

# Guatemala vote a test for democracy Presidential election seen as chance to nudge military from its power position

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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[Alfonso] Portillo, who won 22 per cent of the first-round votes, heads the more right- wing Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG), the Guatemalan Republican Front. The party is in reality headed by Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt, a former president deemed constitutionally ineligible to run for election himself because of his role in a military coup in 1982.

The front's base of support is the countryside, despite the fact that rural areas inhabited by Maya Indians were the killing fields of the 1980s. No military ruler can be assigned more responsibility for terror and bloodshed in Guatemala than Ríos Montt.

## FULL TEXT

GUATEMALANS GO to the polls Sunday to elect a new president who they hope will advance the cause of democracy in their war-torn country.

But democracy in 1996 in Guatemala may prove as elusive as peace in 1995.

The vote constitutes the second round of balloting for the presidency made necessary by the failure of any of the 19 candidates in the Nov. 12 first to win an absolute majority.

Only two candidates, Alvaro Arzu and Alfonso Portillo, survived the first round. The winner will take office the following Sunday

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Guatemala than Rios Montt.

On the surface, Arzu's 15 per cent lead over Portillo in the first round appears to give him the edge going into the second round.

The key to victory, though, may lie in what kind of deals Arzu and Portillo can strike with the executive, and the electorate, of lesser-ranked parties.

Voter turnout is expected to be poor. Barely 46 per cent of registered voters cast ballots in the first round in spite of vigorous appeals by Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu and even guerrillas who are fighting a war against the government.

Guerrillas have endorsed the election in hopes a new president will be more enthusiastic about peace talks. They have declared a ceasefire during the campaign.

Economic considerations will prevent many rural residents from participating. Polling stations in Guatemala are only in populous centres, which means people living elsewhere have to take an unpaid day off work to travel to a nearby town or city to cast their vote.

Also working against a high voter turnout is the fact that Arzu and Portillo represent conservative, right-wing political parties, neither of which advocates the radical reforms necessary to dismantle the structures of privilege and inequality responsible for Guatemala's brutal civil war.

In Guatemala, 90 per cent of all the farms account for 16 per cent of total farm area, while 2 per cent occupy 65 per cent of total farm area. The best land is used to grow coffee, cotton, bananas and sugar cane for export, not to feed malnourished local populations.

Recent United Nations statistics indicate 85 per cent of Guatemala's 11 million people live in poverty, 70 per cent of them in a state of deprivation described as extreme. Only 15 per cent of Guatemalans are considered to live well - thanks to lenient taxation laws that keep their contribution to state revenues, in percentage terms, among the lowest in Latin America.

Addressing these concerns is not part of the campaign agenda of either the advancement party or the front.

The only president to address seriously the issue of land and taxation reforms in Guatemala was Jacobo Arbenz Guzman. His democratically elected government was overthrown in 1954 following a military coup in which the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency played a key destabilizing role.

The national armed forces may have dominated Guatemalan politics in the four decades since the overthrow and exile of Arbenz, but never have they been able to dislodge the symbolic hold the late president exercises on the popular imagination.

In October, when Arbenz's remains were returned to Guatemala for ceremonial burial, the deposed president assumed in death power he could scarcely have contemplated in life.

Much of the credit for orchestrating popular resistance belongs to the Frente Democratico Nueva Guatemala (the New Guatemala Democratic Front), a coalition of left-leaning groups that went on to capture 8 per cent of the Nov .

12 vote.

The coalition's performance is an encouraging one, especially since it was the first time since the victory of Arbenz in 1950 that any left-leaning party has participated in a Guatemalan election. At least five seats in the new congress will be occupied by coalition representatives, among them human rights activists Nineth Montenegro and Rosalina Tuyuc.

Both these women are realistic as well as courageous. They know they must engage the might of the Guatemalan military - not the brass-band members trotted out on state occasions - if they are to end 35 years of civil war.

Through it all, the brutality continues. Only two weeks before Arbenz was buried, an army patrol opened fire on Maya refugees recently returned to Guatemala from Mexico, killing eight and wounding more than 20 persons in Xaman, Verapaz.

Even though a guerrilla threat is now far more illusory than real, it is difficult to envision politics in Guatemala without some kind of military involvement. The national armed forces - at 47,000 men, the largest and most professional military unit in Central America - are headed by a corps of officers whose education and training cultivate the politics of power as a legitimate military preoccupation.

For any president of Guatemala, whether Alvaro Arzu or Alfonso Portillo, the greatest challenge is to convince the army that civil society, as in the case of Costa Rica, can function reasonably well without military intervention. Democracy in Guatemala hinges on defining a very different role for the military than it has assumed and enacted up to now.

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### Illustration

SYGMA FILE PHOTO ARMY IN CHARGE: GUATEMALA'S ARMY HAS LONG CONTROLLED THE NATION'S INDIANS AND DOMINATED POLITICS.

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