

TEXAS PAPERS ON LATIN AMERICA

**Pre-publication working papers of the
Institute of Latin American Studies
University of Texas at Austin**

ISSN 0892-3507

The Political Formula of Costa Rica

Olivier Dabène

**ILAS Visiting Scholar
Lavoisier Scholarship recipient
granted by the
French Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

Paper No. 88-01

THE POLITICAL FORMULA OF COSTA RICA

Olivier Dabène

The research to be presented here was intended to demonstrate that only in terms of its political stability can Costa Rica's democratic performance be fully understood.¹ In this research I described what I called the "political formula" of the country. I did not make any attempt to extract a magic formula for providing stability and democracy. Instead, I described mechanisms and functions of stabilization, which may help us understand Costa Rica and offer a new approach to Latin American politics.

In this article, I shall first explain my approach. Second, I shall describe the political formula of the country and how that formula can explain Costa Rica's stability. Third, I shall emphasize a particular mechanism of stabilization that is, in my view, the most interesting lesson one can draw from a study of contemporary Costa Rica, the permanent socialization of the masses. Finally, I shall comment on the way a democracy can remain stable when facing an economic crisis and a hostile international environment.

ABOUT THE APPROACH

The starting point for my investigation was a dissatisfaction with the approaches commonly used to explain Costa Rica's democratic performance, as well as with those used to study Latin American politics in general. Studies concerning Costa Rica are of two kinds: those concerned with the country's history, which use cultural, economic, social and political indicators to draw an irreversible evolution toward an occidental democratic order; and those that take for granted the exceptional nature of the Costa Rican regime and try to enumerate the society's distinctive features. The first type does not explain but rather commemorates, meaning that every historical event is considered as an evolutionary stage. The second type describes social features, but does not explain either.²

¹ See Olivier Dabène, "La formule politique du Costa Rica", PhD diss., Institut d'Etudes Politiques, Grenoble, 1987.

² The first approach is the core of official propaganda, but can be found in many studies, such as Juan Bosch, *Una interpretación de la historia costarricense* (San José: Juricentro, 1980); Carlos Monge, *Historia de Costa Rica* (San José: ECR, 1980). The second is typical of the developmental period of political science and is close to tautology: democracy is defined by certain criteria, and those criteria are supposed to explain democracy. See, for instance, James Busey, *Notas sobre la democracia costarricense* (San José: ECR, 1968). Of course, I do not claim that all scholars fit into this rather reductionist categorization. Some, like José Luis Vega Carballo, offer a very complete explanation of Costa Rican democracy: *Poder político y democracia* (San José: Porvenir, 1982), or *Hacia una interpretación del*

Observation of Costa Rica in the 1980s shows how a regime must sacrifice enough democracy to remain stable without damaging its reputation. The political scientist must shift attention from the democratic characteristics of the country to the recipes that are used to preserve stability and to the conditions that can affect that stability.

If we assume that the stability of a polity is the continuity of the elements identifying that polity,³ we must conclude that an exhaustive description of the system's characteristics must precede any discussion of stability.

The study of a political formula allows us both to present a complete, multidimensional description of a political system and to develop a conceptual schema that can integrate all of these elements into a global explanation of its stability.⁴ The idea is to follow the emergence of social conflicts from grass-roots politics up to its influence on the decision making process and to describe how in return the ruling sectors impose their domination.

The study of a political formula includes seven analytical levels: social structure, cultural identification, mobilization, mediation, institutions, decision making, and domination. The first, the grass-roots level, describes the social structure. The historical process of social stratification and the way population is distributed according to demographic, social, and economic factors are studied. The purpose of this type of analysis is to clarify social segmentation. Social mobility is also studied to get an idea of the evolution of the social configuration.

The actors composing the different segments of society may or may not be aware of belonging to a specific social group. Consequently, the second level analyzes cultural identification. In this study I describe the main features of Costa Rica's political culture as well as the feeling of belonging to a social class.

These two levels characterize the social and cultural basis of politics and give us an idea of the objective degree of segmentation a political system has to face.⁵ Nevertheless, we cannot say that, for instance, when a social group's living conditions are poor (as measured in terms of loss in purchasing power, or of acquisition of a culture of poverty), the situation automatically leads to violent demonstrations.

desarrollo costarricense : ensayo sociológico (San José: Porvenir, 1983). For a complete review of available explanations, see Olivier Dabène, "En torno a la estabilidad política de Costa Rica: tres paradigmas, dos conceptos, una fórmula," *Anuario de Estudios Centroamericanos* 12, nº1 (1986): 41-52.

³ Keith Dowding and Richard Kimber, "The Meaning and Use of 'Political Stability,'" *European Journal of Political Research* 11, nº3 (September 1983): 229-243.

⁴ The political formula approach was first partially elaborated by Yves Schemel in *Sociologie du Système Politique Libanais* (Grenoble: PUG 1976).

⁵ See Olivier Dabène, "Las bases sociales y culturales de lo político en Costa Rica," *Revista de Ciencias Sociales* nº31 (March 1986): 67-83.