

Vision, Values and Determination

An Interview with Laura Chinchilla Miranda, Former President of Costa Rica

EDITORS' NOTE *Laura Chinchilla Miranda has dedicated her career to public service and to consulting for international organizations. She was elected President of the Republic of Costa Rica on February 7, 2010, for a constitutional term of four years. She is the first Costa Rican woman to serve in this role. Her election as President was preceded by a successful political career which began with her appointment as Minister of Public Security, being the first woman to hold that position, between 1996 and 1998. While in that role, she also served as President of the National Immigration Board and the National Drug Council. Between 2002 and 2006, she was elected member of the National Congress where she chaired the Committee on Legal Affairs and the Committee on Narcotics. In 2006, she was elected Vice President of Costa Rica, assuming office as the Ministry of Justice at the same time. During her years of service, she prompted measures on institutional reform of the Costa Rican government, on digital government, on the promotion of the rights of women, on the protection of children and on environmental sustainability. She has also worked as a consultant in Latin America and Africa with various international organizations such as the Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations Program for Development (UNDP) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) in the area of institutional reform, with particular emphasis on judicial and public security reform. She is active on global agenda issues as a part of various forums, such as the Club de Madrid, the Inter-American Dialogue, and the Latin America Presidential Commission. Most recently, she headed the Organization of American State's Observation Electoral Mission during the 2015 electoral process in México. She is inviting professor at the Government School at the Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey. She graduated from college at the Universidad de Costa Rica and holds a master's degree in public policy from Georgetown University. She holds Honorary Doctorates from the University for Peace of the United Nations, Georgetown University and Kyoto University of Foreign Studies.*



Laura Chinchilla Miranda

What interested you in public service and led you to run for President of Costa Rica?

Costa Rica is one of the oldest democracies in Latin America and one of the three, alongside Chile and Uruguay, considered by *The Economist* as “full democracies.” One of the reasons behind this is our strong civic culture that we have tried to instill in our children who have the possibility of voting in national elections. Although their vote does not count to elect presidents or law-

makers, it symbolizes an important democratic exercise. Thanks to this tradition, since I was a child, I enjoyed the civic life of our country. As a student, I was always interested in social problems and got involved in student governments and associations. What most influenced my decision to dedicate myself to public service in my country was that when I turned 20, while in college, I decided to travel to our neighboring countries in Central America to witness firsthand the civil wars that were bleeding the region at that time. What I saw hurt me deeply and marked me forever. The brutality, the violence and sadness I witnessed could never be forgotten. Hence, I decided that I would do everything I could to prevent our country from losing the peace and democracy we enjoyed. Therefore, I decided to get involved in politics and public service.

What are you most proud of accomplishing during your time leading Costa Rica?

When Costa Ricans elected me as President, there was a security crisis going on characterized by a growth in criminal violence and the increasing presence of organized crime gangs. Due to my previous experience as Minister of Security, my main pledge to Costa Ricans was to make Costa Rica a safe home for all its inhabitants, and I succeeded. Between 2010 and 2014, we decreased homicide rates by 30 percent and femicide rates by 50 percent. Policies for comprehensive early childhood care, environmental protection – especially our seas, and women’s empowerment were also very important during my administration.

However, beyond these and other specific achievements, I believe my major accomplishment was to break the glass ceilings in politics when becoming the country’s first woman president

after nearly 200 years of Republican life. The impact this event had on Costa Rican girls was instrumental in changing perspectives. I was able to confirm this when, shortly after I was elected, I visited several schools and found many girls who told me that they too would become, one day, presidents of the country. My election as president certainly contributed to empowering a whole new generation of girls and young women.

How are you focusing your efforts today as you are engaged in a number of organizations and institutions?

At the end of my presidency and leaving behind about 25 years in public service, I decided to put my experience at the service of several organizations and people. As a professor at universities in this hemisphere and as a lecturer, I have been able to carry out my message about the importance of protecting democratic institutions, promoting sustainable development, providing early childhood development programs, and empowering women. I am also a member of several global and regional organizations that seek to influence decision-making in matters such as human rights, climate change and multilateralism. The COVID-19 pandemic has left us with much suffering, but also with many lessons. One of them is that precisely because the most serious threats to humanity are of global nature, we need global answers to effectively tackle them. That is why I believe in the need to act collectively, from all possible trenches. With that in mind, I will continue putting my experience at the service of all these causes.

How has Latin America, and Costa Rica specifically, been impacted by the global pandemic and what are the keys to recovery and growth in the region?

Latin America has been one of the regions of the world most severely impacted by the pandemic. By the end of last year, and with only 8 percent of the world’s population, Latin America accumulated 27 percent of confirmed cases and 34 percent of COVID-related deaths worldwide. According to the IMF, the drop in economic activity reached -7.4 percent in 2020, one of the highest in emerging economies, with serious consequences for employment and poverty. This crisis threatens to reverse important achievements in economic and human development and to further deepen preexisting gaps and vulnerabilities, such as weak economic growth, high levels of informality, persistent inequality and low productivity.

