What Can Costa Ricans Expect of Carlos Alvarado?

Ruling party candidate Carlos Alvarado Quesada was elected Costa Rica’s president in Sunday’s runoff election. He is to take office in May. // File Photo: Alvarado Quesada Campaign.

Q: Ruling party candidate Carlos Alvarado Quesada on Sunday won Costa Rica’s presidential runoff, garnering 61 percent of the vote to defeat evangelical singer and lawmaker Fabricio Alvarado Muñoz. Same-sex marriage was a prominent issue in the campaign, with Alvarado Quesada in support of it and Alvarado Muñoz opposed to it. To what can Alvarado Quesada, who came in behind Alvarado Muñoz in the first round, attribute his victory? What can Costa Ricans expect of his government, and how much will his policies differ from those of current President Luis Guillermo Solís? What will Alvarado Quesada’s government mean for businesses operating in Costa Rica and for the country’s economy?

A: Rogelio Douglas, president of the Caribbean Sustainable Development Group in Limón, Costa Rica: “Much of Costa Rica’s current peace and joy is based on expectations. President-elect Carlos Alvarado Quesada beat Fabricio Alvarado Muñoz by more than 20 percentage points. It was a very unexpected margin, considering that Alvarado Muñoz had won the first round with a surprising surge from 12th place out of 13 candidates, while the winner’s party is finishing its term with two of the largest corruption cases in the country’s history and an anemic economy. In the end, the theme that carried the winner across the finish line on Sunday night appears to be a stronger understanding and more effective communication of economic issues and possible solutions, not religion or social rights. The challenge for the new government will be effectively addressing the economy. At the macro level, this includes issues such as economic growth, a budget...
Peru’s Vizcarra Swears in New Cabinet Members

Peruvian President Martín Vizcarra, who took office just over a week ago following the resignation of his predecessor, Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, on Monday swore in his new cabinet, Peruvian daily newspaper La República reported. The entirely new cabinet is led by Prime Minister César Villanueva, an opposition legislator who had helped to lead the push to impeach Kuczynski. Villanueva has vowed to focus on resolving social problems in the interior of Peru, the Associated Press reported. David Tuesta, who has worked for BBVA for the past decade and before that served as a director for the CAF development bank, was tapped as finance minister. Néstor Popolizo, a career diplomat, was named foreign minister, the Washington Post reported. The entirely new cabinet is led by Prime Minister César Villanueva, an opposition legislator who had helped to lead the push to impeach Kuczynski.

White House Eyes New Immigration Legislation

Trump administration officials said Monday that the White House is planning another effort at creating new immigration legislation, CNN reported. A White House official told CNN that the Department of Homeland Security is working on a legislative package that “would basically close these loopholes so we can have a lawful immigration system and save a lot of lives on both sides of the border.” The news followed a series of tweets by Trump on Sunday and Monday that showed the president’s growing frustration with the immigration system. On Monday, the president reiterated his anger over the “caravan” of Central Americans heading for the United States to remit money to countries including the United States to other countries within 10 minutes, the company announced. Walmart, based in Bentonville, Ark., launched its money transfer service four years ago, the Financial Times reported. The new push to expand its money transfer service includes a recent partnership with MoneyGram, allowing senders in the United States to remit money to countries including Mexico.

Walmart Expanding Money Transfer Operation to 200 Countries

U.S.-based retailer Walmart is expanding its money transfer operation to 200 countries, allowing customers to send money from any of Walmart’s nearly 5,000 stores in the United States to other countries within 10 minutes, the company announced. Walmart, based in Bentonville, Ark., launched its money transfer service four years ago, the Financial Times reported. The new push to expand its money transfer service includes a recent partnership with MoneyGram, allowing senders in the United States to remit money to countries including Mexico.

Strong Earthquake Rattles Bolivia, Brazil

The San Calixto Observatory in Bolivia recorded a 6.6 magnitude earthquake centered near La Paz at 9:40 a.m. local time Monday, La Razón reported. The tremor did not result in any personal injuries or significant property damage, the Observatory said. According to Reuters, the earthquake was centered near La Paz and shook buildings as far away as Brasilia and São Paulo, forcing people there to evacuate buildings. The U.S. Geological Survey measured the earthquake at a magnitude of 6.8.

