



SPECIAL REPORT

Panama: in the final stretch to elect a new president

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1. THE ELECTORAL ATMOSPHERE

Less than 10 days marks the countdown for the fifth election in Panama, after the fall of the military regime in 1989, in which 2,482,322 voters will choose in a single vote the next President, 77 mayors, 71 deputies to the National Assembly, 20 to the Central American Parliament and 648 representatives of corregimientos (subdivision of districts) in the whole country.

In the final stretch, caravans, propaganda, tours and attacks have intensified in search of the youth vote and the undecided voters who can be decisive in the results of May 4. Surveys are carried out weekly and the firms Ipsos and Dichter & Neira show in common a narrow margin between the candidates and a decrease in the strong preference which characterized the candidate of the ruling party, José Domingo Arias, at the beginning of the electoral battle.

In terms of social networks, the so called dirty propaganda and constant opinion polls take up great part of the online political discussion. Even the most direct attacks between candidates and the president Ricardo Martinelli himself take on greater value in the world 2.0.

The seven presidential candidates can close their campaigns before May 1, date in which any political propaganda is suspended and the Electoral Court takes complete control of the process which includes the control of security institutions which, from the end of April until the new President is elected, are subject to the Electoral Court.

The streets full of political propaganda and the high advertising investment in traditional and non-traditional media reflect the high cost of this campaign which according to the Electoral Court amounts to around 60 million dollars. The presidency of Panama is fought for by three independent candidates: Juan Jované, Esteban Rodríguez and Gerardo Barroso; the new party FAP of working-class origin which proposes the trade union leader Genaro López; the traditional PRD and Panameñista with Juan Carlos Navarro and Juan Carlos Varela, respectively; and José Domingo Arias who aims to give continuity to the government of Cambio Democrático, a phenomenon that Panama has not experienced in its 25 years of democratic era.

2. 120 MINUTES OF PROPOSALS AND ATTACKS

On April 8, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Panama, main business association, organized the presidential debate “Agenda País”. The only debate which was able to gather 5 official candidates, including the independent one Juan Jované, elected on the basis of the results of the last surveys.

In previous debates organized by different groupings, the participation of the four main candidates of the battle had not been achieved. A need demanded by the population who wanted to listen carefully to the proposals of each one.

At eight o'clock started the broadcast of the debate on national television channel. All the candidates wore clothing in black, red and yellow tones; the nervousness was evident and prevented some candidates from being able to develop their ideas before their speaking time was out.

In three blocks, the candidates were given the opportunity to talk about education, security and public administration. Points raised by the moderator which were not analyzed in detail by the candidates that used the few minutes of discussion to attack rather than to explain the pillars of their government plans.

The last block, in which the interaction between candidates

was allowed, was the most enraged one. None of them missed the opportunity to criticize the actions or proposals of their opponents besides leaving a great deal of accusations and questions on personal matters and judicial investigations hanging in the air.

These “cutting remarks” were what impressed the audience and the social networks the most which repeated the disputes.

Even the president Ricardo Martinelli, who was not part of the debate, was mentioned several times in the questioning that the candidate of the ruling party received. The president, very active in this electoral battle, opted to respond via his Twitter account.

Words like neoliberalism, price control, basic food basket, transparency, corruption, commitment, old politics and fresh air were heard during the minutes of the closure of the debate when each candidate appealed to the Panamanians’ vote.

Outside the headquarters of the Chamber of Commerce, the supporters of the candidates caused some incidents with the electoral delegates, reflection, in the view of analysts, of the enthusiasm that will be experienced in the elections of May 4.

Finally, this democratic exercise, promoted by the private sector of the country, gave the voters the unique opportunity of



From left to right: Juan Jované, Juan Carlos Varela, José Domingo Arias, Genaro López and Juan Carlos Navarro.



Tweet by the president during the debate, confirming that the PRD’s candidate meets with him.

listening to the candidates not only to promote their plans, but also to question their rivals in this contest, a novel mechanism which reaffirmed the strong differences that exist at political level and in the content of their government plans.

3. GOVERNMENT PLANS VS. NEEDS

According to the opinion polls, Panamanians think that the cost of the basic food basket and insecurity are the issues which most concern them and therefore the ones they expect to be solved by the next president.

10% in the cost of the main products of the basic food basket, through a series of State policies, improving the training of farmers and stockbreeders and giving them an aggressive plan of tax benefits and credit conditions with zero interest.

