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Religion-Politics Mix Marks Tight Presidential Runoff in Costa Rica

by George Rodríguez

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In an environment polarized along religion, gender issues, and interpretation of traditional values, Costa Rica's voters are getting ready to cast their ballots in a tight presidential runoff on April 1 between a conservative former Evangelical opposition congressman and a progressive former labor minister of the governing party.

The two contenders share a last name---they are no relation, though—and a profession, but they represent the two strikingly different ideological choices.

Fabricio Alvarado, 42, and Carlos Alvarado, 38, two former television reporters, are the candidates respectively of the rightist evangelical Partido Restauración Nacional (National Restoration Party, PRN) and the center-left, ruling Partido Acción Ciudadana (Citizen Action Party, PAC) ([NotiCen, Jan. 25, 2018](#), and [Feb. 15, 2018](#)).

For decades, the two dominant political forces in Costa Rica—the social democratic Partido Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Party, PLN) and the Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (Social Christian Unity Party, PUSC)—dominated the political scene. Through elections, they took turns at the presidency and shared, in varying percentages, most of the 57 seats in the Asamblea Legislativa, the country's single-chamber parliament, with a few minority parties having scarce legislative representation.

All that began to change in 2002, when the PAC positioned itself as Costa Rica's third political party, after the PUSC, the winner that year, and the PLN. The PAC managed to beat PLN in the 2014 presidential runoff, and is now aiming at a second consecutive term, with neither traditional force taking part in second-round vote ([NotiCen, Feb. 15, 2018](#)).

A poll released on March 6 by the research center Centro de Investigación y Estudios Políticos (CIEP) at the Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR) predicts a tight runoff contest between the two candidates. Less than a month before the decisive vote, the two contenders are virtually tied, with the PAC ahead with 41%, followed by the PRN with 39%, a difference well within the 3.1% margin of error.

Unlike previous elections, where campaign debates were related to the economy, security, and social issues, voters this year seem to be focused on religious beliefs, gender topics, and interpretation of traditional values.

During his tenure as the only PRN congressman (he was elected in 2014), Fabricio Alvarado maintained his stern stand against same-sex marriage, adoption by same-sex couples, in vitro fertilization, and abortion, among other socially sensitive and divisive issues.

Congresswoman Patricia Mora of the leftist Frente Amplio (Broad Front, FA) rejected Fabricio Alvarado's platform. His having a shot at the presidency, she said, means "we're really facing a return to the 18th century; we're at the threshold of our country returning to the Middle Ages."

'Heterosexual morality'

Despite Fabricio Alvarado's efforts to rebut the charges of homophobia levied by members of the LGBT community and other opposition figures, one of his two vice-presidential running mates, Francisco Prendas, made comments that had the opposite effect and quickly had to be retracted.

Interviewed on Feb. 26 by a local radio station, Prendas was asked whether a gay person could be appointed to serve in a PRN government.

"The issue is that the vast majority of Costa Ricans, who don't favor gay marriage or adoption by same-sex persons, see very clear and specific values and principles represented in us," he said, adding that in a situation where two persons "with similar criteria and capabilities" were competing for the same job, they'd "possibly choose" the heterosexual person.

"What we don't want is to hurt the values and interests of most Costa Ricans who, if they see a minister participating, perhaps, in a [gay pride] march, they won't feel represented, and not only that, [they would feel] even offended, and we don't want that."

Those in high positions in a PNR administration should possess, he said, "eligibility and morality [in line] with the vast majority of the population," adding that "heterosexual morality is fine."

Immediate reaction

The following day, the human rights organizations Acciones Estratégicas por los Derechos Humanos en Costa Rica (ACCEDER) and the Frente por los Derechos Igualitarios (FDI) issued strong statements.

Under the title "Citizen alert: normalization of hate discourses," ACCEDER warned about "discrimination in plain sight in a Fabricio Alvarado government," and "the eventual persecution of lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons in public institutions, based on what Restauración Nacional calls 'heterosexual morality.'"

This "takes the form of a real threat to coexistence in society and to the foundations of Costa Rican society, but above all, it is a real threat to the human rights of all people in Costa Rica," it added.

Almost simultaneously, FDI released a statement charging that Prendas' words "reflect a more than clear intention to discriminate, exclude, and alienate persons because of sexual orientation and gender identity."

It also noted that the PRN position poses the risk of "a clear attack on constitutional rights and guarantees."

FDI spokesperson Michelle Jones was quoted in the release as saying, "It's not by chance that, while PRN issues increasingly discriminatory statements that threaten the integrity and stability of a sector of the population, we already have 29 reported cases of violence and discrimination." She did not provide details on those reports.

Another FDI spokesperson, Janekeith Durán, also quoted in the press release, warned that "a political party that believes in the supremacy of a group of persons based on a particular feature is a threat to all persons who don't share that same feature and to democracy as a whole."

The FDI pointed out that Prendas offers a glimpse to “a real threat of regressions in human rights.”

In another local radio interview, Prendas admitted that some people could possibly feel discriminated against by his words and said, “I didn’t mean to offend them.”

In answer to reporters’ questions, Fabricio Alvarado said, “If we’ve offended anyone with this, I apologize. I apologize to Catholics, to Evangelicals, to the LGBT community ...

I apologize, because someone has to apologize for this polarization ... and if people think we’re the ones responsible, I apologize.”

His statement came hours after La Nación, a San José daily newspaper, printed a full-page story about statements made by Fabricio Alvarado in 2016 and 2017, before the election campaign, about gay persons, when he addressed participants in religious ceremonies in two Evangelical temples, one of them led by the parents of his other vice-presidential running mate, Ivonne Acuña.

In June 2016, the candidate said, “God is not looking for people who would send to hell those who are in sin or are wrong. God is looking for people ... who will make those who are outside the Lord’s path to come so we can embrace them and we can restore them, so those people can change.”

Asked last month by reporters about that specific statement, he explained: “I agree that people who want to leave homosexuality must have a space where they can be assisted and restored.”

-- End --