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Evangelicals Gain Ground in Latin American Politics

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The mere fact that the Evangelical pastor Fabricio Alvarado Muñoz made it to the April 1 presidential runoff in Costa Rica—after receiving the largest number of votes in the initial round on Feb. 4 (24% of the votes to 21% for his closest opponent)—highlights an ongoing process of rapprochement in Latin America between Evangelical churches and ultra-conservative political factions.

Although Alvarado Muñoz eventually lost to Carlos Alvarado Quesada (no relation), his initial performance follows the success of Jimmy Morales, who won the presidency of Guatemala in 2015 ([NotiCen, Nov. 5, 2015](#)), Brazil's Marcelo Crivella, elected mayor of Rio de Janeiro in 2016 ([NotiSur, Nov. 11, 2016](#), and [March 24, 2017](#)), and the 266 Evangelical churches in Colombia that helped tip the balance, in the 2016 referendum, against a peace accord that the government and guerrilla rebels had signed to end more than a half-century of bloody civil war ([NotiSur, Oct. 21, 2016](#)).

Various studies on this phenomenon suggest that, when engaging in politics, Evangelical pastors and their churches tend to have specific and shared ideological leanings, much in the way the Catholic Church did when, starting in the second half of the 20th century, it helped bring the Christian Democratic political model from Europe to Latin America.

Colombian sociologist Javier Calderón Castillo, a researcher at the think tank Centro Estratégico Latinoamericano de Geopolítica (CELAG), has found that Evangelicals tend to have ultra-conservative positions on family and social liberties; are staunch defenders of neoliberalism (free-market capitalism); have significant financial resources thanks to contributions from church members and from various outside business interests; and have ready-made media access through their own television, radio, and social network outlets. News reports suggest there are approximately 19,000 Evangelical churches in Latin America and more than 100 million worshippers—roughly a sixth of the region's population.

As Calderón Castillo argues, the policies to which Evangelical churches adhere or directly promote coincide with neoliberalism. Tied to that is the emphasis Evangelical churches in Colombian and Central America place on the so-called "protestant work ethic"—on the successful, frugal, consistent, and devoted worker "for whom material success appears as proof of God's favor," the sociologist explains. If an individual earns more, Calderón Castillo adds, he or she will be inclined, in turn, to associate that improvement with the church and become even more involved.

Huge assets

The CELAG researcher notes that many politically inclined pastors, including the mayor of Rio de Janeiro, belong to the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), a Pentecostal church. The largest such association worldwide (it operates in 147 countries), the UCKG has pragmatic, rightist political leanings. Brazilian financial authorities suggest that together, the country's various Evangelical churches moved more than US\$7 billion in 2015, an astronomical sum that has allowed them to continue growing exponentially. In Colombia, Evangelical churches have registered assets worth US\$5 billion.

It is unclear how much money Evangelical leaders manage in other countries of the region, though it can be assumed that the “faith business” is lucrative in those places as well, according to Calderón Castillo. Church-related finances are unregulated: Pastors and their churches are exempt from paying taxes, and there’s no official oversight of either revenue or spending.

Given the official numbers gathered in Brazil and Colombia, the revenue generated elsewhere in Latin America is presumably substantial, especially in Central America, where such entities have grown at a dazzling pace, and at the expense of the traditional Catholic Church. In Guatemala, 42% of the population belongs to an Evangelical church. Honduras is second on the list (41%) followed by Nicaragua (36%), El Salvador (35%), Costa Rica (22%), and Panama (18%).

Politics of exclusion

In an analysis piece following Alvarado Muñoz’s success in the first round of the election in Costa Rica—which, together with Uruguay, has one of the two most stable and consolidated democracies in Latin America—the German radio and television network Deutsche Welle (DW) noted, “The conservatives of Latin America have a new and powerful ally: the Pentecostal-Evangelical currents that are gaining ground and today celebrate a partial victory in Costa Rica.”

