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LADB Staff

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Panamanian Presidential Candidates Differ

by LADB Staff

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As Panama looks toward presidential elections on May 2, a clear front-runner is emerging among four candidates whose platforms don't differ very much. All appear to have agreed that unemployment, health, education, infrastructure, corruption, and security are the major issues. Martin Torrijos (see NotiCen, 1998-11-05), son of General Omar Torrijos, will stand for the Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD) and the Partido Popular in a coalition called Patria Nueva; Ricardo Martinelli for Cambio Democrático (CD); Jose Miguel Aleman for the ruling Partido Arnulfista (PA); and ex-President Guillermo Endara (1989-1994) will run with a newly brought together political organization called Solidaridad, after suffering rejection at the hands of the Arnulfistas. From the menu of issues, all four have selected corruption as the favorite, following polls that indicate the public is tired of recurrent scandals.

Aleman, foreign minister for the first three years of President Mireya Moscoso's administration, has outlined a strategy that he claims will propel the economy to 6% annual growth during the 5-year term beginning in 2004. His plan centers on development of agro-export, tourism, transport, and small business, with the additional goal of creating 225,000 new jobs in five years to reduce unemployment to a slimmer 8% from its present 13% of the economically active population (EAP).

Torrijos' platform document targets creation of "a new political culture" and "sustainable human development." He is the early favorite with 46% of prospective voters. Endara has 36%, Aleman 10%, and Martinelli 5%. Martinelli promised to create 300,000 jobs using his business experience to do so. He owns a supermarket chain.

Endara has not presented a campaign document but has based his candidacy on his administration's record. He said his major accomplishments were fighting corruption and reactivating the economy after the military regime and the December 1989 US invasion. All four candidates have rejected privatizing social security and the state-owned water company. Both these ideas are anathema to the country's 2.1 million eligible voters.

Close together, but far apart

Though little divides the candidates by way of substance, there is a good deal of enmity among them. Aleman complained to the Tribunal Electoral (TE) that Endara was using PA party symbols in his campaign, including the image of its founder, Arnulfo Arias Madrid. When the TE ruled against Endara and against his use of the phrase, "President Endara, a real president," Endara called the TE a "lap dog" of President Moscoso. Moscoso had infuriated Endara by saying publicly that Aleman is the only PA candidate because "the other," as she called Endara, is a traitor and was expelled from the party.

Front-runner Torrijos seized the moment to enrage Moscoso by commenting that the Arnulfistas have three candidates Mireya Moscoso, Jose Miguel Aleman, and Guillermo Endara. A humorless Moscoso sputtered to the press, "Martin has not noticed that I am his president and not a candidate." Of all the mudslingers, Endara so far is the only one to have thought better of the practice. He apologized to the TE for his remarks, excusing himself as "an old political warrior" accustomed to fighting against powerful forces in ways that have fallen into disfavor. The old warrior might have been motivated to recant by polls showing his numbers dipping slightly, but so did those of Torrijos, and Endara is still solidly second.

Torrijos' coalition would also, according to recent polls, win the mayoralty of the capital. The present mayor, Juan Carlos Navarro, is running on the Patria Nueva ticket and would win 60.9% of the vote among respondents. The ruling party's entry, Marco Ameglio, would get only 8.5%, even after signing up boxing legend Roberto "Manos de Piedra" Duran as vice-mayoral candidate. As the days dwindle down to a precious few, Moscoso has decided to do what Endara would not. She will take the seat to which she is entitled, by virtue of having been president, on the Parlamento Centroamericano (Parlacen). This she did despite the popular disdain in which Parlacen is held in her country.

She defended the decision with a statement that suggested she had no choice. "It isn't a question of being interested in being a Parlacen deputy, but by law a seat in this organization belongs to all ex-presidents," she said. Endara had refused his seat because it conferred immunity from prosecution, and he said that he should be legally responsible for the honesty of his administration (see NotiCen, 2004-01-08).

CD candidate Martinelli made some political hay of the situation by calling upon Moscoso to forego the seat so that she too could avoid the embarrassment of immunity. "Who ought not, does not," he said, "and she should renounce that right, because Parlacen is nothing more than a cave of immunities and people who hang out instead of work." The lagging candidate has promised to withdraw Panama from Parlacen in the event of his election. With little of substance distinguishing the candidates, the polls have become an issue for the candidates and their supporters.

Moscoso, rankled by her man's low standing in the early going, charged, "The polls are fabricated, they are paid off, they are manipulated. In the street we have acceptance, and the people tell us that they are going to vote for Jose Miguel Aleman," she said unscientifically. Others in the ruling party were less disdainful.

Arnulfista Deputy Jose Blandon didn't doubt the numbers but pointed out that it is still early in the process. Still, he would not give the polls credit for objectivity, telling reporters, "Don't expect to see Jose Miguel Aleman leading the polls, but the vote, yes." Perhaps the most Pollyannaish take on the polls was Arnulfista mayoralty candidate Marco Ameglio, who didn't doubt the numbers but didn't discount silver linings either. "I'm aware of the current scenario, but that's the beauty of campaigning, because I have 90 days to recover," he said. From high atop his awesome lead, the incumbent Navarro said, "I always read and study the polls carefully because they are an indispensable tool for the modern politician." His overwhelming edge, he said, will spur him to "work twice as hard for the city."

Reaction among the presidential candidates tracked their relative positions. First-place Torrijos had no problem with the latest results but took care to remind the electorate, "I don't buy anybody, much less the pollsters." Martinelli, by contrast, said, "We aren't traditional politicians, we are administrators, and I appreciate however much or little they give me in this or that poll. The worried ones should be the traditional politicians who should be scoring higher."

A pugnacious Aleman challenged the pollsters to give it up, promising he'd soon give them "a preview of what they're going to get on election day." Public wants to know cabinet choices The most recent polls went further in their survey of Panamanian preferences. They also ascertained that that just about half of those who intend to vote want to know whom the candidates will name to their cabinets and said that this information would influence their vote "a lot," more than superficial advertising. This was according to the firm LatiNetwork Dichter & Neira, commissioned by Panamanian daily La Prensa. No candidate has fully taken this step.

Angelica Maytin Justiniana, director of the Panama office of Transparency International, said that the candidate who reveals who will be his ministers and collaborators would be making a commitment to transparency. "The risk," she told La Prensa, "is that we can vote for a good candidate who can commit the error of naming people who have no interest in practicing transparency or in combating corruption." She said that candidates justify withholding names to avoid jealousies among staffers during campaigns.

Leading candidate Torrijos, confronted with the poll results on this question, was unmoved. He said some of his competitors justify their incompetence by revealing the names of people they would appoint. He may have had Endara in mind. Endara announced that he would appoint assistant prosecutor Mercedes Arauz de Grimaldo as public minister, but almost 45% of survey respondents didn't like the choice. Torrijos said he would reveal "part of our cabinet," but "later." The polls also asked about prospective voters' perceptions of candidate's weaknesses.

They thought Endara expressed himself badly, Aleman was stubborn, Torrijos hurt his collaborators, and Martinelli was a despot. But if that's how Panamanians think, why do they keep voting for these people, La Prensa asked sociologist Raul Leis. Two reasons, he said, are that there is a culture of exploitation of what can be gotten from politicians even though they don't believe in them, and that people vote to punish those who govern, which explains why the past several governments have alternated parties.

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