
A Happy Election in Latin America

For a change.

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February 22, 2010, Vol. 15, No. 22

San Jose, Costa Rica

Costa Ricans went to the polls on February 7 and elected their first female president, Laura Chinchilla. As the candidate of the governing party and the chosen successor of incumbent Oscar Arias, Chinchilla could hardly run on hope and change. Instead, her campaign slogan declared her to be “firm and honest,” an implicit acknowledgment of the concerns most voters had about her candidacy—that she would be a puppet of Arias and that she would be no less corrupt than her predecessors (two former Costa Rican presidents have been imprisoned on charges of graft in recent years).

In the event, those concerns were hardly enough to keep Chinchilla from smashing through the glass ceiling that our Hillary failed to crack. Chinchilla benefited from a weak and fractured opposition, but more than that from an electorate pretty content with the direction of their country.

And why shouldn't they be? Costa Rica has been hurt by the recession—a large portion of the country's economy is dependent on tourism from the United States, which has declined precipitously—but it remains a remarkable success story. Indeed, if the rest of Latin America looked like Costa Rica—democratic, prosperous, and demilitarized—it would be more than the author of the Monroe Doctrine could ever have hoped for.

Chinchilla's win was in no small part a reflection of the high marks (a 60 percent approval rating) Costa Ricans give Arias, who managed to help them avoid the worst of the global economic downturn while overseeing a massive effort to improve the country's infrastructure. His foreign policy endeavors were less successful. Arias won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 during his first four-year term as president (Costa Rican law requires two intervening presidents before any attempt at reelection) for efforts to end the civil wars that then plagued Central America. This time around Arias sought to relive that former glory by inserting himself into the recent constitutional crisis in Honduras.

Acting at the behest of the Obama administration, Arias attempted to broker a resolution that would have seen Manuel Zelaya, a close ally of Hugo Chávez, returned to the Honduran presidency after having been ousted by the Congress with the consent of the Honduran Constitutional Court. The Obama-Arias intervention was a disaster, and both Costa Rica and the United States are now quietly working to restore relations with the new, democratically elected president of Honduras, Porfirio Lobo Sosa.

Nuria Marin, one of Chinchilla's key advisers and a likely foreign minister in the new administration, said that Costa Rica would seek a “fresh start” with Honduras once Arias left office. “Laura will be more focused on the domestic agenda,” she said. Libertarian candidate Otto Guevara, who finished third after seeing his poll numbers collapse in the run up to the election, said the “government acted [in Honduras] without all the facts.” Guevara also seemed to take a swipe at Obama, saying that “people started making judgments in Honduras without knowing the laws of Honduras.” And he promised that, if elected, he would “congratulate Lobo and help Honduras return to normality.”

Honduras wasn't the only place where the Arias foreign policy stirred controversy. Costa Rica had been one of two countries to maintain an embassy in Jerusalem when Arias took office his second time. He ordered the embassy moved to Tel Aviv and offered official recognition to the “state” of Palestine, causing a rift with Israel but ingratiating his government with Arab states. (He also switched the country's diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to mainland China.)

What, precisely, Arias gained for Costa Rica (or himself) from the decision to move the embassy out of Jerusalem is the subject of some speculation; no one seems to know for sure, and most assume some quid pro quo. More concrete, quite literally, are the effects of the switch in recognition to China. The Chinese government is building a massive stadium in the country's capital, using an imported Chinese labor force, as a gift to the people of Costa Rica.

Oddly, it was the leftist candidate Otton Solis, whom Arias narrowly defeated in the 2006 election and who was runner-up once again this year, who offered the harshest criticism of the stadium. He promised that if elected, he would name it in honor of the Dalai Lama. Indeed, Solis hardly presented himself as a leftist at all. It was Guevara—who had proposed a national flat tax and played up his close ties to the Cato Institute (his former assistant runs the think-tank's Latin America program) as evidence of his free market bona fides—that Costa Ricans kept telling me was a Communist.

Guevara's steep decline in the polls coincided with a series of articles in the country's leading newspaper raising question about the sources of his campaign funding, but few voters I talked to were aware of any of that. Perhaps it was his campaign colors—red and white—that led voters to believe he was a Communist. Or maybe it was his plan to eliminate taxes on the poor (an attempt to make his flat tax more progressive) or his promise to provide every primary student in Costa Rica with a free laptop.

When I asked a Solis supporter who was volunteering at a polling place amid the carnival-like atmosphere of Election Day why people thought Guevara was a Communist, he shrugged. "I studied medicine in the Soviet Union, I know what a Communist is—Otto is not a Communist," he said. "People confuse Communism and fascism." Whatever the explanation, the penchant working class Costa Ricans have for labeling their opponents Communists is perhaps the best evidence that Costa Rica is set to remain a haven for capitalism, democracy, and freedom in an otherwise troubled region.

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