

Costa Rica's Democratic Gamble

ENCA's chairperson and co-editor of the ENCA Newsletter also writes a regular column in Geographical, the official magazine of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG). Here we reproduce Doug Specht's article on Costa Rica's latest election and how it could unravel Latin America's oldest democracy.

On 15 January, just 17 days before Costa Rica's presidential election, El Salvador's Nayib Bukele arrived in the country to lay the first stone for a mega-prison modelled on his notorious CECOT facility, a facility documented by Human Rights Watch as a site of systematic torture. Three weeks later, voters elected Laura Fernández, Bukele's explicit admirer, promising to replicate his security model. Costa Rica held a free, fair, and transparent election monitored by 100+ international observers. The electoral process was democratic. Yet the outcome may not be.

Fernández and her governing party won with 48.3 per cent of the vote and 31 legislative seats, enough to govern, but not enough to alter the constitution. Costa Rica has been Latin America's democratic exemplar for 75 years. However, as this democracy elects an authoritarian, it is pertinent to ask if it is possible to prevent

what happened in El Salvador, the complete dismantling of checks on executive power? And if Costa Rica falls to authoritarianism, the regional implications could be profound.

The security crisis that changed everything

Across Costa Rica, homicide rates jumped from 11.5 per 100,000 in 2021 to a record 17.2 in 2023, 865 killings in a single year, the most violent in the country's history. Gang violence has increasingly transformed what was called the 'Switzerland of Central America' into a country dominated by cartel logistics and territorial warfare. Responding to this, seventy per cent of voters prioritised security in exit polls. Three-quarters of citizens no longer align with any political party, and only 25 per cent remain satisfied with democracy. When institutions fail to deliver basic security, democratic norms can become expendable, at least in the minds of voters.

Fernández promised a hard line: a \$35 million mega-prison modelled on Bukele's CECOT, states of emergency suspending

constitutional guarantees in gang-affected areas, fast-track justice procedures, and 'lifting of guarantees' for security operations. Voters, terrified, embraced it. She didn't just promise to copy Bukele, she positioned herself as his apprentice. Bukele's January visit, her immediate post-victory call with him, and her explicit commitment to mirror his tactics made the model transfer explicit.

How it begins: the Chaves precedent

Before Fernández, President Rodrigo Chaves (2022-2026), her mentor and political godfather, spent four years testing how far Costa Rica's institutions would bend. He dismissed legislative censure votes as irrelevant, called the Electoral Court a 'coup d'état,' labelled the press 'scumbag press,' and accused the Comptroller General of sabotage. Chaves openly campaigned for Fernández despite constitutional prohibitions on presidential electoral activity. The Legislature attempted to strip his immunity twice, once for corruption allegations, once for electoral law violations, but failed to achieve the required 38-vote supermajority.

His four-year assault on institutions, the delegitimising rhetoric, the institutional pressure, and the electoral violations laid the groundwork for what could follow. He showed Costa Rica's institutions could be attacked without collapsing. Now Fernández, even stronger in the legislature, has clearer opportunity to push further.

Bukele's blueprint: what happened in El Salvador

In El Salvador, Bukele's consolidation of power followed a clear timeline. In February 2020, Bukele entered the legislature with armed soldiers to pressure lawmakers. In May 2021, he removed Constitutional Court justices and the Attorney General after gaining a >>



Does Costa Rica's green reputation hang in the balance? Photo by Sterling Lanier via Unsplash

supermajority, installing loyalists. In March 2022, he declared a state of exception for 'war on gangs.' By July 2025, constitutional reforms eliminated presidential term limits, extended terms to six years, and allowed indefinite rule.

The human cost has been staggering. Multiple agencies have documented systematic torture in Bukele's mega prison, CECOT. Every former detainee interviewed reported 'serious physical and psychological abuse on a near-daily basis.' Overcrowding is extreme, with less than 2 square foot per prisoner, food withheld, medical care denied. Mass arbitrary arrests created 110,000 prisoners, three times pre-2022 levels, with thousands of innocents arrested on tenuous grounds.

El Salvador's Supreme Electoral Court, once independent, now validates Bukele's decisions. Judges who disagreed were removed. Press freedom deteriorated. Civil society operates under threat. Bukele now controls the presidency, legislature, judiciary, and elections machinery, exactly as intended. His supporters note that homicides dropped and that security improved, but this came at the cost of democracy itself, systematic torture, mass incarceration, constitutional dismantling, and there is no indication this security can last should the harsh measures be rescinded.

Why the 31 seats matter more than the presidency

Fernández's 31 seats give her genuine governing power: control over regular legislation, budgets, and appointments. But constitutional amendments require 38 votes, a two-thirds supermajority she lacks. She cannot unilaterally rewrite the constitution or eliminate presidential term limits as Bukele has done.

The National Liberation Party holds 17 seats, the Broad Front holds seven, and others hold two. PLN leader Álvaro Ramos pledged to collaborate on shared priorities but oppose on contentious issues, particularly constitutional reforms. If the security crisis worsens, if gangs escalate violence, and if the opposition appears

obstructionist, Fernández could leverage these dynamics to build coalitional support for constitutional changes. Alternatively, states of emergency could be invoked to govern by decree. The question is whether the opposition can hold the line.

Free, or not?

The EU sent its first-ever observer mission to Costa Rica; the OAS deployed 27 representatives from 15 countries. Voter turnout hit 69 per cent, strong for the region. No protests, no fraud claims. Ramos conceded on election night.

