

COSTA RICAN INTERPRETATIONS OF COSTA RICAN POLITICS

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- COSTA RICA EN LOS AÑOS OCHENTA*. Second edition. By JORGE ROVIRA MAS. (San José: Editorial Porvenir, 1988. Pp. 190.)
- ¿QUIÉN GOBIERNA EN COSTA RICA?* Third edition. By OSCAR ARIAS SANCHEZ. (San José: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1984. Pp. 378.)
- NUEVOS RUMBOS PARA EL DESARROLLO COSTARRICENSE*. Second edition. By OSCAR ARIAS SANCHEZ. (San José: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1984. Pp. 150.)
- EL MODELO POLITICO COSTARRICENSE*. Edited by ASOCIACION NACIONAL DE FOMENTO ECONOMICO. (San José: Asociación Nacional de Fomento Económico, 1984. Pp. 168.)
- EL PRIMER DOMINGO DE FEBRERO: CRONICA INTERIOR DE LA ELECCION DE OSCAR ARIAS*. By GUIDO FERNANDEZ. (San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 1986. Pp. 443.)

Costa Rica today is commanding worldwide attention as an island of peace in a region wracked by internal wars. The efforts of the president of Costa Rica to spread that peace to the rest of the area have received international recognition. Moreover, Costa Rica's exceptional character has long made it an interesting puzzle for specialists and foreign visitors.¹ U.S. political scientists who take a cultural approach in explaining the general failure of democracy in Latin America have had to modify their theory to account for Costa Rica's greater success with democratic institutions.² Even more problems arise when theorists try to explain Costa Rica according to concepts like "modernization" and "political participation"³ or in the broader context of all countries similarly situated that have managed to achieve a democratic regime.⁴

As important as these theoretical contributions may be, the purpose of this review is to determine how Costa Ricans themselves assess their political system. Costa Rican authors have struggled to separate political myth from reality and have identified areas of national weakness as well as areas of strength. Adopting this perspective will enable readers to understand the Costa Rican political system as it is functioning today and the challenges facing Costa Ricans as they approach another national

election. Although the books selected focus on the internal arena, they also help explain important aspects of Costa Rica's approach to hemispheric problems. The five books chosen for review concentrate on the problems and politics of the last ten years. The group includes a book addressed to a general political audience, an objective academic treatise, a policy document, a set of conference papers on the need for reforms in the political system, and the diary of a political campaign.⁵

The Crisis of the 1980s

A useful introduction to the politics of the 1980s is *Costa Rica en los años ochenta* by Jorge Rovira Mas of the Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales and the Escuela de Antropología y Sociología of the Universidad de Costa Rica. The book focuses on the economic crisis of 1980–1982 and the economic and political responses to that crisis, especially from 1982 to 1985. The virtue of this book is that it fully explains the trajectory of the Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN), the party that emerged from the Revolution of 1948 and set the political agenda until 1982, when it took power during the worst crisis since the revolution. That crisis and the response to it by President Luis Alberto Monge (1982–1986) and the PLN are perceived by Rovira as a crisis in the “style of development.” The years 1980–1982 witnessed a rise in oil prices, a collapse in production, runaway inflation, large-scale unemployment, and a massive debt problem. This set of problems necessitated changes in the approach to development previously espoused by the PLN. Some of the party's ideological baggage had to be jettisoned: the heavy reliance on the state as director and manager of the economy had to yield more to market forces and private enterprise. This new approach raised questions about the role of the national banking system, questions that were deemed heretical by a minority of the PLN faithful during the Monge administration.⁶

Rovira describes the extent to which the PLN and its leadership were gradually infected by the “neoliberal” ideas of the country's main opposition party, the Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC), the world financial institutions with whom the PLN had to renegotiate loans, and the Reagan administration on whom it greatly depended for loans and grants. Appearing during the first year of the Oscar Arias administration, *Costa Rica en los años ochenta* anticipated virtually all the economic issues that have challenged the new president. What worries Rovira most is not that these policies will fail—indeed, his interim assessment is that they are working well—but that PLN will not be able to redistribute enough of the wealth created by the new economic growth to the lowest 20 percent of the society who have not benefited sufficiently from the growth of the economy. Rovira sees the political system as to some degree a victim of its own successes. The typical Costa Rican believes so strongly that the present

system is the most perfect of all possible systems that the typical voter is reluctant to follow those (especially on the left) who advocate major changes. But according to Rovira, the problem is that valid claims from popular organizations are too often rejected. Even the PLN with its social democratic tradition seems blind to the difficulties of trade unions and landless campesinos.⁷

Despite changes in the PLN's program that have brought it closer to the PUSC, Rovira finds that healthy differences remain between the PLN and its competitors. After a period of waffling and compromise under pressure from the Reagan administration,⁸ Monge asserted and maintained a foreign policy of neutrality and receptivity to the Contadora process, a stance much criticized by the Costa Rican press and the opposition party.

