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Gen. Torrijos' Son Martin to Represent Governing Party in Panama Elections

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The major political parties in Panama have selected their presidential candidates for the May 1999 election. It is still not clear, however, what the lineup of forces will be as both the governing Partido Revolucionario Democratica (PRD) and the largest opposition party, the Partido Arnulfista, are still plumbing for support among the smaller parties that must live politically through alliances.

The defeat of President Ernesto Perez Balladares' bid for re-election in August (see NotiCen, 09/03/98) resulted in confusion and finger pointing while PRD leaders searched for scapegoats. Internal party bickering and the sudden relaxation of Perez Balladares' grip on the party broke the PRD primary wide open. Fourteen candidates sought the nomination, including three relatives of former head of state Gen. Omar Torrijos (1968-1978).

Party stalwarts push maverick Alfredo Oranges aside

In its Oct. 25 primary, the PRD chose Martin Torrijos Espino, son of Gen. Torrijos, as its candidate in the 1999 election. He is former vice minister of interior and justice in the current administration. The party's Junta de Escrutinio officially confirmed the result on Oct. 28. The nominee received 56% of the primary vote, ahead of Alfredo Oranges with 23%.

In third place was the nominee's cousin, Hugo Torrijos Richa, with 11%, followed by another of the general's sons, Omar Torrijos Pauzner, with 5%. Several other candidates received about 1% each. Oranges, the first announced candidate, was distinguished by his opposition to the re-election attempt and his early challenge to Perez Balladares (see NotiCen 06/11/898 and 09/03/98).

Considered a reformer and a maverick within the party, Oranges clearly expected to take advantage of a weakened president and was widely thought to have support from "torrijista" elements in the party. However, he was soon attacked by party stalwarts who charged that he was under investigation for money laundering by anti-Mafia prosecutors in Italy.

In July, Oranges produced a letter from Italian prosecutor Vittorio de Cesare certifying that he was not under investigation, but the issue remained unresolved when the primary vote was taken, and analysts believe it was a factor in Oranges' defeat. Another factor was the concerted opposition to Oranges by other candidates. Oranges complained that Perez Balladares, who had promised to remain neutral in the nomination process, secretly met with all other candidates to plan how to block Oranges in the primary.

One candidate, Francisco Sanchez Cardenas, admitted that he and other candidates were prepared to shift their support to a front runner to stop Oranges. He added that the rank and file would
never forgive Oranges for opposing re-election during the August referendum. "Oranges...has no chance whatever of winning the primary," he said. In the 1999 election, Torrijos will face Mireya Moscoso, candidate of the major opposition Partido Arnulfista (PA). Moscoso also has the support of El Movimiento Liberal Republicano Nacionalista (MOLIRENA). Moscoso is the widow of three-time president Arnulfo Arias. Gen. Torrijos, founder of the PRD, overthrew Arias in the 1968 military coup. In what may be the theme of the 1999 campaign, Torrijos called on PRD supporters to unite, avoiding the squabbles of the opposition who are interested in "assaulting" the wealth of the Canal when it reverts to Panamanian control during the next president's administration.

**Opposition vote could be split by third coalition**

A third electoral force in the making is led by banker Alberto Vallarino, who lost the Arnulfista nomination in March to Moscoso (see NotiCen, 04/16/98). After his defeat, Vallarino began organizing an alliance comprising the Partido de Renovacion Civilista (PRC), Partido Democrata Cristiano (PDC), and Partido Liberal Autentico (PLA). Vallarino's search for an alliance has split the PA as well as the three parties whose support he has won.

Not all members agreed with the decision of their party leaders to support Vallarino. "Wherever Vallarino goes he has divided the parties," said Edwin Aizprua of the PRC. Vallarino's critics inside the PA have started a formal procedure to expel him from the party for "treason." Some of his Arnulfista supporters have said they will leave the party and join one of the other parties forming the Vallarino alliance. To his critics, Vallarino has destroyed any chance of a grand alliance to defeat the PRD. But he may also hurt the PRD's alliance.

The Partido Solidaridad, a PRD ally in the 1994 election, is considering backing Vallarino, the son-in-law of Solidaridad's president Samuel Lewis Galindo. With Vallarino acting the spoiler, former president Guillermo Endara (1989-94) said the election is now between Moscoso and Torrijos. Blades may quit party or become either PRD or PA candidate The pre-election maneuvering may not yet be over since the three major alliances have yet to be solidified.

And a fourth variable is Ruben Blades, founder of the Movimiento Papa Egoro (MPE), who placed third in the 1994 presidential race with more than 17% of the vote. Since then, the MPE has undergone internal turmoil bordering on chaos (see NotiCen, 09/24/98) and has neither declared for any candidate nor nominated its own.

While other parties were well into their nomination processes, Blades called off an Oct. 2 a meeting of the MPE's national directorate, during which it was supposed to have chosen its electoral course for 1999. In a letter canceling the meeting for "financial and logistical" reasons Blades, who is running the party from the US, threatened to quit the party if the "internal intrigues" were not resolved. He said the survival of the MPE hangs in the balance. The party is divided into factions arguing about whether to run an MPE presidential candidate, join an alliance with the Arnulfistas, or take some other course. In late September, MPE legislator Bernabe Perez said Blades might become the vice presidential candidate on either the PRD or Arnulfista ticket. He ruled out any possibility that the party would ally with a third force such as the one under construction by Vallarino.
The electoral scene is still in such a state of flux that even the nominees could change places, according to some analysts. In its bulletin Infofax, the Centro Informativo Panama (CIP) speculated that before the election the PRD might strike a bargain with Vallarino, offering him the presidential slot and moving Torrijos to the vice presidential place on the ticket. This would result in a two-way race with Vallarino, who is still a member of the Partido Arnulfista, facing Arnulfista candidate Moscoso. An opinion poll in October indicated that the front runners are Torrijos with 31% and Moscoso with 24%. Blades has surrendered third place to Vallarino, who registered 14%. [Sources: Infofax (Panama), 10/25/98; El Panama America, 09/23/98, 10/06/98, 10/14/98, 10/28/98, 10/29/98; Notimex, 09/09/98, 09/24/98, 09/29/98, 10/02/98, 10/27/98, 10/28/98, 10/29/98]