Political Parties Choose Presidential and Congressional Candidates for Costa Rica’s 2014 Elections

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Costa Rica’s political parties are getting their act together for next year’s presidential and congressional elections. For their top tickets, some parties have gone through primary elections, while others have had only one nomination each, thus not needing to hold primaries and just having their respective assemblies ratify their nominee.

So far, adding traditional, medium-size, and small political parties, the presidential offer in this Central American nation of just over 4.6 million people consists of 15 hopefuls.

The political spectrum—ranging from right to extreme left—includes, for this election, five new, minority parties, founded mostly by former leaders of traditional parties—mainly the ruling social democrat Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN) and the former ruling Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC)—who broke ranks voicing disappointment at the two parties’ top leadership.

In 2004, both the PLN and the PUSC saw some of their leaders involved in two corruption scandals that rocked and shook the nation—including three former Costa Rican presidents, two of them sons of two ex-presidents who led major social and political reform in the 1940s.

Former presidents caught up in serious scandals
In the PLN case, former President José María Figueres (1994-1998) was charged with having received US$900,000 from the French telecommunications company Alcatel as payment for consultancy work.

Figueres, who left Costa Rica in 2000 and remained abroad the following 11 years, mostly in Europe, working as an expert for international organizations in the fields of economy, environment, and technology, ignored several calls by a congressional committee investigating the case to return to Costa Rica and explain details regarding the payment. The former president sent the committee written statements from Europe and offered to participate in a videoconference to answer questions from committee members (NotiCen, Nov. 4, 2004).

Figueres—son of the late, three-time Costa Rican President José Figueres (1948-1949, 1953-1958, 1970-1974), who co-founded the PLN—took a packed press conference at his home, during his first visit to the country on Dec. 22, 2011, that "the Ministerio Público never called me."

The two other 2004 corruption scandals involved one of the co-founders and another top leader of the PUSC, both former presidents of Costa Rica. Unlike Figueres, former Presidents Rafael Angel "Junior" Calderón (1990-1994) and Miguel Angel Rodríguez (1998-2002) were arrested almost simultaneously and temporarily taken to prison at the start of each investigation. They were both arrested, taken to prison, put under house arrest, later released before being tried, found guilty of corruption, sentenced to prison, appealed the punishment, and released.

Rodríguez was arrested before leaving the airplane that brought him back to Costa Rica two weeks after arriving in Washington as the new secretary-general of the Organization of American States.
(OAS). Rodríguez and other government officials and relatives were charged with having received payments in exchange for having the Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad (ICE) buy 400 telephone lines from Alcatel. ICE then held the state telecommunications monopoly (NotiCen, Oct. 7, 2004, and Oct. 14, 2004).

On April 27, 2011, Rodríguez was found guilty of corruption and sentenced to five years in prison. After the appeal, more than a year later, the Tribunal de Apelaciones absolved the former president on Dec. 22, 2012.

The other jailed and convicted former president is Calderón, a co-founder of the PUSC, nicknamed "Junior" because his father was the late former President Rafael Angel Calderón Guardia (1940-1944).

"Junior" Calderón and seven other defendants were also tried for corruption in a case about the purchase of medical equipment—which turned out to be useless—from a Finnish company for the state Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social (CCSS), an emblematic institution of this country’s welfare policy, ironically founded under Calderón Guardia’s administration.

On Oct. 5, 2009, Calderón was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to five years in prison, a punishment he also appealed. On May 11, 2011, the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) reduced the original charges, lowered the sentence to three years, and placed him on probation (NotiCen, June 9, 2011).

2014 elections offer parties chance for redemption

Such events hit the PUSC the hardest and caused the party to massively lose support, a situation demonstrated by the 2006 and 2010 presidential and legislative elections, in which, after being a ruling party, it became one of the minority opposition groups in the unicameral Asamblea Legislativa (AL). As a means to recover its image, for the upcoming elections—the third since its 2004 corruption catastrophe—the party came up with what it hopes to be the winning presidential candidate.

Despite being "Junior" Calderón’s pick for the PUSC primaries against Rodolfo Piza, promoted by Rodríguez, the party’s nominee for the country’s top job, Rodolfo Hernández, has an nonpolitical image as the head of the state Hospital Nacional de Niños (HNN), a post he has successfully held for years and which people link him to.