Arias as Political Scientist

Two of the books chosen for review were authored by the current president, Oscar Arias Sánchez, and another is by the manager of his successful campaign. Since his childhood, Arias had been planning a political career that would take him to the presidency of his country. He began by building solid academic credentials.⁹ His doctoral dissertation, written for the University of Essex in Great Britain, was first published in 1976 as *¿Quién gobierna en Costa Rica?* It exemplifies solid empirical research with its use of systematic questionnaires to the holders of 575 top governmental positions between 1948 and 1974. The offices included all presidents, cabinet ministers, heads of executive agencies, members of the supreme court, and deputies in the Legislative Assembly (the holders of 520 of these posts responded, a resounding 90 percent response rate). The members of this political elite were studied for their career patterns, education, and socioeconomic background to test the hypothesis that since the Revolution of 1948, the top positions in the country have been opened to the lower and middle classes. Although this view is widely held in Costa Rica, the proposition that the governing class is now more "representative" than it was forty years ago is not supported by Arias's data. He concluded, "If by democratization of the formal power structure, we mean a greater participation by people from the middle and lower strata in the upper levels of the political system, then according to our data, that statement is false" (p. 241).

Arias provides some dramatic examples of the narrowness of the political elite. Sixty-one percent of the ministers and 55 percent of the legislators belong to exclusive social clubs, whose annual fees exceed the yearly income of 80 percent of Costa Rican workers (pp. 75–79). Of the 44 presidents who have held office since 1821, 34 are related to one of three elite families; 750 of the 1300 members of the legislature descended from

six of these families (p. 87). Yet because of the myth of an absence of social classes in the country, many Costa Ricans subjectively classify themselves as "middle class" when objective criteria would indicate otherwise. Arias strikes hard at that myth: "Many Costa Ricans, perhaps through ignorance, believe that Costa Rica is a country without social classes. . . . Even today, when we find small landholders increasingly absorbed by large landholders, the idea still persists that Costa Rica is living the rural democracy characteristic of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (p. 188).

Arias tempers the harshness of his conclusions with some modifying observations. It seems that economic development has benefited the middle class relatively more than the upper or the lower classes. Moreover, the guarantees of free public education for all up to age fifteen and a social security system that now covers 70 percent of the population do benefit the lower class (p. 188). The greater educational opportunities now available provide "the possibility of access" for the lower class. Finally, Arias does not doubt that "the Costa Rican political elite is more open and more permeable than that of many other countries" (p. 247). Thus although his study's solid evidence denies the representativeness of the system, Arias underlines other more positive aspects of the Costa Rican polity that may nourish the myths he set out to destroy.

Arias as Planner

Nuevos rumbos para el desarrollo costarricense is a distillation of Arias's analyses and reflections made as Minister of Planning and Political Economy in two administrations, those of José Figueres (1970–1974) and Daniel Oduber (1974–1978). The most useful chapter summarizes the rise of the planning movement in Latin America and its history in Costa Rica, culminating with the creation of the Office of Planning during the administration of President Francisco Orlich (1962–1966). Although the book's emphasis is analytical rather than ideological, Arias asserts his social democratic values throughout, even while making readers aware of the difficulties of effecting those values. Examining the grinding poverty of the Third World, Arias states, "the world lives under a sick system that demands reforms and not just palliatives, because the crisis is structural and not just a temporary maladjustment in the development process" (p. 23). But after fifteen years' experience with the planning process in Costa Rica, he has learned that "[p]lanning must be flexible, in harmony with the changing human reality. It follows from this that development plans should be revised continually so that they can be adapted to the social, economic, and even the political circumstances of the moment" (p. 45). How such a planning process could ever generate the structural reforms required by the world is not made clear.

