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## Addressing Opposition-Led Congress, Costa Rican President Stresses Need for Dialogue and Building Democratic Culture

by George Rodríguez

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Just hours before Costa Rican President Luis Guillermo Solís ([NotiCen, April 17, 2014](#)) delivered his first of four yearly reports to the unicameral Asamblea Legislativa (AL), a new six-member directorate—five of them opposition deputies—was elected for the 2015-2016 congressional period.

The election, which brought down the ruling center-left Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC) from the AL leadership, was possible through an alliance of six parties—out of an unprecedented nine political organizations now represented in a parliament where bipartisanship was the rule until the start of this century.

The social democratic Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN), the center-right Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC)—the country's two traditional political groups—and the rightist Movimiento Libertario (ML) are the opposition team's major forces. Three smaller Christian parties complete the group—the Partido Renovación Costarricense (PRC), Partido Restauración Nacional (PRN), and Alianza Demócrata Cristiana (ADC), the last two with only one deputy each.

The alliance—most of whose members are fiercely opposed to the government—secured PUSC, the more moderate in the group, in the presidency and the vice presidency, and placed the PLN, one of the more radically critical, at the two secretariats, the next-most-important positions. Completing the six-strong roster, one legislator each from ML and—a major surprise—PAC were elected assistant secretaries.

However moderate PUSC legislators—especially Rafael Ortiz, the new president, and Luis Vásquez, the new vice president—have been as opposition deputies, a common denominator for the alliance is its disapproval of controversial bills the government has put before Congress.

The main initiatives cover economic and human rights issues, such as reforming fiscal legislation to improve tax collection, strengthening measures against smuggling, authorizing in vitro fertilization (IVF)—banned in 2000 by the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ)—and recognizing rights for same-sex couples.

The first year of the president's term has been marked, among other obstacles, by tough opposition to the 2015 budget. The opposition—the majority in the AL, where PAC is a minority with 13 of the 57 deputies—tried to drastically cut down the budget, claiming that the initial figures meant a 19% increase compared with last year's numbers and that it went contrary to the austerity PAC promised during the election campaign. During the heated congressional debate, the government reduced it—not as much as its critics wanted—and managed to have it passed.

### *President wants to curb corruption, establish transparency*

Presenting his first report, Solís emphasized the need to improve the executive-legislative dialogue and strengthen this Central American nation's century-old democracy to secure the change he said

PAC is introducing in politics through efforts to curb corruption and establish transparency and accountability ([NotiCen, May 22, 2014](#), and [Sept. 4, 2014](#)).

Besides reporting on the work done so far, the president stressed the need for "a renewed multiparty dialogue" aimed at "strengthening and modernizing our democracy, making it more efficient." Dialogue is also needed around the IVF and same-sex couples initiatives, "two bills we must pass as an ethical and moral commitment to different sectors in our society that deserve all guarantees that their rights are recognized and will be safeguarded," he said.

"They undoubtedly are polemic issues ... which because of their nature must be discussed and solved with sensitivity and respect," Solís pointed out. "Costa Rican democratic tolerance will prevail among us," he said, and he guaranteed "open and constructive dialogue" from his administration.

"This government's fundamental aim is that, in the midst of a plurality of ideas and a diversity of interests ... we continue building new political and social consensus," the president said.

Solís also highlighted "the fundamental challenge we face as a nation: together building a new democratic culture that will lead us to greater economic prosperity and simultaneously more social equity. Conscious of it, in this first year ... we have acted on the premise that we Costa Ricans are living in a democracy in transition. We are advancing from formal democracy to real democracy." The government and the people "must know how to assess what is really happening in our country to be able to correctly identify the causes of our problems and then try the most efficient solutions."

"Contrary to what some doomsayers usually tell us, the country is moving forward with determination along the path of change, something that could never be understood as a march free from surprises and eventual stumbling," Solís pointed out, referring to opposition from conservative quarters. "My government is proud of the impulse given during this first year of work to the process of change."

"Beyond the dangers the voices of political pessimism claim to see—sometimes with an unusual high pitch and in many cases forgetting their own responsibility in the wrongs they now point to, trying in vain to present themselves as the savior of the nation's destiny—the country understands the change is unwavering and will be irreversible," the president stated. "Nobody here is going back to the past, no matter how nostalgic political actors, or the economic interest groups they protect, may feel."

### *Opposition reaction comes quickly*

Negative reaction to the presidential address did not take long to surface from political and entrepreneurial quarters. Echoing the general complaints, the local morning daily La Nación, the country's most influential newspaper and an outstandingly fierce critic of the Solís administration, titled its harsh editorial of May 4 "Economic Aspects of the Presidential Message."

"The vision of the Costa Rican economy condensed in the presidential speech of May 1 does not match reality, although there are some exceptions. It is rather a distorted opinion of what has really happened, especially in the fiscal field, with a reluctance to admit mistakes and the repeated effort to blame third parties for actions or neglects in the government's first year," the editorial said.

"The biggest disparity between reality and rhetoric ... is in the fiscal field ([NotiCen, Oct. 2, 2014](#)), since the president offers an outlook of substantial improvement 'thanks to the successful results in

control of expenditures and budget execution,' but figures show the opposite," the paper added. "He forgot to mention that in October he presented the Asamblea Legislativa with the biggest budget in recent years, expanded by 19%, a regrettable oversight showing lack of transparency about the country's main problem."

"Figures for this year's first quarter show the central government's deficit has actually increased instead of improving," said La Nación. "Although income grew by 117 billion colones [some US\$234 million], expenditures grew a lot more: 152 billion colones [around US\$304 million]—12% more, with yearly inflation below 3%. This caused a deficit increase of 35 billion colones (some US\$70 million), an added 9%."

La Nación also warned that, "as long as [President Solís] does not understand the new reality in the makeup of the legislative directorate, and as long as he is not willing to reduce expenditures and accept future limitations, he will face hard opposition."

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