In the PUSC primaries on May 19, Hernández’s landslide victory gave the kids’ doctor 80% of the vote. As his nomination was confirmed this month by a party general assembly, Hernández committed himself to lead what he describes as the best government ever in the country’s history, one which will have to tackle corruption and poverty, among other national problems.

"We’re getting ready to be the best government in the history of Costa Rica," Hernández told a packed party assembly on July 28 at a luxury hotel on the outskirts of San José.

"Politics should not be left to self-made politicians seeking to serve themselves and not to serve," he added, speaking at the event where he received his credential as the party’s presidential candidate. "They’re the same ones who’ve been telling us for the past 20 years that they’re going to turn us into Latin America’s most developed country."
Hernández later told reporters, "What Costa Rica wants is to have an honest government, a
government that doesn’t overspend and doesn’t change money’s destination. That’s what I’m
going to do." He went on to guarantee that "we’re going to base everything on principles and basic
values."

Hernández also said that this country’s "fundamental problems" include "corruption, lack of
security, poverty, lack of employment" and that, "if the government were to make the decision—
which we’ve already made—these problems can be solved, or at least diminished."

Hernández is being referred to as "el doctor," the appellative still used to refer to the senior
Calderón.

Across the street, in the ranks the other historic party, the PLN, former San José mayor Johnny
Araya has stepped up to try and secure the party’s third administration in a row, an unprecedented
situation in this country with Central America’s most stable democracy.

Araya became the PLN nominee by default, after the other three initial hopefuls dropped out.
The two with the least-likely possibilities were former security minister Fernando Berrocal and
businessman and former congressman Antonio Álvarez, who came back after several years away
from the PLN and is now in charge of Araya’s campaign.

The major opponent of Araya—a nephew of PLN co-founder, former union leader, and Costa
Rican ex-President Luis Alberto Monge (1982-1986)—was Rodrigo Arias, who was minister of
the presidency in the two administrations of his brother, ex-President Oscar Arias (1986-1990,
2006-2010).

But an excessively early announcement that he was after the nomination—immediately after
leaving the post for the second time—coupled with an investigation on corruption allegations—
which he successfully passed—and corruption scandals during his brother’s second term in office,
derminated the attempt to have, for the third time, an Arias at the country’s helm.

After more than two uninterrupted decades as the capital’s mayor, Araya’s nomination was ratified
by the PLN’s General Assembly on July 29.

Center-left party also chooses candidate in squeaker primary

The other key player in Costa Rican elections since 2002, the center-left Partido Acción Ciudadana
(PAC), just confirmed, in a neck-and-neck finish, the winner of last week’s party primary election.
Political scientist and former PLN member Luis Guillermo Solís and congressman and former AL
president Juan Carlos Mendoza battled in the end for 72 votes—of the just over 23,000 cast on July
21—that eventually tipped the scales. Solís came in first, with 35.48%, followed by Mendoza, with
34.99%. Both presidential hopefuls stated their willingness to work in the PAC campaign regardless
of the outcome.

Meanwhile, five new political parties have popped up on Costa Rica’s increasingly populated
political stage, covering the full ideological spectrum, from right to far left—in this case, Trotskyism.
Their possibilities do not seem good, to say the least, but they are willing to make space for
themselves, hopefully by managing to win a deputy or two, or, who knows, maybe more.
Introducing, from right to extreme left: the rightist Partido Avance Nacional (PAN); Centro
Democrático y Social (CDS), Nueva Generación (NG), Patria Nueva (PN), the center-left trio; and the Trotskyite Partido de los Trabajadores (PT).

They join the nine already there—including the PAC, PLN, and PUSC, plus the rightist Movimiento Libertario (ML), the center-right Partido Accesibilidad sin Exclusión (PASE), and, with one deputy each, the Christian Renovación Nacional (RN) and Renovación Costarricense (RC), and the leftist Frente Amplio (FA).

The total presidential sum: 15 hopefuls. Now, they must each come up with candidates for the 57 vacancies to be filled in the Asamblea Nacional, whose members are renewed every four years.

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