President Laura Chinchilla Begins Term With Commitment To Safer, Greener, More Prosperous Costa Rica

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President Laura Chinchilla Begins Term With Commitment To Safer, Greener, More Prosperous Costa Rica

by George Rodriguez
Category/Department: Costa Rica
Published: 2010-05-13

"Sí, juro" (Yes, I swear). With those words Laura Chinchilla became the first woman to be sworn into office as president of Costa Rica (NotiCen, February 11, 2010).

Minutes later, as this Central American nation's head of state, Chinchilla addressed her fellow Costa Ricans, committing herself to work, among other major goals, for what she successively described as a safer, greener, more prosperous country, one where fruitful, honest dialogue is the name of the game and where no one is entitled to believe they monopolize the truth.

Parque Metropolitano La Sabana, on the capital city's west end and one of the town's two major parks, was the site chosen for the event to allow as many people as possible to attend, along with the nine presidents and delegations sent by some 30 governments.

Immediately after the ceremony, Doña Laura – or just Laura – as she is popularly referred to, walked over to a white canopy set up behind the platform where she was sworn in, and there she presided over her first Cabinet meeting, during which she signed four key decrees fulfilling campaign and post-election promises and commitments.

Inaugural address enumerates commitments
In her 20-minute inauguration speech, the new president outlined her administration's guidelines and repeatedly used the word "work."

"We shall work as a team toward a safer and more tranquil Costa Rica," she said. "Through effective, orderly, and duly coordinated action we shall work for a more educated and prepared Costa Rica, healthier and with better housing, with care options for its boys, girls, and elderly," a country "that makes the struggle against poverty its major commitment."

"We shall work for a greener and cleaner Costa Rica, for a vigorous economy respectful of its natural resources and able to produce from those resources 100% renewable energy that it uses," added the president. "A prosperous and green Costa Rica, prosperity shared by all, greenness protected by all."

"I shall work for a Costa Rica capable of maintaining its moral leadership in the world...projecting more strongly its firm determination to fight for our planet's sustainability, sharing without prejudice or vanity the common struggles we will have to wage hand in hand with our sister Central American republics," added Doña Laura.

"We shall work for a Costa Rica nurtured by the fundamental values of solidarity, responsibility, adherence to truth, to transparency and to civic virtue, able to firmly reject the false promises of selfishness, arrogance, and indifference," underlined Chinchilla, often interrupted by applause and cheering.
She assured her fellow citizens that she came before them "convinced of my intentions, ideals, and personal limitations, but sure of the quality of my team and of the support from the people of Costa Rica, who deserve the best from us."

The president also pointed out that, with the Feb. 7 elections over, "spaces have been created and opened for talks and for reaching concrete agreements for the common good." She added, "This is the moment to build politics in which leadership does not consist of lecturing or haranguing but of sharing coincidences and articulating agreements."

"Costa Rica is the homeland we share and our common home. In this house that shelters us, no one should seek the monopoly of truth. It is rather an ethical imperative to listen, to lend an attentive ear, and to debate," said the president, and she committed her government "to make an effort to be for all, always in search of the common good, with respect and an open mind."

**Chinchilla not a continuation of Arias**

Such concepts were seen by some observers as a message of detachment from former Costa Rican President Óscar Arias, whom she succeeded the morning of May 8.

In the weeks before Chinchilla took office – including at the gala dinner the former president offered heads of state and governments invited to the swearing-in ceremony – Arias repeatedly said that his administration took the difficult steps to, as he put it, set Costa Rica's course, which Chinchilla's government was sure to follow, thus "setting the table" for his successor.

When Chinchilla began selecting candidates for her Cabinet, Arias told local reporters three days after her victory that he would suggest to Laura, as he always calls her, that she keep some of his administration's ministers. "That's a decision Laura has to make, but on this issue we're possibly going to talk at some point," he said, adding, "I certainly think there are people who have distinguished themselves and I think the president-elect should consider them."

Chinchilla eventually kept some Arias-administration Cabinet members, either in the same positions or in other posts.

In an interview with the weekly Costa Rica newspaper El Financiero, five days before handing the presidential sash to his successor, Arias said, "I leave her the table set...We made the major difficult changes. All she has to do is to continue what we've done, and manage."

On May 5, before his administration's last weekly press conference, Arias said, "I'm going to hand command over, very happy," and he underlined that "in this second term, we put Costa Rica walking again," stressing that "today, no doubt, Costa Rica has a course, has a North, we opened a path, not a destiny, a path, a path the next government is sure to follow."

**Arias’ assessment seen as self-serving**

The former president first held the post in 1986-1990, the term during which he was awarded, in 1987, the Nobel Peace Prize.

Arias' repeated self-evaluation and his concepts regarding Chinchilla's job sparked criticism, such as that of former deputy Elizabeth Fonseca, who considered his point of view "conceited and smug" and said "it devalues the tasks the new government must face."
"Besides, it avoids the major problems he leaves for the next administration the considerable rise in public spending, lack of (citizen) safety, poverty, inequality, environmental devastation..., etc," added the former center-left Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC) representative.

An exponent of this line of reasoning, Costa Rican political analyst Constantino Urcuyo told NotiCen that Chinchilla's swearing-in ceremony and inaugural speech marked a split from Arias' line.

Urcuyo gave the example that Chinchilla, unlike Arias four years earlier, had invited to her inaugural San José Archbishop Hugo Barrantes, also head of the Conferencia Episcopal de Costa Rica CECR), who said a prayer asking God to accompany the members of the new government, "thus making them true promoters of dialogue and builders of a united homeland."

The political scientist said that Chinchilla's speech proved that "she wants to set a new style that is not only formal but is a new means to facing up to the political needs in this country, which date back to the election campaign."

In Urcuyo's view, "Óscar Arias is the typical 70-year-old patriarch who was angry because people wouldn't do as he said," while his successor, the former vice president and minister of justice in the past administration, not only is "a generation younger" but "knows it's not about people doing what she says," and she "realizes this is a country where the vertical structure of politics doesn't work."

"And she wants to start a phase of horizontality," the success of which depends on factors such as whom she starts dialogue with first, how she constructs a political-social coalition," added Urcuyo.

As she has pointed out, Chinchilla is set on working as a president, not as a manager. "Although it's true that Don Óscar leaves a major legacy, and the balance of his administration is very positive...whoever followed could not feel satisfied by managing," she said the week before taking office. "Bureaucracy is there for managing. Governing is setting aims, (and) defining strategies in order to reach them, and, above all, defining goals not only in view of present generations but of future ones."

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