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**Reactionary, misogynistic, homophobic**

**An evangelical movement shakes  
party-political democracy  
in Costa Rica**

By Andreas Stamm,  
German Development Institute /  
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)

# The Current Column

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# An evangelical movement shakes party-political democracy in Costa Rica

Bonn, 12 March 2018. On 4 February of this year elections were held in Costa Rica, the results of which have shaken party-political democracy in the Central American country. A charismatic television preacher achieved a landslide victory with primarily homophobic rhetoric, surprisingly reaching the run-off for the presidency on 1 April. This is a reflection of a widespread trend in Latin America: the rapid rise of conservative evangelical groups in society and politics.

## The end of the two-party system in Costa Rica

For the last 70 years changes in government in Costa Rica have occurred peacefully, on the basis of a functioning party-political democracy. From 1970 to 2014 seven presidents were elected from the social democratic Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN) and five from the conservative Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC). For the first time, 2014 saw the winning candidate come from another party, the liberal-left Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC). The traditional two-party system was finished. The election in February 2018 threw up a result that could not have been anticipated even shortly beforehand. In November 2017 the evangelical movement of the Partido Renovación Nacional (PREN) was polling at less than 5 percent, on 4 February it won nearly 25 percent of the vote. The PAC candidate received just under 22 percent.

Resentment had been growing in the background amongst traditional segments of the population for some time. This became evident in particular on issues that had been instrumentalised for years by evangelicals in many parts of Latin America: equality policies (dismissed as "gender ideology"), pluralistic sex education, and above all same-sex marriage. On 9 January a ruling of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights IDH obliged its member states to guarantee the same rights for same-sex marriages. The Costa Rican constitution commits the government to implement the ruling of the IDH. The PREN candidate nonetheless announced his intention to ignore the ruling in the event of electoral victory. In the space of just four weeks this led to a meteoric rise, resulting in a share of nearly 25 percent of votes in the February election.

Evangelical – especially Pentecostal – movements have increased in popularity in predominantly Catholic Latin America in the past three to four decades. Whilst in 1970 around 92 percent of people adhered to the Catholic faith, by 2014 the figure had fallen to 69 percent. In a number of countries large sections of the population now follow the Protestant faith, such as 40 percent in Guatemala, 36 percent in Honduras, 26

percent in Nicaragua and between 15 and 25 percent in Costa Rica.

For a long time these movements operated unobtrusively, however, now they are increasingly seeking to wield political influence and power. For example, 2015 saw an evangelical television comedian become president of Guatemala. A Protestant priest has been mayor of Rio de Janeiro since 2016. In Colombia the Pentecostal movement worked to generate key opposition to the peace treaty between the government and the rebel organisation FARC, contributing decisively to its rejection in the first vote in October 2016.

The rise of evangelical groups began in Guatemala as early as the 1930s and proceeded at varying speeds in different countries. Missionary work is targeted above all at the poorest social strata, in some cases also indigenous groups and the descendants of African slaves, such as on the Central American Caribbean coast. In the early days these groups were reached through the use of mass communication media such as radio and television ("televangelists"), today via professional networks of multimedial diffusion channels (RedeRecord, UnoRed). This enabled the initially dispersed target groups to be reached at an early stage. Rural migration in recent decades has resulted in these now being settled primarily in the marginal districts of cities, where evangelical churches are often the sole safe public space.

## The "drive-through" areas of Costa Rica

What is known as "flyover country" in the US is the "drive through" in Costa Rica - regions on both coasts, which the urban population only experiences on weekend and holiday trips to the beaches. The population that lives in these areas is affected by poverty and unemployment and is disconnected from the economic dynamism of the central highlands. Evangelical churches are often places of refuge in the event of natural disasters and personal difficulties. Their popularity is therefore particularly high here. In the February elections their political wing PREN received 35 percent of votes in the Pacific province and 42 percent on the Caribbean coast. As the population here has felt disadvantaged for decades, it is unlikely that they will vote very differently in the run-off on 1 April. In mid March the outcome remains completely open.

This year will also see elections in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Venezuela and Paraguay. The evangelicals also play an increasing role in these countries.