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How to Become Costa Rica's President in Three Awesome Steps

by George Rodríguez
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The underdog in the bid for the presidential nomination for the opposition center-left Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC), political scientist and university professor Luis Guillermo Solís, last year scored the first of three surprise political wins in a row when he became the party’s hopeful for the 2014 elections (NotiCen, Aug. 1, 2013).

Again the underdog, now as PAC’s second presidential candidate after founder Ottón Solís unsuccessfully ran in the party’s first three elections—2002, 2006, and 2010—Luis Guillermo, as Costa Ricans affectionately refer to him, was the least known of the five contenders with a possibility to win the Feb. 2 election.

So, in his first television spot last year, Solís started by telling Costa Ricans, "My name is Luis Guillermo Solís, and I want you to get to know me." He then went on to briefly list, among his possessions, a watch, "four suits that actually fit," and a very used car, and to mention his family and that he is a professor.

From the second television spot on, Solís began to outline his program for a new Costa Rica, updating the past PAC slogan salí a votar (go out and vote), and usually closing his messages with a call on Costa Ricans to actually vote: "I need one vote: yours."

Just as he did for his party’s primary, the presidential candidate who started off basically known to academia, journalists, and international organizations rolled up his sleeves and geared up for some hard work.

It meant going to communities countrywide, personally delivering his message of making a national effort for what he describes as a better, more inclusive, more solidary Costa Rica, and carefully listening to people’s needs, complaints, and proposals, besides having his picture taken with locals, as many times as he was asked to—including selfies by supporters.

Solís called his uninterrupted, weeks-long tour of the country la caravana de la alegría (the happiness caravan), and it was usually met by typical popular bands of local musicians called cimarronas, colorful groups that usually perform during community celebrations. And there were also countless media interviews and meetings with different sectors.

Solís comes in second in first-round balloting

The result was the second surprise victory, when, despite poll estimates that did not give him much of a chance, early results of the elections on Feb. 2 placed him first, followed by Johnny Araya of the ruling social democratic Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN), who came in second, after having led polls (NotiCen, Feb. 13, 2014).

Neither obtained more than 50% of the votes, which meant Solís and Araya had to go to a runoff—this for the second time in Costa Rican history—scheduled for April 6. Official results announced
Feb. 17—two weeks after the vote—by the Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones (TSE) put Solís first, with 30.64%, followed by Araya, with 29.71, while absenteeism was 31.8%.

Thus, Luis Guillermo kept his sleeves rolled up and continued touring the country with the happiness caravan. And just as the early stages of the campaign had showed some unprecedented events—with two presidential candidates announcing their resignations, then retracting, and one of them again resigning for good—and two congressional candidates—one of them a PAC hopeful—heavily questioned on ethical issues, the campaign for the second round had a stunning, also unprecedented, outcome.

The morning of March 5, just over a month after the February presidential and congressional elections, results of a state University of Costa Rica (UCR) poll published by UCR’s weekly newspaper Semanario Universidad placed Solís as the winner of the second round, with a margin of more than 40 points. Asked, "If the runoff were today, which candidate would you vote for?" 64.4% said they would back Solís, 20.9% said they would support Araya, while 14.7% did not answer.

**Opponent drops out of race**

By late afternoon, Araya held a press conference, and made a stunning announcement. "With a firm spirit, I make my decision known to conclude this campaign for the presidency today," he told dozens of journalists and applauding sympathizers. "Costa Rica's presidency is beyond my aspiration. Prudence advises not spending millions of colones in propaganda, meetings, and campaigning."

"We comply with the applicable constitutional rules, but I will be refraining from any election activity," added Araya, accompanied by party leaders, his wife, and campaign staffers.

Araya’s decision was widely seen as a disguised resignation, since the Constitution prevented him from formally quitting. Article 138 of the Constitution states that "citizens included in a list already registered according to law may not resign as candidates for the presidency or the [two] vice presidencies." The article goes on to specifically state that "neither may candidates of the two most voted lists in the first [election] refrain from appearing in the second election."

Nevertheless, in his very few statements after his stunning announcement, Araya told journalists in the following weeks, "I want to be president."

Meanwhile, Solís kept up his unwavering campaign, now against what he described as a "ghost candidate," constantly calling on the slightly more than 3 million voters to massively go to the polls.

April 6 came, and with it Luis Guillermo’s third election surprise: a landslide victory margin of more than 55 points. The closing preliminary TSE figures, for 90% of voting centers, indicated Solís won with 77.81%, overwhelming Araya’s 22.19%. The surprise became even stronger, since figures were showing that Solís had actually doubled his first-round vote.

In his post-election speech that evening, Araya said, "I receive these results with serenity ... with my conscience at ease ... with maturity, and I begin by humbly and respectfully admitting the results we already know ... and by congratulating Costa Rica's president-elect. I've already done so by telephone, and I've already expressed to him my congratulation and my good wishes for this delicate task he'll have before him. We humbly admit this clear and forceful will of the people of Costa Rica."
The first time a second round was held in Costa Rica, in 2002 (NotiCen, April 11, 2002), Araya’s brother Rolando Araya, also running for the PLN, lost the presidential election to Abel Pacheco of the traditional Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC).

Shortly after Araya spoke, across the political street, a happy Solís told hundreds of jubilant followers packing a capital city square of the need for national unity in search of prosperity and what he described as a new moment in the country's history.

"Let there be no more divisions among us than those resulting from the plurality that must prevail in democracy. Let there be among us no conflict whatsoever to divide the Costa Rican people’s purpose of unity in this march toward development. And may all of us, beyond political flags and parties … walk together, hand in hand, searching for the prosperity the people demand and also for a new moment in national history," Solís said to repeated applause and cheers.

"The people have again taken over their country’s affairs, and … with lucidity, with will, with courage have said ‘enough’ to traditional politics that have harmed us so much and have said ‘yes’ to a vibrant, just, strong democracy. It is the moment for change, it is the moment for transformation," Solís added.

The following morning, referring to the PLN and PUSC, Luis Guillermo told a packed press conference, "‘Change’ is the emblematic word for this campaign. … Costa Ricans chose, for the first time in 65 years, a party that doesn’t represent those traditional blocs of national power."

Final official results for the second round will be announced later this week by the TSE.

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