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## Costa Rica Election Hinges on Gay Rights

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A former evangelical preacher has seized on the issue of gay rights to gain a lead in the presidential race in Costa Rica, upending politics in a country that has long been exceptional for its stability in a tumultuous region.

Leading polls is Fabricio Alvarado Muñoz, a former preacher and psalm singer with the evangelical National Restoration Party who has forged a union between the country's conservative Catholics and its growing evangelical population.

His ascent reflects the growing clout of evangelical Christians, who are transforming politics throughout Latin America, strengthening conservative politicians and giving leverage to new movements and causes. More than 20% of the population in Latin America is evangelical, compared with 3% three decades ago, according to a Pew Research survey. For conservative politicians, wooing them has become essential.

The 43-year-old Mr. Alvarado Muñoz pulled off a surprise victory in February by obtaining the most votes in the first round of voting for the presidency. He maintains a slight lead in polls ahead of Easter Sunday's runoff against ruling-party candidate Carlos Alvarado Quesada, 38, who served as labor minister in the current center-left administration of President Luis Guillermo Solís. The two candidates aren't related.

One of Latin America's oldest democracies, Costa Rica has an unbroken tradition of democratic elections since 1949 and is globally known for its protection of the environment and human rights. San José, its capital, is the home of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, part of the Organization of American States.

That court infuriated religious conservatives in January by telling Costa Rica to allow same-sex marriage after the government asked the court for an opinion on the matter. The ruling polarized Costa Rica's voters and quickly became the single biggest issue in the election.

Almost overnight, Mr. Alvarado Muñoz, who until then had about 3% support, became the front-runner by coming out strongly against the court and its ruling, which he characterized as a case of a foreign institution overriding local traditions.

His rival, Mr. Alvarado Quesada, was the only major presidential candidate to fully back the court ruling, calling it a matter of defending basic human rights.

Mr. Alvarado Muñoz, an articulate conservative who honed his television skills as a crime reporter and pastor, said he would pull Costa Rica out of the court if needed. Meanwhile, a video showing his wife speaking in tongues became a viral hit. She calls herself a prophet.

In an interview with Spain's El País newspaper, Mr. Alvarado Muñoz said that gay people currently in government jobs could "rest easy." His vice presidential running mate, however, said on television that given candidates with the same qualifications, he would prefer to hire heterosexuals who would better reflect Costa Rican values.

Mr. Alvarado Muñoz could deal a major blow to Costa Rica's strong tradition of defending human rights if elected, said Kevin Casas Zamora, a former social democratic vice president of Costa Rica who is now a senior fellow at Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington-based think tank.

"He is embracing as public policy a very extreme religious stamp, which he will impose on a diverse society," he said.

The candidate's supporters deny such accusations.

"There's been a media campaign that says he is homophobic and would install a theocratic government," said Mario Redondo, a key aide to Mr. Alvarado Muñoz. "None of those things are true."

Evangelicals make up about 25% of Costa Rica's population of some five million people, and are extremely well organized.

"Catholics and evangelicals used to be rivals, but now the Catholic Church has concluded that the biggest threat it faces is secularism and anti-religiosity," said Javier Corrales, a Latin American expert at Amherst College. "They are also very much against so-called gender ideology, which is the term the Catholic Church uses to classify such things as feminism and LGBT rights."

Mr. Alvarado Muñoz has also mobilized support from business groups uncomfortable with the big fiscal deficits racked up by the current administration, which they see as an ally of powerful state-workers unions.

While Mr. Alvarado Muñoz's social views are well known, he has little knowledge of economics, said Juan Carlos Hidalgo, an analyst at Washington's Cato Institute.

"A part of the business and middle classes are backing Fabricio even though he doesn't know anything about economics because they think he is malleable, controllable, and will listen," he said.