Arias perceives the need for corrective state interventions in the economic realm, a strong tradition of his political party: "Poverty will never be eradicated from Costa Rican society if the automatic mechanisms of the market are left to operate freely. A high level of global development is perfectly possible at the same time as a growing pauperization of certain social groups" (p. 46). Even so, Arias criticizes the "excessive state paternalism" that is creating ever greater dependence by individuals on the state: "Fixed in the minds of Costa Ricans is the certainty that the State can resolve all problems" (p. 99).¹⁰ Arias would resolve these problems by pragmatic avoidance of ideological extremes, a characteristic that he believes he shares with most Costa Ricans. Indeed, the way in which all these difficult choices are best made is an improved democratic system. According to Arias, Costa Ricans believe that the evils of democracy can be corrected only with more democracy. He therefore recommends, "In order to build a more just society, greater citizen participation is needed in public affairs. . . . Hence the importance of distributing political power more rationally, by means of creating multiple centers of influence designed to maintain the equilibrium that might avoid the domination of some groups by others" (p. 143).

The emphasis in *Nuevos rumbos* is on economic development policy, but Arias also sketches out his ideas for achieving this more rational distribution of power. He proposes greater decentralization in education and social services, especially in the delivery of health services.

Flaws in the Model

Arias's proposals for decentralization were shared in a symposium sponsored by the Asociación Nacional de Fomento Económico (ANFE). Established in 1958, ANFE is a pressure group for neoliberal ideas (which in the United States would be called neoconservative). The association asserts the desirability of joining market competition and the rights of private property with political liberties to assure the success of democracy. *El modelo político costarricense* is valuable as an index of current thinking about problems of the political system because ANFE assembled most of the major political leaders of the last fifty years and provided a forum for their reflections on the weaknesses in their nation's political system.¹¹ Although many of the participants, especially those from Liberación Nacional, made it clear that they did not share ANFE's ideology, all treated the symposium as a responsible forum for expressing their ideas for reform.

What strikes this reader about these discussions is the critical, sometimes brutally frank assessments that were made of the Costa Rican system. Neither the political leaders nor the academicians in the forum were content with uttering rosy platitudes about the successes of Costa

Rican democracy. All participants agreed on the following disturbing characteristics of the Costa Rican political system: centralization of power in the hands of the president; expansion in the state's sphere of action; weakness and inefficiency of the legislative power; lessening in the importance of the municipalities; failure of the goals of the decentralized institutions; and lack of participation by citizens in decision making (p. 7).

Several participants pointed with alarm to the appearance of an "imperial presidency." Former President Daniel Oduber went so far as to refer to the political situation as one of "chaos" and "anarchy" that "could easily be converted into a dictatorship" (pp. 34ff). All the speakers rejected the parliamentary system as a solution, although former President Mario Echandi made a plea for strengthening the Legislative Assembly. By allowing immediate reelection of deputies and providing for midterm elections, he hoped to encourage the rise of full-time career legislators capable of holding their own against the executive and the bureaucracy. There was general agreement that the independent agencies created in the 1940s and 1950s had failed to maintain their independence and that municipalities, whatever their legal powers, simply had too few economic resources to perform effectively.

The need for decentralization, strongly advocated by Arias in *Nuevos rumbos*, is also the theme of his contribution *El modelo político costarricense* (pp. 75–83). He characterizes excessive centralization as not only inefficient but antidemocratic. Arias again advocates decentralization in education and health and now adds public works. All these measures would serve the end of controlling power. Arias reminds us of Montesquieu's dictum, "Only power can check power."

Arias as Campaigner

Despite his academic accomplishments and extensive political experience as deputy, minister of planning, and president of his political party, Arias had to fight to win the nomination of his party and his election to the presidency. *El primer domingo de febrero* tells the story of the campaign that led to final success on election day in February 1986. Author Guido Fernández quit his job in television journalism to assist Arias's campaign effort. As an individual who had not been politically active and was regarded as a likely opponent of the PLN, Fernández surprised himself and others by joining the Arias team.¹²

This book makes fascinating reading with its details of manipulation of the media, computerized files on the party faithful, and systematic use of polling for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the candidates. In this realm, much had been learned from the United States. Having decided that Arias had an "image problem," his advisers sent him

to a special “clinic” in New York where certain cosmetic recommendations were made to improve his appearance on television.

