



Opposition to same-sex marriage boosts presidential candidate in Costa Rica

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A popular revolt against the imposition of same-sex marriage has transformed the political landscape of Costa Rica, propelling a once-obscure Christian evangelical singer to a first-place finish in presidential voting this month and putting the outspoken critic of gay marriage in a strong position to win the spring runoff.

In a crowded field, Fabricio Alvarado catapulted from afterthought to front-runner in the wake of a January ruling that seemed to pave the way for same-sex unions in the largely Catholic Central American nation. Mr. Alvarado, 43, the candidate of the minuscule conservative National Restoration Party, vowed to defy the order issued by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

He will now face the progressive candidate Carlos Alvarado — no relation — in an April 1 runoff.

With polls showing a majority of Costa Ricans oppose legalization of same-sex marriages, Fabricio Alvarado said, the country should withdraw from the international tribunal rather than submit to the order.

“If we have to leave, if we have to denounce the Pact of San Jose and thus stop the interference from the [court], it won’t make our hands tremble,” Mr. Alvarado told a Costa Rican television program. “They are imposing something on us that ought to be resolved by the Legislative Assembly,” the country’s parliament.

Mr. Alvarado’s unambiguous stance contrasted with his challengers’ more nuanced reactions — and proved hugely popular with his socially conservative base.

Costa Rica “is a majority-conservative nation. There’s no mystery there, and it shouldn’t surprise anybody,” said Adrian Pignataro, a political scientist at the University of Costa Rica. “That was already there. That didn’t start with this election.”

But Mr. Alvarado smartly combined his conservative message with populist and nationalist overtones, managing to capture votes in the lesser-developed coastal regions traditionally dominated by the big-tent National Liberation Party, whose candidate, Antonio Alvarez, he relegated to third place.

“It’s a fact that Fabricio Alvarado’s party did not just criticize the decision’s basis in that it favors marriage equality, but also cast it as a question of sovereignty,” Mr. Pignataro said. “It’s also a discussion of nationalism versus cosmopolitanism.”

The ripple effects of what Mr. Alvarado called an “activist” ruling point to a tension that far exceeds the question of who will govern the nation of 4.9 million, said Cato Institute analyst Juan Carlos Hidalgo.

“This doesn’t apply only to Costa Rica: In theory ... the Inter-American Court of Human Rights just legalized same-sex marriage throughout the region, throughout Latin America,” Mr. Hidalgo said in a briefing Wednesday at the Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington think tank devoted to hemispheric issues. “It was reckless.”

Even supporters of same-sex marriage such as former Costa Rican Vice President Kevin Casas-Zamora warned that supranational bodies hurt themselves by failing to show a level of “self-restraint” on hot-button political and social issues.

“It’s — to put it mildly — problematic when a foreign court settles the issue for you,” Mr. Casas-Zamora said at the Washington briefing. “For their own sake, they should start being more careful ... and more mindful of the timing of their rulings.”

Rising resentment

Social conservatives and religious voters had much to gripe about even before Fabricio Alvarado — his party’s only delegate in the national legislature — scored his stunning upset Sunday.

The center-left government of President Luis Guillermo Solis’ government pursued an aggressive liberal agenda even before the same-sex edict was handed down, supporting in-vitro fertilization, civil unions for same-sex couples and a controversial sex education curriculum.

The so-called Christian bloc in the assembly gained influence by opposing the idea of civil unions for same-sex couples and winning the election of a pastor, Gonzalo Ramirez, as the body’s president.

Tens of thousands of protesters flooded the streets of San Jose in December to join a “march for life and the family.”

“The march ... seems to me to have been an inflection point,” Gustavo Araya, a specialist in political communications at the University of Costa Rica, told The Associated Press last week. “It showed that this issue can summon the people and become a social motivator.”

A key moment in the campaign came when rivals leaked a video showing Fabricio Alvarado’s wife praying and speaking in tongues, sparking first ridicule and then a strong backlash among conservatives online.

“The disrespect and the jokes that these people suffered caused me to empathize,” Ricardo Alfaro, a professional musician who decided to vote for Mr. Alvarado, told AP.

Meanwhile, the outcome of the coming runoff between the evangelical newcomer, who was backed by 24.9 percent of voters in the first round, and Carlos Alvarado, a former labor minister and leader of the ruling Citizens' Action Party who scored 21.7 percent of the vote, remains anybody's guess.

Carlos Alvarado has readily accepted the role of the consummate liberal in the race, endorsing same-sex marriage and equally controversial provisions on comprehensive sex education. He now may have to tone down his rhetoric, Mr. Hidalgo said.

"[It seemed] he was running for president of [his] high-school class. He was highlighting the fact that he likes the Beatles, highlighting the fact that he owns a dog named Yoda," Mr. Hidalgo said. "He was very successful in [capturing] that young, progressive vote ... but it didn't appeal to the broader electorate."

His challenger, on the other hand, needs to move beyond social issues, Mr. Casas-Zamora said.

"Fabricio Alvarado is a conservative candidate, but he's a one-trick pony. He only cares about cultural issues," he said. "I know what his position on same-sex marriage is — that's all I know about him."

For the time being, both Alvarados seem to have a shot at replacing Mr. Solis, said Maria Jose Cascante of the University of Costa Rica's School of Political Sciences. The once-irrelevant National Restoration Party could form the largest bloc in the parliament even if its candidate is defeated, forcing the next president to tack to the center.

"Both candidates have good chances to win the election," Ms. Cascante said. "But in general, Costa Rica is looking at four very difficult years."

Fabricio Alvarado had his own succinct interpretation of the first round of voting, telling jubilant supporters Sunday night, "Costa Rica has made it clear to the traditional politicians: Never again mess with the family, never again mess with our children."