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Costa Rica’s Election Campaign Gets Off to Rocky Start

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Costa Rica’s election campaign, officially launched early last month, got off to a rocky start, with two presidential candidates resigning—one permanently, the other returning—and a congressional hopeful about to be kicked off of his party’s list.

With 13 candidates nominated for this Central American nation’s top job and 27 political parties vying for the 57 seats up for grabs in the unicameral Asamblea Legislativa (AL), the election process is marked by what is seen as the definitive end of Costa Rica’s historic bipartisanship—a process started two elections ago when numerous parties entered the legislature.

The two traditional choices—social democrat (Partido Liberación Nacional, PLN) and social Christian (Partido Unidad Social Cristiana, PUSC)—in this particular election are no longer the majority options, according to the latest opinion polls.

The ruling PLN appears so far as the favorite choice, with its presidential candidate, former capital city mayor Johnny Araya, leading the polls. But the PLN’s historic adversary, the PUSC, with lawyer Rodolfo Piza as its nominee for the presidency, is not the second option—it actually ranks third, so far.

The second spot is being intensely contested by rightist Movimiento Libertario (ML) co-founder Otto Guevara—now nominated for the fourth time in a row—and José María Villalta, the only deputy of the leftist Frente Amplio (FA)—running for the first time.

The presidential and legislative elections scheduled for February also face the menace of absenteeism, a phenomenon that has hovered overhead with particular momentum since the 2006 election, when it reached its highest peak yet.

On Oct. 2, when he officially launched the campaign period, Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones (TSE) president Luis Antonio Sobrado warned candidates—all but one present at the ceremony—that voters’ participation was up to them. "You have an enormous challenge in this election process: Costa Ricans’ enthusiasm to participate in it is up to you. During the next four months, all of us Costa Ricans will pay special attention to what you may have to tell us, to your proposals, to your ideas. And to the shared illusions with which you may want to remind us that politics still is the most noble and respected profession a free woman or a free man may devote themselves to."

Costa Ricans "are a people not enthusiastic about political colors or caudillos. They want clear proposals and concrete solutions, and they want to be respected and taken seriously," Sobrado warned. The country’s top elections official also said that Costa Rica’s democracy is mature, thus it should not fear popular unease or criticism, which is bound to mark next year’s vote, but boredom.

Frequent changes in party tickets
The following day, Rodolfo Hernández, a physician who heads the state Hospital Nacional de Niños (HNN) and the presidential candidate the PUSC had chosen almost five months earlier—the only nominee absent from the official campaign launching—announced his decision to quit.
In a two-page text, eldoctor—as Hernández was called while he ran for office—said he could no longer cope with the situation within the party. "I have made a great effort to continue, but I cannot abide any more back-stabbing," he said. "I never thought I would have to face so much intrigue, so much envy, so much selfishness, so much treason, and so much disloyalty."

"In my mind, it was not possible that politics could lend itself to do damage. I was reluctant to accept that an action as noble as politics could have prostituted itself from its foundations," added Hernández, who also warned that "democracy is in intensive care because those responsible to look after it offended it, weakened it, raped it, and pretend to keep it like that, kidnapped, to favor personal or group interests that I cannot cover up."

The physician released the statement two days after the four members of the party’s strategic campaign committee resigned, within the context of the internal conflict.

Hernández was elected on May 19 with 80% of the vote cast in PUSC primaries, comfortably defeating Piza, who later joined the party’s ticket as first-vice-presidential candidate, with environmentalist Mónica Araya nominated for the post of second vice president.

Unlike Araya, who resigned with the ticket’s head, Piza remained, saying he would make an effort to get eldoctor to return.

Two days later, a group of followers marched to Hernández’s home in the western sector of San José, the nation’s capital, to ask their leader to rethink his decision and get back on the PUSC campaign wagon. Rethink he did, and, accompanied by wife Marcelle de Merzzerville, told his sympathizers of the decision to retake the nomination, assuring the group that "this boat will arrive at a safe port."

But four days later, on Oct. 9, déjà vu happened when el doctor announced again that he was resigning, this time blaming top party leaders whom he accused of being inflexible and saying, "I cannot be with people like that."

