

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

'Noriega's' party wins elections

Torrijos-Carter treaties are given new meaning: "Torrijos wins you the elections, Carter appoints your cabinet."

Nearly five years after George Bush sent tens of thousands of American troops into Panama to remove Gen. Manuel Noriega and the military-founded Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) from power, that same party was returned to office by Panamanian voters in presidential elections held May 8.

Elected President for a five-year term was PRD candidate Ernesto "Toro" ("Bull") Pérez Balladares. He received just over 33% of the vote, defeating Mireya Moscoso, widow of Panama's late would-be führer Arnulfo Arias, 29%; salsa king Rubén Blades; and former Chase Manhattan Bank official Rubén Darío Carles. Three other candidates each got less than 3%.

Although Balladares, a U.S.-trained economist of free trade inclinations, disavowed Noriega and denounced the former Panamanian Defense Forces throughout the campaign, the perception inside and outside Panama is that the PRD was "Noriega's party." This was reinforced by the PRD's opponents, whose electoral propaganda hammered away on the theme that a PRD victory meant a return to the military governments of the past.

A few weeks before the election, for example, U.S.-installed President Guillermo "Porky" Endara announced that he would have a "momentous" announcement in the next few days. Expecting the worst, Panamanians stockpiled food and water and sat down in front of their television sets on April 14, only to see Endara present a series of videos documenting the ties of Balladares and his

running mates with the previous Noriega regime.

Thus, the elections provided a vindication of sorts for Noriega, currently a prisoner of war of the United States in Florida. The results also demonstrate that Bush lied when he justified launching his new world order by claiming that an invasion was necessary to free the oppressed Panamanians from the "hated dictator" Noriega. In fact, as U.S. Democratic presidential pre-candidate Lyndon LaRouche, an outspoken critic of the invasion, recalled in a May 12 radio interview, Bush went after Noriega because the Panamanian leader refused to cooperate with "Bush's illegal operations in connection with the Contras," including "drug running." LaRouche said that Bush was "the Willie Horton of Panama," who "killed thousands of Panamanians by ordering a strike against the most densely inhabited tenement slum in Panama."

Alas, the elections give Panamanian nationalists no reason for elation, because the architects of this "democratic experiment" of the new world order prediscouted the results and rigged the race so that no matter who won, the policies carried out by the continued U.S. occupation—through Endara's narco-government—remain unchanged. Virtually the first appointment Balladares made to his cabinet, was that of Gabriel Lewis Galindo to the Foreign Ministry.

Lewis Galindo was the Washington-based leader of the Civic Crusade, which provided cover for Bush's campaign against Panama, first by lobbying for a crippling embargo and economic sanctions, and then calling

for the invasion.

Having betrayed his country once, Lewis is now charged with getting Panama into the North American Free Trade Agreement. More importantly, he will be in a key position regarding the transfer of big chunks of valuable real estate from the former Canal Zone to Panama, a potential boondoggle worth several billion dollars. But, the key reason he got the job is to revise the 1977 Torrijos-Carter treaties (which he helped negotiate), for the United States to keep its military bases in Panama past the year 2000.

U.S. Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) said at a conference shortly before the elections that "the U.S. needs assurances that Panama can defend the canal." Panama cannot do so, since its army was destroyed by the invasion and Endara. Rangel said that the United States has substantial "military investments in Panama, and tens of thousands of people directly or indirectly depend on the U.S. military there, so we just can't pull out." The only reason the treaty hasn't been renegotiated yet, he said, is because Endara "is perceived as a puppet of the United States. But, we will deal with this right after Panama's election."

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, in Panama to monitor the elections, hailed Lewis Galindo as an excellent appointment. In fact, sources say, Lewis Galindo was appointed by Balladares at Carter's suggestion. Since Balladares campaigned by wrapping himself in the mantle of national hero Omar Torrijos, one wag commented: "That's the new meaning of Torrijos-Carter: use Torrijos to win the elections, and Carter appoints your cabinet!"

Indicating that Lewis Galindo is part of a package deal, Carter also announced the appointment of his longtime aide, Robert Pastor, as the new U.S. ambassador to Panama.