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Ruling Party Easily Wins Costa Rica Presidential Vote

José de Córdoba

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Costa Ricans flocked to the polls Sunday to give an upset landslide victory to the ruling party, rejecting a conservative evangelical candidate who campaigned against same-sex marriage.

Carlos Alvarado Quesada, a 38-year-old novelist who served as labor minister in the current center-left administration of President Luis Guillermo Solís, beat Fabricio Alvarado Muñoz, 43, a former preacher and psalm singer who seized on opposition to same-sex marriage to vault to first place in the first round of elections. Mr. Alvarado Muñoz also led polls ahead of Sunday's runoff. The two candidates aren't related.

With 95% of the ballots counted Sunday night, Mr. Alvarado Quesada was leading with 61% of the vote, against 39% for Mr. Alvarado Muñoz. Voter participation was 67%.

"I will unite the country to move it forward," Mr. Alvarado Quesada said before a large and festive crowd. He called for a government of national unity to work to better education and reduce inequalities in the Central American country.

In his earlier concession speech, Mr. Alvarado Muñoz thanked God and said he would keep fighting to defend "life, family, ethics and the independence of Costa Rica." He also pledged to help his opponent combat corruption, crime and inefficiency.

"Democracy won today," Mr. Alvarado Muñoz added.

Mr. Alvarado Muñoz, a legislator of his evangelical party in Costa Rica's congress, leapt to first place in January's first electoral round days after the Inter American Court of Human Rights, based in the country's capital of San José, ruled that same-sex marriage should be allowed in Costa Rica.

Mr. Alvarado Muñoz, who until then had about 3% support, strongly opposed the court's decision, quickly becoming the front-runner. He characterized the ruling as a case of a foreign institution imposing its criteria over local traditions. He warned that the court would legalize abortion next in Costa Rica.

Mr. Alvarado Quesada was the only major presidential candidate to strongly defend the court's ruling as a matter of defending fundamental human rights.

The court's decision polarized the electorate, immediately turning the election into a one-issue poll. Opponents said Mr. Alvarado Muñoz would turn Costa Rica, one of the oldest democracies in Latin America, into a theocracy and limit the rights of gay people and other minorities.

"People got scared and said, 'Not here,' and went out in droves to vote," said Armando González, editor in chief of La Nación, Costa Rica's largest newspaper.

The vast majority of undecided voters had ultimately gone for Mr. Alvarado Quesada when faced by what they believed to be the radical choice presented by Mr. Alvarado Muñoz, said Juan Carlos Hidalgo, an analyst for Washington's Cato Institute.

"Costa Ricans are very conservative," he said. "This represents the continuation of the government of the last four years."

He said he hoped Mr. Alvarado Quesada would govern as a unity president, and quickly take action to lower Costa Rica's high fiscal deficits. "Urgent measures have to be taken," he added.