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The Political Formula of Costa Rica

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THE POLITICAL FORMULA OF COSTA RICA

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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.

In this respect, the third level of analysis, political and social mobilization, is a very important one from the theoretical point of view. On the one hand, one must examine how collective actors take action to defend their common interests. On the other, one must describe how the political system impregnates the social fabric. Groups mobilize to defend themselves, but at the same time they are mobilized (or socialized) by the elites who try to organize a consensus and to legitimize themselves. The comparison between the flow coming from the bottom, spontaneous mobilization, and the one coming from the top, organized mobilization, gives an idea of the regulation capacities of a polity.

Social groups that decide to defend their interests seek to send their demands up to the decision makers. At a fourth level, I describe the mediation mechanisms used to transmit the demands. The pressure groups, the unions, and the political parties select the demands they chose to represent, but a complex network of informal mediation mechanisms (kind of an invisible political party) directly satisfies numerous personal needs.

The competition between the parties or the pressure groups and the relations between the government and the governed take place in a legal framework that historical evolution has shaped. At a fifth level, institutions and administrative constraint are described, thereby facilitating comprehension of the system's functioning.

At the sixth level, the observation of the policymaking process teaches us how government reacts to pressure. The rationale that demands the implementation of certain policies reveals the ideological orientation of the decision makers. A glance at the organization of the bureaucracy gives an idea of the actual process of policy implementation, and of dealing with demands.

Finally at the seventh level, we must go back from the top to the bottom to describe the domination process. Three perspectives have been used: the historical (the evolution of the forms of domination), the ideological (the sources of legitimacy used to consolidate domination), and the elite (who governs and with the help of whom).

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Each level contributes significantly to the stabilization (or destabilization) of the system. Let us now characterize the formula and evaluate the stabilizing potentials.

Costa Rica has a history of relatively homogeneous social structure. Poverty was widespread during the colonial period, so *hidalgos* could not base their domination on economic disparities. After independence, the coffee economy fragmented the society but did not horizontally stratify it. On the contrary, the vertical ties typical of a clientelistic society were reinforced by an inseparable couple *patrón/peón*. After the 1948 revolution, redistributive policies and the high cost of education increased

the size of the middle sectors at a time when the closing of the frontier was limiting upward social mobility.

Nevertheless, all of the social indicators I examined evidence a disarticulation of this well-balanced and rather flexible social structure. The fact that the country experienced one of the highest birth rates in the world in the 1960s today constitutes a tremendous handicap. A growing proportion of the population is now marginalized, especially since the economic collapse between 1979 and 1982.⁶ About 30 percent of the population is considered "poor," a phenomenon that was unknown in the 1970s. This leads to frustration, and confrontation between classes replaces the faith in progress that characterized the population after 1948. The middle sectors are particularly affected by this feeling of deprivation, having lost 30 percent of their income between 1979 and 1981.

Costa Rica's political culture, a culture of compromise, clearly compensates for this disarticulation. Since colonial times, when poverty forced everybody to compromise, the Costa Ricans have had a tendency to look for compromise to avoid confrontation. This culture has been shaped primarily by the style of social relationships that existed in the countryside between the coffee planter and the *peones*. Compromise was necessary because the *patrón* needed labor for production and stocks held as a guarantee for English creditors, and the *peones* needed extra money so took advantage of high wages. With modernization, clientelism did not disappear. In the 1950s, the Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN) took the place of the traditional *patrón* as a broker between the national political system and the small communities.

Cultural features perpetuate the search for compromise: *choteo*, a kind of mockery of those who break the social norm of coolness; *brochismo*, an attitude of flattery that reactivates clientelistic relationships; or *palanganeo*, a typical manner of bargaining in the decision making process with the sole purpose of satisfying everybody involved (which is, of course, virtually impossible and explains the social deadlock of the society as well as certain foreign policy initiatives). In addition to these stabilizing elements, Costa Ricans have a religious faith in their political institutions. The strong legitimacy of those institutions is fed by continuous propaganda. Clientelism, compromise-oriented culture, and, institutional legitimacy explain why no real confrontation between classes has yet emerged in Costa Rica, although the social structure is getting more and more rigid.

Another dimension of the low-level conflict orientation of Costa Rican society is the population's traditionally weak propensity for mobilization. Costa Ricans are definitely not a people of spectacu-

⁶ On September 18, 1981, Costa Rica officially declared itself bankrupt and stopped making debt payments. The costs of the crisis were not well distributed: the GNP/capita decline was 16.5 percent in 1981-1982, the average salary fell by 44 percent and the 500 percent devaluation of the *colón* favored exporters.

larly violent mobilization; their political participation cannot be reduced to the casting of a ballot every four years, however. It appears that each social group has a particular way of expressing its demands through spontaneous mobilizations. Due to the scarce means of communication, blocking of roads is a very spectacular, although not very efficient, way of protesting, and is used by food producers, as well as by some towns (the second-largest city, Cartago, has been regularly blocking the only road leading to the capital for fifteen years to demand a highway). The private sector usually sends petitions directly to the president to suggest modifications in policy. Students and unions try to organize street demonstrations, but they have not been very successful lately. Land invasion has been a recurrent device for about thirty years, and from time to time rural violence makes the headlines of newspapers in the capital. Plantation workers often go on strike, but not very successfully either. The means of protest appear to be highly segmented and social discontent is dispersed. Union federations never organize unified demonstrations.⁷ Recently, however, there is evidence of a multiplication of desperate forms of mobilization, such as hunger strikes and violent land invasions.

