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FEATURED Q&A

Who Is Most Likely to Become the Next President of Panama?



Skyscrapers have mushroomed across Panama amid an economic expansion that the country's next president will need to find new ways to sustain, Orlando Pérez writes below. // File Photo: Dronepic [CC BY 3.0].

Q **Laurentino Cortizo Cohen of the Democratic Revolutionary Party is leading opinion polls ahead of Panama's May 5 presidential election with 48.7 percent of support, according to a February survey by StratMark Consultores. His closest contender, Rómulo Roux of the Democratic Change Party, registered 23.9 percent of voter intention in the survey. Who are the must-watch candidates as the presidential race unravels, and what are their most important differences? What are their key issues for voters in this election? What factors or developments are most likely to shape the campaign in the months ahead?**

A **Orlando J. Pérez, associate dean of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at Millersville University:** "On May 5, Panama will celebrate the sixth presidential election since the restoration of democracy in 1989. President Juan Carlos Varela is barred from seeking re-election. Every one of the previous elections has been won by a party in opposition. Therefore, there is a strong historical dynamic in favor of parties opposing the extant government. This trend is reinforced by the fact that every single previous government has left office less popular than it came in. President Varela's job approval rating stands at 15 percent. The main contenders include Laurentino Cortizo, leading the 'Partido Revolucionario Democrático,' José Isabel Blandón, candidate of the ruling 'Partido Panameñista,' and Rómulo Roux of 'Cambio Democrático,' the party of former president Ricardo Martinelli. Cortizo has a wide lead in current polls, with Roux far behind in second place and Blandón in third with 10.8 percent. These

Continued on page 3

TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Guaidó to Return to Venezuela, Calls for Protests Today

Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó's return sets up another high-profile confrontation with President Nicolás Maduro, who will have to decide whether to arrest him or allow him to move about freely.

Page 2

ECONOMIC

Argentines Better Off, Macri Says in Last State of the Nation Speech

Argentine President Mauricio Macri delivered the last state of the nation speech of his current term Friday, defending his government's austerity policies.

Page 2

POLITICAL

Nicaragua Talks Slow to Progress

Wilfredo Navarro of the Sandinista Front said the government of Daniel Ortega is negotiating in good faith despite the fact that the two sides failed to reach agreement on any of the main points of the agenda after three days of talks.

Page 2



Navarro // File Photo: Nicaraguan Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Guaidó Plans Return to Venezuela, Calls for Protests Today

Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó has called for nationwide street protests today as he plans to re-enter his home country after a week of meetings with regional allies abroad, the Associated Press reported. "I call on Venezuelans to gather across the country tomorrow at 11 a.m.," he tweeted Sunday. Guaidó's return sets up another high-profile confrontation with President Nicolás Maduro, who will have to decide whether to arrest him or allow Guaidó to move about freely. Venezuela's Supreme Court, dominated by Maduro loyalists, placed a travel ban on the opposition leader last month, which he defied on Feb. 23 when he snuck across the border with Colombia to orchestrate a bid to get international food aid into the country that ultimately failed. Maduro has imprisoned other opposition leaders for years under horrible living conditions. U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton tweeted early this morning that



Guaidó (L) met with Ecuadorean President Lenín Moreno on Saturday. // Photo: @jguaido via Twitter.

"Any threats or acts against his safe return will be met with a strong and significant response from the United States and the international community." Meanwhile, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov spoke with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Saturday over the phone, Reuters reported. In the call, Lavrov said he condemned threats that Washington has made toward "the country's lawful leadership," referring to Maduro, and said Russia would take part in bilateral talks with the United States over Venezuela.

Nicaragua Talks Off to a Slow Start

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega's administration is negotiating with the opposition in good faith in an effort to find common ground to calm the country's political standoff, a government representative said Friday, the Associated Press reported. Lawmaker Wilfredo Navarro of the Sandinista Front made the comments as the third day of talks came to an end without the two sides reaching agreement on any of the main points of the agenda. "The government is making every effort," said Navarro. "We are sitting down with all the will in the world to achieve agreements." However, when asked whether the government would allow "guarantors" at the talks, as the opposition has sought, Navarro rejected the demand. "There cannot be guarantors right now," he said. "If we still have not reached agreements, what is there to guarantee?" The Civic Alliance opposition group said it was pushing for agreement on a "roadmap" to set out "clear rules of the game." Organization of American States Secretary General Luis Almagro said last week that the organization could act as a guarantor of the talks, EFE reported. Almagro also called for the release of "political prisoners" in Nicaragua. "We are in agreement with the process of dialogue, not exactly as mediators, but rather as guarantors of this process," Almagro said last week. As the day of negotiations concluded Friday, the two sides had still not agreed on rules for the talks, the AP reported. On Friday, a small group of university students staged an anti-government demonstration, defying a de facto ban by the government on such protests. Anti-government protests erupted in the Central American country last April, and at least 325 people have been killed since then, according to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Opponents of Ortega accuse him of ruling the country in an increasingly authoritarian manner, while the government has accused protesters of trying to overthrow him in a coup. In addition to demanding the participation of international guarantors from the Organization of American States, United Nations or another organization, the opposition is seeking an

