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Costa Rica’s New President Breaks with Traditional Politics, Seeks Transparency and Accountability

by George Rodríguez
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In a surprising request during his inauguration speech, Costa Rica’s new President Luis Guillermo Solís asked the people to repudiate him should he fail to fulfill his duties. He also stressed the need for scrutiny by the people as well as transparency and accountability in public office, turning the government into a "crystal house."

As part of the transparency promoted by the new head of state, the incoming ministers signed, before being sworn in, an ethical-commitment document covering items ranging from expenses to access for the media.

Some of Solís’ first actions since taking office on May 8 for the 2014-2018 period have been signals in this direction, including personal contact with people, removing metal security barriers from around the Casa Presidencial—the seat of this Central American nation’s government—as well as the thick bushes that for years had grown high on the building’s front fence.

Inaugural speech calls for public scrutiny
"When I go wrong, correct me; when I lose my way, look for me; when I falter, give me strength. If I don’t listen to you, complain; if I abandon you, if I am not there when you most need me, if I maliciously betray the trust so generously placed in me by a people demanding honesty and good governance, repudiate me," Solis told Costa Ricans in his inaugural speech at the Estadio Nacional in the western sector of San José, the nation’s capital. "And if I should faithfully accomplish my duty, as I hope to do, then let there be for me no more than the acknowledgement from work satisfactorily fulfilled as needed, for there is no greater glory for a leader than to fulfill the responsibilities of his destiny. There is also no better tribute to a people as devoted and hopeful as mine than to serve with the three supreme virtues of politics: sense, honesty, and coherence between what is said and what is done."

"We live in an extraordinary historic moment. The disappointment of many Costa Ricans in their leaders, in traditional politics and its tricks, has translated in a resonant demand for change, in a powerful tide that has swept the old forms of power administration," said Solís, who was elected to office on April 6 (NotiCen, April 17, 2014). "Today, Costa Rica joyously enters the era of citizen democracy, ruled by renewed forms of participation by the people in management and, above all, in actively watching over public affairs."

"I desire for the government—beginning with the presidential office—to function as a large showcase or 'crystal house,' allowing citizens to examine and monitor the performance of those of us who manage the state," the president added.

The morning after taking office, at the start of his first full day in the Casa Presidencial, the new president told employees that, just as had been the case with past administrations, he expected the utmost loyalty to the country. "This is an important moment … for the country, because there are
changes in the way we look at politics as of today," a context in which "we want an open house," Solís told staff amid a warm, enthusiastic welcome, and he reaffirmed the concept of the Casa Presidencial—starting with his own office—being "like a crystal house, where everything is seen, because we want full opening, permanent accountability ... as a part of public exercise, the exercise of government."

Minutes later, metal security barriers were removed from around the Casa Presidencial, leaving only a few police guarding the government’s headquarters, and the thick, high bushes were cut down, as Solís later said, to allow people to see from the outside the house whose large entrance mat states it is la casa de los costarricenses (the house of Costa Ricans).

**President strolls through neighborhood**

Six days after being sworn in, Solís unexpectedly toured the Casa Presidencial neighborhood in Zapote, a middle-class sector in western San José. "It’s part of the crystal house," he told NotiCen at the start of the early morning, house-to-house, business-to-business walk, which took more than two hours.

Accompanied by Second Vice President Helena Chacón, other close staff, journalists, and one Casa Presidencial security officer, Solís was warmly welcomed by neighbors who began coming out of their houses as the unexpected, unprecedented Zapote tour got underway.

"Upe!" called Solís at the fence gate in front of the first house, using the typical Costa Rican call meaning hello! A pajama-clad young woman opened the door, awed to find a smiling president—and a number of television cameras—waiting on the narrow sidewalk. "Oh! Why so many cameras?" was her first reaction.

As he walked on, Solís accepted request after request for pictures as well as selfies with neighbors and bystanders and held short conversations with neighbors, most of whom expressed satisfaction at the presidential visit. He also answered journalists’ questions, mostly focused on the neighborhood tour.

"We just moved into the barrio, and I think the least I can do is to come say ‘hi’ to them and tell them I’m at their disposal. I think it’s just good manners," Solís said, predicting that "I’m going to spend more time here, in the neighborhood, than at home. This is the start of a great number of meetings I’m going to have with the people of this country."

Along the way, several surprised women walking by or waiting at bus stops made happy comments such as, "Oh, he’s nice," "Oh, honey! Here you are, president!," "May God be with you." One admirer of Solís told another, "Tonight, we’re on TV," and a man told the president, "You’re giving confidence in the government back to people."

At the local Catholic church several people, including three priests, stood at the entrance, waiting to start a funeral. The president stepped in to express his condolences, and for several minutes mourners seemed to put their grief aside, expressing satisfaction for Solís’ presence, and another selfie session took place.

At the end of the neighborhood tour, at a house across a side street from the Casa Presidencial, Solís was treated to yet another warm welcome, this time including freshly brewed coffee.
Rainbow flag flies next to national flag

Two days later, on the eve of the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia, another unexpected, unprecedented Solís event took place, this time in the Casa Presidencial front garden: for the first time, the multicolored sexual-diversity rainbow flag flew next to the Costa Rican flag.

The president said that the event was held in support of a population that has been discriminated against and that it was an expression of the government being against discrimination.

"This population has been subjected to discrimination," Solís said. "I said it many times in the past, and I repeat it today: human rights—when one of them is violated, all are violated, when one person's [human rights] are violated, everyone's are violated. We're here, today, speaking out against discrimination, and specifically, homophobia, lesbophobia, and transphobia. But I'd say that, beyond this, it is an expression of the government and of a country that wants all its inhabitants to enjoy equal rights, as our Constitution guarantees."

Also present were Chacón, who hoisted the flag; Ofelia Tiatelbaum, the defensora de los habitantes; and leaders of Movimiento Diversidad, which champions the rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex (LGBTI) community of some 500,000 in this country of just over 4.6 million people.

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