



SPECIAL REPORT

**Panama:
Four months before the elections.
Lists, polls and tendencies**

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1.ELECTORAL OUTLOOK

The electoral process in Panama was officially opened last January 4, 2014. In this single voting system, all authorities will be renewed and voters are called to choose their President, Mayors, Deputies and District Representatives.

In accordance with the electoral agenda, the four candidates, Juan Carlos Navarro, Juan Carlos Varela, José Domingo Arias and Genaro López, have officially presented their vice-presidencies. The Electoral Tribunal has also confirmed three independent candidates for the Presidency of the Republic.

These candidates were elected according to the number of signatures obtained, with regards to the group, Panamá Avanza which supports the Cambio Democrático (Democratic Change party), classifying the former leader Esteban Rodriguez and Gerardo Barroso.

Gerardo Solís, former Magistrate of the Electoral Tribunal, led the independents' list. However, he became vice-president of the PRD (Partido Revolucionario Democrático) and Juan Jované (University Professor and economist who belongs to the Independent Movement for the Nation's Re-foundation) took over his position. Jované, who issued the formal complaint that led to the admission of independent candidates for the Presidency for the first time, went through a legal and media battle in order to be recognized as a candidate by the Electoral Tribunal.

Now that the candidates' lists are completed, the next three months will be key in promoting their proposals and monitoring polls. In the election atmosphere, we can hear the echoes of "dirty campaign" especially in the social networks, comments regarding the investment on advertising of the party Cambio Democrático and the absence of the governmental candidate in the first presidential debates organized by the Media. However, so far, he leads all the surveys of intended voters choices.

2. A VICE-PRESIDENCY WITH WOMEN'S' FRAGRANCE

With regards to the female sector, which asks for equality regarding electoral and ministerial offices, three of the four parties have decided to present women as vice-presidents.

An independent face on the stage

Last Sunday, January 26, the couple formed by the Panameñista party and the People's Party presented Isabel Saint Maló as their candidate for the vice-presidency of the Republic. She is an independent character and not very famous on the political stage. However, due to her 15 years of service as manager of the UN Development Program for Panama, she has always had very close relationships with several governmental administrations.

She has more than 20 years' experience in consultancy and led the "Acuerdos de Bambito" which were the agreements that designed the country's agenda after the military invasion and included politicians from all areas of the country, businessmen and also civils. She was also part of the team that designed the "Acuerdos de Coronado" which set the legislative basis for the Panama Canal Constitutional Amendment. This amendment created the Authority of the Panama Canal and turned it into an autonomous institution.

In 2007, she completed her service for the UN as Director

of the agreement of National Development for Panama. In 2010, she worked as an independent facilitator for national dialogue which was set by the government of Ricardo Martinelli in order to reform Law 30 and finish with the general crisis that had triggered strikes and violent demonstrations with tragic results. In 2011, President Martinelli required her services again to design and implement a consultation process to present a proposal for a comprehensive reform of the Political Constitution, which had had several problems since its beginning, during the 70s under the dictatorship of Omar Torrijos Herrera, the inspiring leader of the PRD (Revolutionary Democratic Party).

Her two last collaborations reinforced her relationship with the supporting team of Juan Carlos Varela, who was at that time the Republic's Vice-President. When Varela was officially a candidate for the elections, Saint Malo participated in the alliance plan "El pueblo primero" and joined the group "Varela's friends" even attending some public activities of this movement.

During her candidacy acceptance speech, she used her characteristic smooth and conciliatory tone to reveal some of her positions: "Gentlemen, we are not talking about extending paternalism but providing the required tools for people to develop by themselves. *Temporary subsidies are necessary, but permanent ones are unworthy*".

Isabel Saint Malo, Vice-Presidential Candidate of the Panameñista Party for the presidential elections



Maribel Gordón during the announcement of her candidacy for the vice-presidency of the FAD



Varela's candidacy is supported by two personalities of the ancient Panamanian aristocracy who are also representatives of the country's economic power and had previously supported the PRD candidates in the four past elections. The personalities are Ricardo Alberto Arias, former Minister for Foreign Relationships during the government of Ernesto Pérez Balladares and UN ambassador during Martín Torrijos' administration; and Federico Humbert, Panamanian ambassador in the USA during Torrijos' government. Both are connected to the Banco General, one of the most important banks of the country and to the publishing house Coropración la Prensa which publishes the newspapers La Prensa and Mi Diario showing a clear opposition to the current Government.

