April 2024

General elections in Panama
Pre-election report
On May 5, Panamanians will define its next president and the new National Assembly for the 2024-2029 term. Out of 8 presidential candidates, José Raúl Mulino (Realizando Metas) is leading.

Who obtains the highest number of votes will become president, since in the Panamanian electoral system there is no run-off election. Voting is mandatory so 3,004,083 Panamanians will be in charge of defining Sunday's election.

Mulino was originally the vice-presidential candidate of former president Ricardo Martinelli, who was disqualified from running because of a money laundering conviction. Not having been selected by an internal election, Mulino's own candidacy is still in dispute in the Supreme Court.

The 71 seats of the National Assembly, currently controlled by the PRD (ruling party) and its allies, will be up for grabs. The deputies are elected according to 39 constituencies, which are divided into uninominal (the one with the most votes gets the seat) and plurinominal (distributed proportionally to the number of votes). The future ruling party could win a considerable number of seats, but it may have to negotiate to reach a majority.

The ruling party arrives weakened: both outgoing president Laurentino Cortizo and the National Assembly have high levels of disapproval. This has been reflected in the massive social demonstrations in 2022 and 2023.
José Raúl Mulino (29.5%) leads the presidential race. However, while he managed to keep the first place, he has not achieved as strong a position as the original Realizando Metas candidate, Ricardo Martinelli. No candidate seems to be close to Mulino, with second place being shared throughout the campaign between Rómulo Roux (16%), Martín Torrijos (13%) and Ricardo Lombana (14%).

The ruling party (the PRD), affected by the low popularity of Cortizo’s administration, is divided, mainly between the candidacies of Vice President José Gabriel Carrizo and Torrijos (who belonged to the party until early 2024). Since reelection is not allowed, Carrizo heads the ruling party's ticket, but he has always been behind in the electoral race. Thus, Carrizo would be one more example of the difficulty that the ruling parties have to be reelected, which has been observed since 1994, with the first elections after the US invasion.

*Own elaboration based on the average of data taken from surveys published between August 2023 and April 2024 with data from The Marketing Group, Infodata 360, Doxa, Eco Analitic, Gismo Services, Mercadeo Planificado and Cid Gallup. No polls were recorded in November and December 2023.
Elections under a climate of anger

When economic growth is not enough

According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Panama was the fastest growing Latin American economy in 2022 and 2023. However, Cortizo's administration ends with an approval of less than 10% and, according to Latinobarómetro (2023), 83% of Panamanians are dissatisfied with the functioning of their democracy.

In 2022, there were important social demonstrations, mainly due to the increase in the cost of food, gasoline and medicines. In 2023 there were new protests that reflected other citizen interests, such as environmental protection against mining. Both coincide with declines in the president's popularity.

Opinion polls reflect also on the general impact of the country's economic situation in voting intention. Among the main problems surveyed, unemployment and inflation in the basic food basket stand out. In second place are health, corruption, insecurity and lack of water.

Source: own elaboration with data from "Imagen del Poder - DL", based on a compilation of public opinion polls from external sources taken between March 2022 and April 2024.
Ricardo Martinelli's candidacy prohibition

Martinelli: as popular as controversial

- **2009-2014**: Elected president. He won with 60% of the votes, the only one to obtain more than half of the votes since the 1994 elections. He faces several court cases after leaving the Presidency.


- **JULY, 2023**: After being elected presidential candidate in the party's internal elections, he was sentenced to 10 years and 8 months in prison for this case.

- **FEBRUARY, 2024**: The day before the beginning of the electoral campaign, the Supreme Court ratified its decision, rejecting Martinelli’s defense. The former president announces that Mulino will take his place in the electoral race.

- **MARCH, 2024**: The Electoral Tribunal (TE in Spanish) disqualifies him. Article 180 of the Constitution states that whoever has an effective sentence of 5 years or more cannot be president. Mulino is confirmed as the presidential candidate, without a running mate.

Mulino's candidacy under the spotlight

On March 13, 2024, the Supreme Court admitted a lawsuit against the decision of the TE to allow Mulino's candidacy. The complaint alleges non-compliance with the internal election procedure of the candidate, since Realizando Metas chose him after the resignation of Marta Martinelli (Ricardo's wife), who had been selected by the correct mechanism (internal party elections). It is also claimed that Mulino lacks a candidate for vice-president since, after Martinelli’s disqualification, the TE established that the deadlines to choose a replacement had already expired.

At the moment, the country's highest judicial authority has issued a final decision on the matter, so it is expected to do so after the elections. The case is unprecedented and in the event that Mulino wins, it is unclear what would happen if the Court declares the candidacy unconstitutional after May 5.
Mulino: the favorite of the election

Profile

64-year-old lawyer. He holds a degree in Law and Political Science from the Universidad Católica Santa María La Antigua and a Master's degree in Maritime Law from Tulane University, New Orleans, USA. He developed most of his legal career in the latter speciality. Also, he was president of the Panamanian Association of Business Executives (APEDE, in Spanish) and vice-president of the National Council of Private Enterprise (CONEP, in Spanish).

