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Panama: Is President Ricardo Martinelli A Populist?

by LADB Staff

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"We promise to raise the salary for civil servants because they're very badly paid. We will give 100 balboas [US\$100] a month to senior citizens who do not have a pension. And the youngsters who are watching us on TV or listening to the radio today can count on free scholarships and schoolbooks. That's what we're going to offer Panama's poorest families", said President Ricardo Martinelli during his inauguration ceremony on July 1, in a speech delivered to a packed audience that included many of the region's leaders as well as Prince Felipe of Spain (see NotiCen, 2009-07-02). "We will begin the greatest employment program in Panamanian history since the Canal was built. We will also put the construction of the Panama City subway up for bid to give the Panamanian people a better quality of life," continued the 57-year-old supermarket-tycoon-turned-politician. And the promises kept coming. "We have many tasks ahead and at the top of our list is lowering the cost of food....We'll boost national production and help our campesinos increase their production and lower prices," said the new president. During the election campaign, Martinelli had traveled across the country in the ubiquitous Central American chicken bus decrying "savage capitalism," rhetoric not usually associated with a businessman. A few days after being sworn in, Martinelli announced that his US\$5,421 a month salary would be donated to 13 charities, including Fundacion Super 99 and Fundacion Ricardo Martinelli, run by the supermarket chain Super 99 that he owns. Martinelli's vast business empire also includes food-import company Importadora Ricamar S.A., sugar producer Azucarera La Victoria, and the Plastigol plastic factory. He is also CEO of Gold Mills de Panama and Global Bank, among other corporations. In October, Martinelli completed 100 days in office, with strong popularity ratings according to a poll by Consultora Mitofsky, published last month, 77% of Panamanians approve of the Martinelli administration but under fire from the opposition, which accuses him of failing to meet key campaign promises. To this he replies that in 100 days "you can't make magic," but he is confident that the reforms "are on the right track." A pay rise for police officers and the 100 balboa monthly bonus for Panamanians over 70 years of age who do not have a pension won him sympathies and have done much to boost his popularity, given that around 40% of Panamanians live in poverty and almost 6% are unemployed, according to the latest UN Development Programme (UNDP) statistics. However, opposition parties such as the leftist Partido Alternativa Popular (PAP) have argued that 100 balboas are insufficient since the canasta alimenticia the amount of money needed to feed an average-sized family has reached 300 balboas (US\$300) a month, and they have questioned why only those over 70 years of age can apply when the retirement age is 62 for men and 60 for women. Moves to pull Panama out of the Parlamento Centroamericano (PARLACEN), a regional lawmaking body, also explain his soaring popularity. During a recent trip to Costa Rica in May, he said that the European Union (EU)-Central America Association Agreement should be signed as soon as possible and was applauded back home for saying that Panama should forfeit its PARLACEN membership as this regional body "has failed to pass any laws or regulations of any significance for our country." Martinelli said that PARLACEN has become "a safe haven that grants immunity" to a number of controversial and discredited politicians. "I'm going to propose pulling out. PARLACEN needs an overhaul," he said, adding that he would consult Congress on the issue. PARLACEN was created in 1991 to promote regional integration and prevent future conflicts after the bloody civil wars that tore Central America

asunder during the 1980s. But, despite these good intentions, PARLACEN was born with a fatal flaw: its rulings are nonbinding, which means that it has become little more than a talking shop. But what has attracted most criticism through the years and made PARLACEN largely unpopular is that presidents and vice presidents from member countries are automatically given a seat once they end their term in office. This automatic membership has been used by many former leaders such as Nicaraguan ex-President Arnaldo Aleman (1997-2002), sentenced to house arrest for 20 years on corruption charges to escape trial by prolonging their presidential immunity. Martinelli's trips abroad also include Italy, where he described Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi as "the best president that Italy has had," in an interview with *El Giornale*. Can a businessman be a populist? By the time Martinelli completed his first 100 days in office, Panamanians had seen him on TV taking part in a police raid on a brothel and playing baseball in New York's Yankee Stadium. "Martinelli comes across as a dynamic leader" who seeks to put forward the interests of the majority by using a rhetoric that "focuses on social justice and the need to improve the living standards of the majority," says political analyst Carlos Guevara Mann. His tirades against "savage capitalism" and speeches more fitting for the leader of a labor union have led the opposition to label him "a populist." But the fact that he is proudly anti-Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and, unlike most other leaders in the region, has backed Roberto Micheletti's de facto regime in Honduras, saying that he will support and respect the outcome of the Nov. 29 elections, "provided they are transparent," dispels any possible doubts about where his loyalties lie (see *NotiCen*, 2009-09-24).

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