The German news source provided an overview of the political career of Alvarado Muñoz, the candidate for the conservative Partido de Restauración Nacional (National Restoration Party), and explained that his meteoric rise was due in large part to a popular backlash—driven by a rightist press campaign—to a call by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights to respect and guarantee equal rights for sexual minorities and transgender people ([NotiCen, Feb. 15, 2018](#)). “Articulating the rejection to that plea was key to Alvarado’s victory in the first round of the election,” DW argued.

The article cited a poll conducted in 2014 by the Washington DC-based Pew Research Center showing that 69% of adults in Latin America identified themselves as Catholic. The number represents a huge drop, given that until the 1960s, at least 90% of the region’s population was Catholic. The percentage of Protestants, on the other hand, is now up to 19%. The upward trend shows no signs of slowing, and its political impact is only now beginning to be felt.

Despite the diversity of Protestant denominations in Latin America, most have a common “moral agenda,” Colombian sociologist William Beltrán explained in an interview last October with the Bogota daily *El Tiempo*. And the “two most important pillars” of that agenda, he said, are “opposition to recognizing the rights of the LGBT community, and rejection of any effort to decriminalize abortion.”

Credibility and prosperity

Another factor in the recent success of Evangelical candidates is that people are losing faith in traditional political players, the DW analysis argues. “The credibility of the political leadership in Latin America has hit rock bottom. The vast majority of people see politics as a dirty business,” the article explains. Throughout the region, anti-democratic conservatives have also taken advantage of that fact to take actions that discourage all forms of participation in political life.

“Many representatives of Evangelical churches, and of the Catholic Church as well, react with moral pleas,” Thomas Wieland, chief projects officer for the German Episcopal group *Adveniat*, explains in the DW piece. “The people see them as an alternative, as people who aren’t going to steal [public money]. That’s why Evangelical candidates are becoming more popular.”

There's been a paradoxical alliance, furthermore, between Evangelicals and the most conservative sectors of Catholicism, based on a shared defense of certain moral/sexual ideas. Another element linking Evangelicalism to hard-line political conservatism, according to Wieland, is the importance assigned to property and material success.

"Prosperity theology is gaining ground and matches up with the traditional and conservative values of the political parties through which Evangelical elites are positioning themselves," he notes. "Prosperity theology is an important aspect for understanding the political convictions of these groups."

The belief holds that people who are "successful in this life are loved and especially blessed by God," says Wieland. It marks a contrast, in that sense, with the preferential emphasis that Latin American bishops have placed for decades on the poor—"an option based on the Bible and also emphasized by Pope Francis," he explains. Either way, Evangelicalism is growing exponentially among the region's underprivileged—just as it is gaining ground politically—challenging efforts aimed at making society more liberal.

Questionable bedfellows

Diego Vera, author of a DW Feb. 6 report titled "La emergente influencia de las iglesias evangélicas en la política de América Latina" (The emerging influence of Evangelical churches in Latin American politics), notes that these congregations openly associate with the worst sectors of the region's political right.

The author cites the case of Brazil and recalls that, before being sentenced to 15 years in jail for repeated acts of corruption, former congressman Eduardo Cunha led the Frente Parlamentar Evangélica (Evangelical Parliamentary Front—representing 92 of the 513 deputies in Brazil's Congress) against reforms favoring reproductive rights for women, and in the "questionable legislative trial" that resulted in the ousting of the democratically elected president Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016) in August 2016 ([NotiSur, Sept. 30, 2016](#)).

In 2012, at the behest of Rousseff, the Congress set up a Truth Commission tasked with investigating complicity by various churches in human rights violations committed during Brazil's last civil-military dictatorship (1964-1985). Specifically, the commission was instructed to focus on the role played by the Catholic and Evangelical churches. The resolution that created the body mentioned the "new Pentecostal creeds" and noted their explosive growth during those 21 bloody years.

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