Table Set With Problems Has Become Nightmare of Crises Undermining the First Costa Rican Government Headed by a Woman

George Rodriguez
Table Set With Problems Has Become Nightmare of Crises Undermining the First Costa Rican Government Headed by a Woman

by George Rodriguez

Category/Department: Costa Rica

Published: Thursday, August 4, 2011

Last year, a few days before handing over the presidency to Laura Chinchilla, the first woman to head a government in Costa Rica, outgoing President Óscar Arias said he was leaving the table set for his successor to just continue what he had begun. Arias also said that, in the second of his two administrations (1986-1990, 2006-2010), Costa Rica's path had been set, and the incoming government would have to follow it.

"I leave her the table all set," Arias told the specialized Costa Rican weekly in an interview published Feb. 2.

This was just six days before handing the presidential sash to his successor and former vice president in his second term (NotiCen, May 13, 2010). "We've made the major, difficult changes. All she has to do is to continue what we've done, and manage."

Three days later—and only two days before stepping down—Arias said, at the start of his last presidential press conference, that "in this second administration, we put Costa Rica upright again. Today, undoubtedly, Costa Rica has a course, an objective. We've set a path—not a destiny, a path—a path the next government is to follow."

Chinchilla reacted by saying that "although it's true Don Óscar leaves a major legacy and the final outcome of his administration is very positive...upon receiving that good legacy and that of many other generations, whoever comes could not be satisfied by just managing. It must be someone willing to govern."

"In interviews, one probably isn't as explicit as one would want to be. I don't take it wrong, but precision must be made," said Chinchilla, adding that "bureaucracy is for managing. Governing is about setting goals, defining strategies to reach them, and, above all, defining goals thinking not only of present generations but of future ones. My only aspiration is to head the best government possible."

Winner of the February 2010 election with almost 47% of the vote and an almost 22-point advantage over her closest rival, center-left candidate Ottón Solís—compared with Arias’ 1.1% margin over Solís four years earlier—Chinchilla became, on May 8, the first woman to be sworn in as president of this Central American nation (NotiCen, Feb. 11, 2010).

Almost from day one, her administration has been plagued by problems, the majority already there, like the tension in her relations with Arias and his brother Rodrigo, the minister of the presidency in both the former president’s administrations.

Only 43 hours after a meeting with Chinchilla at the Arias residence in late June, the former president told a local entrepreneurial forum, regarding the government’s work so far, that "it seems
to me that there’s been a lack of mental clarity, intellectual clarity. One can’t bring ideas to reality if the latter are too confusing, too dark."

Troubles begin on first day
Chinchilla’s first day on the job was marked by the attempt, abandoned several weeks later, by a majority of the unicameral Asamblea Legislativa (AL), including most legislators of the ruling social-democratic Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN), to seek a more than 60% salary raise. The 57 members of the Asamblea had begun their four-year term on May 1.

Around the same time, Rodrigo Arias publicly announced his decision to seek the PLN presidential nomination for 2014, a move criticized by opposition leaders and local analysts as creating political tension far in advance of the elections.

The 24-member PLN bloc was also divided, with 11 backing Arias and 13 voicing support for Chinchilla, a split which, added to other political elements, enabled the five opposition blocs to win control of the AL on May 2, when new members of the AL’s directorate were elected, displacing the PLN and its allies—two single-delegate Christian parties—from power.

The salary dispute in Congress was solved once the proposal was shelved some weeks later, but Chinchilla’s presidential problems were far from over—as it has turned out, they were about to begin piling up and the table supposedly set with good plates was about to become the president’s political nightmare.

With the rainy season—winter, one of Central America’s two seasons, usually stretching from May through November, while summer, the dry season, covers from December through April—came the highway crisis. The highway connecting San José, the capital, with Caldera is probably one of the icons among the problems surrounding the Chinchilla administration.

Constructed during the Arias administration, some 30 years after it was originally planned, the highway was opened by Arias a few weeks before stepping down. But the road had not yet been finished.

Winter came and bared the many flaws of the structure, built on a concession basis by the Spanish company Autopistas del Sol. Mud and rocks began sliding from the side of the road—at one point claiming the life of a driver—a section of the pavement caved in, pedestrians realized no bridges had been constructed for them, commuters discovered no one had thought of space for bus stops.

During holidays or long weekends, the highway usually collapses with excess traffic, proving that the claim—by the past government and the Spanish company alike—that the trip, at 80 kph, can be made in 45 minutes does not always apply.

The company has not yet corrected these and other blunders, but since it opened its dozens of tollbooths have been busy—even charging ambulances and fire engines on emergency calls.

