

MESOAMERICA

Volume 24, Number 1, January 2005



COSTA RICA

Half of Expected Voters are Undecided

Costa Rica is experiencing its greatest political crisis of the last few decades, according to a recent public opinion poll conducted between 24 Nov and 4 Dec by the Unimer company for the country's largest daily, *La Nación*. Between July and Dec '04, the number of undecided voters increased from 5% to 53% of expected voters in the '06 presidential election, which is strong evidence that the public is losing confidence in its traditional political leadership. By contrast, the number of eligible voters who said they would not vote in the next presidential election increased from 21% in July to 35% in Dec '04.

Despite recent corruption scandals involving former presidents Rafael Angel Calderón ('90-'94) and Miguel Angel Rodríguez ('98-'02) of the Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC), who are both in protective custody while awaiting trial (see Vol. 23, No. 11), current President Abel Pacheco of PUSC is enjoying unexpected popularity according to the Unimer poll: his rating of 70% was the highest among all contemporary political figures. Previously, Pacheco's highest popularity level was 63% in Aug '02, but his ranking fell to 49% in Jan '03 and 39% in July '03 due to a crisis of governability within his administration (Vol. 22, No. 8).

The presidential candidate that registered the largest decline among expected voters in the Unimer poll was former President Oscar Arias ('86-'90) of the National Liberation Party (PLN), who declined from 52% to 22% among expected voters between July and Dec '04, but was ranked 67th in terms of popularity. If the election were held today, Arias would probably win the presidency although by a smaller margin than expected in July '04, no doubt due to the growing disenchantment of voters with his strong neo-liberal economic stance and support for CAFTA.

According to the Unimer poll, other presidential candidates also experienced a decline among expected voters: Ottón Solís (Citizen's Action Party, PAC) dropped from 17% to 8%; Otto Guevara (Libertarian Movement, ML) fell from 12% to 5%; and support for the yet unnamed PUSC candidate declined from 9% to 5%.

When the Unimer pollsters asked the undecided voters who they might vote for if the election were held today, 60% said they would not vote for any party, 9% said they would vote for PUSC, 9% for PAC, 8% for PLN, 5% for ML, and 6% for a new party.

President Pacheco and PUSC Investigated for Campaign Finance Violations

The legislative commission (composed of representatives of five political parties) investigating campaign finance irregularities in the '02 presidential election called on President Abel Pacheco (PUSC) to testify on 2 Dec. The commission questioned Pacheco regarding illegal donations received by his campaign committee, including funds from the French telecommunications giant Alcatel, Taiwanese, Panamanian and other sources, which were not reported to the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) as required by law.

The known illegal campaign donations to the PUSC candidate total \$964,767 to date. These funds, and possibly other illegal donations, were placed in “parallel accounts” in Panamanian banks and were administered by members of Pacheco’s campaign committee, who also have testified before the commission but have refused to reveal the details of these transactions or to accept responsibility for any illegal acts.

Pacheco’s evasive testimony did not satisfy the majority of the commission’s members (five of seven), who subsequently decided to request that Congress—after the current recess ends on 24 Jan—censure the president of the Republic for failing to give satisfactory explanations regarding his knowledge and handling of illegal campaign contributions, including \$100,000 from Alcatel and \$500,000 from Taiwanese sources. Although the censure, if approved, would be on moral and not legal grounds, Pacheco’s reputation—and that of his party—would certainly be tarnished, which could have a negative impact on the PUSC candidate in the '06 presidential election.

The commission, which is chaired by PLN congressman Luis Gerardo Villanueva, has now finished its investigative work and is preparing a final report for the next session of Congress. However, information has been leaked to the press regarding its plan to censure both the president and members of his campaign staff for committing unethical acts regarding their handling of illegal campaign donations. According to congressman Humberto Arce of the Patriotic Block and a member of the investigative commission, some of those who testified before the commission are guilty of lying under oath and giving false testimony, and should be prosecuted by the Public Ministry.

Controversial Comptroller Alex Solís Fired

The Legislative Assembly decided on 13 Dec to remove Alex Solís Fallas (PLN) from his position as Comptroller General of the Republic, by a vote of 39 to 12, following six months of debate on the issue of Solís’ qualifications for the job. During his controversial term in office, Solís was forced to defend himself against charges of unethical conduct (falsification of signatures, among others) prior to being appointed Comptroller General in June '04, while working as a lawyer and notary public in his own law firm in San Isidro de El General, located in the country’s southern-pacific zone. Alex is the brother of congressman Ottón Solís Fallas, who is the undisputed leader of PAC and its presidential candidate for '06.

After his destitution, Alex stated that he was at peace with himself and was optimistic about the future; he claimed that no one had accused him of doing anything wrong while serving in public office, and that he had worked hard and served his country well for which he had no regrets. However, he charged that his removal from office was due to political persecution against him by “powerful economic interests,” which he failed to identify.

The Comptroller General of the Republic is the fiscal agent of Congress that verifies whether or not appropriated funds are used as intended by the various government agencies. The current assistant comptroller general, Marta Acosta, will fill the position vacated by Solís until Congress names his successor, which will require public hearings before the congressional Appointments Commission regarding the qualification of candidates. The removal of Solís from office was the first time in the country’s history that Congress had fired a Comptroller General.

Educational Reforms Demanded due to Low Test Scores

The low-test scores obtained by graduating seniors from public high schools in Nov ’04 have caused educators, parents, and government and business leaders to demand educational reforms to remedy this situation. Despite the fact that the government has increased its investment in infrastructure, equipment, furniture, cafeterias, transportation and scholarships for public education during the past decade, the issue of the quality of education received by students is open for debate.

The fact that each year the theme of low test scores and the differences between the quality of education offered in urban and rural schools, as well as the failure of most public schools to abide by the official school calendar (200 days of classes) approved by the Ministry of Education (MEP), is evidence that little progress has been made in educational reforms, according to critics.

One of the major deficiencies in the current system of public education is that teachers, in general, are not motivating students to develop their creative, critical and reasoning skills, but rather are continuing to require rote memorization of basic information. Teachers are not making the extra effort to motivate their students to study and learn for the sake of improving their own lives and society in general, according to some educators.

By the time most high school students are in their senior year of public school, they exhibit marked deficiencies in grammar and punctuation, communication skills, analytical abilities, working together in group activities, decision-making, and basic cultural and scientific knowledge, among others. These deficiencies are demonstrated by low scores on nation-wide, standardized achievement exams prepared by the MEP, especially in the area of mathematics, science, social studies, civics, Spanish and English. At the end of the ’04 school year, more than half of the students in public high schools failed the math test and received low scores in three other subjects.

Part of the problem with public education has to do with the depressing condition of many of the schools, especially in rural areas. Nationally, according to MEP statistics, the country needs 17 more high schools, 52 more primary schools, 2,104 more classrooms, and 25,771 more student desks. To meet this demand, the MEP has obtained loans from the World Bank (\$29.8 million) and the International Development Bank (\$24.9 million) for investment in infrastructure.

—Clifton L. Holland