

# ***MESOAMERICA***

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## **COSTA RICA**

### **Political Restructuring and Campaign Posturing**

The nation's historic two-party political system, in place since the '48 Civil War, is being replaced by a multi-party system, with a half-dozen political parties expected to win legislative seats in the next national election, scheduled for Feb '06. Recent public opinion polls have confirmed and clarified this trend, while revealing the decline of the current party in power.

Several reasons can be given for this dramatic change in the nation's political orientation:

- The decline of the support base for the conservative Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC, founded in '84), which has won the last two national elections. This deterioration is a consequence of corruption scandals involving two former PUSC presidents, lawyer Rafael Angel Calderón Fournier ('90-'94) and economist Miguel Angel Rodríguez ('98-'02, who briefly served as Organization of American States' Secretary General in '04); the ineptitude of the current president, psychologist Abel Pacheco ('02-'06); the alleged PUSC campaign finance abuses; and the numerous deficiencies of the Pacheco administration. Ricardo Toledo Escalante is the current PUSC presidential candidate.
- The staying power of the National Liberation Party (PLN), which clearly has dominated national elections since its formation in '48 under the charismatic leadership of José "don Pepe" Figueres, who served three terms as the nation's president. The PLN's center-left, Social Democratic philosophy has challenged the conservative Christian Democratic orientation of the major opposition party to win more than half (8 of 15) of the presidential elections, but not necessarily controlling the majority of seats in the National Legislature. Also, the continuing popularity of former President Oscar Arias Sánchez ('86-'90, who won the '87 Nobel Peace Prize), and the current PLN presidential candidate, has given him a strong lead in recent polls.
- The growing popularity of three emerging political parties and their candidates: Ottón Solís of the Citizen's Action Party (PAC, formed in '00); Otto Guevara of the Libertarian Movement (ML, formed in '97); and Antonio Alvarez of Union For Change (UPC, formed in '04). Both

PAC and UPC are PLN splinter groups that emerged with charismatic leaders who have been strongly critical of the PLN's leadership and its policies during the past decade.

- Nine additional political parties have been certified by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal to participate in the current national electoral campaign: The National Union (UN), led by José Manuel Echandi; Patriotic Union (UP), Humberto Arce; Democratic Force (FD), Vladimir de la Cruz; Country First Party (PPP), Juan José Vargas; Costa Rican Renovation Party (PRC), Bolívar Serrano; National Integration Party (PIN), Wálter Muñoz; National Rescue Party (PRN), Alvaro Montero; National Democratic Alliance (AND), José Miguel Villalobos; and United Leftist Coalition (CIU), Humberto Vargas.

Now, with less than two months remaining before the national elections, about 66% of the electorate are expected to cast their votes on 5 Feb '06 for the following political parties (based on party preference), according to a CID-Gallup poll during 22-25 Nov: None 34%, PLN 33%, PUSC 14%, PAC 10%, ML 4%, UPC 2%, PUN 1%, and eight parties with less than 1%.

However, in terms of the popular support, Arias (PLN) is leading with 45% of those who intend to vote, followed by Solís (PAC) with 20%, and tied for a distant third place are Toledo (PUSC), Guevara (ML) and Alvarez (UPC) with 10-12%, based on the recent CID-Gallup poll.

Another poll by UNIMER-RI, taken between 11-23 Nov, projected the following vote for legislators: PLN 39%, PAC 20%, ML 13%, PUSC 9%, UFC 5% and all other parties 14%.

Gone are the days when PLN or PUSC controlled over half of the congressional vote, at least 29 of the 57 seats. In the next Legislative Assembly, the PLN probably will have 23-25 legislators, PAC 10-14, ML 5-9 seats and PUSC 2-5 seats, according to the daily *La Nación* on 5 Dec. For the ruling PUSC, which gained 19 legislative seats in '02, the '06 election probably will be a worst-case scenario.

### **Fiscal Reform and CAFTA Proposals Stalled in Congress**

President Pacheco's four-year old Fiscal Reform proposal, which purports to collect about \$364.4 million in new revenue annually by a series of controversial measures, is facing stiff opposition by members of his own party in Congress, as well as by 20 legislators of PAC, PUN, ML, ADN and various independents who often fail to attend legislative sessions where the proposal is still being discussed. Only nine of 17 PUSC legislators support the proposal, along with 11 PLN and three independent legislators, according to *La Nación* on 26 Nov.