Dispute with Nicaragua adds another crisis
With this fire periodically flaring up, another major and most unwanted problem appeared on the new government’s horizon: a clash with neighbor Nicaragua. The dispute broke out on Oct. 21, 2010, when, as Nicaragua dredged its San Juan River—which runs next to part of the 309 km land border
shared by both nations—Costa Rica accused its neighbor of having dumped sediment on this side of the divide (NotiCen, Nov. 18, 2010) and (Dec. 16, 2010).

The dump occurred specifically on Isla Portillos, a 3 sq km area that is the northern tip of Isla Calero. Costa Rica immediately accused Nicaragua of having caused major environmental damage in the area and also of having violated Costa Rican sovereignty by deploying soldiers—allegations Nicaragua strongly rejected, accusing Costa Rica of having violated Nicaraguan sovereignty.

Costa Rica reacted by first going to the Organization of American States (OAS), showing documents and photos to support its claim that extensive damage was being done to natural resources such as the area's swamps—on both sides of the border—and that Ejército de Nicaragua troops had set up camp on Costa Rican territory.

After hearing both sides' long, powerful arguments and mutual allegations, the OAS recommended, among other things, that they not deploy or station security forces in the sensitive area and keep a prudent distance from the conflict area.

Maintaining its original position, Nicaragua said that the OAS had no authority on the matter and that the appropriate arbiter was the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

While preparing the case it was to bring before the World Court, the Chinchilla administration said its Nicaraguan counterpart headed by President Daniel Ortega was ignoring OAS recommendations, while the Ortega government repeatedly said its troops were on Nicaraguan soil.

In the crossfire, the ICJ met Jan. 11-13 at its headquarters in the Dutch city of The Hague to hear both sides. Costa Rica asked for precautionary measures, including complete Nicaraguan military withdrawal and a stop to environmental damage (NotiCen, Jan. 20, 2011).

The court's decision came a month later, amid both sides' anxiety and high expectations, in the form of an 86-point, 23-page ruling. In a nutshell, the world's top legal body told both countries to do four things (NotiSur, Mar. 17, 2011).

One was to keep military—in Nicaragua's case—and police—in that of Costa Rica, which abolished its army six decades ago—out of the conflict area. It said, however, that Costa Rican civilian personnel could go into the conflict area, "but only in so far as it is necessary to avoid irreparable prejudice being caused to the part of the wetland where that territory is situated."

To do so, Costa Rica must consult with the Ramsar Convention Secretariat—which protects wetlands worldwide, "give Nicaragua prior notice," and "use its best endeavors to find common solutions with Nicaragua in this respect," said the court.

Both parties were also to refrain from actions aggravating or extending the dispute which the ICJ is to resolve in a process that, according to experts and Costa Rican authorities, could take up to three or four years. And they must keep the court updated as to their respective compliance with the provisional measures it thus ordered.

While both sides wait for the court's definitive ruling, Costa Rica is accusing Nicaragua of sending ruling Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) youth members to the place of conflict.
As all this was happening, a case of alleged influence peddling in favor of Don Rodrigo added to a critical citizen-safety situation (NotiCen, Mar. 31, 2011), resulted in Security Minister José María Tijerino stepping down, to later become Costa Rica’s ambassador to Uruguay.

Then yet another wildfire erupted. This time, environmental organizations moved against the open-pit Proyecto Minero Crucitas, which was decreed in 2008 by Arias and his environment minister Roberto Dobles as being "of public interest and national convenience."

After a legal tug of war between the company and the government on one side and environmentalists on the other, which went on from Nov. 4-24, environmental organizations' leaders went on a hunger strike across the street from government headquarters. The appeals court (Tribunal Contencioso Administrativo) ruled against the company, which, outraged, began legal action against it.

But the political waters have not settled, and the latest ripples were caused by the financial and management crisis that had been building for close to three decades in the Caja Costartricense de Seguro Social (CCSS). At the core, among major internal flaws, lies the debt the Costa Rica state has been dragging, which, according to different estimates, is in the region of 134 billion to 720 billion colones (US$268 million to US$440 million).

At the same time, allegations of politically motivated appointments in Costa Rican diplomacy led the president to move Foreign Minister René Castro to the Ministerio de Ambiente, Energía y Telecomunicaciones (MINAET). But environmentalists oppose his new appointment because, when he first held this post (1994-1998), he signed a decree simplifying requirements for oil companies to work in Costa Rica, and he will now have to deal with the US-headquartered Mallon Oil Company’s interest in drilling in northern Costa Rican territory bordering Nicaragua.

-- End --