Although *El primer domingo de febrero* offers an “inside look” at Costa Rican politics, its perspective is perhaps not close enough to the center of the campaign. Fernández was only one of a team of specialists, and it is clear from his account that those closest to Arias are his brother Rodrigo and Arias’s old college roommate, John Biehl. It seems likely that they made the key decisions in sessions that Fernández did not attend. Even so, the book is valuable for what it reveals about several major strategy sessions and numerous tactical decisions to implement the strategies. Given the emphasis on the images of the candidates, it is not surprising that Costa Rican critics complained about the dearth of programmatic or ideological discussions during the campaign. The battle of images also led to negative campaigning—an outcome familiar to those who observed the recent U.S. presidential election. One television ad caricaturing the opponent, Rafael Calderón Fournier, so nauseated Fernández that he ordered it removed. The opponent’s party, Unidad Popular, made heavy use of the issue of corruption in government to attack the PLN, and Arias’s team constantly feared yet another sordid revelation that would derail their momentum toward the presidency. Now that Arias is president, he finds himself repeatedly beset by revelations of scandals in his administration, and corruption will most likely be a key issue in the next campaign.¹³

In a more positive vein, Fernández reveals how Arias increasingly refined his views on peace and neutrality—the basis of what later emerged as the Arias peace initiative—and how successful communication on that issue helped him win the battle for votes. According to Fernández, the peace issue was the most effective of all the themes that Arias raised against his opponent (p. 310).¹⁴

El primer domingo de febrero also tells how the issue of changing the monopoly of the national banking system (long resisted by orthodox members of the PLN) was handled in the campaign. Fernández earlier feared that Arias would hedge on this issue, and he applauds Arias’s statement in confronting a sacred cow of PLN mythology: “I think it is necessary to review everything we have done over the last thirty-five years. . . . It is indispensable to introduce the necessary changes, and if for that reason, one has to touch on even matters of doctrine, it will have to be done because I see that it will be very difficult to increase production and achieve those rates of growth without a more agile, more modern, more expeditious financial system” (pp. 179ff). Arias’s general position on the issue of bank modernization seems clear from this account, but the issue was hotly debated in the Legislative Assembly after his election, and when finally approved, it created divisions in party ranks and provoked a ministerial shake-up.¹⁵

Looking toward the Elections of 1990

If the books reviewed above are sound in their assessment of the system, Costa Ricans will proudly conduct another free and open election in February 1990. Both parties have now chosen their candidates for the contest. They will be confronted by more charges of corruption in high places, and the PLN will be the prime target of such allegations. The broad outlines of Costa Rica's economic development policy seem to have been accepted by both parties. The social democrats within PLN and those more to the left of the party will lament the trimming of the traditional agenda, but this adjustment was directed by the new leaders of the PLN who now control both the assembly and the presidency. These new leaders, well-represented by Arias, are capable of analyzing the underlying inequalities of Costa Rican society, but their pragmatism and their possibly correct taking of the public pulse will limit them to piecemeal solutions. Regardless of who wins the election in 1990, the present coalition of political forces that defines these limits is likely to persist.

NOTES

1. A very useful essay for reviewing the literature of foreign visitors or analysts and Costa Rican commentators on the "specialness" of Costa Rica is Chester Zelaya's "Democracia con justicia social y libertad." He lists eight key factors used to explain the emergence of democracy in Costa Rica and observes that probably some combination of the following factors will explain it: colonial poverty, the absence of precious metals, the isolation of the colony, the small size of the Indian population, and the system of landownership and labor. See Chester Zelaya, Daniel Camacho, Oscar Aguilar Bulgarelli, Adolfo Cerdas, and Jacobo Schifter, *¿Democracia en Costa Rica? Cinco opiniones polémicas*, 2d ed. (San José: Editorial Universidad Estatal a Distancia, 1983), p. 26.
2. For an effort at generalizing about Latin America, see Howard Wiarda and Harvey Kline, *Latin American Politics and Development*, 2d ed. (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1985), chap. 2. Speaking of Costa Rica and a few other countries, the authors comment, "Where Indians and precious metals were scarce and hence Spanish institutions weak, . . . the possibilities for development and democratization have been better" (p. 23). The chapter on Costa Rica cites two additional factors to account for its democratic political system: its educated citizenry and the lack of a standing military force.
3. Rather than attempting to explain why Costa Rica has achieved its level of modernization, Edward Williams and Freeman Wright concentrate on factors that explain why the other countries have not. See Edward J. Williams and Freeman J. Wright, *Latin American Politics: A Developmental Approach* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing, 1975), p. 462. Approaches that employ the concept of "political participation" find much political activity in Latin America to be rational if not democratic. In this context, Costa Rican politics is not unique and exceptional in the area. See *Political Participation in Latin America: Volume 1: Citizen and State*, edited by John A. Booth and Mitchell A. Seligson (New York and London: Holmes & Meier, 1978), chap. 1.
4. One statement of the many theoretical challenges to the problem of explaining the emergence of any democracy is found in Fabrice E. Lehoucq, "Explaining the Origins of Democratic Regimes: Costa Rica in Comparative Perspective," paper presented at the meetings of the Latin American Studies Association, 17-19 Mar. 1988, New Orleans.
5. In deciding which books to include in this review essay, I was greatly aided by

