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Former Costa Rican President Oscar Arias Seeks Another Term

by LADB Staff

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Since August, Nobel laureate and former president Oscar Arias (1986-1990) has been exploring the possibility of running for re-election with members of both major parties. While some former presidents have expressed interest, the idea has also stirred up serious opposition, especially among prospective presidential candidates belonging to Arias' Partido de Liberacion Nacional (PLN).

Before leaving office, former president Jose Maria Figueres (1994-1998) floated the idea of re-election, but found little support, probably related to his very low ratings in opinion polls. And in September, deputy Otto Guevara of the Movimiento Libertario included eliminating the constitutional ban on re-election in a package of reform proposals.

In early December, Arias said he would lobby all 57 Legislative Assembly deputies one by one for a bill to permit re-election. In an interview with the daily newspaper La Republica, Arias said he wanted the presidency to help Costa Rica by using his ability to achieve consensus. Though he regularly publishes political commentary in newspapers, "the people don't pay attention to me," he said. "Mine is one more opinion," said Arias. "Perhaps people read me more than others, but they don't pay attention because I have no political power." He said he had the confidence of Costa Ricans and the demonstrated ability to persuade.

Arias has considerable popular backing. In a poll by Borge y Asociados in mid-December, 70% of respondents belonging to the PLN supported the reform. Asked about preferences among possible PLN presidential candidates, Arias received support from 35.5%, ahead of former candidate Jose Miguel Corrales with 9.6%. Corrales lost the 1998 election to President Miguel Angel Rodriguez. President Rodriguez and the leadership of the governing Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC) have not commented on the issue, but the president said re-election was not on his agenda.

Former president Rafael Calderon (1990-1994), also of the PUSC, told the daily La Nacion that he would leave the decision on whether to support the re-election proposal up to Rodriguez. While the proposal has been discussed in the Assembly, many deputies do not give it high priority because of other major bills under consideration. A bill to modernize the Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad (ICE) and two workers- pension bills take precedence. A constitutional reform would be time-consuming, requiring a series of debates in the current legislative session and in the next.

Arias faces opposition in his party

Arias does not have unified support from PLN leaders as three other presidential candidates have already emerged for the 2002 election: Rolando Araya Monge, Antonio Alvarez Desanti, and Corrales. A survey of the 23 PLN Assembly deputies showed that 16 opposed re-election, five supported it, and two were undecided. A constitutional reform requires 38 votes. Among PLN leaders, opinion varies.

Figueres reportedly favors re-election but has made no public pronouncement on it. Corrales said he opposed changing laws "to satisfy private aspirations," and advised Arias to withdraw his suggestion and wait for a constituent assembly to reform the Constitution. Arias and other former presidents could be delegates to such an assembly, he said. "It isn't necessary to be president to assist in these matters."

Former president Luis Alberto Monge (1982-1986) of the PLN flatly rejected re-election on principle and opposed another term for Arias in particular. "He doesn't have good ideas for the country," Monge said in an interview with La Nacion. Arias' aspirations "are causing great convulsions in the party." Monge said he would publicly campaign against Arias if he were to run. Monge and other Arias opponents say that behind the re-election bid are business interests who want Arias to sell state enterprises including electric power companies, banks, and insurance firms. [Sources: La Nacion (Costa Rica), 12/13/99, 12/14/99, 12/16/99, 12/18/99; Notimex, 09/19/99, 09/29/99, 12/02/99, 12/06/99, 12/07/99, 12/08/99, 12/23/99]

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