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PANAMA

President Torrijos' First Year Performance Record

On 1 Sep, President Martin Torrijos of the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) completed one year in office as head of the Panamanian government, and it appears that already he has accomplished some of the most difficult tasks of his administration: constitutional reforms, fiscal reforms and Social Security Fund (CSS) reforms. All of these initiatives faced serious opposition from some sectors, but what cost the government the most in terms of its popularity were reforms to the Social Security system.

Nevertheless, Torrijos' popularity rating has increased almost as fast as it declined now that most of the debate over the reforms has eased, which leaves the president with four more years to improve his popularity. Between Mar and June '05, Torrijos lost 34 points in the "popularity index" according to a poll conducted by LatiNetwork Dichter & Neira and published in June. However, the following month, after Torrijos suspended for 90 days Law 17 that reformed the CSS and initiated a national dialogue with different social sectors, his popularity rose by 15 points, which gave him a favorable approval of 38% of the total population by the end of July.

Torrijos was elected President on 2 May '04 (and took office on 1 Sep '04) as the PRD candidate under the banner of the New Nation Alliance (APN) with the support of the smaller People's Party. He won with about 47% of the vote, after defeating three rivals. His closest challenger was former President Guillermo Endara of the Solidarity Party, who conceded defeat after finishing 17 percentage points behind Torrijos. The APN also won a majority of seats in the Legislative Assembly, as well as the majority of the mayoral elections (Vol. 23, Nos. 5-6).

Torrijos also ran as the PRD's candidate in the '99 presidential election but finished second to Mireya Moscoso of the Arnulfista Party, whose husband—Dr. Arnulfo Arias Madrid—had been deposed by Martin's father, Gen. Omar Torrijos, in a '68 coup d'état. Moscoso's government ended with an approval rate of about 15%, mostly because of corruption scandals and incompetence, on which Torrijos capitalized successfully with a campaign that had three top priorities: fight government corruption, create more jobs and improve public security. Moscoso's handpicked candidate, José Miguel Alemán, ended in a distant third place with about 16% of the vote, having to carry the weight of the Moscoso administration's poor performance between '99 and '04.

Newsmen Protest Against Civil Court Ruling

On 19 Aug, more than 100 news reporters and their supporters protested outside of the Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ) in Panama City against a civil court judgment that ruled in favor of a magistrate who sued a news company and two reporters for liable. The protestors carried banners and shouted chants in favor of freedom of the press and against the liable case won by judge Winston Spadafora.

Spadafora filed a liable suit against journalists Gustavo Aparicio of *Editora Panamá América* and Marcel Chéry of *La Prensa* in Mar '01 after articles were published that accused the Social Investment Fund (FIS) of constructing a new highway that led up to the properties owned by judge Spadafora and former Comptroller General Alvin Weeden in the district of La Chorrera. The articles denounced the FIS for showing favoritism to public officials, and accused Spadafora and Weeden of "influence peddling."

The protests on 19 Aug were organized by the Association of Journalists (CONAPE) and the Union of Panamanian Journalists (SIP), and were conducted under a blazing hot sun. The protestors marched from the CONAPE building to the CSJ, while denouncing the action taken by Spadafora and defending the freedom of the press.

The condemned journalists and their news organizations were ordered to pay Spadafora \$2 million and the court attached the wages of the two newsmen. The protestors burned photographs of magistrate Spadafora to demonstrate their repudiation of his actions and of the civil court judgment.

Public Prosecutor Accused of Bribery

Panamanian prosecutor Arqímedes Sáez, who in '04 led the criminal investigation against Luis Posada Carriles and three other anti-Castro Cubans for attempting to assassinate President Fidel Castro during his Nov '00 visit to Panama, was arrested on 20 Aug '05 and accused of corruption.

Sáez, who currently is the Second Prosecutor of the Third Judicial Circuit of La Chorrera (located 30 km west of Panama City), was arrested at his home in an operation coordinated by the National Security Council (CNS). He is accused of taking a bribe to alter a criminal investigation against a detained woman.

