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Costa Rican President Miguel Angel Rodriguez Seeks National Consensus

by Guest

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Amid warnings of impending doom for Costa Rican democracy, Ticos were urged this week to put aside their differences and reach a consensus on how best to solve the most pressing problems afflicting the country. "We either unite, or we sink," warned San Jose Archbishop Roman Arrieta, one of the speakers at a ceremony Monday in the Melico Salazar Theater in downtown San Jose to launch President Miguel Angel Rodriguez's much-vaunted process of National Consensus (Concertacion Nacional).

However, as words of encouragement were uttered in the cozy surroundings of the theater hall, outside in the rain, trade-union representatives branded Rodriguez's initiative a "farce," while distributing pamphlets with megaphone in hand. Opposition parties are wary of president's initiative Support from several political quarters was also cautious.

Although willing to give the talks a try, opposition parties are weary of being sucked into what may just be a ploy by the president to push unpopular legislation through a congress where he has no majority. "We are going into this in good faith, but we will be very watchful," said Jose Manuel Nunez, congressional head of the minority Democratic Force party, who will be among more than 100 representatives of social and political groups participating in the process.

Rodriguez started pushing for consensus as soon as he was elected on Feb. 1. Winning by a narrow margin, he obtained the lowest share of congressional seats by any president since 1974. After several months of preparation, the talks begin for real next week, initially focusing on a 10-item agenda including issues such as privatization, corruption, and pensions. The main discussions will take place in a National Forum made up of politicians, academics, trade unionists, businesspeople, farmers, ethnic and religious representatives, magistrates, and environmentalists.

Danilo Chaverri, head of the coordinating committee in charge of the talks, told The Tico Times that he hoped an agreement could be reached within three months on issues currently under consideration in congress, such as the liberalization of the state monopolies in insurance and telecommunications. "There are other subjects on which we can afford to take a bit longer," said Chaverri on the way out of the ceremony where he gave the opening speech. Rodriguez's relations with congress were strained recently, after he urged deputies to hold back on legislation relating to issues on the consensus agenda.

Although ruling Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC) legislators agreed after a few mutterings of protest, many on the opposition benches refuse to comply, seeing it as an infringement on the sovereignty of congress by the executive. Of nearly 300 bills awaiting discussion in the Legislative Assembly, many are related to the issues that will be thrashed out by the National Forum of Consensus. Backers hope consensus will defeat narrow political interests. The main premise of those who spoke at the ceremony is that the democratic system, of which Costa Ricans are so proud, is under threat by narrow political interests that are discrediting it and preventing it from tackling problems of national importance. The only way to resolve this is through consensus, they concluded.

Speakers included Rodriguez, Arrieta, and Chaverri, as well as Presidency Minister Roberto Tovar, former presidency minister of Chile Genero Arriagada, and University Rectors Council president Gabriel Macaya. Tovar blasted the corruption that has become ingrained in Costa Rica's political system and the selfish individualism that has permeated society with the advent of modern life. "It's taken only a generation gradually to lose the politics of social and economic cohesion, of which we were once so proud, and become stagnant," said Tovar. "Do we have to wait for violence, dictatorship, and war to be forced to unite so that the common good can flourish again?"

Arriagada, who played an active role in Chile's transition to democracy after the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, warned how easy it is for a country to lose the democracy it takes for granted through political intransigence and lack of dialogue. The ex-minister explained that the bloody coup that brought Pinochet to power in 1973 was the product of years of divisive politics that preceded it. Before the coup, he said, Chileans had also been proud of their long democratic traditions. Archbishop Arrieta likened the nation to a ship. "If a storm is unleashed, it is logical that we should all unite to keep it [the ship] afloat and take it to port safely," he said. "Otherwise, the ship will sink and we will all go down with it, no matter what group, party, or religion we belong to." A theme repeated throughout the evening was that no single party or group ever has the answer to all problems. This was echoed by Rodriguez, who implored Costa Ricans to "give consensus a chance."

Despite the skepticism expressed by many of his National Liberation Party (PLN) colleagues, former president Jose Maria Figueres, who stepped down from power on May 8, gave his wholehearted support to Rodriguez's plea. Figueres will be among several former heads of state who will form part of a Board of Mediators in charge of making a final decision on any issues the National Forum is unable to agree upon. The board will also include the archbishop and Vice Presidents Astrid Fischel and Elizabeth Odio.

Critics question sincerity of campaign for consensus

However, PLN secretary general Rolando Gonzalez, who was present at the ceremony, accused Rodriguez of having no clear direction or policies. After the event, Gonzalez told the daily *La Republica*, "The government is inconsistent: on one hand, it calls on all sectors to sit down and negotiate, and on the other it hits the people with constant price hikes." Recent rate increases for public services, such as water, electricity and gasoline, was one factor that incited the union protests outside the theater.

The Social and National Struggle Forum, comprising several public-sector unions, handed out pamphlets accusing the new government of pursuing "openly aggressive social and economic

policies," such as cutting public spending and keeping wages down, while carrying on with the pretense of consensus. "The real consensus in this country continues to take place behind the backs of the Costa Rican people, between the main traditional parties in the Legislative Assembly, among national and foreign business chambers and elected politicians, in the style of the [Jose Maria] Figueres- [Rafael] Calderon pact," said the flyer (see NotiSur, 03/31/95). The issues on the initial consensus agenda are: corruption, the insurance and telecommunications markets, severance pay, pensions, family assistance and social development, environmental service payments, trade union freedom, wage policy, and rural development.

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