2-13-2014

Costa Rica's Elections Go to Faceoff Between Leading Candidates Whose Positioning Was Unexpected

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Costa Rica’s presidential election goes, for the second time in this country’s political history, to a faceoff between the two most voted candidates, since none of 13 hopefuls managed to round up more than 40% of the vote. The results of the Feb. 2 election were not a surprise regarding the need for the second round, but the candidates’ positioning was astonishing.

After the initial results announced early that evening by Luis Antonio Sobrado, the head of the Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones (TSE), the first two positions were quickly reversed as figures were automatically updated on the TSE’s Web site.

Thus, after having predicted early that morning that he would obtain at least 1 million votes of the just more than 3 million registered voters, Johnny Araya, for the previous 21 years the mayor of San José, lost the lead to Luis Guillermo Solís, a political scientist and university professor who saw his uphill campaign struggle rewarded.

After having led most pre-election polls, Araya—a nephew of Costa Rica’s former President Luis Alberto Monge (1982-1986) and co-founder in 1948 of the ruling social democratic Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN)—suffered a major blow, along with his party, when he did not win the preliminary electronic results (NotiCen, Jan. 23, 2014). Those results are presently being reviewed and are certain to be confirmed in the vote count being done by hand by hundreds of TSE personnel, including Sobrado and the other four magistrates.

As one of the two traditional parties—the other being the former-ruling Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC)—the PLN has had the image, until now, of a well-oiled election machine, compared by some to Mexico’s Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), back in power after a 12-year break that in 2001 interrupted its seven-decade rule.

**Political scene changing in Costa Rica**

But Costa Rica’s crisis on several fronts—mainly road infrastructure, social security system, widening social gap, plus corruption cases in several PLN administrations including the present one, about to end in May—have eroded the party’s credibility.

And—as indicated by comments in Costa Rican’s political discussions as well as pre-election poll results—even traditional liberacionista members were not willing to make Araya the third PLN president in a row, following ex-President Óscar Arias (1986-1990, 2006-2010) and incumbent President Laura Chinchilla.

Suddenly having—and keeping—the upper hand, Solís was thus culminating an uphill effort he maintained since the start of the election process last year, when, after being the underdog, he managed to come up with the nomination for the center-left, opposition Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC).
As he admitted back then, Solís was the least known of the four presidential hopefuls, including two that are well-known—former deputy Epsy Campbell and Deputy Juan Carlos Mendoza, a former president of the unicameral Asamblea Legislativa (AL). But his door-to-door campaign paid off, and Luis Guillermo—as he is now popularly known by Costa Ricans—won the first battle.

But the uphill effort had to be continued, and Solís began his presidential campaign with a television message that ran for several weeks in which he addressed Costa Ricans with this closing statement, "I'm Luis Guillermo Solís, and I want you to get to know me."

After that, Solís, again an underdog, began to appear in other messages explaining his program, while intensively touring the country and, again, explaining door to door his determination to improve the people’s general situation, combat corruption, establish an effective tax-collecting mechanism, and reduce poverty.

Meanwhile, Araya started off with a television ad in which he told Costa Ricans he was the builder who was going to construct the country again, and his smiling closing statement was, "Hire me."

The ad proved to be quite counterproductive and, among other consequences, was soon the target of memes throughout the Internet—especially on Facebook—as were many of Araya’s statements, including the wrong answer he once gave when asked whether, as someone who was seeking to run the country, he knew how much a carton of milk or a typical local lunch cost.

**Earlier results reversed**

When election day closed and result night began, the first preliminary numbers came out as could have been expected in an election that had been considered unpredictable—since the candidates appeared, as it actually turned out, to be far below the 40% that had to be overcome by at least one vote to win and with a likely second round.

At first, Araya appeared ahead, with 36.24%, followed by Solís, with 21.1%. After Sobrado’s announcement, results were updated at 15-minute intervals on the TSE link, and, for a while, Araya remained ahead but lowering his vote harvest, with the first update showing 33.2%, while Solís, still second, started to climb, reaching 25.4%.

By the following surprising update, Solís had managed to barely overcome his main opponent, with 30.2% against Araya’s 30.1%, a scarce difference which quickly began widening to Luis Guillermo’s unstoppable advantage—next level: 30.9% versus 26.9%.

Seeing the irreversible trend, the other two of the four top candidates swiftly admitted defeat. At a luxury hotel just outside San José, Otto Guevara, co-founder and top leader of the rightist Movimiento Libertario (ML)—in his fourth presidential bid in a row (2002, 2006, 2010, 2014)—who successfully doubled as a candidate for the legislature, held a press conference. Holding back the tears, Guevara told followers, "I had high hopes that I would be able to serve Costa Ricans from the presidency of the republic, but God has other plans for me." The ML leader came in last of the top four, after having been second for several weeks.

José María Villalta, who finished third after at times leading polls, and who is the only opposition deputy of Frente Amplio (FA), gave a lengthy speech, claiming a political victory for his party, which became the first leftist political organization in this country’s history with an option to reach Costa Rica’s top job.
Later in the evening, Araya appeared at a luxury hotel in San José, and, in an effort to give relief and assurance to followers gathered there, said, "We’re the safe road, the responsible road to maintain Costa Rica’s political, economic, and social stability. I’m convinced that the proposal we made to Costa Ricans is a proposal that has backing … inspires affection; it’s a proposal we made from a party that is undergoing a process of renewal—and this is not a campaign act, it’s a sincere effort."

Araya also admitted that "the Costa Rican state has lost legitimacy, because it’s been incapable, during the last years, of reducing poverty, reducing the gaps, and we must admit it." Nevertheless, he immediately said that "today, we’re the most efficient instrument Costa Rican society has to recover its [the state’s] legitimacy. This party is the most important instrument the country has."

Despite saying that the situation is now different and he is not his brother, Araya certainly remembers the first time a second-round presidential vote was held in this country, in April 2002, when Abel Pacheco, the PUSC candidate, beat the PLN’s Rolando Araya (NotiCen, April 11, 2002).

**Solís sets sights on runoff**

Late Sunday night, and last to appear before followers, Solís told sympathizers the PAC’s administration would be sensible, and he emphasized that results marked a definitive change in this Central American nation’s politics. "Even tonight, some think we won’t govern, but we will govern, and we’ll do it with sensibility, responsibility, a team, because we have a team, because we have a program, and because the people of Costa Rica have said, 'Here we are, all of us, willing to build a responsible, inclusive, and just country, the country of Costa Rica’s eternal values.'"

"We’ve begun a road that’s not easy, yet, we must be clear that what’s up ahead is strenuous and perhaps more complicated than any challenge we’ve faced until this moment," Solís told the PAC’s enthusiastic street rally. "We’re ready for this fight … not in the field they [traditional political sectors] want, because that’s not Costa Rica’s field. We’ll do it in the field the people want, which is that of truth, reason, transparency, and democracy."

"The people were wise to choose with the utmost clarity, without any doubt, between change and yesterday’s continuity," Solís added, referring to the PLN, assuring that "today, Costa Rica isn’t the same as it was before 6 o’clock this afternoon [closing time for voting], and the wave that was rising has become a great tsunami that has forever swept traditional politics. Joyfulness has become the trademark of this movement, which, starting today, will change Costa Rican politics."

The runoff between Solís and Araya is set for April 6, and a new chapter in Costa Rica’s political history could then start to be written.

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