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LADB Staff

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Upstart Upsets Traditional Parties In Panama, But Ricardo Martinelli Is Not Much Of An Alternative

by LADB Staff

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With presidential elections four months away, dark-horse candidate Ricardo Martinelli of the Cambio Democratico (CD) party is extending an impressive lead over Balbina Herrera of the mainstream Partido Revolucionario Democratico (PRD). Were Martinelli to win, he would deliver a blow to the traditional parties, which have never lost, and to the power elites whose stranglehold on electoral law has kept the presidency within their comfort zone. But whether businessman Martinelli represents any real change beyond that is a question that those on the outside looking in have answered with a resounding "no!" He is not an outsider, having served in the administrations of former Presidents Ernesto Perez Balladares (1994-1999) and Mireya Moscoso (1999-2004). A real outsider would be Juan Jovane or someone like him. Jovane is a university professor, an economist, and an ardent opponent of neoliberal policy for his country and for the region. He took his political cues from Gandhi and served as economic advisor to President Martin Torrijos' father, Gen. Omar Torrijos (1968-1981). Jovane is trying to run, too, but having a harder time of it. Martinelli is a more conventional outsider. He is running against the entrenched ruling party, Martin Torrijos' huge and powerful PRD. His CD party is running on the theme of change and has captured the "third force" appellation behind the PRD and the second-most-powerful Partido Panamenista (PP). Party regulars pointed to the PRD's perceived loss of power under Torrijos as an indication that the CD's fortunes would continue to rise. And rise they did with the late-January announcement that PP candidate Juan Carlos Varela, running a distant third with 14.9% of the expected vote, had agreed to withdraw and join the CD behind Martinelli as a unity candidate. A Unimer poll had Martinelli in front with 49.2%, running away from Herrera's 25.4%. Other polls confirmed the numbers and the trend. The alliance was one of necessity rather than affinity, according to reports. The PP went with the CD only after an alliance of its own with another party had collapsed. That other party was the Movimiento Liberal Republicano Nacionalista (MOLIRENA); it broke with the PP to join Martinelli. A poll that tracked the split found an immediate four-point drop for Varela followed. Along the way, the snowballing CD ran over some other small parties, which have ceased to exist. Varela is on record as having called Martinelli "an amorphous storm that destroys everything in its path," and of playing nothing more than checkbook politics. At the time, Martinelli responded, "May God forgive him." It now appears that, God notwithstanding, Martinelli forgave him and rewarded Varela with the vice presidential spot on the ticket. To do that, he first had to jilt Leopoldo Benedetti of the Union Patriotico (UP), to whom he had already given the position. Varela's dowry was too big to turn down, however. In return for the vice presidency, his party failed, for the first time in its history, to field its own presidential candidate. The system is crashing With parties crashing and melding left and right, and Martinelli having little to offer in the way of an innovative approach to governance, there is some concern that Panama's political infrastructure is collapsing. Sociologist and leftist professor Olmedo Beluche of the Universidad de Panama took his concerns to the pages of the leading newspaper La Prensa. Under the title, The Death Throes of the Panamanian Political System, he warned that the system was taking on water and starting to sink. A legal scholar who has written extensively on the military regime and the US invasion that ended