Concerning legal participation, it is worth noting the decline of trade unionism. The solidarist associations⁸ that are taking the place of unions are a clear manifestation of the conservative shift of Costa Rican society in the eighties.⁹ Although the disarticulation of the social structure could strengthen the Left, the contrary is happening. The explanation lies in the ruling sectors' tremendous effort to organize mobilization since 1948, and more recently around the concept of crisis.¹⁰

The great achievement of contemporary Costa Rica has been to impose a legitimate conception of the polity that includes the delimitation of parallel spaces for possible mobilization. The rhetoric of the crisis helps to find a balance between the obligations of democracy (to open up participation) and

⁷ The last two important mobilizations (apart from the banana strikes) were in 1970, against the Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA), and a march for peace in 1984.

⁸ Solidarist associations (*asociaciones solidaristas*) emerged in 1948, in the midst of political turmoils, as an alternative to trade unions. The founder, Alberto Martén, wanted to promote a "pacific revolution" through the union of workers and employers. The solidarist associations he created were like friendly societies, or mutual-aid societies, and brought material benefits to the workers through the constitution of savings banks. Nevertheless it is not until the 1980s that the solidarist movement started to be successful. There were 35 associations in 1950, 98 in 1979, 216 in 1981, 500 in 1983, and 735 in 1984. Moreover, between 1979 and 1981, the number of trade unions declined from 325 to 259. See Gustavo Blanco, *La paradoja solidarista: retos teóricos y prácticos de un movimiento obrero-patronal al movimiento obrero y popular costarricense* (San José: Centro de Formación Costarricense, 1984).

⁹ The legal environment has been very favorable to the solidarist associations. Although practically all strikes are declared illegal in Costa Rica and there is no legal protection for unionized workers (*fueros sindicales*), the solidarist associations have been granted special legal status encouraging their activities (Ley solidarista, November 28, 1984).

¹⁰ Since 1948, the Left has been persecuted by the PLN (until 1975, the Communist party was illegal). Nevertheless its semiclandestine nature never led Manuel Mora and his Partido Vanguardia Popular to any guerrilla activities. Because for thirty-five years the PLN defended reform positions, there was little political space left for Mora (see Manuel Solís, *La crisis de la izquierda costarricense: consideraciones para una discusión* (San José: Centro de Estudios para la Acción Social, 1985).

those of stability (to control spontaneous mobilization), because the limitation of democracy is presented as a condition for stability.

The bodies participating in the mediation process (political parties, unions, pressure groups) are very selective about the demands they choose to represent. Roughly, it can be said that there is an overrepresentation of the middle sectors and that the numerous private sector pressure groups are directly involved in decision making.¹¹ The demands of the great majority of the people—land and housing—are ignored. Those *sectores olvidados* can nevertheless take advantage of an immense network of informal mediation based on connections at different levels (family, friends, neighbors, brokers, and so forth).

The progressive substitution of unions by solidarist associations tends to diminish the role of the mediation process. Based on an ideology of social harmony, the solidarist movement insists on the complementarity of worker and employer and brings material benefits to the former while ridding the latter of any "politicized" organization inside the production unit. But by doing so, the solidarist movement leaves workers face to face with employers; thus both find themselves in the nineteenth-century situation where the *peón* stood alone in front of the *patrón* and depended on him for his welfare.

The evolution of these associations combined with the direct association of the private sector to the government leaves no space for a mediation process, and access to power is nearly nonexistent for the lower sectors. Should they be able to gain power, the lower sectors probably could not implement the policies they are fighting for, because of the deadlock of the administration and the institutions.

The circumstances of the 1949 regime's emergence (Figueres, who had won the civil war, could not win the majority in the assembly that drafted the constitution) and the heritage of fraudulent elections (the legislative assembly was in charge of the election process during most of the nineteenth century) explain the complexity of the system of checks and balances the 1949 constitution provides. The controlling bodies (supreme court, government controller, electoral tribunal) have great power, which leads to an immobilization of the decision making process that can be compared to a lame-duck presidency.