NEWS BRIEFS

Mexico Remittances Hit Record High in January

Mexico's level of remittances hit a record high last January, the country's central bank announced Friday, The Yucatán Times reported. The money transfers grew to \$2.41 billion in January, a 6.5 percent increase as compared to the same month last year. Mexicans living abroad sent home a record \$33.47 billion last year. Remittance flows to Mexico have helped the country's private consumption level to remain relatively strong. Most of the remittances to Mexico originate in the United States, which is home to some 11 million Mexicans.

Macri Says Argentines Better Off in Last State of the Nation Speech

Argentine President Mauricio Macri delivered the last state of the nation speech of his current term Friday, defending his government's austerity policies and stressing that the country is on the right path, the Buenos Aires Times reported. Macri, who was heckled during the speech by opposition lawmakers, said his administration's plans are irreversible and also made a case for his re-election in October, saying the country is "better off" than in 2015 when he took office despite the country's high rate of inflation.

Mexico Wants Steel Tariffs Lifted Before USMCA Vote

Mexico will not ratify the new United States-Mexico-Canada agreement with U.S. tariffs on steel and aluminum that are currently in place, The Canadian Press reported Sunday. Luz María de la Mora, Mexico's deputy trade minister, told the news agency that the agreement will likely be sent to the Mexican Congress for ratification after it reconvenes in Sept. 1, but Mexico would be "fine" with the current version of NAFTA that remains in force if the USMCA does not pass because of the tariff dispute.

electoral reform, the release of hundreds of detainees it considers political prisoners and a restoration of freedoms such as the ability to protest, among other demands.

BUSINESS NEWS

Vale CEO Takes Leave After Brazil Mine Dam Disaster

Following a January mine collapse that is feared to have killed more than 300 people, the chief executive of Brazilian mining giant Vale on Saturday tendered what he called his “temporary” resignation, and other executives also stepped down, Bloomberg News reported. “Even totally assured of my righteous ways and having fulfilled my duty, I request the board accept my temporary leave to benefit the company’s continued operations,” CEO Fabio Schvartsman said in a letter to Vale’s board. The company “immediately” accepted his resignation, Vale said in a statement. Eduardo Bartolomeo, a Vale executive director, will replace Schvartsman as CEO. Schvartsman’s departure came more than a month after a Vale tailings dam burst in Minas Gerais State. Since the disaster, investors have questioned how the dam burst could have happened just more than three years after the failure of the Samarco dam, which Vale and BHP Billiton operated as a joint venture. Nineteen people were killed in that dam collapse. Last Friday, prosecutors in Brazil asked for the “immediate removal” of Schvartsman and other Vale executives, including Peter Poppinga, the head of the company’s iron ore division, the Financial Times reported. Prosecutors say they have evidence that Vale knew that the dam that collapsed in January was unsafe and had pressured inspectors who certified the structure as safe. Authorities have already arrested several Vale employees, as well as workers at Germany-based Tüv Süd, which classified the dam as stable. Vale said Saturday that it wanted a “transparent and productive relationship with the Brazilian authorities in order to clarify the facts.”

FEATURED Q&A / Continued from page 1

elections will also see a number of credible independent candidates. Three in particular are worth watching: Ana Matilde Gómez, a former attorney general and current member of the National Assembly; Marco Ameglio, a former deputy, president of the ‘Partido Panameñista’ and member of the Panama Canal Authority; and Ricardo Lombana, a lawyer and former General Counsel of Panama in Washington. At the moment, Gómez is polling fourth at 6 percent. Independent candidates will try to capitalize on the public’s aversion to traditional political parties and the low popularity of the government. However, Panamanian politics are driven by clientelism, and only political parties will have the infrastructure and resources to distribute the goods and services needed to mobilize the electorate. Two key issues will predominate: corruption and sustaining economic growth. However, I do not expect a serious debate. Historically, there is very little ideological differences among Panama’s political parties. Elections are more a contest of personalities and who can use patronage more effectively.”

