

Presidential Elections Held in Central America



President-elect Otto Pérez Molina celebrated his win with Vice President-elect Roxana Baldetti in Guatemala City. (AP Photo/Rodrigo Abd)

Both Nicaragua and Guatemala held presidential elections last Sunday. Daniel Ortega, a former Marxist revolutionary leader, [won a second consecutive term](#) as Nicaragua's president by a landslide, while conservative retired army general [Otto Pérez Molina](#) won the presidency in Guatemala.

Otto Pérez won with a pledge to cut in half homicide rates of more than 41 per 100,000 inhabitants, three times the rate in Nicaragua and eight times that of the United States. Many hope that former general Pérez can defeat the threats of crime, gangs, and drug-related violence that plague Guatemala. Yet whether he will also allow former comrades inside the army to face prosecution for war-time atrocities remains to be seen.

Experts said the low voter turnout, which appeared to be just over 50 percent (down from 65 percent in the 2007 runoff and 90 percent in this year's opening round) was a sign of

public disgust. Guatemalans are angry, not just with crime, poverty and health indicators among the lowest in all of Latin America, but also with leaders who have failed to inspire confidence in the government or democracy.

"It's a dismal reflection on the state of Guatemalan politics and of the disconnect between parties, political leaders, and the people they're supposed to represent," said Cynthia Arnson, director of the Latin American program at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars. "That disconnect is problematic throughout Latin America, but in Guatemala it's worse than almost anywhere else."

Indeed, the new president faces enormous challenges. In addition to the crime wave, there is the issue of resources: Guatemala has a sizable weight of debt (around 30 percent of the country's GDP) and no clear path to improving its revenues, as the country's wealthy elite has generally stayed unified against higher taxes.

A key component of the 1996 peace accord that ended Guatemala's 36-year civil war was the creation of a modern national police force, but very little has been accomplished. The fear is that Pérez, despite all his talk of an "iron fist," isn't the man to bring rule of law to Guatemala, which is one of the world's most lawless countries.

"The assumption shouldn't be that the military is the solution when the military in Guatemala is very much a part of the problem," said Cynthia Arnson. "Guatemala has to enhance the role of police and justice institutions or risk a return to a pattern of military abuses."