it, Beluche noted that the electoral code was drafted under the military and amended after the invasion, "but its guiding principle has always been that the machinery of the state would remain in the hands of a small number of politicians and their two major parties." The cannibalization of the small parties in the rise of the CD is just the latest example of what has happened to a dozen or more such parties over the last 20 years. Beluche identified these as organizations formed by professional or middle-class groups, while "alternative parties promoted by a few multimillionaires were the only ones that found a place in the political arena, of course, playing the role of PRD and Panamenista Party hangers-on when the time came to divvy up the pie." Not only have those of the MOLIRENA stripe, which include Vanguardia Moral and the Partido Liberal (PL), gone under, but the law is designed so that new candidates cannot emerge from nonparty organizations to run for president, or even for deputy. These groups cannot compete in the marketplace of corruption wherein "buying signatures with money, in-kind payments, or public promises of government employment" are the means by which the majors, the PRD and Panamenistas, keep their numbers up so as not to be dissolved. The law demands that the viability of political parties depends on their maintaining 4% of the voters on their rolls, about 60,000 people. Beluche argued that it is popular reaction to this undemocratic state of affairs that would win Martinelli the election, "although in fact he does not represent any substantive change despite what his propaganda alleges." The little candidacy that couldn't This was not an exercise in abstract analysis on Beluche's part. One of the casualties of the conditions he describes is academic and political fellow traveler Juan Jovane. Jovane has been part of the evolving system since he was one of Gen. Omar Torrijos' economic advisors 30 years ago. Gen. Torrijos was never president; he led the country as Maximum Leader of the Panamanian Revolution, or Supreme Chief of Government, or any of a number of other descriptors designed to disguise the more mundane title, dictator, from 1968 to 1981. Most recently, Jovane served as Caja de Seguro Social (CSS) director in the Moscoso administration. In that role, he led a popular movement against her efforts to privatize social security, an effort credited with the downfall of her Panamenista party. In October 2008, he decided to run for president, in part to test the hypothesis that "the electoral law is designed to maintain the status quo and to block any different electoral alternative." He also wants to win, and bases his strategy on research that shows 20% of the population disaffected with the status quo. That 20% would yield the same number of voters as are now claimed by the PRD. Jovane is basing his candidacy on a platform constructed around price controls and freezes for the basic market basket, salary hikes for the working poor, nationalization of electricity and telecommunications, higher pension payments, environmental programs that would include restrictions of mining and dams. It is an unlikely platform for Panama, but recent history elsewhere in Latin America has shown it to be well within the realm of possibility. Fragile as such a platform is, most observers see Jovane's candidacy mainly as a challenge to the electoral status quo. In December, the Tribunal Electoral de Panama (TEP) did as expected and ruled his effort at an independent run, "inappropriate and inadmissible." They based their decision on Article 233 of the electoral code, which restricts the postulation of presidential and vice presidential contenders to legally constituted parties and obliges those parties to maintain the legal minimum number of members. Jovane's Partido Alternativa Popular, founded by Olmedo Beluche, did not have the requisite 60,000 adherents among the union members, social movement activists, and leftists who made up the alliance that supported it. Jovane has taken the decision to the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ). The court has previously ruled against the constitutionality of articles of the electoral law. He told the media, "There is a basic human right to elect and to be elected. We expected this kind of [TEP] decision because the electoral tribunal maintains the idea that the political parties are the only ones to be represented in elections." The CSJ is not the only destination

on his itinerary. Jovane and company also plan to take the issue to the Inter-American Court on Human Rights (IACHR) if the CSJ rules against him. He said that even the TEP decision was not unanimous and that magistrate Gerardo Solis recognized that "the right to exercise a free candidacy for president should prevail, beyond restrictive limitations." Magistrate Solis' view derives from the Constitution, which only requires that a candidate be Panamanian by birth, be over 35 years old, and not have been convicted of a crime with a penalty of more than five years. The premise is that the electoral law cannot be more restrictive than the Constitution. As the Jovane forces count up the forces looming against them, one high on the list is the US. But there is also an asterisk next to that item because of the profound difference between the old administration of former President George W. Bush and the new administration of President Barack Obama. The Panamanian left does not know what to expect from the transition but for the moment must still figure with a US Embassy headed by Bush-appointee Ambassador Barbara Stephenson. They have taken notice that both the insurgency headed by Martinelli and the traditional national parties have unfettered access to the Embassy, while they are shut out. Both Martinelli and Varela were seen to visit the Embassy during ceremonies marking the Obama inauguration on Jan. 20. Commented Saul Mendez, spokesman for the Frente Nacional por la Defensa de los Derechos Economicos y Sociales (Frenadeso), "The most repugnant thing is to see how in this electoral circus the clowns are on their knees before the empire." Regardless of party differences, explained Mendez, Martinelli and Varela are two peas in a historical pod. They are both, he said, "heirs to the old oligarchy that sold this country in 1903" to the US for the building of the Panama Canal. As such they are still "servile to North American interests, and shamelessly cook up their alliances in the gringa embassy." These traditional relationships put Jovane at a severe disadvantage. "In the diplomatic world it is not possible for me to show up at the house of an ambassador and sit down to talk policy with other people in a room if I don't have the endorsement of the ambassador," he said. Jovane charged that talking about internal policy in a foreign embassy is "anti-national," and there seems to be some substance to the charge. La Prensa reported that the meeting with Stephenson, Martinelli, and Varela was where the plan to unite them on the CD ticket was hatched. The paper also said the two met the next day to close the deal and to divvy up the mayoralties of Panama City, La Chorrera, and San Miguelito between their parties.

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