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Panama's Political Parties Divided Before May Elections

by Louisa Reynolds

Category/Department: Panama

Published: 2013-09-05

Three of the country’s five political parties are divided by internal conflicts between rival factions that are endangering their electoral strategies as the country’s political machinery prepares for the run-up to the May 2014 elections.

The Movimiento Liberal Republicano Nacionalista (Molirena) is one of the most divided contenders and faces a struggle between Sergio González Ruíz and other party leaders, who have chosen to maintain their alliance with the governing Cambio Democrático (CD).

Another current, led by Lisímaco López and Olimpo Sáenz, decided to support opposition candidate Juan Carlos Navarro of the Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD). On May 30, López and Sáenz were expelled from the party after its Honor Tribunal found them guilty of violating the party’s statutes for supposedly attempting to discredit party members and holding talks with the PRD and the Partido Panameñista.

To make matters worse, another current led by the party’s founders, who are highly critical of González’s leadership, announced on Sept. 1 that they would support Panameñista candidate Juan Carlos Varela. This group includes Gisela Chung, a former legislator and former Panamanian ambassador to the People’s Republic of China; Guillermo Quijano, a businessman and former minister of housing; and Temístocles Díaz. Chung was also expelled from Molirena on Sept. 1.

As Molirena’s party symbol is a red and yellow flag with a red rooster, González Ruíz referred to their defection as "the flight of the roosters." González Ruíz has said that he intends to run for vice president with the CD’s presidential candidate José Domingo Arias as his running mate.

PP and Panameñistas also divided

The Partido Popular (PP) has also been torn apart by internal struggles, after a faction voiced its opposition to its leaders’ decision to form an alliance with the Partido Panameñista. This dissident faction is known as "Verdes e Independientes del PP" (The PP’s Greens and Independents) and is led by the party’s vice president Aníbal Culiolis. "Handing the PP over to the Panameñistas is a serious danger," warns Culiolis.

In his opinion, the alliance would be disadvantageous for the PP as the Partido Panameñista is not a viable contender against the CD-Molirena alliance. Culiolis believes, however, that an alliance with the PRD would improve his party’s chances in the 2014 elections, which is why his faction has decided to support PRD candidate Juan Carlos Navarro.

Navarro is a businessman and environmentalist and served as Panama City mayor until June 2009. In 1985, he founded the Asociación Nacional para la Conservación de la Naturaleza (ANCON), which became one of the most important environmental organizations in Latin America. In 1990, he was elected to the World Conservation Union (International Union for Conservation of Nature, IUCN) as regional councilor for Latin America and was re-elected in 1994. In 1999, he became Panama’s youngest mayor and was re-elected in 2004.
During the past two weeks, Juan Carlos Varela of the Partido Panameñista has managed to win over members of the PP and Molirena. However, not everyone in his own party supports him, and the Panameñistas have also been torn apart by internal struggles. A faction of the party, led by former President Mireya Moscoso (1999-2004), the widow of party founder and former President Arnulfo Arias Madrid (1940-1941, 1949-1951, 1968), has spoken out against Varela’s leadership.

Moscoso’s faction supports President Ricardo Martinelli, leader of the governing CD party. "Former President Mireya [Moscoso] has always given me sound advice, and it’s always good to talk about issues of national interest with someone who has already lived through the experience of being president," said Martinelli after having lunch with Moscoso in May.

Moscoso was Panama’s first female president. She became active in the 1968 campaign of three-time president Arnulfo Arias, later married him when he went into exile after a military coup, and, after his death in 1984, she assumed control of his political party, the Partido Arnulfista (PA). In 1999, she was elected president, defeating PRD candidate Martín Torrijos by 8% (NotiCen, May 6, 1999). During her tenure in office, she presided over the US’s handover of the Panama Canal to Panama (NotiCen, Aug. 12, 1999) and the economic downturn that resulted from the loss of US personnel.

The PRD’s "Trojan horses"

Although there are seemingly fewer tensions within the PRD party, it is clear that there is still significant discontent within its ranks. Leaders such as Balbina Herrera and Mitchell Doens have said that there are "Trojan horses" within the party who are secretly supporting President Martinelli. However, so far, party leaders have chosen to keep these disputes low-key.

Herrera is an agronomist, she served as mayor of San Miguelito, she is a former legislator, and in 1994 she became the first woman to hold the post of president of the Asamblea Nacional. She also served as minister of housing during the administration of ex-President Martín Torrijos (2004-2009).

Doens is of Cuban-Panamanian parentage; he served as minister of labor during the administration of former President Ernesto Balladares (1994-1999). In 2009, he was elected general-secretary of the PRD.

After the PRD elected its national executive committee in late 2012 and its presidential candidate in early 2013, it entered a process of recovery and tried to overcome the disputes that had torn the party apart.

However, in August, Navarro and Martinelli held a meeting, fueling suspicions among PRD ranks that the PRD’s leadership was considering an alliance with the CD. However, Navarro and Martinelli insisted that the meeting had been casual and that no agreements had been reached. They refused to reveal any further details.

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