

Elections in Panama: Towards a National Unity Government

On May 5th, Panamanians will elect all representatives to positions of popular election, from the president of the republic to the representatives of townships.

For the presidency, there are 8 candidates, and according to an April's survey published by the newspaper La Prensa, José Raúl Mulino of the Realizando Metas party has a considerable advantage over three candidates who are closely ranked in second place: Martín Torrijos of the Popular Party, Romulo Roux of Democratic Change, and Ricardo Lombana of the Otro Camino Movement. Independent candidate Zulay Rodríguez, and the government's candidate and vice president, Gabriel Carrizo, are in third place, followed by Professor Maribel Gordon of the Frente Amplio Popular party and Melitón Arrocha, another independent candidate supported by the Independent Social Alternative Party.

In addition, the survey indicates around 20 percent of undecided voters, who could sway the balance toward one side or the other of the presidential spectrum and change the configuration of the National Assembly and local governments. Undoubtedly, Panamanian voters are heading towards a very uncertain election, which could be further complicated by the outcome of the constitutional challenge against the candidacy of the leading candidate in the polls.

In addition to the complexity and fragmentation observed in these elections, there are multiple and urgent problems facing the country, which have not been resolved by successive governments of the democratic era due to the corruption and clientelism that have infected Panamanian society. Indeed, never before had so many problems accumulated in the country's history, further postponed by the current government, which has preferred to kick the can down the road so that these problems fall on the next government.

The winning candidate in the upcoming elections will have to address a variety of urgent issues such as:

1. Implementation of a plan to reactivate the national economy, drastically reorienting public spending towards productive sectors and allowing the country to regain investment grade. Private job generation is of high priority, as the prolonged and irrational closure of the economy during the pandemic and the protests of 2022 and 2023 led to the closure of 40% of small and medium-sized enterprises and a loss of 407,000 jobs.
2. The collapse of pensions, as pensions will only be paid until this year if no contributions are made to the Disability, Elderly, and Death program of the Social Security Agency. There is an urgent need for a new social security model adapted to the current demographic and economic reality of Panamanian society, without falling into abstract ideological discussions.
3. Expansion of the Canal basin to ensure alternate water supply for Canal operation.
4. The orderly closure of the Donoso mine and assembling a team of patriotic specialists to face international arbitration.
5. Implementation of a national education plan that incorporates new digital tools into the teaching-learning process, English as a second language, and the third language, that of artificial intelligence. We need a new educational model that prepares citizens for life, so

they can integrate into the new digital and environmental economy with specific skills. We cannot continue with an obsolete educational system divorced from the productive forces of society.

6. Implementation of a national health plan that provides timely medical care to citizens, as well as medications at reasonable prices.
7. Combating corruption and clientelism through strict transparency laws, conflict of interest regulations, and especially the approval of asset forfeiture laws to attack not only the assets of drug trafficking but also to recover ill-gotten funds from corrupt practices in government management.
8. Reforming the structure of the Panamanian state through a Constituent Assembly, aimed at ensuring true independence of the Judicial Branch and cleaning up the Legislative Branch so that it fulfills its function of legislating and overseeing public management. It is imperative to eliminate political impunity and prohibit lawmakers and politicians with authority from appointing relatives, friends, and acquaintances to public positions.
9. Creation of a civil service career where officials from general directors downwards are appointed through competitive exams and promoted based on merit in all ministries and state entities. Officials subject to free appointment and removal should only be allowed in the offices of the President, Vice President, ministers, and deputy ministers.

It is concerning that the next president could assume office with electoral support of 30 percent or less, which will undermine the legitimacy of the next government.

Therefore, it is crucial that the Panamanian people elect a president who has the integrity and audacity to call for a national unity government, composed of notable citizens from all political and social forces in the country. The solution to urgent national problems will require great capacity to generate consensus in the short and medium term.

Otherwise, the country will face higher levels of instability and social conflict than experienced in 2022 and 2023.

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