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Deborah Tyroler

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On Major Candidates In Costa Rica's February Elections

by Deborah Tyroler

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The Costa Rican presidential elections in February will be a race between the Social Christian Unity Party's candidate, former foreign minister Rafael Angel Calderon, and former central bank president Carlos Manuel Castillo of the National Liberation Party (PLN). Both candidates are likely to give "economic liberalism" and privatization top billing in the campaign. Calderon Fournier is the son of late president Rafael Angel Calderon Guardia, a populist who together with the Communist Party in the 1940s, initiated the era of state economic intervention which laid the foundations for the PLN's social democratic project. Despite having lost twice to PLN candidates Luis Alberto Monge in 1982 and Oscar Arias in 1986 Calderon has reportedly consolidated his leadership in the PUSC among conservative and neo-liberal interests and a substantial popular base devoted to his father's memory. Carlos Manuel Castillo represents the PLN's old guard, and is considered conservative by the new generation of social democrats who backed Arias in his bid for the presidency. In the 1980s, the PLN has paid dearly in terms of ideological coherence. Faced with a $4.5 billion foreign debt and domestic recession, the PLN began dismantling the welfare state apparatus constructed by the party in the 1950s and 1960s. Economic reform resulted in the rebirth of private banks, privatization of state companies and agencies, and reduced credit sources for small and medium-scale farmers not linked to the "Agriculture of Change" program promoted by both parties. This program encourages the cultivation of alternative crops such as citrus fruits, macadamia nuts, and flowers for export. Increased export revenues are needed to make debt service payments. Economic liberalism as economic policy and political ideology gained at the expense of Costa Rica's social democratic model. Many members of the PLN are concerned about reversing bank nationalization, one of the party's major accomplishments. According to one PLN official, "If the PLN doesn't represent the commitment to nationalized banks, then what does it represent?" An unidentified union leader told Pensamiento Proprio: "There was a time when the state was better able to intervene and mediate social disputes. Now, the only negotiations with any weight are those between the Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund." Former Planning Minister Oton Solis dismisses such concerns: "The PLN is a democratic party in which there is constant debate about national problems. Although the presence of some liberals has been prominent, it doesn't mean they have control. The government simply has taken measures which it considers to be in the country's best interests." Economic liberalism as policy is now accepted by both parties, result of a consensus on strategy to expand exports and foreign investment, and to cut public spending. This acceptance has been in part the outcome of conditions imposed by multilateral financial institutions, and of programs implemented by the US Agency for International Development. During the PUSC primaries in November, Calderon touched on popular issues such as food self-sufficiency, a goal abandoned by the current government. He also capitalized on his father's reformist legacy. Pointing to the PUSC's center-right tendencies, the PLN questioned the sincerity of Calderon's populist proclamations. Many PLN members acknowledge that the Costa Rican poor openly support Calderon. However, the appeal to his father's legacy was not enough to defeat Monge in 1982, nor in 1986 when the PLN put him on the defensive by asserting he would back US policy against Nicaragua. Calderon's support for the regional peace process is well-known. Campaign spokesperson Victor Vargas said, "This time, the people aren't going to believe that Rafael is a warmonger. It was just a PLN
publicity stunt during the last election." Next, Calderon has not joined the conservative opposition to the creation of a Central American Parliament, a provision of the 1987 Esquipulas II peace plan. Castillo and the PLN are expected to capitalize on Arias' role as peacemaker which remind Costa Ricans of the PLN role in abolishing the army in 1948. Next, one of Arias' campaign pledges, construction of 80,000 homes, is being implemented. Inflation, which rose to 25.3% in 1988, may play a role in the election. Housing Minister Fernando Zumbado says, "Inflation will be a determining factor. If the government manages to keep it down, and follow through with the peace plan and housing program, the electorate will judge Arias' term in office as a success. That, logically, will help the PLN." Meanwhile, the PLN is likely to be troubled by charges that some party leaders are linked to drug traffickers. The most damaging expose thus far emerged when the parliamentary commission investigating links between political parties and the drug trade discovered that US citizen James Casey had contributed one million colones to former president Daniel Oduber for the 1986 PLN election campaign. Until recently the country's most popular politician, Oduber's image has suffered. The electoral duel will likely be focused on image rather than platform content. Much of the campaign, to begin in November, will be carried out via television. Calderon has hired publicity agent Roger Ailes, former adviser to US president George Bush while the PLN may use the services of another election publicity expert, Joel McClairy, who has worked as adviser to US Democratic Party candidates. (Based on an article by John McPhaul appearing in April 1989 edition of Pensamiento Proprio, a publication of the Regional Coordination for Economic and Social Research of Central America and the Caribbean-CRIES, Managua.)