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LADB Staff

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Ricardo Martinelli Sworn In As New President Of Panama; A Businessman Comes To Power

by LADB Staff

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Businessman Ricardo Martinelli became President Martinelli July 1, as he received the mantle from now ex-President Martin Torrijos. The new president promised a businesslike approach to government, with no time to waste in getting things moving crisply and efficiently along. His campaign also contained promises to move things noncorruptly and transparently along, seeing to it that individuals do not enter government broke and leave as millionaires. That seemed to be what most voters wanted as they elected for the first time a man without a party, one who came from outside the tight political traditions that have determined past presidencies. Martinelli presented himself to the people as all business. "In these five years, we take it upon ourselves to demonstrate how our economic model can help the country," he said. "We are going to take our experiences in the private sector and put them to work in the government." He will be taking more than his experiences. Some of his key employees from Super 99, his chain of supermarkets, and Importadora Ricamar, his trading company, are coming along to run the new government. This has brought Martinelli criticisms because his appointees are business insiders and cronies and strangers to the public at large. It has been reported these people will be working in the Consejo Nacional de Seguridad (CNS), the Ministerio de Trabajo, the state radio and television system, the Instituto de Investigacion Agropecuaria de Panama (IDIAP), and in human-resources positions. The appointees are unknown to the public, but, to Martinelli, they are the people he trusts. He has said that he can count on their support and that they have the skills to do the work he wants done. The new CNS chief, for instance, will be former military officer Jaime Trujillo, who has proved his worth over the years as head of security at the supermarkets. Security at the markets may be better than in Panama in general, but the concern leveled by critics is that, with the appointment of Gustavo Perez as chief of the Policia Nacional (PN), the whole security apparatus is in the hands of military people. Angelica Maytin of Transparency International (TI) points out that, since the 1990s, it has been the custom to put a civilian in charge of the police. She said crime fighting is best done by good police, not "recycled soldiers." Another appointment stirring criticism in some quarters is that of Alma Cortes as Labor Minister. She is remembered in unions as Martinelli's tough lawyer who defended him against employee lawsuits. Regardless of global conditions, the new president is out to improve Panama's economy, and he is going to do that using new trade agreements. An FTA with the US was completed two years ago but still awaits ratification in the US Congress. The sticking point is that Democrats want to see labor reform, and many want to see changes in the law that make Panama a tax haven. The labor reforms sought could include the right for canal workers to strike. That would make union organizing more appealing to workers and is also something US President Obama has spoken favorably about, but conservative Panamanians see hypocrisy in that because from 1904 to 1999, when the US ran the canal, strikes were prohibited. The country is now in the hands of efficient businesspeople, the incoming president implied in his inaugural speech, and "Vice President [Jose Luis] Varela and I are two businessmen who have broken into politics to change the way of doing things." He promised to "debureaucratize the state." He admitted he had made up the word, and it was difficult to pronounce, but it would behoove those who could not say it to learn

quickly. Martinelli is the kind of fellow businesspeople like to see in these times, when economies are going south and governments are going left. "I'm very positive on Martinelli. He's extremely market-friendly and will continue the positive trend of the economy," said Kathryn Rooney of Bulltick Capital Markets. Representatives of the private sector were also pleased that Martinelli had been chair of the Autoridad del Canal de Panama (ACP) and that he had been canal affairs minister from 1999 to 2003. That experience will come in handy, they say, during the canal expansion, the US \$5.2 billion project scheduled for completion in 2014, still within Martinelli's term. Even for a new broom from outside the system, some things do not change for Latin American presidents. As one of his first official acts, Martinelli joined Presidents Felipe Calderon of Mexico and Alvaro Uribe of Colombia to announce a new anti-crime and drug alliance. Calderon took the occasion to invite Martinelli and Uribe to the next Cumbre Regional Sobre el Problema de las Drogas, Seguridad y Cooperacion, to be held in Mexico later this year.

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