Both the economic and the foreign policies that I have examined in detail confirm this picture. Nevertheless, there is a significant difference between the decision making structure involved in these two crucial areas and the one involved in social policies. In the latter case, the rationale seems to be to

¹¹ Pressure groups such as Coalición Costarricense de Iniciativas de Desarrollo (CINDE), Asociación Costarricense de Gerentes y Empresarios (ACOGE), Asociación Nacional de Fomento Económico (ANFE), Instituto Costarricense del Sector Empresarial (INCOSEM), Unión Costarricense de Cámaras y Asociaciones de la Empresa Privada (UCCAEP), and the different chambers—Cámara de Comercio, Cámara de Industrias—regularly meet with the president and government officials.

dilute popular demands by means of a tremendously complicated administration, which, incidentally, can lead to bureaucratic enclaves that breed the clientelistic networks. In the case of the economic and foreign policies, there are a few key positions and personalities that are given a great degree of liberty (the case of John Biehl, a Chilean college friend of Arias, who originated the Arias Peace Plan, is rather typical, as is that of Rodrigo Carazo, former president [1978-1982], politically opposed to the PLN but who is now helping to gather the Sandinistas and the Contras around the negotiation table).

Concerning the orientation of the economic policy, the evolution toward neoliberalism is quite clear, as it is in almost all of Latin America. The privatization of CODESA (Corporación Costarricense de Desarrollo) is a manifestation of the backing of the state-controlled economy. But for Costa Rica, this evolution could mean more than a simple reorientation of the economy caused by international pressures. Since 1948, the constant growth of the public sector has provided important upward social mobility, as well as an extension of the PLN's potential clientele.¹² The spoils system and corruption have allowed the PLN to reward its followers. If these mechanisms disappear, the state will have to face growing resentment from large sectors of the population. Nevertheless, because in the 1986 elections voters trusted the PLN to bury its own symbols, the country did not end up like the Uruguay of twenty years ago.¹³

Because the disarticulation of the social structure has not led to any social turmoil, the domination process must be very efficient in Costa Rica from at least three points of view: authority, legitimacy, and homogeneity of the actors involved in the process. The *conquistadores* dynasty, as Stone calls it,¹⁴ was rather hegemonic until the beginning of this century. The nineteenth-century coffee Republic progressively opened up the system (direct vote in 1913, secret ballot in 1928), thanks to the clientele-controlled enfranchisement of the poor and the cost of education. The events of 1948 do not represent the accession to power of the middle sectors, as has often been claimed, but rather a violent shift in the development process that would incidentally favor the middle sectors.¹⁵ There was indeed very little change in the power structure, proof of which was the fact that the bourgeoisie dropped its support of Calderón long before 1948.

¹² The proportion of the active population employed in the public sector rose from 6.1 percent in 1950, to 18.4 percent in 1980.

¹³ Concerning the 1986 election, see Olivier Dabène, "Les Elections du 2 février 1986 au Costa Rica: Continuités et Ruptures," *Problèmes d'Amérique Latine*, n°81 (1986): 3-20. During his campaign, Oscar Arias clearly announced some deregulation measures.

¹⁴ Samuel Stone, *La dinastía de los conquistadores. Crisis del poder en la Costa Rica contemporánea* (San José: EDUCA, 1982).

¹⁵ Jacobo Schifter calls Figueres's style an "authoritative transformism," in *La fase oculta de la Guerra Civil en Costa Rica* (San José: EDUCA, 1981).

It is also erroneous to speak of conflict between current factions in the bourgeoisie.¹⁶ There is surely some disagreement about the appropriate economic policy to be followed, but a close look at the actors reveals a very homogeneous and well-integrated ruling class. Thanks to the system of joint stock companies, participation in chambers of commerce or industry, or even frequent changes of activity, elites constitute a social class united by cultural affinities and close ideological references.¹⁷

Rodrigo Madrigal Nieto, the current minister of foreign affairs (*canciller*), provides a rather typical example. His political evolution parallels that of the entire ruling class. In 1959, the same year the Law of Industrial Protection and Development was passed (by an anti-PLN president, Mario Echandi, and a PLN-dominated assembly), he was president of the Chamber of Industry. We can assume that he was at that time connected to the PLN. At present, he is involved in every important sector of the economy (press, trade, industry, finance, service). Between 1978 and 1982, he was president of the anti-PLN-dominated assembly and was close to president Carazo. In 1985, he made an important last-minute financial contribution to the Arias campaign and now supports the PLN again.

THE POLITICAL STABILITY OF COSTA RICA

The elements of the political formula that I have described, some of which stabilize the polity while others destabilize it, create the political stability of Costa Rica. The different contributions are summarized in figure 1:

¹⁶ Following Nicos Poulantzas, a lot of Costa Rican sociologists tend to infer fractions of the bourgeoisie competing for hegemonic domination from the economic infrastructure. See for instance Ana Sojo, *Estado empresario y lucha política en Costa Rica* (San José: EDUCA, 1984).

¹⁷ A study of the list of the stockholders of the newspaper *La Nación*, of the members of different private chambers, and of the résumés of numerous government officials has allowed me to discover an informal network that constitutes the core of the ruling class.

