The Politics of Costa Rica

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Introduction

Costa Rica is frequently held up as a beacon of democracy and political stability in Central America—a region often regarded for its turbulence and volatility. This reputation did not arise by chance; rather, it is the outcome of a unique historical trajectory and a series of deliberate political choices that set Costa Rica apart from its neighbors. From the abolition of the military in 1949 to the nurturing of a robust electoral system and commitment to civil liberties, Costa Rican politics provide a remarkable and instructive case for understanding how a small nation can chart a peaceful and progressive path.

This book, “The Politics of Costa Rica: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Costa Rica,” aims to provide an in-depth exploration of the country’s political structures, institutions, history, and evolving challenges. In an era marked by global uncertainty and democratic backsliding, Costa Rica’s experience offers both inspiration and valuable lessons—not just for Latin America, but for the world.

We begin with a journey through Costa Rica’s early history, examining its independence, the forging of its republic, and the consequential events that led to its modern democratic framework. The 1948 Civil War, a pivotal moment, ultimately led to the drafting of a new constitution that enshrined essential rights, abolished the military, and laid the foundation for one of the region’s most stable political systems. The ongoing influence of the 1949 Constitution permeates all aspects of political and civic life in Costa Rica today.

The chapters that follow provide a comprehensive overview of the country’s three branches of government, its distinctive electoral machinery, and the evolution of its party system. Special attention is paid to the shifting landscape of political competition, the role of civil society, and the persistent challenge of corruption. The absence of a standing army is a defining feature, with profound implications for development, social priorities, and national identity.

Confronting the present, we assess the major issues shaping Costa Rican politics in the twenty-first century. Party fragmentation, social inequality, rising crime, and debates over press freedom have tested longstanding institutions and public trust. Yet, the enduring strength of Costa Rica’s democracy—anchored by an independent judiciary, committed civil society, and engaged citizenry—continues to provide resilience and promise.

By examining both the triumphs and the tensions of Costa Rica’s political system, this book endeavors to equip readers with a nuanced understanding of a democracy that,

while imperfect and evolving, stands as a testament to the possibilities of peaceful governance and the pursuit of the common good.

CHAPTER ONE: Historical Origins of Costa Rican Politics

To understand the unique political landscape of modern Costa Rica, one must first journey back to its origins, long before the arrival of European explorers. The land that would become Costa Rica was inhabited by a variety of indigenous peoples, reflecting influences from both Mesoamerican cultures to the north and Andean cultures to the south. Unlike some of their neighbors, none of these groups developed the large, complex empires found elsewhere in the Americas. Instead, they lived in scattered, independent communities, a factor that would later influence the nature of Spanish colonization.

Christopher Columbus, on his fourth voyage in 1502, became one of the first Europeans to reach these shores. Accounts suggest the indigenous people he encountered possessed gold, leading to the hopeful, perhaps even aspirational, name "Costa Rica," meaning "Rich Coast." This initial impression, however, proved to be largely a misnomer in terms of easily exploitable mineral wealth. While gold was present, it wasn't in the quantities that fueled the intense Spanish conquest and settlement seen in other parts of the Americas. This relative lack of readily available riches meant Costa Rica was, for much of the colonial period, a rather overlooked and impoverished backwater of the Spanish Empire.

The Spanish formally incorporated the territory into the Captaincy General of Guatemala in 1524, placing it under the administrative purview of officials far to the north. However, effective Spanish control and settlement were slow to materialize. The indigenous populations, while not part of large empires, often fiercely resisted Spanish incursions through guerrilla tactics. The dense jungles and challenging terrain also made large-scale settlement and resource extraction difficult.

The first successful permanent Spanish settlement, Cartago, was established in the Central Valley in 1564. This region, with its fertile volcanic soil, proved more amenable to agriculture, which would become the backbone of the colonial economy. Compared to other Spanish colonies, Costa Rica lacked a large indigenous population that could be readily exploited for labor in mines or large plantations. This demographic reality, coupled with the absence of significant gold or silver deposits, meant that the development of large haciendas, or estates, based on forced labor was less prevalent.

