

August 1, 2003

## Former Dictator to Seek Guatemalan Presidency

By DAVID GONZALEZ

GUATEMALA CITY, July 31 — Efraín Ríos Montt, a former military dictator accused of presiding over atrocities during the harshest era of Guatemala's civil war, registered today as a presidential candidate.

His registration came less than 24 hours after the Constitutional Court, the country's highest court, ruled in his favor, ending a judicial crisis over legal challenges filed in a lower court by opposition parties. His registration also came less than a week after mobs apparently organized by his political party rampaged through upper-class neighborhoods in the capital demanding that he be allowed to run.

The Constitutional Court also reversed two of its rulings in 1990 and 1995 that had prohibited Mr. Ríos Montt from seeking the presidency.

Opposition leaders faulted the court's 4-to-3 decision, saying the judges should have recused themselves over conflicts of interest for having been friends of Mr. Ríos Montt or having served as ministers during the present government, which is dominated by his Guatemalan Republican Front party.

Mr. Ríos Montt, a 77-year-old evangelical Christian, is third in opinion polls, but the ranking may not accurately gauge his popularity in remote rural provinces where his party enjoys its greatest support.

It was in those rural provinces that Mr. Ríos Montt imposed his harshest rule, forcing indigenous men into patrols that joined troops in numerous massacres, according to a report published after the 36-year civil war ended with peace accords in 1996.

"Under Ríos Montt they no longer committed selective massacres of men," said Victoria Sanford, an anthropologist and the author of "Buried Secrets," a recently published book that looked at human rights in Guatemala and analyzed data on massacres. "Ríos Montt killed more people, he killed more women and children. It was a systematic practice."

Mr. Ríos Montt has immunity as president of the Congress.

"Morally, his candidacy is a tragedy," said Frank LaRue, director of the Human Rights Legal Action Center here, which has filed a complaint against him. "He does not have the moral qualities to be president. And we will follow the case whether he is president or not."

Mr. Ríos Montt has dismissed the criticism. He has not apologized for any crimes or excesses during his rule. He has presented himself as a champion of the poor who will impose order — promises that appeal to impoverished rural communities.

Copyright 2003 The New York Times Company