An old ally of the working sector

On the same day, January 26, the newborn party Frente Amplio por la Democracia (FAD) also presented a woman as candidate for the vice-presidency in the list led by the legendary trade unionist Genaro López. Her name is Maribel Gordón, and she is an economist and University Professor.

She is well known among trade unionists and the media due to her activities over the past years helping workers in negotiations to set the minimum salary and by her opposition to the neoliberal policies of the nation's governments over the past few decades.

Her appointment was not surprising since the FAD had already announced it would not join any other traditional candidates (by alliances) and that it would present its own candidates.

Candidate Gordón said during his presentation, in a strong and energetic tone, that the FAD's government would be based on respect and recovering the people's rights that had been sullied by the "party-ocracy" governing the country during the Republic.

Another Martinelli for the candidacy

Although the Democratic Party has based its slogan on the strength of the new, in their list you can see a well-known personality of the national scene. Her name is Marta Linares de Martinelli and she is the First Lady of the Republic.

Marta Linares de Martinelli comes from a family with a strong political background. Her father was co founder of the Partido Arnulfista and her aunt, Ana Matilde Linares de Arias was the first wife of the three-times elected President Arnulfo Arias Madrid, leader of the *Partido Panameñista*.

As head of Office of the First Lady, she has developed a wide social and cultural agenda, which is her cover letter. Her speech is soft and formal and she avoids political confrontations in the media. However, her comments on Twitter about different issues are constant.

Marta Linares de Martinelli together with her husband, the President Ricardo Martinelli and her party's colleague José Domingo Díaz



**“Ricardo Martinelli,
all your fears are here
today. Pay attention
to me, Martinelli, your
worst nightmare is
coming true, your time
has finished, I am sure
it’s finished”**

Gerardo Solís, Vice-President of the PRD for the presidential elections



The political rumor started by a member of the Martinelli family which positioned her as the partner of José Domingo Arias for the elections, was then confirmed. This candidacy has heated the debate since some people consider Marta Linares' candidacy as an extension of her husband's government (who cannot be reelected). Another controversial aspect is that she would not have to resign her position as First Lady since she is not a public servant, and therefore, she can continue her activities from the presidential palace while she campaigns as a candidate for the vice-presidency.

There are several arguments against her appointment regarding legal and ethical aspects. However, some renowned experts on the Constitution such as Edgardo Molino Mola, former magistrate of the Supreme Court of Justice, have explained that according to the Article 193 of the Constitution, “President’s relatives up to the forth-level of consanguinity and second of affinity cannot be elected Vice-President”. Nevertheless, the Article 123 of the Family Code does not establish any kinship between wife and husband. Therefore, there is not any kinship between the candidate and the President, and her candidacy is legal.

This is not the first case in the region. The strategy of the party of the former President Leonel Fernández turned his wife Margarita Cedeño, who was First Lady of the Dominican Republic, into the Vice-President of the country.

From Magistrate to Vice-President

The first candidate to announce the vice-president of the party's list was Juan Carlos Navarro from the PRD. The candidate is Gerardo Solís, former director of the Social Investment Fund and Housing Minister during the government of Ernesto Pérez Balladares. After holding these two offices, he worked as an electoral attorney and as magistrate for the Electoral Tribunal.

Again, his appointment was not a surprise due to his old connection to the party and his new role as independent, harshly criticizing the government of Ricardo Martinelli and having made visible strides during his last months as magistrate.

His speech during the official presentation was energetic and focused on the President: “Ricardo Martinelli, all your fears are here today. Pay attention to me, Martinelli, your worst nightmare is coming true, your time has finished, I am sure it’s finished”.

Political analysts share the opinion that this appointment aims to reinforce their position against the government and achieve more aggressive attacks (which was one of the critics to Navarro's speech, as well as its low combative intention and its focus on the government's plan). Critics have come from the most traditional sector of the PRD and independent sectors.

“The last survey carried out by Dichter & Neira for TVN News, shows candidate José Domingo Arias as the favorite candidate (39% intended votes)”

Finally, the group formed by the independent candidates has confirmed its candidates for the vice-presidency. Alberto Reyes, the young leader of the FAT is the candidate for the vice-presidency of professor Jované and Sarai Blaisdell will be the one for the former leader Esteban Rodríguez.