A **Sabrina Bacal, vice president of information services at TVN Media:** “We are living an electoral cycle different from the past. A new law has considerably limited the length of campaigns to a frenetic 60-day electoral race. The adrenaline is evident on social media—a platform for post-truth and dirty campaigns. In this context, there is a complex battle between the old partisan structure—which, despite being tainted by corruption scandals, continues to garner the bulk of the votes—and the clamor of middle-class, urban and young sectors that come together under the ‘no re-election’ banner. Another confusing factor has been the absence of mainstream media surveys. Instead, campaigns have circulated polls and rumors that are convenient to them, strengthening the feeling of collective

uncertainty. The few surveys available show PRD’s Laurentino Cortizo in a comfortable first place. However, although the party’s survival might be at play in this election, no advantage is secure these days. Cambio Democrático—former President Ricardo Martinelli’s party—has former minister Rómulo Roux as its candidate. His position regarding Martinelli’s accusations has been ambivalent. Martinelli, who is detained while being investigated on accusations of illegal telephone tapping, is running for mayor of Panama City from prison. They both emphasize the country’s economic growth during his administration to reinforce the narrative that ‘he stole but got things done.’ Ruling party candidate Mayor José Blandón is an experienced politician, who has distanced himself from the unpopular Varela government. He is betting on voter dispersion to break the alternation of power among parties that has ruled in Panama since the U.S. invasion. It would be an impressive political feat. Other candidates include union leader Saúl Méndez and three independent candidates: Ana Matilde Gómez, Ricardo Lombana and Marco Ameglio. While left-wing labor unions are still unpopular, independent candidates have gotten media coverage and awakened discontent with traditional parties. However, the electoral pendulum continues to swing toward the status quo. Only an extraordinary scandal and an alliance could make the independents win. Panama needs substantial transformations. As election day approaches, there is a lot at play and very few certainties.”

A **Antonio Sola, political strategist in electoral campaigns and government:** “With only two months left before the Panamanian presidential election takes place on May 5, I would say the election is totally open. Any of the seven candidates could actually win. Nowadays, considering an average of all the surveys published so far, the ‘don’t know/no

Continued on page 4

FEATURED Q&A / Continued from page 3

answer' category is leading with 36 percent, followed by Cortizo with 32 percent. Considerably lower, there is Roux with 15 percent, Ana Matilde with 9 percent, Ameglio with 7 percent and Blandón and Lombana with 5 percent each. In a first-glance simplistic analysis, what happens in Panama is not any different to what has happened in other countries of the region recently. The citizens' unhappiness is so intense that none of the candidates can say at this time that he or she has already won. Cortizo is at the limit of the traditional PRD hard vote. The ruling party's candidate, Blandón, is sunk, and the sum of the independents has reached 21 points. Roux has been dragged with the heavy burden of corruption in connection to former President Martinelli, and the 'don't know/no answer' category creates uncertainty regarding which candidate is considered 'the least bad.' In such a

“Any of the seven candidates could actually win.”

— Antonio Sola

scenario, we should undoubtedly watch out for the independents. They are the ones who can grow out of the 'don't know/no answer' category, capitalizing on the enormous discontent that the traditional Panamanian political system generates. Corruption, the poor state of family economy and the widely spread feeling of frustration over politics will be constant issues at stake in this campaign. Today, measuring instruments such as surveys increasingly fail, because they cannot interpret the deep 'spirals of silence' of voters. Therefore, as it has been typical in recent months, the Panamanian race will be an open election, to be defined by an absolute polarization scheme just a few days before voting day.”

A **Eric Jackson, editor of The Panama News:** “The electoral tribunal tried to prohibit polls but was overruled. StratMark’s remarkable finding that nobody is undecided makes its survey suspect. In 2014, a well-funded independent campaign’s intervention flew under a lot of radars and confounded pollsters. That organization, the Independent Movement (MOVIN), is quietly backed by Panama’s reputed wealthiest man, Stanley Motta (linked to Copa Airlines, TVN, etc.), and has Annette Planells as its spokeswoman. This year, given pervasive legislative scandals, they are promoting a #NoALaReelección movement against all incumbents, which the electoral tribunal is trying to suppress. MOVIN may or may not put resources into the presidential race. The electoral tribunal is also blocking criminal proceedings against Roux in connection with the Odebrecht bribery scandal. Prosecutors are slowly intervening in the cases of kickbacks used to purchase jailed former president Ricardo Martinelli’s media empire (the El Panamá América and La Crítica newspapers, NexTV and a string of radio stations). Thus, Roux has these resources behind him, but a taint that will limit him. Martinelli, who is running for legislator and mayor of Panama City, goes on trial in mid-March. History, a weak economy and municipal boondoggles hobble Panameñista candidate and Panama City Mayor José Isabel Blandón. Labor leader Saúl Méndez has an ideology to propagate. Former legislator Marco Ameglio is a vanity candidate. Ricardo Lombana, an anti-corruption campaigner and an evangelical, isn’t well known. Most probably, the main rival for front-runner Cortizo will be independent legislator and former attorney general Ana Matilde Gómez. Even if StratMark counts her out.”

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