Furthermore, he proposes the construction of 250 popular markets and doubling in ten years the production of important foods for the Panamanians such as corn and rice.

The other aspect of his proposal focuses on a tough audit of the country's commercial apparatus in order to slow down speculation, increasing the control efforts by ACODECO (Authority for the Protection of the Consumer and Defense of the Competition), to prevent agreements between traders resulting in higher prices to the consumers' detriment. This proposal makes reference to the supposed processes carried out by supermarket chains, one of which belongs to president Martinelli.

For its part, the candidate of the ruling party, José Domingo Arias, calls for the elimination of intermediaries as the key to reduce the cost of food and to do this he will give continuity to the Jumbo Ferias and will create 600 Jumbo Tiendas so that producers can sell directly to consumers.

His plan also includes the incentive for the cooperation between producers and the

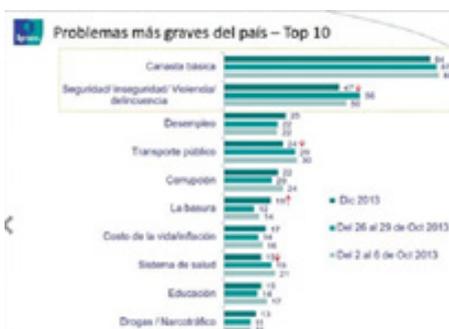
In addition, unemployment and transport belong to the top 5 of the survey by Ipsos.

Let us see how the Government plans of the four candidates will meet the voters' priorities.

Food: between the support to agriculture and the markets

In June 2009, when President Martinelli took office, the basic food basket cost \$251.90; in October 2013 it reached its highest cost: \$306.87. Despite the growth of the so called Jumbo Feria and Jumbo Tiendas, there has been no significant decrease in its price. For its part, the government points out that with the increase in the minimum wage Panamanians have higher purchasing power.

The candidate Navarro, of the PRD, promises a decrease by



Most important problems for Panamanians. Survey by Ipsos.



Long queues are common at the Jumbo Tiendas located in popular areas.



PROGRAMA
Presentación
 a incluir estando en contra de los intereses de aquellos quienes los eligieron.
 Tradicionalmente los grupos de poder económico han organizado partidos políticos para controlar el gobierno y desde él impulsar proyectos que beneficien su riqueza. Derivado de tal proceder, el tráfico de influencia y la corrupción impregnaron todo el engranaje político y comprometieron el

Hay día, amplios sectores ciudadanos, sectores populares, trabajadores del campo y la ciudad, grupos campesinos, pueblos originarios, grupos barriales, movimientos sindicales, profesionales, mujeres y sectores productivos y empresariales



EL PLAN DE TODOS
 No para de generosidad para todos y no para otros cuantos



Government plans of the four candidates per political party.

strengthening of the cold chain, newly created by the Government, so that producers can store their products.

The FAD's plan, party of the trade union movement, points out on this issue that they "will fight for and protect the development of agricultural production as a basis for our Food Sovereignty and Food and Nutritional Security. For this purpose, it will provide impetus and support to agricultural cooperativism".

Finally, the "panameñista" Varela opts for the most controversial policy on this issue: the emergency price control, a measure that has not given good results in Latin countries like Argentina and Venezuela.

Varela's proposal is to control the profit margin in basic food without affecting producers in order to slow down the speculation which, according to him, is what makes the basic food basket more expensive.

The incentives and technical support to agriculture are also part of his proposal as well as the implementation of public markets.

As observed, in general terms, the financial assistance to the agricultural sector and the creation of markets for direct sales from the producer to the consumer are elements that the four proposals have in common.

Security on the streets: between heavy hand and prevention.

According to official figures, Panama recorded at the end of 2013 a total of 665 homicides, a rate of 17.3 per 100,000 inhabitants, and most of them were connected to gangs, organized crime and drug-trafficking.

Although the figure remained the same as in 2012, the citizens consider that they are high figures for a small country in terms of territory and population, and they are also concerned about the level of violence these cases present.

The most radical proposal in order to combat the issue of crime on the streets is presented by the PRD with its "Heavy Hand" which suggests life imprisonment for murderers and to try minors who commit such crimes as adults in addition to the establishment of a policy for Comprehensive Security in Panama and the so called plan "Quiero mi barrio" (I want my neighborhood) which combines security, surveillance and prevention in the most popular communities.

