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Ex-president Oscar Arias Headed For Another Term In Costa Rica

by Mike Leffert

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Costa Rica will elect a new president on Feb. 5, and indications are that former President Oscar Arias (1986-1990) of the Partido Liberacion Nacional (PLN) could win with a sufficient margin to end the contest in the first round. There is no great surprise here.

As early as Dec. 4, 2005, the largest national newspaper La Nacion polled the electorate with the firm Unimer, finding the former president out in front of his chief rival Otton Solis of the Partido Accion Ciudadana (PAC) 45% to 21%. In Costa Rica, a candidate needs only 40% to be declared president without resort to a runoff.

After a lull during the Christmas and New Year holidays, campaigning returned with a vengeance to Costa Rica's streets and public spaces, with the 1987 Nobel Peace Prize winner Arias holding strong, but with renewed doubt that he would capture the needed 40%. Both Solis and third-running Otto Guevara of the Movimiento Libertario (ML) were predicting they would beat Arias in a second round. But that was Jan. 2. By the tenth of the month a CID-Gallup poll showed Arias with a cushy 47% of the intended vote.

Meanwhile Borge y Asociados gave him just 37.4%. This poll also gave the PLN an assured 26-seat presence in the unicameral legislature, with two more in the maybe column, still short of a majority in the 57-member body. The PAC would be next with 12 or 13 seats. The ML would have somewhere between six and 11 seats, with the now ruling Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC) reduced to minor-party status with between six and ten seats.

Arias supremely confident

Arias appears to be going with the bigger CID-Gallup numbers. Soon after the release of these polls, he turned down a Solis call for a public debate and did so with the aplomb of a shoo-in. "It wouldn't interest me even if the Holy Father asked me himself," he said. So impressed with his lead was Arias, he even gave his adversary some strategy pointers. "If Don Otton thinks a debate can reduce a 25-point difference," he told the media, "he has been badly advised."

While Arias cuts himself an ever-bigger piece of the electoral pie, however, concerns grow that the pie itself is shrinking. Irma Sandoval of the Instituto de Estudios Sociales en Poblacion (IDESPO) said that the series of corruption scandals involving three former presidents has caused the electorate to turn away from politics. "People are disenchanted and the results reveal the lack of credibility the political parties have," Sandoval said. She was referring to polls showing the levels of abstention could reach a record 30%, despite the efforts of 54 parties and 15 presidential candidates. Those scandals have enhanced Arias' standing.

He is thought to be a relatively unsullied individual, never having been tainted by the lately uncovered evidence of corruption in high places. He has used those events to campaign advantage, saying that he decided to run to put the country back on course after the national disappointment that shook the widespread view that Costa Rica was somehow above the level of Central American politics. His own trajectory in public life has contributed to that view. His Nobel laurels came as the result of his peace plan to end civil wars elsewhere on the isthmus.

An Arias victory would offer the US momentary relief from the unbroken electoral trend of recent years in Latin America (see NotiSur, 2005-12-02 and 2006-01-06). Unlike these newer presidents, Arias is neither leftist nor necessarily against US policy. He has likened himself to former US President Bill Clinton, and he backs the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). Costa Rica is the only country that has not ratified the accord. Arias owes much of his support to his CAFTA stance.

His former presidency was good for his country's business sector. He brought order to the economy and was largely responsible for a boom in tourism that still sustains the country. Arias has said he believes that, with CAFTA, economic growth would rise from the current respectable 4% to 6% annually. And he wants to slash the bureaucracy. "We need a strong state, not a big state," he said. "We have a state that is too inefficient, sclerotic, chaotic." His good-guy image aside, Arias is a power player of the first rank.

He owes his candidacy to having seized control of the PLN last year, canceling its nominating convention and declaring himself the nominee. Former party member Guillermo Solis summed up that performance, "Arias is a political steamroller." At present, there is no serious disagreement about whether Arias would win in February, although the cited polls and others leave some room for doubt as to whether victory will come outright or in a second round.

There is even less disagreement about the fate of the ruling party, President Abel Pacheco's PUSC. The party is, in a word, doomed. Its candidate, ex-minister of the presidency Ricardo Toledo, is projected to garner 4% of the vote. He is riding the coattails of the most unpopular president since 1978. Pacheco's approval rating stands at 25.6%. Toledo is further disadvantaged by the lack of support from the party's traditional leader Rafael Angel Calderon.

Even if he had that support, a poison pill lies at its center. Calderon, like ex-President and PUSC-member Miguel Angel Rodriguez, was disgraced by scandal (see NotiCen, 2004-11-04). His support would further inflame the general electorate. One constituency likely to gain from these elections, regardless of the minutia, is women.

For the first time, more women are registered to vote than men. The 1,275,557 figure for women voters is exactly 501 more than men. This compares to the 2002 election, when men outnumbered women by 3,545, according to the electoral register. The parties and the candidates have taken note. Solis, for instance, needs all the undecided voters he can get to force a second round, and a December survey by the Universidad de Costa Rica's school of statistics has shown that the majority of the undecided are women. Solis has therefore taken every opportunity to showcase his female

running mate, popular Deputy Epsy Campbell. Arias, meanwhile, surrounds himself with large crowds of women on campaign appearances.

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