DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 03.02.2026 | Daniel Mann

Costa Rica is not an outlier, but a warning sign

Yesterday's election marks the start of an authoritarian transformation, legitimised by a democratic mandate

Outgoing Costa Rican President Rodrigo Chaves has achieved a near-total triumph, although he was constitutionally barred from running for a third term after four years in office, his chosen successor, Laura Fernandez, won the first round of the presidential election on 1 February with more than 48 per cent of the vote. There will therefore be no need for a runoff election. The 39-year-old career politician will thus become the second female president in the country's history. Her party, the *Partido Pueblo Soberano* (PPSO, Party of the Sovereign People), which was only founded in September 2022, is also expected to have a comfortable majority in parliament with 31 of the 57 seats. It therefore looks as if *Chavismo*, the Costa Rican variant of right-wing populism, will now also control parliament for the first time. Chaves could thus be more powerful than ever at the end of his term in office. Only in its self-imposed goal of a two-thirds majority to amend the constitution does the PPSO appear to have failed.

The choice of Chaves' successor finally fell on the PPSO and its presidential minister, Laura Fernandez, who pledged absolute allegiance to the president.

Until a year before the election, it was not even clear who would be inheriting Chaves' political legacy: several parties and shadow candidates were vying for the support of the surprisingly popular president, who had completely fallen out with his old party, the Partido Progreso Socialdemocratico (Social Democratic Progress Party – although neither social democratic nor progressive). The choice finally fell on the PPSO and its presidential minister, Laura Fernandez, who pledged absolute allegiance to the president. The landslide victory of the PPSO 'out of nowhere' is therefore a sign of continuity for a presidency that broke with many written and unwritten rules of Costa Rica's established democracy and was widely

admired for its stability: with dialogue, exchange and compromise. Instead of adapting to the reality of changing majorities and forging alliances, Cháves always openly confronted parliament, the supreme court, the court of auditors as well as other institutions of the, 1949 established, second republic. He declared the civil service to be the enemy of economic development and public social security, health insurance and pensions to be his personal opponents. During his time in office attacks on the press, environmentalists and other 'opposition elements' reached unprecedented levels in Costa Rica.

More violence and crime

Over the past four years, these very actors and institutions had confidently defended the rule of law and democracy against his attacks. Despite, or perhaps because of, numerous defeats before the Supreme Court and the Court of Auditors, which nipped many of his legislative proposals in the bud, Chaves was able to establish himself among his supporters as an alternative to the elite. The rejection of the status quo is no coincidence — good working conditions in the public sector and a few sectors in the central valley around the capital San José, good healthcare and excellent universities are all too often contrasted with precarious employment, lack of prospects and poverty in the periphery.

Informality and crime are on the rise. Costa Rica's image as a balanced, peaceful and socially secure paradise of sustainable development has long since ceased to reflect the reality of life for the majority of the population, certainly not in the less affluent areas of the central valley and even less so in the traditionally neglected coastal regions. For many people, the country's rise from an emerging to an industrialised nation over the past two decades has been reflected more in astronomical supermarket prices than in economic opportunities. The president's rhetoric, which addressed these differences and declared war on 'those at the top', fell on fertile ground here.

Costa Rica is more unsafe in 2026 than ever before.

The fact that he, as a person, also openly catered to deep-rooted resentments in Costa Rican society, such as xenophobia and machismo, contributed to the majority of the population ultimately supporting the president and his successor rather than their own democracy.

Apart from '*continuismo*', i.e. the continuation of Chaves' policies, the issue of internal security was almost the only substantive topic in the election campaign. Here, Fernandez, like Chaves, called for a hard-line policy — El Salvador's authoritarian president Nayib Bukele even made a special state visit a few days before the election to lay the foundation stone for a new high-security prison. The results of the Chaves government are modest in the area of security, as in almost all other areas: Costa Rica is more unsafe in 2026 than ever before.

The Chaves rhetoric appears to be becoming reality

In contrast, the more progressive wing of the opposition promised to defend democracy and the rule of law, but this only scored limited points. Nevertheless, presidential candidate Alvaro Ramos breathed new life into the traditional social democratic Partido Liberacion Nacional (PLN). He pursued a radical course of renewal within the party against the old party elite, which was perceived as corrupt. And, to the surprise of many, not only almost maintained the party's result in parliament compared to the last elections, but also came in a clear second in the presidential election with over 33 per cent of the vote. He is considered a competent politician and, with his matter-of-fact and friendly manner, was able to convince voters as a direct counterpoint to the rhetoric of the president and the government candidate Fernandez, who largely avoided public debate during the election campaign.

In parliament, the PLN will be the largest opposition party with 17 seats, followed by the progressive party Frente Amplio (FA) with 7 seats (one more than in 2022). Libertarian and radical evangelical parties, which had largely supported the Chaves government, are no longer represented. Instead, the political landscape in Costa Rica has consolidated as it has not done for decades: almost the entire conservative to right-wing spectrum has been absorbed by the new presidential party, the PPSO. The three more or less progressive parties remain in opposition with virtually the same overall strength. Regionally, these parties scored particularly well in the economically better-off parts of the central valley, while the PPSO dominated the peripheral provinces and the more marginalised cantons in the centre of the country, each with well over 50 per cent of the vote.

This time, the institutions alone will not be able to stop Chavism.

The Chaves rhetoric appears to be becoming reality: with a significant increase in voter turnout to over 69 per cent, Laura Fernandez and the PPSO have received a clear mandate not only to continue their populist rhetoric, but also to restructure the state. The president-elect herself proclaimed the 'third republic' on election night, and while she ostensibly renewed her commitment to democracy, it can be assumed that many of the institutional obstacles that have hindered Rodrigo Chaves over the past four years will now be removed. As the designated Minister of the Presidency, the former president will have a very direct influence on the policies of his successor and will also escape prosecution for various allegations of corruption during his term in office. He himself could then run again as a presidential candidate in the next elections in 2030. Until then, one of the few glimmers of hope remains the consolidation of progressive forces: Building on Alvaro Ramos' success in renewing the PLN and the strong results of the FA, strategies must now be developed to win back the less privileged sections of the population and prevent this landslide victory. And the, just over 50 per cent, of Costa Rican voters who did not vote for Laura Fernandez must ask themselves how they want to preserve their democracy in the next four years. This time, the institutions alone will not be able to stop Chavism. What is happening in Costa Rica is not an accident in an otherwise intact democracy, but the beginning of an authoritarian transformation with a democratic mandate. Costa Rica is not an outlier, but a warning sign – for Latin America as well as for democracies that take their institutional stability for granted.



Daniel Mann

Dr Daniel Mann is the Regional Representative of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung for Costa Rica, Guatemala and Honduras and the Director of the Social-Ecological Transformation Project in Central America. Previously, he was the head of the FES office in Nigeria, as well as a project assistant in Ghana.