

Costa Rica's First Female President

Written by T. Rob Brown (aka Roberto Chocolate)

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This article is from AS/COA (American Society/Council of the Americas) newsletter. It sheds light on some of Central America's issues. Roberto Chinchilla Lays Groundwork before Inauguration

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President-elect Laura Chinchilla during a visit to Guatemala on April 13. (Costa Rican Government photo by Luis Echeverría)

Costa Rican President-elect Laura Chinchilla set in motion her policy agenda in recent weeks, ahead of her inauguration. Chinchilla, who won the February 7 elections with 47 percent of the vote—nearly double that of her closest rival—becomes Costa Rica's first female president on May 8. The president-elect, a long-time politician who has served as minister of public safety, congressional deputy, and, most recently, as outgoing President Óscar Arias' vice president and justice minister, is expected to continue the previous administration's economic and social policies, with a focus on economic liberalization, public security improvement, and greater international integration following the recently signed free trade agreements with China and Singapore.

Chinchilla has also focused on foreign policy as she takes on a role in mending regional relations in Central America, strained since the June 2009 military ouster of former President Manuel Zelaya in Honduras. On April 12, Chinchilla embarked on a tour to Central America to promote public security and regional unity, with a focus on Honduras' reintegration into the region—a move corresponding to Arias' role as mediator during the Honduran political crisis last year. After discussing regional efforts to combat drug-trafficking with Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes in San Salvador, the president-elect visited Tegucigalpa, where she met with President Porfirio Lobo and urged for Honduras to be readmitted to regional bodies, including the Organization of American States and the Central American Integration System. Chinchilla then stopped in Guatemala before continuing on to Nicaragua on April 20, where she met with President Daniel Ortega. The two leaders agreed to strengthen bilateral cooperation in tourism, public safety, and the environment, and also discussed Nicaragua's plans to improve relations with Honduras. Nicaragua is the only Central American country that has yet to recognize Porfirio Lobo's presidency in Honduras. Following his meeting with Chinchilla, Ortega announced, in reference to Honduras, "We're convinced it's necessary to normalize relations."

Prior to her inauguration, Chinchilla also picked her cabinet, which includes several ministers who served under her predecessor. Familiar faces include: Mayi Antillón, Arias' communications minister, who will take over as economy minister; Anabel González, who previously served as

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vice minister of foreign trade from 1998-2001 and will assume the position of foreign trade minister; Gloria Abraham, who serves as an adviser in the ministry of agriculture and which she will now lead; and Carlos Ricardo Benavides, who will serve as minister of tourism, a position he held under Arias until he resigned to campaign for Chinchilla. Other key appointments include René Castro, a business school professor who guided Chinchilla's successful presidential campaign and will take over as foreign minister, as well as Fernando Herrero, named as Chinchilla's finance minister, a post he held in the 1990s under ex-President José María Figueres. New to the political arena are Chinchilla's vice presidents—Costa Ricans elect a president and two vice presidents on the same ticket—environmentalist Alfio Piva, who has declared his intentions to focus on sustainable development, and banker Luis Liberman, who stated his role will be to turn economic growth into “a fundamental pillar of the social program.”

With a cabinet deemed by Chinchilla to be “well-qualified, dedicated and versed in the challenges the next four years will bring,” the president-elect also expects to confront some of the same issues faced by her predecessor. In one of the last legs of her Central American tour, Chinchilla met with Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli with whom she discussed a plan to launch security operations to combat drug trafficking and money laundering. The U.S. State Department released a report in March revealing that drug traffickers have moved their activities to smuggling routes in Central America. In 2008, nearly 42 percent of cocaine bound for the United States passed through Central America from South America. The Tico Times points out that Costa Rica may have become a transit point for regional drug runners, and that the region's narco-trafficking has resulted in part from crackdowns in Mexico and Colombia. Chinchilla will also have to confront the affects of the global financial crisis, which negatively impacted one of Costa Rica's most profitable industries, tourism. Martha Solano Martínez writes in Nicaragua's La Prensa that although Costa Rica experiences a different economic situation than its neighbors, the global financial downturn may force it to turn toward regional integration in order to revive its economy.

At least 12 Latin American and European leaders, including Prince Felipe of Spain and the Central American leaders with whom Chinchilla met, confirmed their attendance at the president-elect's inauguration.