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## **Panama's Conservative New President Emerging As A Very Popular Populist**

*by LADB Staff*

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Panama's President Ricardo Martinelli is turning out to be a bit less a right-winger than he promised to be and, perhaps related to that, has an approval rating that tops 80%. The former businessman, owner of his nation's largest supermarket chain, said during the campaign he would take the country rightward, but since assuming office he has taken some initiatives that, if not leftist, are at the least populist in their slant (see NotiCen, 2009-07-02). This president is rich enough to be flying to address the UN General Assembly in his own private jet. So is his Economy and Finance Minister Alberto Vallarino, whose jet plane will also be going to New York. The planes will ferry the presidential party. But Martinelli still campaigned on a promise of aid to low-income old people and in mid-September announced a monthly stipend of US\$100 to people over 70 who get no social security. He made the payments retroactive to July 1, when he took office, so the first recipients, 20,000 of them, will get US\$300 as a first payment. A second group will not receive their money until November, so their first payment will be US\$500. At the UN, Martinelli will address the plenum on climate change and its effects in Panama. He is also to speak on the Middle East conflict. True to his conservative bent, he will spend some time talking about the trade agreement Panama has with the US. He is expected to levy some heavy criticism against Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, blaming him for ratcheting up an arms race in Latin America. In particular, he will take the side of Colombia, which has recently allowed the US to use military bases on its territory (see NotiSur, 2009-07-31). Chavez has taken that as a threat. Another popularity booster for Martinelli is the way his Ministerio de Salud is handling the H1N1 flu that has killed 10 and infected 712 people countrywide. He has ordered a 100-person medical force to back up medical teams already working in vulnerable zones including far-flung indigenous areas. "At this moment, we have 26 itinerant groups made up of doctors, nurses, and technicians to check people," said Health Minister Franklin Vergara. On the environmental front, Martinelli is promoting a mining-law-reform bill which, even though the industry appears to support it, specifically outlaws mining in the Coiba National Park. On the whole, these initiatives and actions have earned the new president a second look among more progressive sectors but not from the opposition and not from Balbina Herrera, who stood against him in the election as candidate of the then ruling Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD). Herrera says that Martinelli's use of social themes and frequent mention of social justice in his discourse are empty rhetoric and that "the populist discourse is nothing more than a façade behind which is his real intention to gain access to state contracts." She said that. In addition to his supermarkets, Martinelli is also in the construction, electricity, and bingo businesses. It is true that Martinelli is in favor of building a subway system for Panama City with financing from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the Corporación Andina de Fomento (CAF). But it is also true that a key part of his discourse centers on graft, and he has accused the PRD of being a "mechanism to commit graft." He has said the country operates under a "savage form of capitalism" that has created any number of fortunes through illicit or rigged contracting with the state.

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