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LADB Staff

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Pacheco Takes Over Presidency

by LADB Staff

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Abel Pacheco of the Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC) took over as president of Costa Rica May 8. In his inaugural speech, he set as his top priorities attacking poverty and corruption, promoting free trade, and making the environment and tourism essential national endeavors. Pacheco must work without a majority in the legislature, and the main opposition party is unsure of its direction after two successive defeats at the polls.

Also sworn in were First Vice President Lineth Saborio and Second Vice President Luis Fishman. Pacheco won a second-round election April 7, defeating Partido de Liberacion Nacional (PLN) candidate Rolando Araya (see NotiCen, 2002-04-11). Signaling his intention to keep a campaign promise of frugality, Pacheco ordered a no-frills inaugural. Inauguration officials said they had saved US\$150,000 that would go to social programs. Pacheco, a 68-year old psychiatrist, author, and former television personality, kept to the tradition that new presidents vow to eliminate poverty, fight corruption, reduce crime, cut government spending, and serve for the benefit of all citizens. He said in his inaugural speech that his first priority was to reduce poverty. He proposed a program based on a 6% growth rate that includes job creation and more government spending on social programs.

To combat crime, the new president said he would set up a public-security board (Consejo Nacional de Seguridad) to address common crimes, drug trafficking, and sexual exploitation of children and women. To highlight the importance of the environment, Pacheco plans to ask the Legislative Assembly to give the environmental greater importance through a constitutional amendment.

Among his other proposals are:

making tourism a national priority

providing housing assistance and scholarships to the poor

providing monthly assistance and training programs to mothers who are heads of households while they look for work

providing credit to microbusinesses

reducing the fiscal deficit to zero by the end of his term in 2006 *

Reducing tax evasion

approving free-trade agreements with Canada and the US

helping farmers compete in global markets

creating a national development bank

creating a national fishing fleet

combating prostitution, sex tourism, and domestic violence

How Pacheco will govern given the somewhat inconsistent positions he took during the campaign is open to question. In an interview with the San Jose English-language newspaper The Tico Times, analyst Rodolfo Cerdas pointed out that Pacheco has taken contradictory stances on the economy, proposing free-market policies while also promising protectionism. Pacheco was also noncommittal on most international issues, Cerdas said. "During the campaign, Costa Rica was discussed as if it were an island. Costa Rica is part of an international market, but there does not seem to be a clear vision of what role external factors play on internal problems. You cannot separate the two issues."

Public officials under new ethics rules

Among Pacheco's first acts as president was to sign several executive agreements on ethics and transparency in government. To those who do not comply with the rules, "We will say goodbye," Pacheco said. Under the rules, officials may not: have close relatives on the government payroll; travel abroad by other than economy class; acquire new official vehicles with public funds; receive salary increases greater than the average increase for government employees; accept travel benefits except from international organizations; or accept honoraria for public speeches, conferences, or academic activities.

Pacheco's Cabinet includes:

Foreign Relations, Roberto Tovar

Science and Technology, Rogelio Pardo

Education, Astrid Fischel

Economy, Vilma Villalobos

Culture, Guido Saenz

Foreign Trade, Alberto Trejos

Public Works and Transportation, Javier Chaves

Agriculture, Rodolfo Coto

Planning, Danilo Chaverri

Security, Rogelio Ramos

Some of Pacheco's Cabinet and sub-Cabinet choices, especially Pardo and Fischel, have been criticized for having little or no experience in the areas they will direct. Walter Fernandez, president of the Academia Nacional de Ciencias, said he had hoped the science post would go to someone with wide experience in the field, but "Pardo doesn't have it."

Besides the Cabinet choices, the role of Second Vice President Fishman should be worth watching since Pacheco vowed to exclude him from taking part in his administration. The two men have not spoken since February when Pacheco kicked him out of the election campaign for allegedly trying to take control of it (see NotiCen, 2002-04-11). Admitting he felt uncomfortable during the inauguration, Fishman said intermediaries were working on a reconciliation with Pacheco. Meanwhile, he has not been assigned an office and says he will work from home.

President faces divided legislature

Although Pacheco won impressively in April with 58% of the vote, his party failed to win a majority in the February legislative elections. The PUSC has only 19 seats in the 57-seat unicameral house. The PLN has 17 seats, the Partido Accion Costarricense (PAC) 14, the Movimiento Libertario six, and the Renovacion Costarricense one. Major opposition party in disarray How the PLN will behave as the chief opposition party is unclear, as it is currently in a period of finger pointing and retrenchment. Defeated in two successive presidential elections for the first time in its history, the party is looking for renewal.

Five members of the PLN's political directorate resigned after the April election and recommended that members of the party's executive committee and all other leadership bodies do the same. Under this pressure, the May 25 plenary meeting of the party could decide to entirely reconstitute the party's leadership and set a new direction.

PLN secretary-general Rolando Gonzalez said he was unsure whether the entire hierarchy should resign or just those who were responsible for the electoral defeats in February and April. One of the five who resigned, PLN Assembly Deputy Alicia Fournier, said the party needed to reflect on its defeats and the only way to do that was with new leaders. She said the party should return to its traditional principles, fight corruption, and work for the well-being of the majority of Costa Ricans. The PLN's Assembly delegation is also divided and went through a battle regarding the election of its leaders. Deputies denied there was a division in the delegation but admitted to "very different positions."

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