"They thought they could play with me, they could give me orders, and my statements were insignificant, but they were wrong," Hernández told a group of journalists once again outside his home. "I leave, my head held high, with the dignity of a Costa Rican who loves his country, and I only hope that, come Feb. 2 [election day], God may look on Costa Rica with merciful eyes."

On Oct. 12, the PUSC elected Piza as its new presidential candidate. Minutes later, he told NotiCen that his major immediate challenge was "to reshape the campaign and humbly ask Costa Ricans to listen to our proposals."

But before el doctor, another nominee for the nation’s presidency had already resigned—also to return and almost to leave again. It was José Miguel Corrales, nominated by the center-left minority Partido Patria Nueva (PPN).

On Sept. 12, when the party elected Alvaro Montero, its president, as one of the candidates for the AL, Corrales was outraged because Montero had been involved in a lawsuit regarding violation of a domestic worker’s labor rights.
Corrales—a lawyer who in his PLN years was a presidential candidate (1998) and a deputy (2002-2006)—immediately resigned as the PPN nominee, a decision that led the party to hold a new assembly on Oct. 14, which revoked Montero’s candidacy, paving the way for Corrales’ return.

Eight days later, the TSE declared null the PPN’s removal of Montero as a congressional candidate, and Corrales began pondering whether to resign again. During a press conference hours later, Corrales announced he was not quitting, questioned the TSE’s neutrality, and accused it of illegally interfering in party decisions, allegations the TSE rejected in a communiqué.

Another party faces candidate problems

But party crises around nominations clashing with principles have not ended. It is now the FA’s turn, and it involves a union leader with a past accusation of domestic violence running for Congress. With rumors running strong, the morning of Nov. 7, Villalta told a press conference at party headquarters that FA authorities had decided to request that Jorge Arguedas resign from the nomination.

The party’s only deputy explained that precautionary measures were ordered for Arguedas on charges of domestic violence, something that goes against party statutes. "For the past several days, we’ve had knowledge that there were allegations against don Jorge for domestic violence, and precautionary measures, provisional measures, had been ordered in the year 2002," Villalta told journalists. "At that moment, we asked don Jorge about this case, we requested information from him, we asked him for the case file. We were told the file hadn’t been found, so, we went looking for it."

Since the case "dates back for some time ... the case file wasn’t easily available. Don Jorge told us they were provisional measures that had been ordered because of an argument with his wife," Villalta, a lawyer, added.

Villalta further explained that, in such situations, "judges evaluate the case, analyze evidence ... and have to decide whether to maintain the measures when there are signs that there really was a situation of domestic violence. In this case, judges decided to confirm the measures, and after that the measures were extended for six months. As a whole, they were in force for more than a year, until January 2004."

The party’s top leader said FA statutes clearly state that "a person who has or has had measures for domestic violence cannot be a candidate, and that is precisely what’s happening here."

Hours later, Arguedas held a press conference and said, "I wish to state that I’m not going to give up my nomination because it would mean admitting there were acts of domestic violence."

Arguedas said that a situation such as the one happening in the party around his nomination "happens even in the best of families, where there are different views. We’ve approached party authorities, but what happens is that we have no document whatsoever ... we’ve had information through the press."

In this country of just over 4.6 million people, almost 3.1 million Costa Ricans—a bit more 1.5 million women and almost as many men—are registered to vote in the presidential and congressional elections scheduled for Feb. 2. They are to elect a president, two vice presidents, and the 57 deputies making up the AL, all for the 2014-2018 period.
As far as absenteeism goes, between 1962 and 1994 it remained around 20%. For the 2006 presidential and congressional elections—when former President Óscar Arias (1986-1990, 2006-2010) was elected for the second time, the first case after re-election was established three years before—it soared to almost 35%. The latest election, in 2010, the rate dropped four points.

The high point in voter indifference happens in municipal elections, held separately, since 2002. The first time—10 months after the 2002 presidential and congressional vote—absenteeism skyrocketed to 77.3%, to drop to 76.3% in 2006, and in 2010—the most recent municipal elections—it slid to 72%.

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