

8-28-1997

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LADB Staff. "Allegations of Fraud Surface in Costa Rican Presidential Primary." (1997). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/8308>

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Allegations of Fraud Surface in Costa Rican Preidential Primary

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Costa Rica

Published: 1997-08-28

The presidential candidate for Costa Rica's governing Partido de Liberacion Nacional (PLN), Jose Miguel Corrales, was forced to call for an investigation of his own party following charges that his supporters may have committed fraud in the PLN's presidential primary. The primary selected Corrales as its standard bearer in June.

The two major parties contending for the presidency in the February 1998 elections have taken turns pinning scandal charges on each other. First came the PLN's call for investigations and punishment of Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC) presidential candidate Miguel Angel Rodriguez for possible links to the notorious Mexican political strongman and suspected money launderer Carlos Hank Gonzalez (see NotiCen, 07/03/97).

Then, in mid-July, the PLN's election tribunal (Tribunal de Elecciones Internas, TEI) discovered irregularities in 47 voting places. Rodriguez was quick to charge the PLN with corrupt election procedures. Corrales moved quickly to control the damage. He called on the national electoral tribunal (Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones, TSE) to investigate the matter, bypassing the party's TEI. He also invited the public prosecutor to investigate and punish those who may have committed fraud.

Corrales said he did not want to become president with any doubt about his honesty hanging over him. Furthermore, he announced that if the TEI found sufficient cause, he would agree to nullify the June vote and submit to a new primary. However, PLN secretary general Rolando Gonzalez said that, since the election was an internal matter involving only the PLN, he would not call in the TSE. No culprits were found and party leaders said it was not even certain that the voting irregularities were the result of an organized conspiracy.

Gonzalez laid the blame for the anomalies on a few PLN election workers who took advantage of the absence of poll watchers "to manipulate the votes." In addition, he said that the number of questionable votes was not enough to warrant nullifying the primary or postponing the party's July 8 ratification of Corrales as the PLN candidate. Election Tribunal ratifies PLN primary outcome Despite an initial reluctance to become involved, the TSE reviewed the election returns and found that 18% of the ballots, amounting to more than 29,000 ballots, were invalid or openly fraudulent.

Invalidating all the defective ballots cast for Corrales would not, however, affect the outcome of the primary since he received 73% of the votes. On Aug. 18, the Tribunal ratified Corrales as the party's candidate without passing judgement on the balloting process or making its own independent count. The incident highlighted the PLN's internal divisions as Corrales's defeated opponent for the nomination, Walter Coto, denounced the irregularities as a case of orchestrated fraud. He charged

that 99% of the irregularities were found in voting centers where Corrales won with big margins. In many of these, Coto supporters were not present as poll watchers to prevent PLN vote tampering.

Even though Corrales is now free to launch his campaign against the PUSC candidate, the vote fraud threatened to tarnish his image as an anti-corruption candidate who has been openly critical of scandals in his own party. The most recent opinion poll, taken as the vote fraud unfolded, showed that both presidential candidates lost favor with the public, but that Corrales lost five-percentage points more than Rodriguez. Corrales now trails his rival 23.3% to 26.9%. [Sources: Inforpress Centroamericana (Guatemala), 07/11/97; Tico Times (Costa Rica), 07/04/97, 08/22/97; La Nacion (Costa Rica), 07/01/97, 07/15/97, 08/17/97, 08/22/97]

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