

# Costa Rica's New One-Party System

By **Christie Lang**  
San José Staff



While the party faithful dressed in green-and-white blew horns, tossed confetti and waved flags late into the night on Sunday, 54 percent of Costa Ricans went home after the presidential elections with their heads hung low.

Once again, the opposition parties had failed to amass enough votes to overturn the mighty National Liberation Party (PLN) and, this year, the gap between themselves and the long-dominant party seemed wider.

Despite all the money raised and hands shaken, no party came close to challenging the PLN and the closest candidate, Otto Solís of the Citizen Action Party (PAC), was 20 percentage points behind. For some analysts, Sunday's election proved that Costa Rica is dangerously close to becoming a one-party system.

"For me, the result of the election is worrisome," said Sergio Moys, political science professor at the University of Costa Rica. The election of Laura Chinchilla maintains this dangerous concentration of power in the presidency, in the Legislative Assembly, and in the Ombudsman's Office.

For decades, the PLN traded power with the Social Christian Unity Party (Unidad), a right-of-center political group that placed four of their candidates in Casa Presidencial. But Unidad has yet to recover from the blow of seeing two of its leaders, both former presidents, arrested on charges of corruption in 2004.

Though some hoped Unidad would revive in time for the 2010 elections, support for the one-time political superpower never materialized, and its presidential candidate, former party head Luis Figuera, received a mere 4.1 percent of the vote on Sunday.

Meanwhile, the PLN powerhouse maintained its strong presence in the Legislative Assembly and polled an unprecedented victory margin over rivals in the presidential race. The "well-oiled machine" seemed unchallengeable as the other political parties barely made a dent in the vote.

Political analyst Carlos Denton said the imbalance should correct itself soon.

"A mature market has two main options, like Coke and Pepsi, BMW and Mercedes-Benz, the Tories and the Whigs, Democrats and Republicans," said Denton, co-founder of CID-Gallup, a San José-based market research and polling firm. "The same is true of a mature democracy: Human beings become overwhelmed when there are too many choices."

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**Recount:** Officials of the Supreme Elections Tribunal (TSE) tackle the task of a manual count of votes to determine the winners of a couple of disputed seats in the Legislative Assembly.

Denton said that Costa Rica has a mature democracy and, therefore, the imbalance should soon right itself. But where the opposition will come from is a lingering question.

### The Face of the Opposition

In 2006, PAC was the party that was able to unite the opposition. Mustering its forces from the grassroots — people who were enticed by Solís' promises of accountability and transparency — the left-leaning Belding party blindsided PLN candidate Oscar Arias and came within 2 percentage points of the presidency. "We didn't expect results to be this tight. We all expected a more unified triumph," Arias admitted after the 2006 election. (TT, Feb. 2006)

But the force that united behind Solís in 2006 and, for the most part, joined him in opposition to the 2007 referendum on the Central American Free Trade Agreement with the United States (CAFTA), was notably weaker. This year's election, a former PLN minister and PLN legislator, received only 23 percent of the vote on Sunday.

Some of that support walked across the ideological lines to join Otto Guevara of the right-leaning Libertarian Movement Party (ML).

"You'll find a lot of Guevara supporters are former PAC voters," said Juan López, who spent Election Day outside a polling station in downtown San José, hoping to pull undecided voters into the ML. "They didn't think Solís could be successful after two tries and they joined Guevara instead."

This is not to say Costa Rica is moving to the right, said Michael Shifter, political analyst at the Washington, D.C.-based Inter-American Dialogue, a center for policy analysis on issues in the Western Hemisphere.

"It doesn't signify an ideological shift," he said. "But what I think it does show is (showing) that people distrust politicians and political parties, that they don't feel represented by political leaders, that they are attracted to the outsider who can challenge the status quo."

Guevara, with his catchy political angles and popular proposals, was an attractive alternative for many anti-PLNers, Shifter

said. On Election Day, the red-shirted, anti-tax, free-trade advocates captured 20.1 percent of the electorate and five additional seats in the 57-seat Legislative Assembly. It was a "whopping gain," said José Antonio Muñoz, political analyst and lawyer, calling it a "dramatic ascent." Muñoz said the success of both the ML and the PLN indicates a vote of approval for the economic liberalization and pro-business climate.

