly 6 million Guatemalans are registered to vote Sunday, but to gain the presidency in the first round a candidate must win 50 percent of the popular vote. Most analysts expect a runoff vote Nov. 4.

Violence is not new in a country that suffered more than three decades of civil war and military authoritarian regimes, but residents like Jairo Zacarias say that the threat today is driven by poverty. Mr. Zacarias, a taxi driver, rolls up his window and turns around to lock his back doors as he drives into the crime-riddled historic center of Guatemala City.

He wouldn't have taken such measures before, he says, but a year ago he was assaulted on a public bus. A few days later, a gang put a pistol to his head and took his wallet and shoes. "The last time I was assaulted was six months ago in a bus station," he says. "There is no such thing as security here."

Candidates' platforms offer plans to add more police to the 19,000-strong force, strengthen the judiciary, and purge the state's institutions of organized crime and corruption.

Perez Molina chose a fist for his campaign icon with the slogan "mano dura" or "tough hand," an explicit reference to his zero-tolerance stance on crime. Colom says he, too, will be tough, but that he'll also focus on crime's social causes, such as marginalization and poverty.

Most analysts say that impunity is the main reason that crime has flourished in Guatemala, where almost all cases go unsolved. The other factor is the country's growing role in the drug trade. The US State Department considers it a major drug-transit country for cocaine and heroin heading to the US and Europe. It's not the sole factor in the rise in killings, but the traffickers are seeking to exert control over their territory. "Guatemala is used to violence ... but now organized crime and drug traffickers are directly affecting the elections ... especially at the local level," says Raquel Zelaya, the director of the Association for Social Research and Studies in Guatemala City.

Despite platforms that revolve around security, many question whether the next president will have the will or power to change the status quo. "Everyone has different proposals," says Helen Mack, a human rights activist, "But she doesn't see a candidate willing to take the steps necessary to address "the roots of impunity."

Lowest rate of tax collection

None of the candidates, for example, are talking about fiscal reform, even though Guatemala has one of the lowest tax collection rates in the world, says Ms. Zelaya. "Without resources, we can't do anything to improve security," she says.

And some say that fighting crime is taking precedence over other key issues, such as jobs. "There is an urgent demand among the population to address violence," says Francisco Garcia, a member of the pro-democracy group Electoral Watch in Guatemala, "and I believe there is a lot of manipulation, so that people vote for the one who is most likely to act against violence."

Erick Hernandez, a resident of Guatemala City, says that if jobs were created, then violence would dissipate. According to the US State Department, 80 percent of Guatemalans live in poverty, and its infant mortality and illiteracy are among the worst in the hemisphere. "If people were educated and had jobs," says Mr. Hernandez, "they wouldn't need to rob."