At that time there were 375 pending motions that needed to be discussed and voted on before the Fiscal Reform package could be brought to a final vote. Few legislators believe that this could happen before their 45-day recess begins on 22 Dec. Others, including PUSC presidential candidate Ricardo Toleda, believe that the proposal will not be voted on until after the 5 Feb '06 national elections. This signifies another defeat for President Pacheco, who promoted the Fiscal Reform measure as one of the main priorities of his administration.

After years of negotiations and heated public debate, the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Costa Rica and the US, which is part of the well-known Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) with the US government, was finally sent by President Pacheco on 21 Oct to

the Legislative Assembly for discussion. However, the published document did not arrive in the hands of members of the Commission on International Relations until 20 Nov, and it was not on their agenda for discussion until after 1 Dec. There is little chance that DR-CAFTA will be brought up for a vote in the Legislative Assembly before the scheduled 22 Dec recess. This represents yet another significant failure for the Pacheco administration.

### **Marches For and Against DR-CAFTA Held During Nov**

Opponents of the DR-CAFTA agreement with the US government staged a massive but peaceful four-hour march through the center of the nation's capital, San José, on 17 Nov, with an estimated participation of 18,000-20,000 persons, according to *La Nación*.

Early in the morning marchers gathered at the National Institute of Electricity (ICE) building on the north side of La Sabana Park on the west side of town, at Central Park in downtown San José, and at the University of Costa Rica campus in San Pedro on the east side; they began to converge on the Legislative Assembly around 10:00 am and the rally ended at about 2:00 pm.

Most of the protestors represented labor unions, teachers' unions, students, farmers and numerous politicians, all of whom denounced the Free Trade Agreement as a sellout to US-controlled multinational corporations, whose policies create more poverty in the Third World. Among the politicians who addressed the rally were legislators Gloria Valerín (PUSC), Rodrigo Alberto Carazo (PAC), José Miguel Corrales (UP) and José Merino (FD); presidential candidates Wálter Muñoz (PIN), Humberto Arce (UP) and Valdimir de La Cruz (FD); former president Rodrigo Carazo Odio ('78-'82 of the Unity Party, now known as PUSC), Eddie González of the National Civic Movement, among others.

On 25 Nov, an estimated 20,000 supporters of DR-CAFTA rallied in front of the Legislative Assembly and filled the Plaza de la Democracia in San José, from about 9:00 am to 12:00 noon. Most of the supports were workers and employers of the private sector who arrived in chartered buses from various industrial areas of the Central Valley. Participating in the rally were members of the government's negotiating team who helped draft the Free Trade Agreement, along with legislators and politicians affiliated with PUSC, PLN and ML. The leaders of the movement sought to pressure legislators to speed up the process of discussing and approving DR-CAFTA "for the good of the nation."

### **Stagno to Preside the International Criminal Court**

On 28 Nov, Bruno Stagno, the Costa Rican Ambassador to the UN, was appointed to preside over the International Criminal Court (ICC) for the next three years. The ICC is the principal international tribunal dedicated to investigating and prosecuting those involved in "crimes against humanity." The previous ICC president was prince Zeid Raad Zeid Al-Husein of Jordan, who was appointed by the UN in '02.

Costa Rican Foreign Minister Roberto Tovar manifested his support for Stagno, and stated that his appointment indicated the international community's recognition that "Costa Rica has a permanent commitment to the defense and promotion of human rights in the world." Stagno is the second Costa Rican named to the ICC; magistrate Elizabeth Odio Benito, a former Vice President of Costa Rica

(PUSC, '90-'94), Minister of Justice and Minister of the Environment and Energy, has served as the ICC's Vice President since Mar '03.

Ironically, Costa Rica is on the US' blacklist of eight Latin American countries who have refused to give in to US pressure to exempt US citizens from accusations of "crimes against humanity" in their countries. Included on the blacklist are Mexico, Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Paraguay, Uruguay and Costa Rica. Although the economic cost for Costa Rica is only about \$100,000 in US military aid, the other blacklisted countries will not qualify to receive tens of millions of dollars in US military aid during '06.

—*Clifton L. Holland*