### Response on the Left

Despite Guevara's favorable showings, neither Denton nor Moys see future opposition to the PLN coming from the right. "There is truly a vacuum on the center-left or left that is not being occupied," Moys said. "But PAC doesn't seem to have sufficient maturity to assume the challenge of governing the country."

Moys said PAC faltered when the party didn't look to bridge alliances with social groups or other political forces. It also failed to define its ideology, he said.

It's not just PAC that could emerge as an alternative in years to come. There's also a chance Unidad could resuscitate itself as a left-leaning party, Denton said. "This would be an interesting development in itself, as the party was traditionally seen as being in the right of the PLN until the latter party adopted privatization, free markets and lower taxes as part of its platform."

"We are focusing on rebuilding the party this year," said Abel Delgado, who was running the Unidad table at a polling station in Desamparados, south of San José, on Election Day. "To be honest, we aren't really optimistic about the presidency, but we are aiming for more seats in the Legislative Assembly."

Denton said these "alternative parties" should focus on developing leaders to take the reins in the next election. He said countries need "100 good leaders" in order to move forward.

### The Money Game

There are challenges to constructing an alternative party, not the least of which is coming up with funds to disseminate cam-

paign messages. Solís ran into this problem in the final weeks before the election when he had to pull radio and television advertisements because of lack of funds. The Banco de Costa Rica (BCR) allegedly withheld \$1.8 million in loans, claiming that PAC was not showing well enough in the polls.

Until that point Solís had been receiving between 5 and 15 percent of the vote in pre-election studies. Though the polls had been wrong in the past, the bank decided Solís wasn't a worthwhile investment.

Because public funding for campaigns is retroactive, political parties depend on private loans to cover the up-front costs of campaigning. Depending on how many votes candidates receive in the presidential elections, political parties receive a percentage of the \$11 million in public campaign financing after the election, which they use to repay the loans.

"This is serious," PAC legislator Sergio Alfaro said when he heard the BCR was withdrawing funding. "The banks are weakening Costa Rican democracy. The message they are sending to the people is that, in Costa Rica, whoever presents the money presents the president, and those who pay for the polls can present the president." (TT, Jan. 21, 2006)

The system is set up as a kind of Catch-22, critics allege, as money is only given to parties that have been successful at getting their message out, but, in order to reach the voters, political parties need money. It's caused several parties to point fingers at polling companies, accusing them of being players in the elections, rather than impartial observers.

"All of a sudden, these public opinion studies have become an instrument," said Denton. "I have never seen anything like this before... It has made being a survey researcher a difficult task."

He added, "We are starting to get phone calls from people saying, 'You are ruining the campaign!'"

Before, with only two leading parties, banks knew the vote would be split between the PLN and Unidad so they weren't taking too much risk in issuing bonds to the political parties. Today, Election Day results are harder to measure with four serious contenders.

Watching Solís pull his television advertisements because of lack of money, Zaldívar said public financing needs to change.

"The process has resulted in exclusion, inequity and imbalance in the financing of political campaigns," he told The Tico Times. "We need to revise (the process)."

Ernesto Trejos, a left-leaning academic who ran for president on the Broad Front Party ticket, lamented his financial limitations and its effects on his ability to reach the Costa Rican people. He received only 0.3 percent of the vote and his party managed to put one candidate in the Legislative Assembly.

"Access to mediums of communication is insufficient," he said. "Costa Rica is putting forth a silent democracy — one that can only be accessed with money."

But as PLN prepares to take the helm for another four years, the losing parties of Sunday's election already are talking about next time.

"We faced a party with 60 years of experience and with the indirect support of the government. They had resources, logistics and transportation that we weren't able to have," Guevara told reporters. Nevertheless, he said, "We aspire to be a more influential party in the Costa Rican political scene in the next 20 or 30 years." ■

# Diverse Assembly Awaits Chinchilla

By Chrissie Long  
Tico Times Staff

Laura Chinchilla may have enjoyed a wide victory margin in Sunday's presidential election, but she will face a divided Legislative Assembly when she steps into office on May 8th.

