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Government’s Move to Increase Citizen Participation in Costa Rica Draws Conservative Opposition

by George Rodríguez

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Costa Rica’s government is opening space for citizens to have a say on issues directly related to them. The Luis Guillermo Solís administration believes that Costa Ricans are increasingly critical of the country’s top-down political structure and want a change. With that in mind, the administration held a 13-day citizen consultation exercise that allowed Costa Ricans to express their views and share their experiences about corruption. But conservative sectors—politicians as well as media outlets—have voiced harsh criticism, calling the effort “unscientific and misleading.”

At the start of his four-year term in 2014, President Luis Guillermo Solís condemned corruption in his inauguration speech, where he stressed government transparency and accountability as well as the need for scrutiny by the people, promising that the government would become a “crystal house.”

Later, when he presented his Informe de los 100 Días (Report on the 100 Days), which he described as an occasion to “point out ill practices that have taken root in the government’s administrative apparatus,” Solís again harshly criticized corruption (NotiCen, Oct. 7, 2004, Sept. 18, 2008, Sept. 4, 2014).

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

The president reiterated that “to govern in democracy is, before all and above all, to report to the people and to comply with the Constitution and the law.”

Nineteen months into his mandate, Solís and his administration launched the Estrategia Nacional por un Gobierno Abierto (National Strategy for an Open Government), which they described as a cultural transformation process whose three main components are transparency and access to information, citizen participation, and the fight against corruption. The plan’s central focus is on building citizen control strategies as a means to reduce corruption within public institutions, administration officials said.

So it was that between Sept. 6 and Sept. 18, Costa Ricans had the opportunity to express their views about corruption through a citizen consultation process consisting of a 10-point form made available during that period on the Open Government website.

Citizens were asked to grade, on a scale of 1 to 10, the country’s situation regarding detection, punishment, and prevention of corruption; to state what they believed to be its causes; and to say in which sector—public or private—the phenomenon is most common. The closing question was: “If you could promote actions to punish, detect, or prevent corruption, which would they be? Feel free to go into detail.”
Loud opposition

In reaction, the conservative and influential Costa Rican daily La Nación wrote a stern editorial Sept. 27 charging that the government not only had no understanding of corruption but was not certain about the appropriate means to counter it.

In the editorial, published nine days after the consultation period ended and titled “Survey against corruption,” La Nación wrote: “To come out of its confusion, [the government] will hold a citizen consultation. A survey on the official electronic pages will allow the governed to express their opinion about a very long-standing problem. The method is confusing in itself. Does the government seek to understand corruption or, rather, does it explore the prevailing perception of the phenomenon? Does it seek solutions, or input for a publicity campaign? It is difficult to know.”

Along the same line, Armando González, editor of La Nación, in his weekly column on Sept 18, had described the consultation as “an unscientific and misleading method” that would tell “the authorities, for example, if the citizens perceive more corruption in the public or the private sector.”

Coinciding with opposition politicians, González added, “The fact is completely irrelevant for any practical purpose. At best, it will reveal the prevailing impression in a statistically useless universe.”

The government has repeatedly asserted that it fully understands what corruption is. And it has explained that it is asking the people to give their views, to share their experiences, and to say how they feel present legislation should be changed to detect and prevent the phenomenon, which, although at nowhere near the levels found in other Central American nations, is a cause of concern.

“I want it to be understood that this administration is extremely clear about what corruption is,” Vice Minister of the Presidency Ana Gabriel Zúñiga told LADB. “It seems very peculiar that some people say that we don’t know what corruption is and that we’re asking the people that, although nowhere on the form were people asked what corruption is,” she pointed out. She complained “people rant against a participation action without having read the form.”

Looking for concrete actions

The most important feature of the consultation, she said, “was that people could propose concrete reform actions, that people could point out where we could improve, because in their daily activity, they saw that we weren’t so transparent, and that there were, let’s say, some corruption actions.”

The Constitution mandates strong citizen participation, she said, and ranks the people on an equal footing with the government. According to Article 9 of the Costa Rican Constitution, the government is “popular, representative, participative, alternative, and responsible. It is exercised by the people and three different and independent powers”—the executive, legislative and judiciary branches. Article 50 points out that the government “will seek the greater well-being for all the country’s inhabitants” and that “all persons have the right to a healthy and ecologically balanced environment. Thus, they are legitimized to report actions that infringe that right and to claim repair of the damage caused. The government will guarantee, defend, and preserve that right.”

Zúñiga said that the administration saw a real need “to build capabilities to strengthen democracy and guarantee real participation.” She explained that a separate consultation had been held with experts, and the input produced in both cases is being systematized for presentation during a public
event that will include “dialog and exchange in order to identify some three reform priorities we can promote.”

Zúñiga added that the consultation showed “citizens’ need to influence,” and that people in the 18-35 age group, a decisive voter segment, “have a very different concept of how executive power politics should be exercised.” The consultation process, she said, has resulted in “people participating and feeling they’re a part of the change,” which is the aim of “a more progressive perspective of the exercise of democracy.”

'Still a representative democracy'

She clarified that the Open Government initiative is not intended to result in participatory democracy. “We’re still a representative democracy,” she said, but that “doesn’t mean that representatives have to be detached from the people.” And she warned, “All the persons who don’t like participation should brace themselves, because we’re going to continue to open up spaces. I’m not saying those persons are bad persons... It’s just that they’re clinging to a way of doing politics, a way of understanding public office.”

Zúñiga said she was not surprised by the opposition that the consultation has drawn, and noted that some people are fearful of changes. “I imagine that... it’s people who know that, with what we’re going to do, they possibly won’t be able to benefit from the institutional structure any longer.”

She said there will always be opposition to “cultural transformation.”

“There are always going to be people who will be afraid; there are always going to be people who won’t like to learn something new; and there are always going to be people who feel comfortable in their status quo,” she said, adding, “This is only the start of a new culture, where people basically assume their political responsibility.”

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