



FIELD REPORT: GUATEMALA PROJECT

The following letter has been written by Guatemala Team Coordinator Betsy Crites. For the first round of elections, the team members decided to volunteer as election observers. This has not been part of their regular work for NP but an additional activity.

Dear Friends,

The Guatemalan elections, nicknamed the “civic celebration” (Fiesta Civica), were held last Sunday, Sept. 9. This first round narrowed the field from 14 presidential candidates to 2. No party had enough votes to win, so we are in for another seven weeks of campaigning until the second round of voting on November 4.

This was not an election that offered much hope for a new Guatemala. Polls had shown from the start that the 3-4 parties whose programs called for changes that would address the economic and social injustices were barely keeping their horses in the race. Perhaps no one was surprised that the two parties that spent the most money, plastered the most posters, bought the most TV and newspapers ads, and were aligned with the wealthiest sectors, were the top vote getters. It doesn't take a political scientist to know that repetition, bright colors, and catchy slogans that address people's worst fears win votes. It also helps to incite and create fear and to use your money to buy and hand out fertilizer, food, and gifts.

On Sunday I left the house at 5:15 a.m. to go to the office of La Unidad where Luisa was setting up for a busy day. She was staffing one of the centers for the Mirador Electoral, with the job of receiving calls from observers placed strategically around the country. The Mirador used sampling to estimate the final result. My presence was to provide security accompaniment so Luisa would not be alone during those early morning hours.

Later I headed to my assigned post at a school not far from our house. Equipped with my election observer tee shirt, badge necklace, and packet of reporting forms, all issued to me by the Human Rights Ombudsman's office that had also provided 2 hours of training, I arrived ready to defend democracy. When I got there the

polls had opened and voters were trickling in. Our job was to document anyone handing out party propaganda, any attempts to slip in alternative ballots or otherwise depart from the established procedure, and to take complaints of mistreatment or fraud. The place was full of observers, including other internationals and student volunteers wearing tee shirts saying “I’m a hero of democracy”. In the remote rural areas where my teammates went there was a scarcity of observers. Bego and Vito were traveling between polling places where there were practically no other outside observers.

The police and army deployed tens of thousands of personnel to discourage and quell violence. There was reason to think there might be problems. The numbers of candidates and party leaders that had been assassinated during the campaign exceeded anything the country had experienced in 22 years. The generalized violence, i.e. people shot in the streets, gangs infiltrating neighborhoods and using extortion in exchange for security, and bus drivers being killed because they refused to pay the “tax”, raised the already high level of fear and insecurity.

In mid-campaign season, the sitting president Oscar Berger spoke out accusing unnamed parties of creating a climate of chaos (i.e. hiring gangs and assassins) to benefit their party. One party he may have had in mind, the Patriotic Party (PP), offered a tough military solution and based its campaign on the symbol of a clinched fist and the slogan “iron fist” (mano dura). It promised to deal with the violence by deploying the army. Their presidential candidate, Otto Perez Molina, is a former director of army intelligence (D-2) and former chief of an elite corps of the military (Estado Mayor Presidencial). Both groups were guilty of some of the worst abuses of the war, but this was not discussed in the campaign. As the election violence continued the public became more and more desperate for promises of security. The PP shot up in the last pre-election polls finishing second.

The party that came out in front, the centrist National Unity of Hope (UNE), employed the symbol of hands joined to form the shape of a white dove in flight, though many people didn’t believe those hands were clean. One neighbor said she wouldn’t vote for Colom because she felt he was corrupt and would bankrupt the country like President Portillo did before. The UNE campaign focused more on social and economic development. Their proposal to curb the violence is to purge and reform the police force and organize neighborhood committees for self-defense. Their candidate, Alvaro Colom, would reduce the army and use it for fighting drug dealers.

Perhaps the worst violations on election day occurred in the tourist town of Antigua. Organization of American States observers had reported that the voter registration there jumped an unusual 10%. On election day witnesses saw truck loads of people brought in from outside the town to a particular voting station and

then taken to the UNE headquarters for lunch. It remains to be seen whether the Supreme Electoral Council will take any action on this.

Since election day there have been serious incidents in 16 municipalities. Ballots were burned, a police station was burned, and in one place a mob of 6000 set fire to a municipal building. The protests were all at the local level and directed against the incumbent mayors that retained power. Since many of these races were not even close and residents have informed police that many demonstrators are not local, the police hypothesize that gangs were hired to incite violence. In one municipality in an Eastern state, police identified members of a gang from the capital area.

For those curious about how Nobel Laureate Rigoberta Menchu fared, the answer is not well. She ended up with slightly more than 3%, which put her in 7th place. She ran in the Encuentro de Guatemala (EG) party with Nineth Montenegro, an internationally known human rights defender who gained notoriety in the 80's and 90's for her work organizing families of the forcibly disappeared. Montenegro won her seat in Congress. Racism and limited funding were the reasons offered by EG for the poor showing. Montenegro also said this shows there is no Indigenous movement in the country; "people's interests are more personal than ethnic".

The party of Rios Montt, the former general who led a coup in 1982 and presided over a scorched earth genocide of the Indigenous population, won his Congressional seat. He is forbidden from running for president because he led a coup, but other efforts to hold him responsible for the past have fallen short. The presidential candidate for his FRG party, Rabbe, came in 6th with 7.3% of the vote.

These events have not directly affected the human rights defenders we accompany, but it has provided a backdrop of violence and impunity that, because of the nature of their work, threatens them more than the ordinary citizen. Our team continues to travel with them within the capital and on trips to the countryside in hopes that our presence will be seen by potential attackers as increasing the cost of an aggression and will thus be a deterrent.

Now, on to the second round on November 4. But first, on September 18 I travel to Kenya to join Nonviolent Peaceforce in its second international conference and assembly. I am thrilled to be a part of this gathering of peace makers from around the world. I return briefly to Guatemala and then leave again to visit family in North Carolina. I'll be back with the NPG team on October 16.

With warm greetings and big hugs,
Betsy