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In the case of Costa Rica, health responses were better than other countries in the region thanks to the robustness and effectiveness of our healthcare system which guarantees universal coverage to the entire population. Moreover, the fall in economic activity (-4.5 percent) was less serious than the regional average. However, we still have a long road to overcoming the social impacts of the pandemic and laying the foundations for building back better.

While the effort ahead of us is immense, both Costa Rica and the other countries in the region have the opportunity to drive recovery strategies focusing on policies able to trigger transformative and long-term dynamics. Those policies should be grouped into five fundamental pillars, namely: strengthening development and social inclusion networks to protect and reinforce human capital; boosting economic growth by taking advantage of the transformations in global value chains and the geographical relocation of production processes; accelerating the massive use of digital technologies through more investment on the expansion of fixed and mobile networks, connectivity and digitization of homes, schools and productive units; promoting green and sustainable development through public-private partnerships and investments in clean energy and sustainable infrastructure; and fostering fair, efficient and transparent institutions that guarantee adherence to the rule of law, more legal certainty and integrity.

What do you see as the role of Costa Rica in being a stabilizing force in Latin America?

Thanks to its strong democracy, political stability and the absence of armed forces abolished more than 70 years ago, Costa Rica has historically been a stabilizing force in the region. During the years of dictatorships in Latin America, we were a safe haven for many refugees and political asylum seekers; today we continue to be recipients of migrants who, from countries like Venezuela and Nicaragua, are fleeing from political repression and economic deficiencies. In the '80s, the country promoted a peace plan for the pacification of the Central American region, and today we are joining efforts so that the international community contributes to addressing the migratory crisis that the countries of the Northern Triangle of

Central America are experiencing, as well as the political crisis in Nicaragua. We hope to continue being an exemplary nation in terms of democracy, human development and the decarbonised economy, and to continue contributing to the promotion of global and regional agendas on these issues.

Do you feel that Costa Rica is well-understood by foreign investors and what do you tell investors about the opportunities that exist in Costa Rica?

Forty years ago, Costa Rica decided to complement its development strategy by promoting a solid foreign investment and trade attraction platform. Since then, the country has become one of the most important gateways to the Americas. Thanks to the free trade agreements that we have signed with the most important markets in the world, 92 percent of our exports of goods and services are covered by these agreements, and foreign investment companies grant preferential access to markets representing 65 percent of the global GDP.

As a result of these policies, we have enjoyed a steady growth of FDI which represents between 4 percent to 5 percent of GDP. In recent years, investment in high-skilled sectors, such as high-tech medical equipment, has been considerable, making Costa Rica a leading exporter in industrial goods. The country evolved in a matter of decades from an agricultural economy to a diversified and thriving economy.

Beyond the adoption of the right trade and regulatory policies, one of the most important keys to our success is the high quality of our human capital. Our governments have embraced education as one of our highest priorities. Currently we invest about 7 percent of GDP in financing a public education system which guarantees free education to all boys and girls.

Given these conditions, to which a green economy also plays a critical part, Costa Rica is one of the best positioned countries to take advantage of the relocation of global production chains (nearshoring) and thus accelerate its post-pandemic recovery phase.

We Costa Ricans are conscious of the challenges that lie ahead but, at the same time, we are convinced that Costa Rica has the fundamental requirements for a fast, sustainable and green recovery.

You served as the first woman to be president of Costa Rica. What do you tell young girls about a career in public service and the opportunities to lead in government?

Public service gives us the great privilege of being able to serve the people, especially those who have the greatest needs. In order to respond in the best possible way to citizen demands and expectations, public servants must have empathy and sensitivity to the problems of others, and must act with integrity and transparency - conditions most commonly found in female leadership. If we want to improve the quality of public service and politics, we must bring more women into those areas. I am optimistic that the future will be better, thanks to the fact that more women belonging to the new generations will assume the leadership of their nations.

What do you see as the keys to effective leadership in order to drive change and lasting impact?

I don't think there are natural leaders - leadership is forged along the way, and although there are many types of leadership, I believe that democratic leadership is one that is characterized by at least the following conditions: vision, values, and determination.

Vision allows us to set goals that, while being realistic, seek to transcend the immediate plane and positively impact future generations. Unfortunately, many leaders seek to reap easy and immediate victories at the expense of their decisions' long-term effects.

Values are instrumental since they impose the limits of our actions. A leader cannot justify the use of any means to achieve his/her intended ends. This is particularly important when leadership is exercised in a democracy because the will and actions of the leader must be subjected to the rule of law, respect for the rights of minorities, and ethical conduct and integrity.

Finally, a leader without determination and tireless ability to fight, he/she ends up becoming a demagogue unable to go beyond empty promises. The leader enhances this condition when he/she knows how to choose and shape work teams and inspire citizens to join the struggles he/she sets out to undertake.

When the world sees with concern the resurgence of populist and demagogic leaderships, these characteristics become more decisive, so we must stimulate and instill them in the new generations. ●