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## Costa Rica: Woman's Bid For Presidency Appears Bound For Success

by LADB Staff

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By George Rodriguez She is not the first Costa Rican woman to seek her country's presidential chair, but she is the first woman in this Central American nation whose chances of succeeding are considerable. Laura Chinchilla, a political scientist graduated from the state Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR) and who in the current administration was simultaneously the country's vice president and minister of justice, is running as the ruling social democratic Partido Liberacion Nacional (PLN) presidential candidate for next year's elections. Chinchilla won her party's primary election with 55.51% of the vote cast on June 7, defeating her two rivals Johnny Araya, mayor of San Jose, the Costa Rican capital, and Fernando Berrocal, a former minister of security. Eleven days later, when the PLN primary results were announced, Laura, as Costa Ricans usually refer to her, said during a press conference at party headquarters that "finally, this house has a woman." Her first predecessor was Norma Vargas, unanimously chosen in 1994 by members of the Partido Union Generalena (PUGEN), a small political party that took its name from San Isidro de El General, the town some 130 km southeast of San Jose where it was founded. In her unprecedented bid for office, Vargas rounded up 2,150 votes. Four years later, Vargas left PUGEN and joined Pueblo Unido a coalition of leftist political parties for which she again ran as a presidential candidate, and this time her rivals included two women Yolanda Gutierrez of the Partido Independiente and Marina Volio of Rescate Nacional. The second time around, Vargas' vote count rose to 3,075. Since Chinchilla won the PLN nomination, opinion polls have placed her with a comfortable lead at the top of the nine presidential contenders, which include another woman Mayra Gonzalez, running for the Christian Partido Renovacion Costarricense (PRC), but who has little backing. Different poll results showed support for Chinchilla soaring from some 46% in July to as high as 63% in September, with her closest rivals Otton Solis of the center-left Partido Accion Ciudadana (PAC) and Otto Guevara of the right-wing Movimiento Libertario (ML), taking turns in the second and third positions. However, one of the latest surveys showed her lead taking a nosedive to the 40% range, although still at the top, and the gap between Chinchilla and Guevara dramatically narrowing. In this poll, whose results were published by the Costa Rican conservative daily La Nacion, from September to November the former vice president's comfortable 63% dropped to 43%, while Guevara's second place skyrocketed from 13% to 30%. Opponent wages fierce personal campaign against Chinchilla Political analysts say this is partly because of the strong personal campaign Guevara has launched against Chinchilla hinging on allegations that she depends politically on President Oscar Arias and was his choice as candidate. In television campaign advertisements, Guevara is shown blaming on both "don Oscar" and first lady "dona Laura" the county's citizen-safety crisis, which includes a surge in drug trafficking and other organized-crime activity, and he goes on to ask, "And they want four more years of the same?" Another of the ML's television ads asks viewers, "Did you know that Laura Chinchilla decreed Law 7786, which established that drug consumption in Costa Rica is not a crime?" All of the party's campaign advertisements close with the slogan "Hagamos el cambio ya!" (Let's make the change now!). "Negative campaign advertising is nothing new to Costa Rica," media expert Francisco Correa, who heads the communications firm Media Guru, was quoted by

the Costa Rican English-language weekly *The Tico Times*. "Its effect is determined by how the candidates respond to the threats. But, yes, negative advertising is used." The negative campaign happens regardless of the fact that on Oct. 7, when he officially launched the present election process, Luis Antonio Sobrado, president of the Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones (TSE), called for a high-quality campaign. Each citizen responsible for ethical campaign. "Each one of us Costa Ricans shall be the makers of a common destiny marked by the results of the next elections," warned Sobrado. "We shall be responsible for the quality of this election process." It is necessary to promote "a campaign ruled by the discussion of ideas and respect among contenders," Sobrado added as an example. Regarding citizen safety, Chinchilla stated in an article published by *La Nacion* that her proposal on this issue includes the wide-ranging, long-term security policy Costa Rica needs to combat and prevent organized crime, including drug trafficking, among other key points. Although she was security minister from 1994 to 1998 and on an interim basis for two weeks in 2006, Chinchilla has not based her campaign on the citizen-safety issue as much as Guevara has. In one of her messages, this former PLN congresswoman (2002-2006) tells Costa Ricans that she listens to their needs and hopes; in another she assures people that "our proposal is Costa Rican," respectful of "the way we are"; and her campaign ads all close with a concise description of the candidate "Laura, firme y honesta" (Laura, firm and honest). Quoted on her Web site, Chinchilla, whose campaign signs include a symbol similar to a "forward" button above the word *adelante* (forward), says, "Our country cannot stop. We must keep moving forward." "That is why my proposal is to continue building a Costa Rica with security and prosperity," adds the presidential nominee. "Costa Rica has the elements needed to reach higher levels of development and well-being-

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