The ruling party Cambio Democrático advocates the strengthening of the repressive action against drug-trafficking and gangs, violence prevention programs, especially the one against women, and community policing.

Furthermore, it seeks to repeat the successful experience of the transformation of the neighborhood of Curundú, which went from being considered a “red area” to a safe residential area through a comprehensive plan for housing, resocialization and security.

The FAD proposes “a professional public force, respectful of the rule of law to ensure the national sovereignty and the security of all citizens and not as an institution aimed at humiliating people and trampling their fundamental rights and guarantees”.

Finally, the “panameñismo” talks about a combined plan: “More opportunities and Heavy Hand” which includes repeating the model of the neighborhood of Curundú in the Atlantic province of Colon and the district of San Miguelito, located on the outskirts of the capital city, which also experiences high levels of violence. Moreover, they propose the construction of new prisons with a resocialization element and doubling the surveillance in neighborhoods.

The attention to surveillance and prevention at community level is precisely the main focus of most of the proposals on this issue.

In terms of unemployment, the proposals coincide in subsidy and training programs for vulnerable sectors such as women and young people, especially the so called “Ni-Ni”,

young population who neither works nor studies.

In addition, they propose incentive packages to the private sector in order to create jobs, opportunity for the first job without experience and the recognition of special bonuses to the workforce. Except for the FAD, none of the analyzed candidates makes a formal commitment to a general increase in wages. *de aumento general de sueldo.*

4. CONCLUSIONS

In a race against time, there is very little time for the candidates to do great maneuvers to further promote themselves or change the decision of the so called “faithful vote”.

However, like in every election, it will be the party’s logistics and organization set up on election day what will make the difference. It is the key to get the mass of voters to the polls and control their votes in each of the 6500 polling stations that will be set up throughout the country.

Citizens are also concerned about the atmosphere that will be experienced on the streets on May 4 because, despite the signing of the ethical-electoral pact promoted by the Catholic Church, the aggressive tone of the campaign has not decreased. On social networks, there are plenty of personal attacks and on traditional media, the so called civil groups supporting the political parties have gained their space with direct propaganda distorting their adversaries.



Sample ballot paper for the Presidential Election.

“There is very little time to know the sixth president of Panama in its democratic era”

This atmosphere has caused media such as TVN, one of Panama’s main television channels, to refrain from broadcasting propaganda that they consider offensive for the candidates.

In the same vein, the governing body of the political competition, the Electoral Court of Panama, is struggling between the accuser and the accused.

The body, through its presiding judge, Erasmo Pinilla, lodged a complaint with the Procuraduría de la Nación (National Attorney General’s Office) against those responsible for plagiarizing information for the database created by the ruling party Cambio Democrático for its presidential candidate José Domingo Arias. According to the Electoral Court, the data uploaded at the site www.josedomingoarias.org, created to attract potential voters, were apparently taken from the Identity Verification Service and from insider information used for research and security purposes by the Ministry of the Presidency, the Ministry of Government, the Public Prosecutor’s Office, the National Police and the Comptroller General of the Republic. (La Prensa, March 12, 2014).

For their part, allies of the ruling party have filed a complaint in order to demand the dismissal of the Judge Pinilla for “alleged violation of the constitution and of the freedom of expression”, and another one to verify the suitability of the judge to practice as a lawyer.

The die is cast and the voter will have the option to choose between the traditional PRD, with the former mayor of the capital city for 10 years, Juan Carlos Navarro, as a leader; the “panameñismo” led by Juan Carlos Varela, current Vice-President of the country and former political ally of President Martinelli; or the first Workers’ Party, the FAD, led by the trade union leader, Genaro López, who is about to call a national strike in the construction sector.

Options also include, for the first time, three independent candidates for the presidency and the possible reelection of the ruling party Cambio Democrático by the hand of the former Housing Minister, José Domingo Arias.

In the final stretch, the important participation of the candidates for vice-presidents of the nominations has become less strong.

At the end of the competition, the atmosphere has heated due to the results of the last surveys, which, with narrow margins, continue to bring the three candidates closer to the objective, what foretells an election with the tightest results of the recent history of the country.

There is very little time to know the sixth president of Panama in its democratic era and to define whether the country will continue with the traditional alternation in power, if a popular party will appear or whether Panama will join the regional tendency of parties’ continuity in office.

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