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President Rodriguez Presses Social Agenda

by LADB Staff

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President Miguel Angel Rodriguez has moved aggressively this year with a batch of proposals for social legislation and has reversed the decline in his approval ratings that has dogged his administration. The spurt of activity in the social field comes after opinion polls consistently showed his approval ratings in the negative numbers. In the most recent poll, Unimer found that Rodriguez's approval rating in February had risen by nearly four percentage points. "I am convinced that this is the result of permanent action to resolve the daily problems of the people, problems that have not been resolved for many years," Rodriguez said.

For much of the current year, he has restricted trips outside the country and concentrated on dedicating new schools and housing projects and sending social legislation to the Assembly. Administration bill get tough on crime One of the president's high-priority items is an administration bill to get tough on crime. Its major provisions would stiffen penalties for petty offenses. The bill would also increase the prison sentences for kidnapping, trafficking in women, children, and drugs, and other serious crimes from 15 to 20 years.

At a legislative hearing on the bill in February, Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) President Luis Paulino Mora and magistrate Daniel Gonzalez opposed punishing petty crimes with jail sentences. But Alex Sibaja, legislative leader of the opposition Partido de Liberacion Nacional (PLN), said the "social reality" of rising crime rates and rising public apprehension about personal security tell the legislators the jurists were wrong. The petty-crime issue is a particularly sensitive one because the public increasingly blames light or nonexistent prison sentences for much of the current increase in crime.

Under Costa Rican law, petty crime is punishable only with a fine or community service. Furthermore, the offender may skip paying the fine if unable to pay it. Minor assaults or theft of US\$160 or less are considered petty, but critics of the current system say that in a country with so much poverty, US\$160 is not a petty amount. The first of the plan's 14 provisions approved by the legislature was a bill to strengthen the police force. The bill raises educational and other requirements for police officers and increases salaries by up to 18%. It also aims to prevent mass firings every four years as new administrations hand out police posts to political supporters. The bill will also prohibit the use of military ranks and will substitute blue uniforms for military-style fatigues.

On Feb. 22, Rodriguez sent an anti-poverty bill to the Assembly. This Plan de Solidaridad increases various kinds of social assistance. In education, the plan would raise the number of poor students who receive scholarships from 20,000 last year to 41,00 this year. It would also continue to hand out cash grants for schools supplies. Rodriguez said 100,000 students are receiving the cash grants during the current school year.

In housing, the government provides US\$6,000 to qualifying families to construct houses. In 2000, nearly 20,000 such grants were distributed and over 16,000 will be distributed this year. In the business sector, Rodriguez promised soft loans to 100 small and medium-size businesses this year.

The blitz of activity has considerable popular approval and has left critics to quibble that Rodriguez is pressing the social agenda to gain popular approval. After softening up the public with popular reforms, the critics say he will then push his other reform agenda, which includes a major government restructuring along neoliberal lines. But Rodriguez says that there is nothing new in his agenda and that he is following the same legislative priorities as before.

Deputy Jose Merino of the Fuerza Democratica, like some others in the opposition, said the president's legislative agenda is "confused" and lacks focus. Sonia Picado, president of the PLN, told the daily La Nacion that the administration lacked leadership, direction, and, in some cases, transparency. But Vice Minister of the Presidency Carlos Vargas attributed her remark to electoral politics in preparation for the 2002 presidential election campaign. "They [the PLN] are already campaigning and we are not," Vargas said. "We have more important things to take care of."

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