- discussions with faculty at the University of Costa Rica, especially Professors Daniel Masis (Political Science) and Juan Muñoz López (Sociology).
6. In August 1984, the banking law was modified, after initial opposition by a group of nineteen PLN deputies (see Rovira, p. 86). The issue arose again during the Arias administration that followed.
 7. Rovira is highly critical of Costa Rican treatment of labor unions. He quotes Manuel Rojas and Elisa Donato as saying, "If the tendency toward the deterioration and weakening of labor organizations does not turn around, it is possible that unionism in Costa Rica in the next few years may have a purely nominal existence, one without any real power." Rovira adds that this judgment is only slightly exaggerated (p. 113).
 8. Rovira mentions Monge's pronouncements in favor of U.S. aid to the Contras and in support of the attack on Libya (p. 95). Monge's successor, Oscar Arias, has also criticized him for collaborating with the United States, contrary to the proclaimed policy of "unarmed, active, and perpetual neutrality." See "Arias critica al Gobierno de Monge," *La Nación*, 6 Aug. 1988, p. 4-A. Even so, Monge asserted his foreign policy differences with the United States by supporting the Contadora process. Those differences have continued and sharpened with the advent of Arias and his formulation of a Central American initiative to replace the faltering Contadora process.
 9. Earlier in his career, Arias published *Grupos de presión en Costa Rica* (San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 1971), for which he received the Aquileo Echeverría Prize.
 10. Things may have changed since Arias wrote *Nuevos rumbos*. Recent polls show that a majority of those sampled believed that the government was not interested in their problems (54.5 percent); that it serves the interests of the few (62.3 percent); that it mispends tax money (78.8 percent); and that many public employees are dishonest (59.3 percent). This poll was conducted by Investigaciones Psicosociales and reported in "Ticos tienen imagen negativa del Estado," *La Nación*, 14 Oct. 1988, p. 4-A.
 11. The collection contains statements by four former presidents—José Figueres, Mario Echandi, Daniel Oduber, and Luis Monge. Also participating in the symposium were Oscar Arias and Rafael Calderón Fournier, both of whom were then candidates for the presidency. ANFE has also produced an influential companion volume entitled *El modelo económico costarricense* (San José: ANFE, 1980).
 12. Fernández has played an important role in the current Arias administration. He served as ambassador to the United States until recalled in February 1988, allegedly due to pressure from Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams. Fernández was then appointed Minister of Information, a position he holds at the time of this writing (late 1989). See "February," *The Tico Times: 1988 Year in Review*, special issue, Dec. 1988, p. 10.
 13. The most serious charges, involving questionable relationships between high officials and known drug dealers, have led to a major investigation by a special commission of the Legislative Assembly. The commission made the unprecedented demand that three supreme court justices and one deputy in the Legislative Assembly resign. See "Comisión pide renuncia de 3 magistrados y diputado," *La Nación*, 24 Nov. 1988, p. 4-A.
 14. Apparently, Arias as president continues to command public support for his peace initiative. In a public opinion poll conducted by Investigaciones Psicosociales, 44.9 percent of the respondents rated the peace plan as the greatest achievement of his government. See "El Gobierno en la mira ciudadana," *La Nación*, 29 Jan. 1989, p. 8-A.
 15. One minister resigned, three were shifted, and one was promoted from the rank of vice-minister. See "Arias Wins Key Victory in Shuffle," *The Tico Times*, 9 Sept. 1988, p. 1. The background to the internal conflict is described by Eduardo Amador in "Los pleitos de Oscar Arias," *Rumbo*, 27 Sept. 1988, pp. 8-11. The minister who resigned, Ottón Solís, did so primarily over opposition to the bank modernization law. He subsequently formed an association called *Mi Voto por un Programa* to elect a nominee for the PLN who would pledge himself specifically to change the newly enacted bank law. Solís's group endorsed Carlos Manuel Castillo, who went on to win the nomination of the PLN in February 1989.