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President Rodriguez Calls for Radical Change

by LADB Staff

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During his annual report to the Legislative Assembly on May 1, Costa Rican President Miguel Angel Rodriguez surprised the nation by recommending scrapping the presidential system in favor of a "semiparliamentary" or "semipresidential" system. The following day, Rodriguez named a special commission of jurists to draw up a proposal for the constitutional amendments necessary to make the change. The commission, chaired by Rodolfo Piza, executive president of the Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social (CCSS), has a mandate to return a proposal within five months.

Rodriguez said that, during the next five months, the commission could receive proposals from all sectors of society and take its proposal to the legislature in September. Assessing his three years in office, Rodriguez praised the government's investments in telecommunications, roads, education, and low-income housing. He said that, in his three years as president, Costa Rica had begun to recover from its deficits in education, increasing the number of teachers and scholarships. He noted that the administration had eliminated the government's US\$750 million debt to the Banco Central. He also mentioned a reduction in infant-mortality rates, a reduction in childhood diseases, and other social advances. For the future, Rodriguez proposed concentrating economic development in technology in preparation for global competition.

President proposes end to ungovernability

Rodriguez implied that the major shortcomings of his administration were mostly caused by structural deficiencies in government and that the country needed a form of government in which the legislature and the executive would exercise controls over one another and get legislation passed. He suggested that, under the new scheme, the voters would directly elect the president as they do now, but the Cabinet would be approved by the Assembly by a simple-majority vote.

In the legislative process, the Assembly would have a fixed time in which to approve or reject presidential initiatives. Failure of the legislature to act would constitute censure of the administration and a new Cabinet would be formed or a new presidential election held. Rodriguez said the reforms would ensure "that decisions are made within a reasonable time while improving congressional accountability to the public and presidential accountability to the legislative branch." "The question is whether the political leaders are going to collaborate with Costa Ricans or slow down advances for considerations that are purely electoral."

Rodriguez also proposed adoption of a referendum process and a requirement that justices of the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) and the comptroller general would need a two-thirds vote by the Assembly instead of a simple majority to be confirmed. Rodriguez has seen much of his legislative agenda stalled or defeated in the Assembly, where his party does not have a majority.

Among the bills that went down to defeat was one to authorize telephone taps in cases involving sexual exploitation of children and another to crack the state telecommunications monopoly held by the Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad (ICE). The president also wants to see passage of administrative and budget reforms, an anti-corruption law, and a press- freedom law.

In an interview with the daily La Nacion four days before delivering his report, Rodriguez acknowledged that his administration had "committed errors," but he also complained that divisions and entrenched groups within the opposition parties, especially the Partido de Liberacion Nacional (PLN), contributed to a general state of inefficiency and inaction.

Responding to the review of the administration's accomplishments, PLN spokesman Alex Sibaja said Rodriguez had misused statistics to mask the fact that the economy was "a failure" in 2000 as growth dropped to 1.4% from 8.3% in 1999. He also questioned the investments in social programs, saying the funds allocated had not been spent. Others reminded Rodriguez that poverty had grown during the three years of his administration. As for the change in government structure, local newspapers reported some critics complaining that the proposal was "cosmetic." However, prospective presidential candidates from both major parties responded favorably to the idea.

Rodolfo Mendez Mata, candidate of the governing Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC), said the change could end the "ungovernability" plaguing the current administration. Representatives of the smaller parties also expressed interest in the plan. The president's enthusiasm for a quasi-parliamentary system appeared at odds with a proposal he made last year to strengthen presidential powers. After several run-ins with Comptroller General Luis Fernando Vargas, Rodriguez suggested augmenting the president's discretionary authority. The proposal did not stir up much enthusiasm. Rodolfo Piza said the president had enough authority and that "all those who want more power say the country is ungovernable." Vargas called Rodriguez's government-restructuring idea "unfortunate."

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