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Costa Rica’s New President Says Country Badly Governed for Decades, Corruption Ushered In; Accountability Now a Must

by George Rodríguez
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Before making public his account of the first 100 days of his administration, Costa Rican President Luis Guillermo Solís repeatedly said he was going to tell Costa Ricans the state in which he found the country and what his government’s roadmap would be. In a television spot as well as in frequent statements to journalists prior to presenting his Informe de los 100 Días, he said that he found "the ranch filled with scrub."

Perhaps a preview of the report, Culture Minister Elizabeth Fonseca told media about apparently doubtful contracts and public bids for different activities—including an arts festival, a movie festival, and a book fair—she found upon taking office.

As the target date approached, Solís said he planned to present the report in the unicameral Asamblea Legislativa (AL) before the 57 deputies in their capacity as representatives of the people.

What would have been an unprecedented event fell though because of the opposition arising basically from the social democrat, traditional Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN), which headed the past two administrations (2006-2014).

Solís, a political scientist as well as historian and university professor, reacted by announcing he would present the report directly to la gente (the people). "I've made the decision to take this report to the people who ultimately are the holders of sovereignty and who are our boss," he told a press conference nine days before the event.

On the report’s contents, Solís said, "It’s not a list of complaints ... but, yes, an opportunity to frankly, respectfully, thoroughly outline the problems that today account for the dysfunctionality of the Costa Rican state and its decision-making process." The president described the presentation as "an occasion to also point out ill practices that are rooted in the state’s administrative apparatus."

President takes his case to the people
The evening of Aug. 28, as announced, Solís presented the report before an audience of close to 1,000 members of civil-society sectors packing the Teatro Popular Melico Salazar, named after the late Costa Rican tenor Manuel "Melico" Salazar.

"To govern in democracy is, before all and above all, to report to the people and to comply with the Constitution and the law," Solís said. "My intention is that all Costa Ricans know the situation in which the new government found the country on May 8."

"This exercise inevitably implies reviewing and evaluating the way Costa Rica has been governed for many years, not to get even or for political persecution, not to settle scores ... but for historic responsibility," Solís explained. "You know this is a government of change, as the people demanded..."
through their vote, and we are not going to let them down. It is imperative to have a real and effective plan to run the country, restoring the citizens' trust in national destiny. Should we not accomplish this, we will have failed, and this I will not allow."

Then came the evaluation from a leader elected by an unprecedented 1.3 million votes (NotiCen, April 17, 2014), heading the ticket of a fairly new political party—the center-left Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC)—which in its fourth-straight election process (2002, 2006, 2010, 2014) reached the nation's presidency immediately after the first Costa Rican government headed by a woman, President Laura Chinchilla (2010-2014) of the PLN.

"I say it without beating about the bush. During the past decades, we have been irresponsibly governed. Many times, and in diverse ways, those who received the mandate to govern from the people violated the Constitution and the law," said the president. "This is not a gratuitous statement. Judicial statistics prove it so."

Solís said that, from 2006 through last year, the Sala Constitucional—also known as the Sala Cuarta—of the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) "censured, every day—I repeat, every day—an average of 10 public institutions or officials for not fulfilling their duties or for trampling on citizens' fundamental rights."

"Spiral of corruption and inefficiency"

"Even more serious, on many other occasions these violations and arbitrary actions occurred with the accompanying tolerance, or at least with the resignation, of many people who, skeptical or frustrated, did not even complain about it," the president pointed out. "This is how our country gradually sank into a spiral of corruption and inefficiency that today strangles and irritates almost all of us. And it should be clear that the main responsibility lies with those who have run the ship of state."

Having said this, the president mentioned a lengthy list of examples of what he described as an "unbearable lack of efficiency" and "unthinkable irresponsibility," adding, "This produces corruption, corruption, and more corruption."

Solís also said that the worst corruption cases during the past 15 years add up to more than 60 billion colones (some US$120 million), or 7% of the nation's production.

Summing up the reality he pictured, the president said that only one conclusion is possible: "We must reverse the state of affairs the country is in." In his view, to do so requires dialogue among sectors and citizens' participation, and the government has began to act on this by creating work groups on different topics of the national agenda.

Solís also pointed out that the dialogue among political parties with congressional representation needs to be renewed to pass legislation needed to address many of the problems he mentioned. He immediately invited those parties' leaders and heads of parliamentary blocs to a meeting to be scheduled this month at the Casa Presidencial.

The Costa Rican leader also announced "a bill to be promptly sent to the Asamblea Legislativa aimed at strengthening accountability and political responsibility in public administration."

Regarding the stern opposition he has been facing from political and other sectors, the president asked for serenity, moderate criticism, and generous contribution, adding, "I say to power
leaderships: 'Let me govern, allow me to go forward and fulfill the mandate I received in the elections.'"

-- End --