Later he held different positions in Government, most notably as Minister of Foreign Affairs in the administration 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 co-responsibility banking at the international level.
- Create "the largest first job plan in the country's history" and once again achieve the highest minimum wage in Latin America.
- Establish legal frameworks for the development of new technologies related 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.
- Transform Panama into a cinematic hub by incentivizing streaming platforms.
- Create a program to incentivize the use of alternative energies.
**Mulino's main rivals**

**Rómulo Roux**
(Cambio Demócrático-Partido Panameñista)

**Profile**
At 59 years old, Roux is a lawyer with a Doctorate in Law from the University of Miami, USA.

In his professional career, he mostly worked as a lawyer at the Morgan & Morgan firm. In the public sector, he stood out as Chancellor and Minister of Panama Canal Affairs in Martinelli’s administration. In the 2019 elections, he came in 2nd place with 31% of the votes.

**Government Plan**
- Expand online payment options for government procedures and services (credit cards, debit cards, and e-payments).
- Implement the Guaranteed First Job Plan.
- Develop a Unified System for Medicine Purchases, including the private sector.
- Strengthen existing mechanisms of the National Directorate of Cinematographic and Audiovisual Industry.
- Update and develop the National Food Security and Nutrition Plan.
- Promote the National Decarbonization Plan.

**Ricardo Lombana**
(Movimiento Otro Camino)

**Profile**
Lawyer. 50 years old. He holds a Master’s Degree in International Law from George Washington University, USA.

Most of his experience in the private sector was as a lawyer in different law firms and as a communicator in different media. Regarding his public activity, he was consul in the USA under the presidency of Martín Torrijos. In the 2019 elections, he finished in 3rd place, with almost 19% of the votes.

**Government plan**
- Promote a new Law to reform the National Payment System
- Create the Institute of Artificial Intelligence, Robotics and Data Science.
- To regulate the new drug law
- Create an autonomous National Drug Authority, certified by PAHO/WHO.
- Protect and promote the cultural and labor rights of artists.
- Support the creation and promotion of local e-commerce platforms
The PRD, fragmented

**Profile**

He is 60 years old and holds a degree in Economics and Political Science from Texas A&M University, USA.

He was president of the country between 2004 and 2009 for the PRD. Son of General Omar Torrijos, founder of the aforementioned party and leader of the country between 1968 and 1981.

**Government plan**

- Creation of a specific law for Payment Facilitators.
- Incentivize the formalization and regulation of cross-border payments.
- Adaptation of regulations to include cryptocurrencies.
- Creation of the Drug Supply Agency and the Panamanian Drug Regulatory Authority.
- Promote labeling law and regulate advertising of foods with high levels of sugar or trans fats.
- Law proposal on circular economy

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**Profile**

Lawyer. 40 years old. He has a degree in Law and Political Science from the Universidad Santa María la Antigua.

He is the current vice-president of the country. Prior to his public activity, he worked as a lawyer and as a director in companies in the construction and livestock sector.

**Government plan**

- Implement a 40-hour workday in 4 days and minimum wage of USD 1,000.
- Move forward in the digitalization and modernization of the tax payment process.
- Strengthen the Authority for Consumer Protection and Defense of Competition.
- Create the “Hub of Opportunities for the Future” to promote employment in conjunction with the private sector.
- Decarbonization of the energetic matrix
- Creation of the National Cybersecurity Directorate.
- To pass a Law for the regulation of outsourcing companies.
Currently, the ruling Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD) has 35 seats, achieving a majority thanks to the 5 deputies of its ally, the Molirena Party.

However, this majority has not ensured an easy way to push forward with its agenda, reflecting differences between the Executive and the Legislative.

This is due to internal disagreements between different factions of the legislators.

According to opinion surveys, the great majority of citizens have a poor evaluation of the work of the current Legislative branch. In this scenario, all presidential candidates have proposed reforms to the Constitution in order to improve the way the State operates, being the Assembly one of the most targeted.

Due to the electoral system for the Legislative branch, the winning party in the elections could obtain a considerable number of deputies without the need of a large number of votes. In this case, by joining minor forces, it could reach a majority. However when seeking ambitious reforms, such as an eventual constitutional reform, more allies will be required. In this case, negotiations and the construction of broad agreements will be essential for the future ruling party.

Considering Martinelli’s political confrontation with the leaders of the other major political parties (such as the PRD and Cambio Democrático), it is possible that Mulino may face some difficulties in forming alliances. However, his success is not ruled out, given that the legislative practice in the country tends to give legislators a relative amount of independence against their political parties.
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.

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