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President Ricardo Martinelli Is Panama’s Most Unpopular President, Says Recent Poll

by Louisa Reynolds
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Voters appear to be increasingly disillusioned with President Ricardo Martinelli, a supermarket tycoon who came to power in 2009 promising an end to the corrupt practices that had marred previous administrations.

In the latest poll carried out by Unimer in May of this year and published by Panamanian newspaper La Prensa, Martinelli was rated badly by more than half of those surveyed (a total of 1,209 respondents). Whereas 55.5% of those polled rated his administration "bad" or "very bad," only 43.2% rated it "good" or "excellent."

These figures are particularly striking given that Martinelli was elected by 60% of the population, a far greater endorsement than his predecessors had: ex-Presidents Martín Torrijos (2004-2009) took 47% of the vote; Mireya Moscoso (1999-2004), 44%; and Ernesto Pérez Balladares (1994-1999), 33%. Martinelli’s popularity rating after his first 100 days in office (85.9%) was also greater than those of his predecessors: Moscoso and Torrijos scored 70% and Pérez Balladares, 81.3%.

However, after three years in office, Martinelli’s fate has changed, and only 43.2% of those polled still regard his administration in a positive light, meaning that his popularity has plummeted by 42.7%.

Moscoso is the only president who achieved worse ratings after three years in office, with only 40.8% of those polled expressing satisfaction with her performance in 2002. In September 2007, after 36 months in office, Torrijos had a 58.4% approval rate, and in 1997 Balladares was rated well by 50.3% of those polled.

**Corruption scandals and political ambition**

Martinelli’s fall from grace has been attributed to a number of corruption scandals during his administration, such as claims that he received bribes from Italian businessman Valter Lavitola, a close aide to former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, so that the Finmeccanica corporation would receive a series of lucrative contracts to build prison facilities in Panama. Lavitola currently faces prosecution in Italy.

After Martinelli fired foreign minister and Partido Panameñista (PP) leader Juan Carlos Varela in August 2011, the marriage of convenience between his Cambio Democrático (CD) and the Panameñistas, known as the Gran Alianza, came to an abrupt end (NotiCen, Oct. 20, 2011). The move was branded as "irresponsible" by left-wing opposition leader Balbina Herrera, who accused Martinelli of "running the country as if it were his private farm or supermarket." Meanwhile, Varela retaliated by accusing the president of "using public funds to buy members of Congress from opposition parties."

After Martinelli came to power, he did his utmost to strengthen the CD and guarantee its independence as a political force. He then decided to free himself from the alliance with the PP.
and proposed changes to Panama’s election system that would introduce a second round if no party managed to win an absolute majority. This would effectively isolate the PP, allowing the CD to run without its support, and create strong incentives for parties to form coalitions. Varela strongly opposed the proposal, which led to his removal.

In February last year, Martinelli signed a sworn pledge stating that he would not seek re-election. Nevertheless, he later announced that he would run again in 2014, and this about-face has had a negative effect on his approval ratings.

The economy grows, social and political tension persists

A report published in March by the Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Fiscales (ICEFI) said Panama continues to be one of the fastest-growing economies in Latin America, an average of 8% per year, thanks to revenue generated by the Panama Canal as well as its strong tourism and banking sectors.

Panama’s fiscal debt (2.3% of GDP) is below the 3% threshold established by the fiscal-responsibility law (Ley de Responsabilidad Fiscal). However, ICEFI points out that economic growth has not led to growth in formal employment. Almost 41% of the economically active population (EAP) work in the informal sector, and unemployment reached 4.5% in January.

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) expects Panama’s economy to grow by 6% in 2012, thus outperforming other Central American countries. However, ICEFI’s report notes that the country’s present growth can be largely attributed to the expansion of the Panama Canal, which is scheduled for completion by 2013. Once this has occurred, growth will be slower and current political tensions could come to the fore.

"Martinelli’s style of governance has made him unpopular with many groups in society, including the very same coalition that brought him to power, which creates uncertainty regarding the country’s governance prospects. Added to this, a series of confrontations with organized movements, such as the banana-workers labor union last year, and more recently with indigenous groups opposed to mining projects (NotiCen, Sept. 9, 2010, and Feb. 23, 2012), have called into question Martinelli’s ability to solve conflicts peacefully," states ICEFI.

ICEFI admits that, after both conflicts, the Martinelli administration agreed to negotiate but only after the crisis had peaked and lives had been lost. "The best thing that President Martinelli can do to consolidate the country’s current economic growth is to implement a clear conflict-resolution policy that can generate a more solid and participative democracy."

Added to this, ICEFI warns that the Martinelli administration must endeavor to substantially improve education, health care, and nutrition among the population with the aim of increasing productivity, generating more and better-quality jobs, and "eliminating bottlenecks that could become an obstacle for economic growth in the future."

Reducing inequality, says ICEFI, will not only make economic growth more even, it will also "avoid potential sources of conflict that can jeopardize economic growth."

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