

## **CONTINUITY IN COSTA RICA FOR THE COMING PARLIAMENTARY TERM. COSTA RICA HAS ELECTED ITS NEW PRESIDENT**

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On 7 February 2010, Costa Rica elected a woman as head of state for the first time in its history with Laura Chinchilla of the Social Democrat – Liberal governing party, Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN). 60 years after the introduction of voting rights for women in Costa Rica, a woman has made the leap to the country's top job. The result of the presidential election was unambiguous. The final count left Chinchilla holding 46.91% of votes cast. Otón Solís of the leftist Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC) came second with 25.05%, followed by the liberal candidate Otto Guevara Guth (Movimiento Libertario) with 20.92%. Lagging far behind was the Christian Social Partido Unión Social Cristiana candidate Luis Fishman with 3.88%.

At the same time as the presidential election, new members of Parliament and community councils were also voted in. Electoral law lays down that votes must be counted in that order and, where disagreements arise, they must be recounted and verified. And in fact, presidential election results were already available on the evening of election day for 95% of all polling stations and could be officially published on 19 February. The last parliamentary seat, though, could only be verified at the end of January as some polling districts had to be recounted by hand. It was already becoming clear on election day evening that in the presidential elections the PLN had won all but two of the 79 election districts. With 24 out of 57 members, the PLN comprises the majority in parliament. Two thirds of the members of parliament, a total of 38, are needed to decide on constitutional amendments. The ruling party's majority is too small for that in this parliamentary session, and so once more alliances will have to be formed for far-reaching reforms. The election result brought a final end to the two party system which existed hitherto. Up to the election before last, in 2006, there were essentially two parties in Costa Rica, which took over as government by turns. Costa Rica's present constitution was adopted in 1949. There are basically two political currents – the green-white Partido Liberación Nacional and the Christian Democrat/Conservative group. In 1983, the Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC) was formed from various smaller Christian Democrat and Conservative parties. Personalities from both parties have shaped the development of Costa Rica ever since. President Oscar Arias (PLN), still in office, was president of Costa Rica from 1986-1998. He achieved international recognition for his participation in the peace process negotiations following the civil wars in Central America in the 1980's. President Miguel Angel Rodríguez (PUSC), president from 1998-2002, shaped the country with his economic policy, which contained features of social market economics. Both parties are char-

acterised by a strong membership structure and a group of committed voters within the population, the "voto duro" (the safe vote).

The election campaign officially began four months before the election, on 7 October 2009. As the candidates had to be confirmed in advance of that date, the parties had already conducted an internal and largely also public electoral campaign, in which the then prospective candidates had to pit themselves against their party-listed adversaries. To some extent these election campaigns were more interesting than the official campaigns nearer the end of the year. The presidential candidate's strategy was based on getting involved as little as possible in discussions and statements about her policy proposals. Although Otto Guevara of the Movimiento Libertario repeatedly tried to provoke and polarise, Laura Chinchilla would have none of it. The electoral campaign developed into heated exchanges between opposition candidates playing to the gallery. In the months before Christmas, Laura Chinchilla shone in the discussions by her absence. And it would in fact have become relatively hard for her to steer a firm course in the election campaign. She stood for the policies of the government in office. As Oscar Arias' former vice-president, she carried joint responsibility for his policies. One of her central electoral promises was to carry forward the positive achievements of Oscar Arias' presidency. She included in that some of the existing social programmes, especially the *Avancemos Programme* (a scholarship programme for children from poorer households and for family support). She also emphasised that because of Arias' economic policy the global financial crisis had not hit Costa Rica as hard as the neighbouring countries of the region. She recognised one weak point in her predecessor's security policy. She did not however make a frontal attack on the inadequate measures of the Arias government as she herself had been part of that government. As justification, she argued that the economic situation to date had not allowed appropriate measures. Consequently she stood for continuity with the government in office, and that was honoured by the voters. In common with the other candidates, however, she left ideological discussions out of the election campaign.

In general, the themes of security and economic recovery had priority. Chinchilla's election slogan read "Firmeza y Honestidad" – "Resolve and Honesty". On the one hand, she demanded decisive action on violent crime and on the other, the issue of corruption was to be tackled more openly. Otto Guevara on the other hand, fell back on populist demands such as a tougher crack-down on crime to win votes. His motto was "Mano firme contra los delincuentes" – "A firm hand with criminals". Drawing on his earlier experience as Minister for Public Safety, Luis Fishman (PUSC) campaigned for foreigners who committed crimes in the country to be deported. In any event, he attracted special attention with, according to one survey, the worst election broadcast and the campaign, "El menos malo" – "The Less Worst". Ottón

Solís was the only one to concentrate on party political issues. He spoke about environmental protection, job security, increase in university places and eliminating discrimination of all kinds.

Several challenges await Laura Chinchilla in the next four years as Costa Rica's new president. For one thing she must keep the party strong. If the PLN were to lose the presidential election in 2014, it would be attributed to her political leadership. The upcoming internal power struggle will have repercussions on her national prestige. The political grouping around Oscar and Rodrigo Arias is already trying to position Rodrigo Arias, who as Minister for the Presidential Office (Ministro de la Presidencia) occupied a strong position in Oscar Arias' government, as the PLN's next presidential candidate. Jonny Araya, current mayor of San José and in-party opposition candidate to Laura Chinchilla, is trying to achieve the same thing for himself with his political group. The way it seems, Rodrigo Arias cannot rely on support from Laura Chinchilla in the internal debate. With her appointment of ministers she was already making it clear that she does not see herself as a "puppet of the Arias family". For the most important of the presidential offices, the Minister for the Presidential Office (Ministro de la Presidencia), who functions as co-coordinator of the other ministers and establishes the connection between president and parliament, and for the post of Minister for Foreign Affairs, she has appointed people close to former president José María Figueres. The same goes for the members of parliament closest to her. She is showing that she will retain the political direction of Oscar Arias, but will lay down her own priorities.

Challenges about what that means are already arising for her. One issue which will not be far from Costa Rica and the whole of Central America in the coming years is the fight against organised crime and especially the powerful drug cartels. Chinchilla used the summit meeting of heads of state and governments of Latin America and the Caribbean in Cancun (Mexico) on 22 and 23 February 2010 to discuss the issue with some of her future colleagues in office. It is very likely that Panama and Costa Rica will have to work more closely together in this area. The president elect also led talks with Costa Rica's other political parties shortly after the election on the same subject. In order to tackle important reforms, she needs the others' support. Early consultation and agreement on central issues is an advantage to future policy, to directly prevent any alliances among opposition parties and draw them into their own government work. Other central policy issues will be the stimulation of the economy, and the expansion and improvement of the social system. Laura Chinchilla and her party will have to be content to be judged by results on these points in the next elections.