May 2024

General elections in Panama

Post-election report
Opposition candidate José Raúl Mulino (Realizando Metas) won the presidential election with 34.29% of the votes. He will be in office for the period 2024-2029. In his speech, he called for a “government of national unity” and “pro-private business”.

He will take office on July 1. The outgoing president Laurentino Cortizo committed himself to an “orderly and open” transition.

Mulino's challenge will be to rule without a legislative majority, since his party and allies will have only 15 out of 71 seats in the National Assembly. Consensus building will be key to push his agenda. Within a very divided Legislative branch, independent legislators would be the first minority, with 21 seats.

Mulino's candidacy was declared constitutional, and after his victory in the elections, an important thing to be decided will be the selection of the vice-president for the new administration since he competed without a running mate. Although the vice presidency is an elected position, its figure could be replaced by a member of the cabinet of the incoming president. Mulino said that he has not yet defined his cabinet.
With 98% of the votes counted, Mulino secured the Presidency with 34.29%. Given that there is no run-off, the Realizando Metas candidate only needed to obtain the highest share of votes. In the last elections, elected presidents also won office with around 30%, with the exception of Martinelli in 2009 who became president with 60%.

Of the candidates who participated in the 2019 elections, Lombana stands out: he came second after being third 5 years ago and having increased his electoral flow of around 6%. Roux lost 20% of his votes and fell from second to fourth place.

The ruling PRD had the worst election in its history. It had never obtained less than 25% in a presidential election. Vice President Carrizo got less votes than the candidates who left the PRD, former President Torrijos and Zulay Rodriguez.
The winner of the election

José Raúl Mulino
(Realizando Metas)

Profile

Lawyer, 64 years old. He graduated in Law and Political Science at Universidad Católica Santa María La Antigua and obtained a Master's Degree in Maritime Law at Tulane University, New Orleans, USA. In the latter specialty he developed most of his career in law. He was also president of the Panamanian Association of Business Executives (APEDE in Spanish) and vice president of the National Council of Private Enterprise (CONEP in Spanish).

Afterwards, he held different positions in the State, standing out as Minister of Foreign Affairs in the government of Guillermo Endara (1989-1994) and as Minister of Government and Justice, and Minister of Public Security in the administration of Ricardo Martinelli (2009-2014).

Government Plan

Among his government proposals, the following stand out:

- Increase the competitiveness of the banking sector and expand the offer of banking co-responsibility at the international level.
- Create "the largest first employment plan in the history of the country" and once again achieve the highest minimum wage in Latin America.
- Create legal frameworks for the development of new technologies linked to blockchain or Fintech.
- Lower the price of medicines and guarantee their supply, creating a Single Law on Purchases and Supplies with a Single Price.
- Turn Panama into a cinematographic hub, encouraging streaming platforms.
- Create an incentive program for the use of alternative energies.
Highlights of Election Day

- These elections stood out for being the ones with the highest turnout since the return to democracy, surpassing the historical barrier of 77.5% and the record of 2019 by around 4.5%. Mulino was quickly congratulated by his rivals and received a call from President Laurentino Cortizo to carry out an "orderly and open transition".

- In his first speech as president-elect, Mulino pointed out that he will promote a "pro-investment and pro-private enterprise government", although he ratified that he will not forget "those who are hungry, those who want a job and those who need drinking water throughout the country".

- Likewise, he assured that in his first days of government he will summon the leaders of other parties and representatives of the civil sector, including the private sector, to "lay the foundations of a government of national unity". In this sense, he remarked that this "will not mean to distribute positions" in the government, but to put an end to the "revenge" spirit.

- Regarding this, Mulino affirmed that it includes "those who cowardly tried, with trickery, manipulations and blackmails, to twist the will of the people".

- "Political persecution, manipulation of the Public Ministry, of judges and magistrates is over. From July 1, they will recover the keys to the padlocks that have kept them imprisoned", Mulino stated. This in reference to the disqualification of RM's original candidate, former President Ricardo Martinelli, and the attempts to declare his own nomination unconstitutional.
Martinelli's influence

What role will the former president play?

- The influence of the most important figure and original candidate of Realizando Metas, former President Martinelli, will be one of the most important aspects of Mulino's presidency.

- The former president is currently in political asylum in the Nicaraguan Embassy, after being sentenced to 10 years and 8 months in prison for money laundering in the “New Business case”. He is also facing other ongoing judicial proceedings.

- Shortly after the vote, Mulino went to the aforementioned embassy to meet with him. In his victory speech, the president-elect reaffirmed that he is "nobody's puppet" and emphasised: "I have a popular mandate that legitimises my presence. I am not here because someone put me here, but because of the popular vote of the majority of Panamanians".

- Martinelli is as popular as he is controversial on the Panamanian political scene, so his level of influence over Mulino's administration may strain ties, not only with opposition parties, but also with other state institutions, such as the Judicial branch. During the campaign, Mulino promised to "help" Martinelli with his situation, without specifying how.

- It is worth noting that Martinelli has a history of coming into conflict with people close to him, as happened with Juan Carlos Varela (who was his vice-president in 2009-2014 and later president) and Rómulo Roux (for the leadership of the Cambio Democrático party).
With 96% of the votes counted, the first projections from the Electoral Tribunal indicate that RM and his ally, the Partido Alianza, would only secure 15 out of the 71 seats, far from the 36 needed to achieve a majority. Thus, it will be essential for Mulino to build consensus with other political forces to pass his initiatives in the upcoming legislative term of the Assembly.

From these preliminary results, it is noteworthy that, for the first time since the return to democracy, no party would reach the 20 seats and that independent legislators would be the largest minority. This aligns with the citizens' distrust in their ruling class. The majority of these independent seats would belong to the Movimiento Vamos, which did not support any presidential candidate and promotes its own agenda. The group is led by current deputies Gabriel Silva and Juan Diego Vásquez, who decided not to run for the Assembly again.

According to initial estimates, only 13 out of the 60 deputies seeking reelection would have succeeded, most from the PRD party. In this sense, although the current ruling party lost nearly 30 seats, it would remain a key player in the next legislative body.
Key actors of the upcoming Assembly

The following deputies would have an important role in the creation of possible legislative alliances to secure the approval of Mulino's legislative agenda:

**Luis Eduardo Camacho**

He would be a deputy for Realizando Metas (new ruling party). He is the General Secretary of the party and the official spokesperson for former president Ricardo Martinelli. He could be the leader of the ruling party's bloc in the next term of the Assembly.

**Shirley Castañeda**

She would be a deputy for Realizando Metas (new ruling party). She is a lawyer for former President Ricardo Martinelli and a member of the party's Board of Directors.

**Benicio Robinson**

He is a deputy and the president of the PRD (now opposition). He is considered the most powerful figure in the current Assembly, especially leading the Budget Committee.

**Crispiano Adames**

He is a deputy and the vice president of the PRD (now opposition). He was the President of the National Assembly between 2021 and 2023. In this electoral period, he lost to Vice President Carrizo in the party's internal election. With certain differences from Robinson, he may bring opposition votes closer to Mulino in the Assembly.
Directorio Legislativo is a non-partisan and independent organization that for 10 years has been promoting the strengthening of legislative powers and the consolidation of democratic systems in Latin America through transparency, access to public information and dialogue with actors from the public, private, academic and civil society sectors.

info@directoriolegislativo.org