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## Costa Rica's Presidential Runoff Keeps Governing Party in Power

by George Rodríguez

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Costa Rica's voters gave a nontraditional political party a second chance at running their country, and with it raised the expectations to a level far higher than the first time a candidate for the Partido Acción Ciudadana (Citizen Action Party, PAC) was elected, four years ago.

With an ambitious government plan, president-elect Carlos Alvarado, a journalist, former rock singer and guitarist, and former labor minister, faces a major challenge: delivering on campaign promises that voters felt had not been met by the outgoing administration: to relentlessly fight corruption, introduce long-due tax reforms, wipe out extreme poverty, and improve citizen safety, among others.

Like his predecessor, Luis Guillermo Solís, Alvarado started his campaign at the bottom of the country's opinion polls, surprisingly soared to second position—behind rival Fabricio Alvarado, of the Partido Restauración Nacional (National Restoration Party, PRN)—and eventually won the April 1 runoff ([NotiCen, Feb. 15, 2018](#)).

### *Divisive campaign*

The campaign for this year's election was unusually divisive, mostly around personal principles, religious beliefs, and human rights issues, such as same sex marriage and other LGBT rights.

Before and after the runoff, given the notable polarization, both contenders repeatedly underlined the need for Costa Ricans to reconcile and stressed the need to build what they separately described as a "national government"—one of unity.

This year's campaign, particularly for the runoff, seems to have drastically, and perhaps permanently, changed Costa Rican politics.

For one thing, it apparently dismantled the country's traditional bipartisanship. For the first time since the establishment of the Second Republic in 1948, neither of the two traditional parties reached the runoff. The social democratic Partido Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Party, PLN)—formed by the winners of the armed struggle that led to the Second Republic—and its historic rival, the Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (Social Christian Unity Party, PUSC), were both losers.

For decades, those two organizations had dominated the 57-member single-chamber legislature, the Asamblea Legislativa. After their runoff debacle, however, the leaders of the PLN and PUSC freed their rank-and-file supporters to back either of the nontraditional presidential options.

At first, this seemed like an opportunistic way for the PLN and PUSC to somehow hang on to a modicum of power, taking advantage of both presidential hopefuls' youth—Carlos Alvarado is 38, Fabricio Alvarado is 44—and lack of governing experience.

## *Reaching out to other parties*

On election night, after the country's top electoral authority, the Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones (TSE), announced the PAC's victory, Carlos Alvarado was surrounded by a variety of political leaders, ranging from left to center-right, as he spoke to followers gathered in San Pedro, a district in eastern San José.

Since then, the president elect has been holding meetings with the seven political parties that will be represented in the AL during the 2018-2022 term, which begins off May 1.

The lack of a parliamentary majority for Alvarado's party demands high negotiating skills and an ability to reach agreements from an administration starting off with highly ambitious goals and only the third-largest congressional bloc (10), after the PLN (18) and the PRN (14).

A sector within PUSC is supporting Alvarado, and the party's former presidential candidate, Rodolfo Piza, signed a detailed agreement with the president-elect on how to tackle the country's top issues.

Although it has not signed a formal agreement, the weakened, leftist Frente Amplio (Broad Front, FA), which went down from its present nine deputies to barely one, has stated its willingness to work with the incoming PAC government as well.

Alvarado has proposed to name almost half of his Cabinet members from parties ready to cooperate with his administration.

Vice President-elect Epsy Campbell, the first Afro Costa Rican to hold the post, and Víctor Morales, who will lead the PAC deputies in the legislature, have been meeting with elected legislators from different parties.

For its part, the PLN has stated, through its future bloc leader, Carlos Ricardo Benavides, that although it is willing to cooperate, it does not want any positions in the administration. A similar reply came from Carlos Avendaño, the future head of the PRN legislative bloc, who said that his party would be willing to "interact" and "seek agreements that could be useful to the country."

In an article titled "What Costa Rica expects of Carlos," Jorge Woodbridge, a member of past PLN administrations and a columnist for the influential local daily La Nación, wrote five days after the runoff: "Carlo Alvarado, you have received important support from the Costa Rican people ... all of us are committed to supporting you, but you must not fail us."

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