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Costa Rican President Rodriguez Confesses Political 'Errors,' Slips in Polls

by LADB Staff

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As he neared the end of his first year in office, Costa Rican President Miguel Angel Rodriguez said errors had been made. He finds his popular support declining and his major legislative initiatives stalled in congress. His standing may have eroded further after a televised outburst in which he called his political opponents "traitors."

Minister of the Presidency Roberto Tovar said April 9 that the main problems stemmed from "weaknesses in communication and information policy" as well as "too much confidence" in the country's other political actors. Tovar made the remarks during a retreat for the Cabinet, presidential advisors, and some Legislative Assembly deputies to evaluate the administration's performance during the year.

Despite admitting errors, the administration blamed the legislative paralysis squarely on the opposition parties in the Assembly. Tovar criticized the Assembly for failing to enact presidential bills he said would have helped in the "transformation" of the country, especially in opening telecommunications, insurance, and electricity monopolies. "When one takes on hard challenges, it's difficult to meet them," said Tovar. "We had too much faith, believing we were going to succeed and believing that there was a national consciousness about the true needs of the country."

Referring to his central legislative project, the "concertacion," intended to draw a popular mandate for change out of a grand national forum (see NotiCen, 1998-10-15), Rodriguez said the Assembly's failure to approve his measures was "the biggest stumbling block." The president's public relations director, Agustin Castro, said in the future administration initiatives would be defended more aggressively to counter the "open lies" of adversaries in the Assembly.

Cabinet members listed accomplishments during the first year, including reducing the fiscal deficit, increasing exports, attracting new foreign investments, increasing spending in the social sector, and implementing efforts to curb corruption. But two issues have stymied the president's efforts to govern through consensus: his attempts to undercut the state-run monopolies and his colossal pay raise.

Opponents charge president plans to sell state properties

Two previous presidents failed to eliminate the state monopolies in telecommunications, electricity, insurance, and alcohol production. The collapse of the Jose Maria Figueres presidency (1994-1998) was in part attributable to his unpopular privatization plans even after he retreated to a program of restructuring to open the state entities to private capital (see Chronicle, 1995-07-12, 1997-06-05). Upon taking office last year, Rodriguez said he would wait for consensus to emerge from the concertacion before pressing his legislative agenda, but was then criticized for inaction.

Now, after proposing the opening for the Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad (ICE), opponents charge him with trying to ram constitutional changes through the Assembly without consensus (see NotiCen, 1998-07-30). Poll shows president's support down by 16% Perhaps the president's biggest mistake was taking a 155% salary increase this year, after promising "austerity" in his inauguration speech (see NotiCen 1998-05-14).

An Unimer poll commissioned by the daily La Nacion in February showed Rodriguez's favorable rating had plummeted by 16.2 percentage points since September 1998 to 21.1%. A majority of respondents said their main complaint was the president's salary increase, which raised his pay to more than US\$260,000 per year, not counting expenses.

Other complaints included price increases in some basic consumer goods and the general increase in the cost of living. Opposition parties and the Asociacion Nacional de Empleados Publicos (ANEP) protested the president's raise. ANEP leader Albino Vargas questioned the size of the increase given that public employees received only a 5.6% raise this year and workers in the private sector 6.5%. Administration officials defended the raise saying that in real terms it only brought the presidential salary up to where it was in 1990. Unlike other public employees, they said, presidents since that year had received no increase.

Rodriguez turned aside the opposition critics, but when the poll results were published, he went on national television Feb. 25 to announce he was giving up the salary increase "for the good of the country." He said he understood that the pay cut would "represent an operational limitation," but he promised that it would not "limit my determination to do the best" for Costa Rica.

Political analyst Francisco Barahona said the poll showed the administration had projected "an image of stupidity." If there are more such stupidities, it would be understandable if the public mood turned punitive, he said. Since the favorable-opinion numbers still outweigh the unfavorable, the administration has room to recover if there are no more "errors."

President lashes out against opponent

By early April, some analysts were saying Rodriguez had made another major error, this time lashing out at his rival in the 1998 presidential campaign, Jose Miguel Corrales of the Partido de Liberacion Nacional (PLN). He accused Corrales of torpedoing his proposals for constitutional reforms that would open up telecommunications and electric-power generation to private investment. Rodriguez has warned that if the Assembly does not end the state monopoly in these two areas, the government will have to invest US\$4 billion money it does not have over the next ten years to modernize the systems. In a television broadcast April 11, he said

Corrales, former president Rodrigo Carazo (1978-1982), union leaders, and legislators lied by claiming the administration intended to privatize ICE and the other state businesses. An administration bill to open up ICE failed to pass the Assembly and has been withdrawn until the next session begins in May. "To achieve their anti-patriotic and irresponsible aims, they have resorted to....lies, demagoguery, and filibusterism." In Costa Rica the word filibuster refers to US freebooter William Walker who tried to take over Central America in 1856.

Political scientist Manuel Rojas said the outburst would help Corrales' image as the main opposition leader and could "help bring dissenting groups together into a single opposition bloc." In response to Rodriguez, Corrales said it was the president who lied by saying he had no intention of selling ICE. Daniel Gallardo, leader of the PLN legislative faction, called the president's attitude "arrogant." He said the word filibuster fits those who would put public agencies like ICE into a few private hands. [Sources: La Nacion (Costa Rica), 02/11/99, 02/26/99, 04/10/99; Spanish News Service EFE, 02/10/99, 04/13/99; The Tico Times (Costa Rica), 04/16/99]

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