Yet the election itself may have been undermined by Chávez's campaigning for Fernández despite legal prohibitions, Bukele's strategically timed 15 January prison visit, 17 days before voting, and reports of an alleged assassination plot against Chávez, purportedly intended to justify strengthening the security apparatus. A free election may produce an unfree government.

Costa Rica's electorate, through legitimate democratic means, is potentially voting to dismantle democratic institutions. This isn't fraud, it's the internal contradiction of democracy: voters using democratic rights to eliminate democracy itself.

Costa Rica faces a decisive moment. Unlike El Salvador in 2019, Costa Rican institutions are stronger, democratic traditions deeper, and the opposition has legislative veto power. But Bukele's example shows that authoritarianism can consolidate within a single presidential term.

The question isn't whether Costa Rica held its 1 February election fairly, it did. The question is whether it will prevent February 2030 from looking like El Salvador today: a country where electoral legitimacy has been hollowed out, constitutional constraints eliminated, and the security apparatus turned into a tool of executive control.

Climate Stories Library- an invitation to contribute your story!

The Climate Stories Library provides a platform for individuals and grassroots groups to share their experiences of the climate and nature crisis, and other intersecting injustices. We believe every voice matters in the climate conversation. This project, set up by UK climate activists and primary school teacher, Juliet Nolan, and ecologist Jennie Lord, aims to

- ✓ enable those at the frontlines of the climate and nature crisis to tell their story directly and easily to a global audience
- ✓ amplify the voices of those who are often less heard or not heard at all
- ✓ build solidarity and connections between individuals and grassroots movements and to encourage seeing the world through the lenses of others

The Library has over 80 videos to date but few from Latin America. Juliet therefore invites ENCA partners in Central America to send 1-3 short videos (2 mins. max) taken on a mobile phone in which an environmental or land rights defender, community organiser, trainer, agroecological producer, youth activist or secondary school student speaks to camera in their own words about some aspect of how the climate or ecological emergencies are affecting them, their family or their community. They can talk about negative or positive experiences, and/or actions they're taking to restore Nature or improve community resilience. Full instructions are on the website and videos in Spanish are fine. ENCA partners IMAP in Guatemala contributed 2 farmer videos in Jan. 2026- you can see Concepción Ajtujal, a young woman permaculture grower speaking via: tinyurl.com/3srd67ke

ENCA members in the UK are also welcome to contribute too!

www.climatestorieslibrary.com/

US military bases in Costa Rica?



Costa Rica's undeserved reputation for neutrality and pacifism may also be coming to an end soon when Laura Fernández takes office as the country's new President on May 8th this year.

Fabián Silva Gamboa, a constitutional lawyer who advises the President-elect, has proposed a reform to the political constitution that would allow the United States to establish military bases there. Fernández has already signalled her intentions to replace the model of the country that arose from the 1948 civil war which abolished the country's army and built the foundations of a welfare state.

Thanks to the neoliberal turn in the 1990s and 2000s and thanks to US pressure to militarise the country's police force from the 1980s onwards, much of the welfare state is now in poor condition, poverty is not falling and violence and citizen security has been getting worse in recent years.

In recent years, Costa Rica has become a significant territory, especially its coastal areas, for storing and moving cocaine bound for the United States and Europe, and along with this violence has also increased. Silva Gamboa suggests that the presence of US bases will help to deter the incidence of drug trafficking. Others might suggest the opposite.

One might ask why a newsletter dedicated to environmental issues should be reporting on overtly and internationally political issues such as the US interference in other country's national affairs, but quite apart from policy influence, the environmental pollution record of former

US military bases is extremely abusive, as Costa Rica's southern neighbour can testify. (See earlier ENCA Newsletters on the toxic pollution left behind in Panama by the former US bases.)

Given that Costa Rica abolished its army in 1948, the proposal would require a constitutional amendment, a broad legislative majority that the 31 legislative seats won by the PPSO are not sufficient. To move forward with this initiative, at least seven opposition legislators would need to join them.

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Panama cancels canal concession to China and seizes two key ports from Hong Kong corporation

Compiled by ENCA editor Martin Mowforth

At the end of January this year, Panama's Supreme Court annulled the concession under which the Hong Kong corporation CK Hutchison operated the Balboa and Cristobal port terminals, claiming that the original concession to operate the two ports was unconstitutional.

Three weeks later, the Panamanian authorities "made direct physical entry into the terminals at Balboa and Cristobal" and assumed "administrative and

operational control" over the two ports, according to the company. The corporation described the takeover as unlawful and claimed that Panamanian authorities had threatened its employees with criminal prosecution if they defied orders to leave the two ports.

Readers will recall that even before his inauguration in January 2025, the Supreme Leader Donald Trump had begun to allege that the Canal was being operated by China and he promised to "take it back", using military force if necessary. These moves by the Panama government clearly reflect the threats made by the US President.

In place of licenses granted to CK Hutchison, Panama has granted temporary licenses to the Danish shipping company Maersk and the Geneva-based Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC). CK Hutchison said it was taking legal advice on pursuing national and international legal action against Panama and third parties. The corporation notified Panama of an investment protection treaty dispute that it would pursue after Maersk had expressed its interest in running the ports.

Hong Kong's government also expressed strong dissatisfaction and opposition to Panama's takeover and urged Panamanian authorities to respect the spirit of the contracts. The Chinese government warned that Panama would pay a heavy price, both politically and economically.

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