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Costa Rica Congressional Opposition Alliance Aims to Take Hold of Leadership and Draw up National Problem-solving Agenda

by George Rodriguez
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After weeks of negotiating, the five opposition blocs in Costa Rica’s unicameral Asamblea Legislativa (AL) came through with an unprecedented alliance. For the first time ever, the opposition is gearing up to take over the Directorio de la Asamblea Legislativa.

The parliamentary coalition aims at removing the ruling social democrat Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN) from the presidency of the AL directorate. It also seeks to displace the PLN and its two evangelic allies—Renovación Costarricense (RC) and Restauración Nacional (RN)—from the other congressional leadership positions.

The agreement (Acuerdo por Costa Rica), bringing together diverse ideologies ranging from right to left and uniting 31 of the nation’s 57 deputies, is set to last for the remaining three years of the present legislature (2010-2014).

The alliance involves the rightist Movimiento Libertario (ML), the former ruling Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC), the centrist Partido Accesibilidad sin Exclusión (PASE)—advocating for rights of the handicapped, the center-left Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC), and the leftist Frente Amplio (FA), named after the ruling coalition in Uruguay.

Split between Arias brothers and president

This move is seen as a consequence of the recent almost 50-50 split in the 24-strong PLN bloc, with 13 liberacionistas voicing support for Costa Rican President Laura Chinchilla and 11 siding with PLN presidential hopeful and former minister of the presidency Rodrigo Arias.

Rodrigo Arias and his brother, former President Óscar Arias (1986-1990, 2006-2010), in both of whose administrations Rodrigo served, are influential leaders within the PLN and in Costa Rica and are not supportive of Chinchilla, the first Costa Rican woman head of state, whose 2010-2014 four-year term succeeds the second Arias administration, in which she served as vice president.

Juan Carlos Mendoza, head of the PAC parliamentary bloc and the opposition’s choice to head the AL in 2011-2012, said, "The decision that is being made is not that of individuals, it is a decision by political parties."

"Besides, we are convinced that we are here for Costa Rica, we are for drawing up a national agenda, and that is this group’s...number-one priority," Mendoza added, during a press conference on April 18 by heads of the five congressional blocs. All this, "for the good of Costa Rica, which is what unites us today."

"To doña Laura Chinchilla we can say that, definitely, in this opposition bloc there is the will to move Costa Rica forward, to develop Costa Rica, and that we are absolutely committed to following
"This path," the congressman said. "This will imply, for her, evident possibilities to work [with the AL] from her administration, which, up to now, she has not done because the ruling party’s bloc is completely fractured and not as supportive as it should be."

"This government—and the ruling party’s bloc—has not been capable of building the dialogue processes needed to make the parliament function, and...we have to take on a historic responsibility," Mendoza said. "We are convinced...the country needs an opposition that we are sure will be much better at relating to the executive than a ruling party’s fractured bloc, which is the major opposition to the government."

Following a similar line of reasoning, Víctor Granados, head of PASE, said, during the press conference, that "regardless of voices claiming otherwise, this is the best that could happen to doña Laura Chinchilla’s government."

"The opposition represented here is a constructive opposition, a dynamic opposition, an opposition that has contributed to this government," Granados said. "And it has done more for the issues that are vital to this country that the ruling Partido Liberación Nacional’s own bloc, which is now split."

**Chinchilla administration wary of opposition move**

Nevertheless, Minister of the Presidency Carlos Ricardo Benavides is skeptical, at best, of the alliance’s intentions. "We view this with concern," he told local media last week, adding that, "of course, we respect the ideas opposition groups may have, but we believe this is not the most convenient path for the country to follow."

And the influential and conservative local morning daily described in its April 19 editorial the creation of the opposition alliance as a "political rehearsal."

Also skeptical of the first-ever congressional opposition coalition assembled to take control of this country’s parliament, Costa Rican civil-society leader Jorge Coronado believes the variety of ideologies makes the alliance a fragile one, and he is sure that the critical split in the PLN bloc made the pact possible.

"The ruling party is right when it speaks of the lack of seriousness of an agreement among such an ideologically diverse opposition that has reached an agreement merely—it seems to me—to fill positions in the Asamblea Legislativa directorate," he told NotiCen. "But this does reflect a crisis within the ruling party. It seems to me that bringing together the opposition has happened as an expression of the crisis within the Liberación Nacional, of the tug of war between the Arias [brothers] and the Laura Chinchilla administration, which is so weak that it even caused the split in the Partido Liberación Nacional bloc itself," added Coronado.

If the opposition parties succeed, they are going to "burden themselves with being responsible for any congressional malfunction, and it’s going to be very easy for the government to blame the opposition for bills that get bogged down," Coronado warned.

So, for the coalition it is "a risky step in that keeping control of the directorate is almost, almost to co-govern, and to co-govern with a government that shows such serious weaknesses, that shows it has no clear horizon or a precise, clear government agenda could mean [for the opposition] a political and election cost," added the civil-society leader. "The other thing is that ideological discrepancies could cause [the coalition] to break down over any issue."
As tradition dictates, the election of legislative directorate members for 2011-2012 is set for May 1, to be followed a few hours later by the yearly presidential report to the Asamblea Legislativa.

The five-party coalition is confident it will succeed in gaining control, since the group has 31 deputies, two votes more than the number required, while the PLN and its two allies round up 26 votes, three short of the minimum they need to stay at the head of the AL.

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