According to *La Prensa*, CNS agents recorded Prosecutor Sáez in the act of taking the bribe from intermediaries to favor the young woman who had been detained and was being investigated by Sáez himself. Apparently, Sáez had demanded \$2,000 from the girl's father about two weeks earlier to bury the investigation, but the father went to senior police officials to denounce the attempted bribe, which gave CNS agents time to set up the sting operation.

Congressman Accused of Taking Drug Money

The tentacles of narco-trafficking have reached into the National Legislative Assembly again, this time to entrap Congressman Rogelio Alba, who represents the Comarca Kuna Yala, one of the Kuna Indian Reserves. Alba is accused of receiving between \$30,000 and \$70,000 from the sale of a ton of cocaine in the area of Achutupu, after local Kuna Indians stole the cocaine shipment from a group of Colombian para-military forces. Alba strongly denied the accusations.

The Office of the Prosecutor General announced that it had sent its evidence to the Supreme Court of Justice, asking that the Public Ministry be granted the authority to continue the criminal investigation of Congressman Alba, a procedure that is stipulated in Article 206 of the National Constitution.

According to police officials, some of the Kuna Indians who were arrested for selling drugs in Comarca Kuna Yala implicated Alba as one of their associates who benefited from the trafficking of cocaine in the region. Apparently, Alba was asked by some of the Kuna drug-traffickers to help them buy a house in the district of Achutupu using some of the proceeds from their drug sales, and Alba took the money to buy the house knowing that it was “dirty money.”

It was reported that the Colombian drug-traffickers who “lost” the boat-load of cocaine, which was “found” and sold by some Kuna Indians, were furious about this and began to threaten the local Indian population with reprisals if the “stolen” drugs or the money from drug sells was not returned to them immediately. Consequently, the threatened local leaders in the frontier region of Puerto Obaldía went to the local police authorities and asked them to provide protection for their communities from the “Colombian narco-terrorists.”

PANAMAX 2005 Anti-Terrorism Maneuvers Claim Three Lives

In mid-Aug, 22 warships from 10 countries participated in “PANAMAX 2005” in international waters along the Pacific and Caribbean coasts of Panama, in a series of training maneuvers to simulate how to respond to a “hypothetical terrorist attack” against the Panama Canal.

US Rear Admiral Vinson E. Smith, commander of the US Naval Forces Southern Command, headed up these joint naval maneuvers during 11-16 Aug in conjunction with Panama’s National Maritime Service (SMN), which conducted land exercises. Participating were warships from Argentina, Canada, Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico and the US, along with observers from Costa Rica, El Salvador, Uruguay and France.

The SMN, which hosted the exercises, conducted land maneuvers with combined Panamanian security forces, aided by US Special Forces, along the 80 km of the canal for the purpose of identifying the most vulnerable points of possible terrorist attack.

Unfortunately, three Panamanian military police officers drowned in Colon Province on 14 Aug while participating in amphibious training exercises near Guasha Island in Gatun Lake, which provides fresh water for the operation of the canal’s locks. Those who died were part of an assault team that was attacking a mock terrorist camp on the island as part of the exercise.

The PANAMAX defense strategy has increased in complexity since its first operation in ’03 in which only Panama, Chile and US armed forces participated. This year the “war games” sought to standardize international procedures in control and command, maritime interdiction, rules of engagement, security and communications.

However, in the local media, this “military training exercise” was virtually invisible to most Panamanians, who dislike huge military displays and who rebel at the idea of US soldiers in their national territory, because it brings back bad memories of the US military occupation of the old Panama Canal Zone and of a series of military dictatorships that produced fear and repression in their homeland. The Panamanian government and pro-government media owners allegedly judged it wiser to keep the general population ignorant about the nature of PANAMAX 2005, according to some

international news reports, in order to not raise concerns about the possible militarization of the nation's defense forces.

The Panama Canal, which connects the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, carries 5% of world trade and saves ships an 8,000-mile trip around Cape Horn at the southern tip of South America. An average of 43 ships transit the canal daily and the Panama Canal Authority collects nearly \$700 million in tolls yearly.

—*Clifton L. Holland*