

Guatemala votes for new president, runoff likely to decide outcome

17/06/2019 19:54 by admin

Former first lady Sandra Torres, of the center-left UNE party, has led the race to succeed President Jimmy Morales, a conservative former television host whose term has been blighted by accusations of corruption made by UN-backed investigators.

Vote counting takes place following the first round of the presidential election, at a voting center in Guatemala City, Guatemala June 16, 2019. (Reuters)

Guatemala City: Guatemalans on Sunday voted for a new president, who will face the daunting challenge of curbing drug gang violence that has ravaged the country and helped spur illegal immigration to the United States, stoking tensions with President Donald Trump.

Polling stations closed at 6 p.m. (0000 GMT). None of the 19 candidates is expected to win an outright majority, meaning the top two finishers will likely face off in a second round on Aug. 11. Former first lady Sandra Torres, of the center-left UNE party, has led the race to succeed President Jimmy Morales, a conservative former television host whose term has been blighted by accusations of corruption made by U.N.-backed investigators.

Election workers count votes following the first round of the presidential election in Guatemala City, Guatemala June 16, 2019. (Reuters)

Torres, who wants to send troops into the streets to fight drug gangs, and use welfare programs to tackle poverty, has the support of about 20 percent of the electorate, opinion polls showed.

“We have to sort out our problems here, and part of the reason for the migration is the lack of jobs, the gap in wages between the United States and here,” Torres said as she voted in Guatemala City. “We need to work with the business community to revive the economy and create jobs.”

Her closest rivals, trailing by a few percentage points, are conservatives Alejandro Giammattei, who is running in his fourth campaign, and Edmond Mulet, a former U.N. official whose candidacy has gained traction in recent weeks.

People wait in a queue to vote at a polling station during the first round of Guatemala’s presidential election, in San Pedro Sacatepequez, Guatemala, June 16, 2019. (Reuters)

Arriving to vote while driving a white car carrying his wife and son, Mulet said he had run an austere campaign and was hopeful of making the runoff.

Rampant violence and widespread discontent over corruption and impunity in the country of 17 million have prompted more and more Guatemalans to flee for the United States.

The surge of departures has undermined Trump's pledge to curb illegal immigration, and the U.S. president has responded by threatening to cut U.S. aid to Central America.

That prospect has caused alarm in Guatemala, where the legacy of the bloody 1960-1996 civil war still casts a long shadow over the country's development.

Preliminary results are due to begin coming in around 7 p.m. (0100 GMT).

COALITION PROSPECTS

With polls showing it is highly unlikely any candidate will win more than 50% of the vote, victory will likely depend on candidates' ability to build a coalition for the second round.

Consultancy Eurasia Group said on Friday that Torres would struggle to win a runoff, given her high negative ratings and the ability of her likely opponent to unify conservative voters and secure support from the country's powerful elites.

Morales, who is barred by law from seeking re-election, took office in 2016 vowing to root out corruption after his predecessor was brought down by a probe led by the U.N.-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG).

Instead, Morales himself became a target of a CICIG probe into allegations of campaign finance wrongdoing and was subject to impeachment proceedings in 2017.

He survived the attempt to oust him, and then engaged in a bitter dispute with the CICIG before finally terminating its mandate, effective from September.

None of the top contenders has unequivocally backed the CICIG, with Torres saying she would consider holding a referendum on whether it should remain in Guatemala.

Fernando Escalante, 41, an industrial design adviser, said the next president must continue the fight against corruption. "I fear all the progress we've made could be lost, but maybe it's time for us Guatemalans to take on the task," he said.

Questions of legitimacy have dogged the 2019 contest since two of the front-runners were forced out, including Thelma Aldana, a former attorney general who tried to impeach Morales with the CICIG. The government accused Aldana of corruption, leading to her exclusion last month.

Allegations of shady dealings have permeated the election, which has been fought out amid intensifying efforts by Trump to turn Mexico and Guatemala into buffer zones to keep migrants from entering the United States illegally.

Presidential hopeful Mario Estrada and congressional candidate Julio Jose Rosales were arrested during the campaign and charged with having links to Mexico's Sinaloa drug cartel.