3. LATEST POLLS SHOW TENDENCIES

As was expected, both, the media and the political parties, are monitoring the voting intentions and reacting to each new development concerning the presidential candidates.

The last survey carried out by Dichter & Neira for TVN News, shows candidate José Domingo Arias as the favorite candidate (39% intended votes) followed by Juan Carlos Navarro (24%) and Juan Carlos Varela (22%).

By analyzing the last six surveys of the company it can be seen that candidate Arias has always been the favorite with a percentage over 37% (in September 2013) and which increased by 39% according to the last survey in January 2014.

However, different percentages can be observed between the other two candidates who are fighting for the second and the third position. According to the analysis of the same surveys, it can be noted that Juan Carlos Navarro had, at the beginning, 24% of the intended votes and after some increases and decreases he keeps now

the same percentage as in September last year.

As for Juan Carlos Varela, he started in September 2013 with 22% and after an increase that led the party to reach 27% of the voting intention, he is now back to the same percentage (22%) of five months ago.

Another baseline survey was the one carried out by Ipsos, “Panamá Opina” for Telemetro reporta and the newspaper La Estrella. Although percentages are slightly different according to this survey, the positioning is still the same.

According to the surveys of January, the government’s candidate would lead the voting gathering 31% of the voting intention, followed by Navarro (25%), Juan Carlos Varela (19%) and the FAD’s candidate (1%).

Several political analysts say that it is still too soon to talk about irreversible tendencies since percentages can still change. However, they highlight that the gap between the government’s candidate and the other candidates is getting bigger and there is not much time before the general elections.

4. CONCLUSIONS

There are 2 million 457 thousand and 401 citizens entitled to vote and choose their new authorities for the next five years. The new president will be the sixth of the country’s democracy after two decades of military dictatorship.

In the final stretch, speeches are focused on attacking the other candidates and presenting their government plans. The weekends become electoral parties full with conventions, meetings, assemblies and tours all over the country. The activity does not stop either in the social networks between truces and “dirty campaigns”.

The current elections are quite different from the old ones which were traditionally an electoral battle between the Government and the Opposition.

The new elections’ scenario is full of news for voters. There is an opposition with two candidates, (one of them was part of the current government until August 2012), a new left wing party led by a worker trade unionist (the Panamanian Lula), three candidates who are allowed to participate thanks to the new section of Law which accepts independent candidates, and

there is a governmental candidate who could be elected and finish with the power alternation that has been typical over the past four general elections.

In the event of the election of the government’s candidate, Panama, for the first time, would join the list of the countries in the region where there is no party’s alternation. For example, in Costa Rica, the Partido Liberación Nacional has governed the country with the same president since 2006; in Colombia, the president Álvaro Uribe was substituted by his party’s colleague Juan Manuel Santos; in Brazil, Dilma Rousseff could be reelected as president and that would mean the fourth period in a row with the same party, and in Bolivia, Evo Morales could be elected president for the third time. Other countries such as Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, Argentina, Honduras and El Salvador have also reelected the same party for the government.

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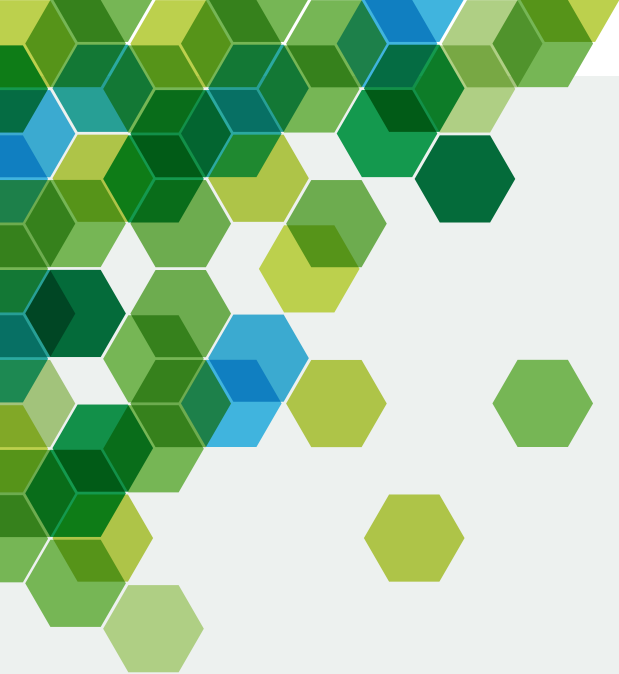
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