

BOB-14

COSTA RICAN ELECTION: PURA VIDA!

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

San Jose, February 12, 1994.

Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755, U.S.A.

Dear Peter,

Every four years Costa Ricans elect a new president to rule their country. And last Sunday February 6 was election day. The Verde-blanco (Green-white) and Rojo-Azul (Red-blue) flags can be seen hoisted on many houses or plastered to walls or glued on cars or sported on T-shirts. Some cars and some houses may display two flags—a show of divided loyalties. And if you are a visitor for the first time to Costa Rica you might think this flags represent the best sporting clubs or soccer teams in San Jose. But no they are not. They represent the two major political parties in the Costa Rica: the Verde-blanco represent the National Liberation Party (NLP) and the Rojo-azul the Social Christian Party (SCP).

When the election campaign was coming to its end, my Costa Rican friends told me that they were preparing for "la gran fiesta politica" of the election day. I could not gather at first what they meant by la gran fiesta politica on election day.

Sunday morning looked more quiter than the night before. But one can feel a lot of movement going on. Then towards mid-day cars began sounding their horns and you began hearing shouts here and there. Figueres (NLP)! Miguel Angel (SCP)! Names of the two most important candidates running for presidency.

The school of Perfirio Brenes is near to where I live in Moravia and it is one of the polling stations in the area. I decided to visit it to see how Ticos vote in their election.

On the street outside the school representatives of the main political parties show voters the procedures about how to vote and where to vote. If you are a "Liberacionista" you go to where the Verde-blanco group is and if you are a "Social Democrata" you march to the Rojo-azul group. But you could also get guidance from any party representative.

Then the voter's name and cedula (I.D.) number are checked against official registered records. After you are done, one of the children (who have been trained as election guias or guides) will escort you into the school to show you the election office where you are going to vote.

The street was full of action. The political camps were busy showing people where and how to vote. A young girl (about 9 years old) from the Verde-blanco asked me, "votaste senor? (did you vote, sir?)" And I said, "no, no puedo votar (no, I can not vote)". " Pero porque no? Es una fiesta tan linda (but why not? It's such a nice fiesta)", she said. So I tried to explained to her that I am not Costa Rican and so I can not vote. She looked a

Bacete Bwogo is an ICWA fellow studying primary health care delivery in Costa Rica, Cuba, Kerala State in India & the U.S.A.

bit unhappy. And insistingly she said, "usted puedes votar, le ayudare (you can vote, I will help you)". At that moment I really wished I could vote just not to disappoint this happy little guide. For her everybody that came around came to vote. Election day is a great fun for children here. They look so happy and enjoy their participation as guides for voters.

I continued watching what was going on. Then a man on a motor bike stop by.

"Our election office is on the other side of the street. You are welcome to visit us", he said to me. He is from the Rojo-Azules, and perhaps he thought I could vote for them too. Just after he left two other persons from the Verde-blancos came to me and asked, "have you voted yet?". I told them, "I am a visitor from Africa".

"Did you like our elections?", they asked.

"Yes, I thought it was interesting", I replied.

"Si, asi es nuestra democracia. Nuestra eleccion es una fiesta para todo el pais (Yes, this is how our democracy is. It is a feast for all the country)", they said.

Inside the school are the polling offices where you will find the representatives of the Supreme Elections Tribunal (SET). The process is orderly and quite. Ticos line up outside waiting their turn to go in. You present your cedula, then go behind a curtain to select the candidate you are voting for. Voting is secret. Then you come back to the table where the (SET) representatives are and cast your votes in the boxes designated for president or Vice-president or assembly deputy. When you are through with that and before you leave the polling office, the SEP representatives will tell you to dip your right index finger in some blue-black ink-material (which doesn't wash away easily). This is done as a security measure so that a person can not vote twice. Every person who has voted already will have this black-blue mark on his/her index finger for the whole election day-24 hours. So any person wanting to cheat would have to cut off the index finger first in order to be able to vote a second time same day! Every voter must dip their fingers in the black-blue ink, including the current president of the Republic, presidential candidates and candidates for deputies.

There was a bit of calm as the hour approached 6:00 O'clock in the evening, the closing time for the polling stations. By this time there was not much shouting on the streets, many people have gone to their homes. Now the sound of Latin and other types of music could be heard all over the neighbor in Moravia. The counting of votes has begun and the long awaited election fiesta is about to begin.

From avenida central (in central San Jose) to San Pedro, the road was packed with cars. It is wild. Loud music, people waving flags Verde-blanco or Rojo-azul, there is singing and dancing, party fans shouting, Figueres! or Miguel Angel! More cars join in the jam, the fiesta feeling is building up.

I sat on the road side to watch with amazement this display of what I don't know what to say but call it -wonderful event. You get the feeling you are watching the finals of a World Cup

soccer game. More shouts of "Figueres con la fuerza del pueblo " and "vamos a ganar". It is a festive atmosphere. Even tourists have joined the fiesta bandwagon. You could see some of them holding two different flags to show their neutrality. It's fun.

By 7:30 O'clock the fiesta was intense. Then I saw a newspaper (El Dia) being circulated. It said "Figueres gano - Figueres won". Still non of the celebrating people of both political party seem to care. The spirit of fiesta has dominated them. Then six young men and women parked their Toyota pick-up car near to where I was still sitting. They had a huge stage amplifier tied to the back of the car. They unloaded some soft drinks and beer, turned on the music. The fiesta continued.

I returned home at 8:00 pm and turned on the TV for official election news. And the result was "Jose Maria Figueres has won the 1994 elections" by 49.6% of votes. The loosing candidate, Miguel Angel Rodrigues had 47.6% of votes. A narrow win for Figueres. For the Rojo-azules, the elections are over. For the Verde-blancos, the fiesta continued into the early morning hours of the following day.



President-elect Jose Maria Figueres

It was remarkable seeing all these happy people celebrating their political electoral process without the losers grudgingly fighting the winners. In fact when I was watching the fiesta on the street in San Pedro I was more concerned about road-traffic accidents that could occur, instead of gun-shot wounds which are frequently seen in other developing countries (during elections)

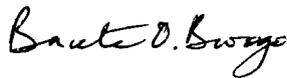
especially when different political groups meet each other on the way. Here instead of friction it is fiesta for all. I think Ticos have the spirit of good sportsmen: in competition, it is a win or lose situation, if you win that's fine, and if you lose still you congratulate the winner. The losing candidate (Miguel Angel) confirmed this spirit when he publicly acknowledge his election defeat and went on to congratulate the winner (Figueres) and wishing him and the new government success in the future. I was especially enthused by this show of great spirit despite the difficult election campaigning sometimes characterized by a tinge of personal mud-slinging. But this is Costa Rica. Pura vida!

However, not all Costa Ricans were able to vote on election day. Some could not. They are the Indians who live in the remote areas of the Talamanca region in southern Costa Rica. Many Indians received cedula (official identity cards) only two years ago. And this could have been their first time to participate in a national election. (1)

But at least the Ticos have an interesting political process which they could show to other people: FIESTA y PURA VIDA!

Hasta aqui, gracias.

Yours sincerely,



Bacete O. Bwogo

1. Tico Times, February 11, 1994. p. 14.