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Voters' Options in Costa Rica: Stay on Quest for Change or Return to Tradition

by George Rodríguez

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In the past two elections, Costa Rican voters broke with tradition, and signaled they wanted a change. First, they gave their country its first woman president; then they supported a political outsider.

But voters were gripped by disappointment when both administrations became embroiled in major corruption scandals, although the presidents were not participants in either of them.

First woman president

Although a member of the long-established social democratic Partido Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Party, PLN), Laura Chinchilla (2010-2014) was seen as an option for change. In a male-dominated political stage, Chinchilla—a political scientist who had been a legislator and vice president as well as security and justice minister—managed an unprecedented win in 2010.

After earning one of the highest vote counts in the nation's electoral history—just under 900,000 of the almost 1.9 million votes cast, or 46.9%—Chinchilla received the presidential sash from two-time president Oscar Arias (1986-1990, 2006-2010) ([NotiCen, May 13, 2010](#)). It wasn't long before the problems began, though. As a result of a territorial dispute with neighboring Nicaragua, and as a national security measure, construction began on a dirt road on the Costa Rican side of the 309-km land border between the two countries. But when the first winter rains washed away parts of the road, a scam by public works officials and hired builders became evident. Chinchilla began legal proceedings against those responsible and fired her public works minister ([NotiCen, May 3, 2012](#), and [Aug. 23, 2012](#)).

The outsider

The 2014 presidential election had in store an even more astonishing surprise: A total newcomer to politics, Luis Guillermo Solís, obtained a sweeping victory over his PLN rival, whom he beat with 77.77% of the votes, or just over 1.3 million ballots of the approximately 1.7 million cast. (Absenteeism in Costa Rica has been in the 30%-range for years [[NotiCen, April 17, 2014](#), and [Sept. 4, 2014](#)].)

Reaching the presidency as the candidate of the center-left Partido Acción Ciudadana (Citizen Action Party, PAC) meant hard work for Solís, a historian, political analyst, and university professor whose outsider status was reflected in the early pre-election polls, which placed him at the bottom, with percentages that started off below the error margin.

As its predecessor, the Solís administration has been severely hit by an influence-peddling incident often described as the country's worst corruption case. It has involved members of the executive, legislative and judiciary branches and a local cement importer who is now in jail, awaiting trial together with former top officials of a leading bank.

A congressional investigative committee looked into the affair and questioned the president during a lengthy session held at his official residence, the Casa Presidencial. But despite the effort by the PLN members of the committee to show some degree of presidential involvement, Solís gave abundant testimony to the contrary.

Having campaigned and reached the presidency on a program centered on change from traditional politics, Solís' popularity has dived to 30% since the scandal unraveled.

A new choice

The question for the next presidential and parliamentary elections, scheduled for Feb. 4, is whether Costa Rican voters will continue seeking change or go back to supporting one of the two traditional options, the PLN or the conservative Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (Social Christian Unity Party, PUSC).

Historically, the PLN and the PUSC had been the overwhelmingly dominant forces in the country's single-chamber, 57-member parliament, the Asamblea Legislativa. Then, in 2002, the PAC participated in elections for the first time, on a powerful ethics and anti-corruption platform, and placed itself as the country's third major political force, eliminating the essentially bipartisan control of Congress.

The PAC rose quickly in the following three elections and managed to win the 2014 presidential vote, but it was not able to couple that with a majority in Congress, where it rounded up the second largest bloc, after the PLN.

This time, the outsider in the presidential race is Juan Diego Castro, of the Partido Integración Nacional (PIN), a confrontational lawyer whose blunt anti-corruption discourse has lifted him from fifth place to leading candidate since the campaign began in October ([NotiCen, Dec. 14, 2017](#)).

Castro's frankness and tough stand, especially on issues such as security and corruption, has led critics to label him as a populist. His campaign slogan describes him as un presidente de verdad ("a president for real").

A survey published earlier this month by the online news outlet Mundo CR placed Castro—a former security and justice minister—as the favorite option among 13 candidates, with 29.7% of those polled favoring him. He is closely followed by the PLN's Antonio Álvarez with 27.4%; the PUSC's Rodolfo Piza trailing with 12.5%.

No candidate is close to the 40% plus one needed to win the election outright, so a runoff will likely be necessary between the top two vote-getters. About 70% of voters say they plan to vote, but many—almost 27%—say they are undecided, according to the poll published by Mundo CR. The date for the runoff is officially set for the first Sunday in April, which this year coincides with Easter Sunday, presenting a logistical challenge in a country whose Constitution establishes Catholicism as the state religion.

Meanwhile, in a recent opinion article published by the influential local daily La Nación, political analyst Constantino Urcuyo, a former legislator, warned that Costa Rica is in the midst of a political crisis that he blames on the political parties' inability to renew themselves, as well as on the ongoing corruption scandal.

Costa Rican voters have fallen prey to “political consumerism,” Urcuyo argued. “The search for something new has led to the consumption of political products with no quality test,” he wrote.

“The mistakes and corrupt acts by some public figures has increased mistrust, something that contains a dangerous paradox: People say they believe nothing, but they can end up believing anything as long it appears to be a novelty and opposes what is old, worn down or questioned,” Urcuyo warned. “There’s the naïve temptation to follow a messiah capable of magically solving all problems with no other resource than authoritarian will, with no vision of the global world and the country’s future. ... Frivolous publicity or the populist promise anchored in demagoguery and in providential saviors are risky mirages, and what is worse, false ones.”

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