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Pacheco Wins Presidential Election

by LADB Staff

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Abel Pacheco of Costa Rica's governing Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC) won the presidential runoff election April 7, defeating Partido de Liberacion Nacional (PLN) candidate Rolando Araya. The election failed to ignite public enthusiasm resulting in record abstention. The campaign was marred by campaign-finance irregularities that electoral officials were unequipped to cope with.

The 68-year old Pacheco a psychiatrist and television personality took 58% of the vote in a easy win that was expected since the first-round election on Feb. 4 knocked out third-party candidate Otton Solis of the new Partido Accion Ciudadana (PAC). Solis' impressive 26.4% vote helped weaken the PLN candidate, forcing the unprecedented runoff election and probably dampening public interest in the outcome (see NotiCen, 2002-02-07).

The April election was unusual because it was the first runoff in Costa Rican history and because it was the first time the PUSC held onto the presidency for two successive terms. The runoff also set a record for abstention when 39% of voters stayed home. Pollsters attributed the abstentions to a widespread lack of faith in the two major parties and low expectations for the next administration. Solis announced he would cast a blank ballot to protest the choice limited to the parties that have rotated in power for decades. "We can't continue voting for the lesser of two evils," he said.

Considered weak on economic matters, Pacheco presented himself as a corruption fighter and one who would work for poverty reduction. "My absolute commitment is to the poorest," he said after claiming victory. Pacheco and his two vice-presidential running mates Linette Saborio and Luis Fishman take office May 1. Araya said that he would not be a presidential candidate again and that he had "serious fears about what might happen in this country." His advice to the PLN was that it fight against globalization and "stop abetting corruption."

New president to work with divided congress

The makeup of the National Assembly was determined in the February elections. The unicameral body is fairly evenly divided among the three larger parties. The conservative PUSC will have a 19-seat plurality, followed by the centrist PLN with 17, and Solis' reform PAC with 14. The right-wing libertarian Movimiento Libertario (ML) has six seats and the Christian Renovacion Costarricense one. President Miguel Angel Rodriguez asked the Assembly in 2001 for structural reforms to turn the government into a "semiparliamentary" system (see NotiCen, 2001-05-10). The bill has gone nowhere.

But now that the Assembly has no party with a working majority, some observers believe it will move toward parliamentary consensus-building or get nothing of substance done. Campaign

thin on substance After Feb. 4, the PLN defeat was taken for granted, and as the runoff campaign progressed, analysts said Araya's message became muddled.

A panel of experts gathered together by the daily La Nacion agreed that Araya and the PLN never struck a consistent cord. The panel said Araya began the campaign by focusing on agriculture, then education, then on a vague claim that the PLN represented change while the PUSC represented the old guard. To his advantage, Pacheco refused to make specific promises throughout most of the campaign, which gave him a certain consistency. He focused mostly on himself as a healer and unifying figure. He kept the PUSC out of his speeches to paint himself as removed from the political fray. Pacheco declined to locate himself on the political spectrum or identify himself as a neoliberal in economic matters. He said his movement included everyone from marxists to neoliberals.

In a post-election interview, Pacheco said his administration would be "very firm in the fight against corruption" and "committed to transparency." Pacheco has had a varied career as psychiatrist, writer, businessman, TV advice-giver on his one-minute program Commentary with Dr. Abel Pacheco, and director of the National Psychiatric Hospital. "If he ran the lunatic asylum that well, we can assume Pacheco will know how to run this country," said PLN leader Jorge Rossi. Both parties suffered internal problems during the campaign.

After the first-round election, Moises Fachler resigned as PLN assistant secretary general because he objected to the party's apparent abandonment of its traditional reformist themes, allowing Solis to grab votes that might have gone to the PLN. And in an astonishing announcement in mid-February, Pacheco said Fishman had resigned from the ticket. Pacheco said he refused to give in to Fishman's demands for control of the campaign and Fishman said there were anti-Semitic murmurings in the party.

While it was not clear whether Fishman actually resigned, he later went on television to say he was still in the race and would be vice president, functioning if necessary from home. The whole thing had been a "misunderstanding," he said. "I am more committed than ever to this campaign." The bizarre incident is complicated by Costa Rican law, which prohibits a candidate from pulling out of a race until after the election. It remains to be seen whether Fishman will be forced out after taking office in May.

Campaign finances in chaos

This second-round election is not something Costa Rican officials or candidates will want to repeat. They cannot afford the cost. The two major parties spent heavily on the first round and had little left for the second. Betting on winning, they borrowed heavily, issuing party bonds. Although the government reimburses the parties after the election, the reimbursement comes out of a constitutionally fixed fund, which this year is US\$14.7 million. The amount allocated to each party is based on the percentage of votes they get. That forces the parties to carefully calibrate their estimated vote with the amount they borrow (see NotiCen, 2002-01-10).

Government figures show the two parties borrowed a combined total of US\$14.5 million. But since Solis took 26.4% of the vote in the February round, the PUSC and PLN were left with gaps between

what they borrowed and what they would be reimbursed. After reimbursement, the PLN may owe more than US\$1 million to the Banco de Costa Rica. Sources told the English-language weekly *The Tico Times* that the party borrowed US\$5.4 million from the bank.

Election officials of the Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones (TSE) said that, since the second round is not considered a separate election, there would be no additional government funding for it. That meant the parties had to turn to private contributions to help finance the April runoff, thereby opening the door to campaign-finance abuses. The Los Angeles Spanish-language daily *La Opinion* reported in mid-February about irregularities in the PLN's campaign-finance reporting.

In reviewing the PLN's books, the Direccion General de Tributacion Directa found that several individuals were listed as contributors when they had given nothing. Some with subsistence incomes appeared as thousand-dollar contributors on the reports the PLN sent to the TSE. Transparency International (TI) challenged the PLN in February to release documentation on its financing to clear up the discrepancies. For its part, the PUSC failed to give TI the complete financial-disclosure reports it asked for.

In fallout from the campaign-finance issue, businessman Oscar Alfaro Zamora resigned from the PLN's ethics tribunal when he could not get an accounting of the donations. He said he had introduced motions in the tribunal, but instead of giving a public accounting of finances, tribunal members began debating whether Alfaro should be fired. Tribunal president Raquel Rockwerger acknowledged that firing Alfaro was discussed but not because of his insistence on transparency. Rather it was because Alfaro had exceeded his authority by bringing up the matter and because he had gone public with tribunal discussions, said Rockwerger.

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