While the exact apportionment of seats among the political parties in the Legislative Assembly won't be known until next week, early figures indicate Chinchilla's party, the National Liberation Party (PLN), provisionally holds 23 of the 57 seats — six short of the number required to pass bills easily with an absolute majority.

But the fact the PLN is six votes short won't be an impediment, according to University of Costa Rica political science professor Sergio Moya. "She (Chinchilla) will be able to achieve a majority in the assembly thanks to alliances with the Libertarian Movement Party (ML)."

The centrist PLN and the right-wing ML have been aligned on many issues in the last few years. With the ML doubling its forces after this election, it stands as an ally that can carry through PLN proposals, said Moya.

## Legislative Elections

Costa Rica replaces its 57-seat Legislative Assembly with new members every four years. Candidates are not directly elected, but are appointed from a pool of pre-selected party members after voters indicate their party preferences in the polls. Based on the percentage of votes a party receives in each province, a specified number of their candidates gain seats in the Legislative Assembly.

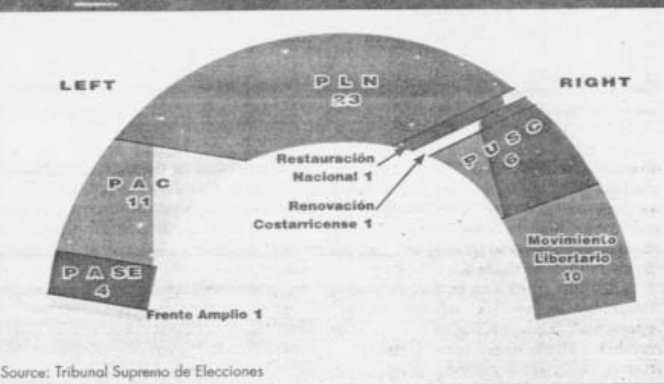
Political analyst Fernando Zeledón said the real loser in Sunday's election was the PAC, which lost six seats in the Legislative Assembly and 15 percent of the presidential vote compared to the 2006 election.

But another left-leaning party, Accessibility Without Exclusion Party (PASE), was able to pick up some of those votes, quadrupling their legislative seats from one to four.

"That was a big surprise in this election," said Moya, who attributed the gain to the success of PASE legislator Oscar López.

"His attitude and actions in the Legislative Assembly attracted a lot of sympathizers in

## Party Representation in the Leg. Assembly



Source: Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones

Roy Arguedas Arias | Tico Times

Costa Rica," Moya said of the 38-year-old blind politician who made a run for president this year.

Representing the disabled and elderly populations, López has made waves in political circles by giving a voice to the marginalized. Though it's still premature to say where his support came from in this election, Moya said, his message of equal opportunity clearly has reached many ears.

Other legislative seats went to the Social Christian Unity Party (6), the Broad Front Party (1), the Costa Rican Renovation Party (1) and the National Restoration Party (1).

"We expect to know the full makeup of the Legislative Assembly in the coming week," said Luis A. Sobrado, president of the Supreme Elections Tribunal (TSE), who said that the assembly figures are confirmed after the votes for president. Currently, the TSE is undertaking a recount of half the tables due to discrepancies in the numbers.

Sobrado said he doesn't expect the percentages to change in the presidential race, but the TSE is undertaking the process "to

remove any doubts or suspicions."

Any number of reasons could prompt the recount, Sobrado said, including differences between the tally of voters and the number of ballots, questionable markings on the physical ballot or vote tallies missing the signatures of a sufficient number of observers.

"We expect one vote to be invalid here, another to be void over there but, in the end, we think it would be unusual for (the recount) to modify the results," Sobrado said.

Yet, the legislative vote could change, Sobrado said, as 10 percent of the ballots have yet to be counted.

Reluctant to comment on the congressional results after the polls closed Sunday as the results weren't yet confirmed, Chinchilla did say her government would be one of collaboration.

"Independently of how the Legislative Assembly will be configured, our effort will be to establish a permanent dialogue with the political parties and social sectors of the country," she said. ■

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