Brazil Could Grow More Than 2.6% Forecast: Central Bank Chief

Brazil’s economy, the largest in Latin America, could grow more than the 2.6 percent that economists have forecast, the country’s central bank chief said Monday, Reuters reported. Ilan Goldfajn added that the official estimate is “well calibrated.” During an event in São Paulo, Goldfajn said Brazil’s recovery from its most severe recession in decades appears to be consistent, despite volatility in recent readings of economic activity.
Colombia’s Attorney General Investigating Ecopetrol Oil Spill

The Colombian attorney general’s office on Monday opened an investigation into Ecopetrol’s role in an oil spill last month in the north of the country, El Tiempo reported. The spill, which began on March 2, was caused by a leak from an old well that was thought to be sealed off. The oil has reached 40 bodies of water and killed 2,437 animals, mostly fish, in the area surrounding the town of Barrancabermeja. In a separate report Monday, Ecopetrol CEO Felipe Bayón Pardo told the newspaper that two-thirds of the oil had been cleaned up and that his firm is conducting an internal investigation that will be complete by the end of April. But Luis Gilberto Murillo, Colombia’s minister of the environment and sustainable development, says the firm “underestimated” the extent of the spill and responded late. According to Reuters, the Colombian inspector general and environmental licensing agency are also conducting investigations. “The investigation will seek to establish if individual officials from Ecopetrol were responsible and could be penalized,” an official from the attorney general’s office told the wire service. Bayón told reporters on Monday that his company is cooperating with the investigation.

The new administration will face some significant economic challenges."

— Christine Wade

Bruce M. Wilson, professor of political science at the University of Central Florida: “Carlos Alvarado Quesada’s margin of victory in Sunday’s runoff election (61 percent to 39 percent), a blowout, was not predicted by any national pre-election polls. Instead, polls consistently showed him trailing or in a dead heat with right-wing evangelical singer and deputy Fabricio Alvarado Muñoz. Turnout was unexpectedly high, surpassing the first-round totals, despite the election being held during a major Costa Rican vacation period. In the two months between the two rounds, both candidates courted supporters of the other 11 parties that failed to make the second round and made policy concessions and promises of collaboration in a future government. Alvarado Muñoz, though, made a series of unforced errors including...
cancelling his participation in some national debates, gagging his party’s 14 newly elected deputies, preventing the public from getting to know them, filing a legally required donors list late, releasing the party’s program just three days before the election, and focusing almost exclusively on the same-sex marriage issue that he used successfully to animate his supporters in the first round. Furthermore, his spiritual mentor’s attacks on Catholic icons including the crucifix and the much loved, ‘La Negrita,’ the patron saint of Costa Rica, helped undermine support from Catholics. President-elect Carlos Alvarado’s capacity to govern depends on his ability to negotiate with deputies from six other parties in the Legislative Assembly, where his own party controls just 10 of the 57 seats. Compounding his difficulty is that the Costa Rican president’s institutional powers are among the weakest in Latin America.”

Mitchell A. Seligson, Centennial Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt University: “As Mark Twain might have said, reports of the demise of Costa Rica’s democracy and civility were greatly exaggerated. The trouncing that the outsider, evangelical populist candidate Fabricio Alvarado, took in the runoff—losing to Carlos Alvarado, a candidate of an unpopular incumbent party—demonstrates how far off the mark those widely expressed fears actually were. In a previous issue of this publication, I predicted Fabricio Alvarado’s defeat, saying that when Costa Ricans placed the explosive issue of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights’ ruling on legalizing same sex marriage in perspective with the other challenges the country faces, such as crime, corruption, and the budget deficit, it would be unlikely that Fabricio Alvarado would be elected president, and more likely that Carlos Alvarado Quesada, who was only 3 percent behind Fabricio Alvarado, would be elected. While the same-sex marriage question was a highly divisive issue in this election, Vanderbilt University’s LAPOP AmericasBarometer surveys have shown a steady increase in tolerance toward gays and same-sex marriage in Costa Rica over the past decade. The real message of this issue was not that Costa Rica is following Guatemala in losing its Catholic majority and becoming an evangelical country, but rather that the great geographic division in the vote revealed deep regional splits. In two of Costa Rica’s seven provinces, the evangelical candidate came out ahead in the run-off. The majority of voters supported him in Puntarenas, 55 percent, and Limón, 63 percent—regions far poorer and less developed than the rest of the country. The ruling Citizens’ Action Party is going to need to expend extra effort in these provinces if it expects to win their support in future elections.”

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gkuleta@thedialogue.org.

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