Instead, a society of small, independent farmers gradually emerged, particularly in the Central Valley. These settlers, many of whom had to work their own land, fostered a more egalitarian social structure than was typical in other Spanish colonies. While

social distinctions certainly existed, the absence of a deeply entrenched aristocracy reliant on a vast, subjugated labor force contributed to a less rigid hierarchy. This pattern of settlement and land ownership is often cited as an early factor in the development of a more democratic and less stratified society in Costa Rica.

Despite its relative isolation and less strategic importance to the Spanish Crown, Costa Rica was still subject to the administrative and legal framework of the Captaincy General of Guatemala. Decisions made in Guatemala City, though often distant and slow to arrive, held official sway. This period of colonial rule, spanning nearly 300 years, left an indelible mark on Costa Rican culture, particularly in language, religion, and aspects of architecture and urban planning, with towns often centered around a plaza.

As the winds of change began to sweep across Latin America in the early 19th century, fueled by independence movements inspired by events in Europe and elsewhere, Central America too began its push for emancipation from Spanish rule. The news of Mexico's independence in September 1821 served as a catalyst for the region. On September 15, 1821, leaders in Guatemala declared the independence of the Captaincy General of Guatemala, which included Costa Rica.

Due to the slow pace of communication at the time, the official news of independence did not reach Costa Rica until October 1821. The arrival of the news was met with a mixture of relief, uncertainty, and debate about the future path of the province. While independence from Spain was generally welcomed, there were differing views on what the next step should be.

One significant point of contention was whether Costa Rica should join the newly formed Mexican Empire, led by Agustín de Iturbide. This idea had proponents, particularly in some of the more conservative towns like Cartago and Heredia, who saw potential stability and economic benefits in aligning with Mexico. However, others, particularly in burgeoning centers like San José and Alajuela, favored complete independence.

This internal division led to a brief but significant civil conflict in 1823, known as the Battle of Ochomogo. Forces favoring annexation to the Mexican Empire clashed with those advocating for a republican, independent path. The republican forces, primarily from San José and Alajuela, were victorious, a pivotal moment that solidified Costa Rica's trajectory towards independent nationhood and resulted in the capital being moved from Cartago to San José.

Following the collapse of the short-lived Mexican Empire, Costa Rica joined the newly formed Federal Republic of Central America in 1823. This was a union of the former provinces of the Captaincy General of Guatemala, an attempt to create a unified Central American nation. However, this federation was plagued by internal strife,

political instability, and civil wars among the member states, driven by ideological differences between Liberals and Conservatives and regional rivalries.

Costa Rica, geographically somewhat isolated from the main centers of conflict within the federation, largely managed to avoid the worst of this turmoil. Its relatively homogenous society of small landowners and the absence of a powerful military class contributed to this greater stability compared to its neighbors. Despite this, the experience within the turbulent federation proved disillusioning for many Costa Ricans.

The country's unique circumstances and desire for peace and self-determination led to a growing sentiment for withdrawal from the federation. Under the leadership of Braulio Carrillo Colina, who served as Head of State, Costa Rica formally withdrew from the Federal Republic of Central America in 1838, proclaiming itself a sovereign and independent state. This decision marked a definitive break from regional entanglements and set Costa Rica on a path of greater isolationism, focusing on its own internal development.

During these early years of independence, key figures like Juan Mora Fernández, the first elected Head of State, played a significant role in laying the groundwork for the new nation's institutions and economy. Land reform was initiated, and the cultivation of coffee began to take hold, transforming the economy and connecting Costa Rica to international markets. This agricultural shift, driven by small and medium-sized farms, further reinforced the existing social structure and contributed to a degree of shared prosperity, distinct from the stark inequalities often found in countries dominated by large plantations and a landowning elite.

The decision to abolish the military following the 1948 Civil War, which will be explored in later chapters, was not an isolated event but rather a culmination of this unique historical trajectory. The relative absence of a strong military tradition in the colonial and early independence periods, the focus on agriculture and a more egalitarian society, and the disillusionment with the violent conflicts of the Central American Federation all contributed to creating an environment where such a radical and visionary step was possible.

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