

## **Dodging a Bullet in Costa Rica**

**A leftist candidate in Latin America loses, for a change, but only by the narrowest of margins**

**By Tim Padgett and Mishelle Mitchell**

**March 8, 2006**

The Bush Administration has dodged another electoral bullet south of the border, but only by the narrowest of margins. Nobel Peace laureate Oscar Arias was finally declared the winner of Costa Rica's presidential election on Tuesday—ending a tense, month-long manual vote recount that almost put another anti-U.S. leftist in power in Latin America, this time in one of the region's most traditionally stable and U.S.-friendly nations.

Arias, 64, a Social Democrat who won the Nobel Prize during his first presidency in the 1980s for his work to end Central America's bloody civil wars, defeated Otton Solis of the Citizen's Action Party by just 1.1%, one of the closest margins in Costa Rica's history, and he garnered only 40.9% of the total vote. Solis—who was backed by the radical and increasingly popular left-wing Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez—opposes Costa Rica's entrance into the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) with the U.S.

Solis' stunning near-upset—pre-election voter polls suggested Arias would win handily—came close to adding Costa Rica to the growing list of Latin nations who have moved leftward in the past year, as voters grow increasingly frustrated with U.S.-backed capitalist reforms that only seem to have widened the region's epic wealth gap. Bolivia, Chile and Uruguay recently elected leftist heads of state; seven more Latin presidential elections are slated for this year, and leftist candidates are given a strong chance of winning as many as six of them. “Hopefully, Arias can be a counterbalance against the leftist movements springing up in South America,” says Lynda Solar, vice president of the American Chambers of Commerce in Latin America.

Costa Rica, largely immune to the dictatorships, corruption and grinding poverty that mark so many of its neighbors, has long been considered the “Switzerland of Central America.” But in recent years it has been plagued by a moribund economy and a string of presidential bribery scandals that have made it a ripe target for left-leaning pols like Solis. Arias, meanwhile, ran a bland campaign that seemed to rest on his Nobel laurels. “Such a weighty name was supposed to sweep away any opponent,” says political analyst Victor Ramirez, “but (voters) proved it wasn't enough to reconquer” a population soured by Costa Rica's current troubles.

But while the Bush Administration can breathe an electoral sigh of relief for once in Latin America, Arias still has to contend with Solis' surprisingly large constituency—which will make it even harder to get Costa Ricans, the lone holdouts in Central America, to ratify CAFTA. As a result, what the Washington, D.C.-based Council on Hemispheric Affairs called “the Bush Administration’s alarmingly foundering Latin America policy” still faces an uphill battle in Central America's Switzerland.

*Copyright © 2006 Time Inc. All rights reserved.*