

Evangelical Win in Costa Rica Election Could Spell Fiscal Trouble

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Spending is not the path to salvation.

Photographer: Daniel Ramalho/AFP/Getty Images

Latin America



Costa Rica's Election Offers Fiscal Faith Test

An evangelical win could deepen its economic problems.

by

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With its open doors to tourists, no standing army since 1948, and proud claims as Central America's oldest democracy, Costa Rica is not the place you'd look for a religious uprising. Yet this country of 4.9 million may be poised next month to elect a former gospel singer and television evangelist dedicated to fighting gay marriage and rescuing the country from the Devil's designs.

Sure, when Fabricio Alvarado Munoz topped a dozen rivals to win the first round of the presidential election last month, the 43-year-old evangelist sounded almost ecumenical in his call for a movement "of solidarity, values, of innovation and of genuine progress." Parse the stump speech, though, and catch the new grammar of the Latin American reformation, where an aggressive faith-based conservatism is moving from the pews to politics. But in Costa Rica as elsewhere in the region, that could spell trouble for efforts to deal with deep-seated economic problems, not least the world's highest overall fiscal deficit.

Just a few decades ago, evangelical Christians in mostly Catholic Latin America were targets of discrimination and harassment, and they steered clear of electoral politics. The cloister ended with the rise of Pentecostal sects, now the majority among the region's Protestant orders, where ambitious pastors with an eye on secular glory whipped their growing fold into disciplined cadres, especially at election time. Boston University political scientist Taylor Boas calls the evangelicals' rise a feature of the "new inclusion" in Latin American democracy.

Evangelicals arguably are still underrepresented in public office, but they have scored important wins. Some 80 of Brazil's 513-member lower house are self-defined evangelicals; Rio de Janeiro, the country's second largest city, is run by a Pentecostal mayor, a first among the country's 27 regional capitals. Evangelicals have brokered their support of mainstream candidates, like Mexican presidential front-runner Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. And while Protestant churchgoers have long thrown their weight behind

establishment leaders, such as former Peruvian autocrat Alberto Fujimori or evangelical strongman Efraim Rios Montt, more recently they are forming their own religion-based parties and challenging legacy politics.

Granted, a good part of this shift is down to the lackluster competition: Catholic liturgy has lost its allure before a nimble class of pastors with their brightly lit temples, catchier soundtracks and seismic sermons that inveigh against the indulgences of the flesh and spirit, and promise real-time salvation.

Of course, such trappings also can be an invitation to obscurantism. Consider Brazil's evangelical congressional caucus, which took point on legalizing so-called reconversion therapy for homosexuals, or Alvarado's vow to pull his country from a marquee Latin American human rights convention rather than obey the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruling in favor of same-sex marriage. Never mind that the convention is the San Jose Pact, named for the capital of the host nation, Costa Rica.

If there is a lodestar for evangelical politicians, it's "Know thy constituency": 69 percent of Costa Ricans reject gay marriage, and despite recent legal reforms most Latin Americans still say amen to that. "While nations such as Argentina and Brazil were among the first countries in the world to legalize same-sex unions, it was often achieved through supreme court decisions instead of national referendums," Andrew Chesnut, professor of religious studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, told me.

What's less clear is whether such evangelical ardor can be leveraged into vital reforms in countries that have long been hostage to cronyism, corruption and fiscal sins.

Until this year, Alvarado was a relatively obscure federal legislator, whose National Restoration Party wielded little clout in congress. Even as his closest rival -- who actually shares the same family name -- announced plans this week to slash the deficit and limit public borrowing, front-runner Alvarado has said next to nothing about public spending, now running at 21 percent of gross domestic product, or on reducing the national deficit, which climbed to 6.2 percent in 2017, a 34-year high, according to Giancarlo Morelli of the Economist Intelligence Unit.

Aside from its predictable opposition to abortion and LGBT rights, Brazil's sizable evangelical caucus was best known for lobbying last year to pardon millions of dollars worth of church debts and win tax breaks for its congregation. So much for Weberian self-reliance and the Protestant work ethic.

"It's probably unrealistic to expect evangelical politicians to behave differently in a region where distributing public resources to your constituency is the rule," said Boas in an interview.

Not everyone agrees. "Protestantism could be a force to modernize the state by calling for concentrating public services in education, health and security," theology scholar Franklin Ferreira, an independent pastor who lectures at the Brazilian chapter of the Martin Bucer Seminary, told me. "But I don't see many evangelicals embracing that agenda."

Instead, Ferreria said, evangelical politicians are more likely to “exploit Christian clichés” as they serve up more familiar political fare, such as cash handouts and subsidies, which political bosses can easily hijack. “Populists, amateurs and the unprepared” is how Ferreira described his country’s evangelical politicians in a recent book, suggestively titled “Against Idolatry of the State.”

Marcelo Neri, who studies the religious economy at the **Getulio Vargas Foundation** in Rio, traces the populist jag to the shifting demographics of faith during times of duress. Neri’s studies show that the ranks of evangelicals surged from 6.6 percent to 16.2 percent of the population from 1980 to 2000, which were “lost decades” for the Brazilian economy. “In times of economic emergency, with inflation and high unemployment, the evangelical churches end up taking on a paternalist role, mimicking the state,” **Neri** told me.

Sure, evangelicalism has also been an important ladder for social groups that have been left out of traditional politics and slighted by organized religion. Latin American evangelicals are generally poorer, blacker and more female than their Catholic counterparts, and practice their faith more fervently, according to a survey by Latinobarometro. That holds even for Costa Rica, where Catholicism is the state religion but bleeding souls. “Small evangelical orders are gaining devotees and helping people prosper in less privileged areas, where the state can’t reach,” Morelli explained. “That means political machinery.”

Given the soldierly discipline, devotion and handsome collections that pastors marshal from their flock, the potential political capital for aspiring candidates of all political persuasions is irresistible. That’s one reason why instead of waging holy war, Catholics and evangelicals are increasingly likely to team up to push socially conservative policies of mutual interest, such as fighting abortion, boosting (heterosexual) family values, and keeping vexing gender politics out of the classroom.

If only the same alliances could work their miracles on the region’s incorrigible state finances.

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