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## Panama has come a long way Mr. Biden

I'd like to welcome a guest post from [Orlando J. Pérez](#), Professor of Political Science and Director of Cultural and Global Studies at Central Michigan University. Orlando is an expert on Panama and we hoped that this post would run to coincide with Vice President Biden's planned visit to the country. Unfortunately, his visit was cancelled last week. So here is what the VP is missing:

Vice President Joe Biden has canceled his visit to Panama because of the crisis in Syria. Twenty-four years ago Panama was at the center of U.S. foreign policy as the United States sought to remove via military action the nation's dictator. Panama has come a long way since the days of machete wielding General Manuel Noriega's regime. The Panama that Vice President Joe Biden was going to visit is now composed of gleaming new skyscrapers, new roads, hotels, an expanded airport and a soon to be opened subway system. Additionally, the Panama Canal, the "jewel in the crown," is undergoing a \$5 billion expansion due to be completed in 2014. The Canal itself, under Panamanian management since 1999, is more profitable and efficient than when the U.S. ran it. Panama's economy grew 10% in 2012 and is expected to grow another 8.5% in 2013. Unemployment is at 4.8% the lowest rate in decades. The current government led by businessman Ricardo Martinelli which came to power in 2009 with nearly 60% of the vote, has based most of its economic and social policies on massive infrastructure and welfare spending. To a great extent Martinelli represents a right-wing version of Brazil's Lula.

The 2009 elections represented the fourth presidential elections since the 1989 military invasion by the United States. Each of these elections, 1994, 1999, 2004 and 2009 were characterized by vigorous electoral competition, high levels of participation (over 75% of eligible voters), and peaceful turnover of power between government and opposition parties. This remarkable record of electoral democracy reflects significant advances since the military regime that governed Panama from 1968 to 1989. While the military intervention remains controversial in Panama and the United States, there is little doubt that it ushered significant changes which today serve as the basis for the potential of democratic consolidation in Panama.

First, a process of de-militarization, made easier by the results of the invasion that dismantled the old military and established firm civilian command of security forces. Second, a competitive electoral process underpinned by the institutionalization of an independent Electoral Tribunal. Third, the development of a process of social dialogue that created an atmosphere within which political leaders could discuss vital issues facing the nation. Fourth, the ability of Panama to successfully acquire control of the Panama Canal focused the mind and attention of political actors who understood that failure in that front would represent failure nationally and internationally. Fifth, survey research has shown that significant majorities of Panamanians express the view that democracy is the best form of government despite all of its shortcomings.\*

Despite the advances, however, the Panama that Vice President Joe Biden would likely not see, and the one tourist or business investors never see, is the one that remains economically divided; where corrupt practices still prevail; executive power is too concentrated; and the judicial system is not fully independent. The metropolitan Panama City

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area has human development levels equivalent to middle income countries, whereas the interior, and particularly indigenous areas, exhibit development scores rivaling those in sub-Saharan Africa! Corruption remains widespread. Panama was ranked 83 out of 176 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.

President Martinelli has moved to consolidate executive power at the expense of the legislature and judiciary. The man praised by many in Panama and abroad for investing billions in infrastructure projects and promoting international investment, governs through a polarizing political discourse that attempts to disqualify opponents and threatens media outlets critical of the government. Martinelli's polarizing modus operandi led to the breakup in 2011 of the coalition that brought him to power. The vice-president and former foreign minister, Juan Carlos Varela, is now one of the main opposition candidates in next year's presidential elections.

The elections will be held May 4th, 2014. President Martinelli is barred from running for re-election. His party has chosen a former minister of housing, José Domingo Arias. The leading opposition candidates will be the aforementioned Juan Carlos Varela, and Juan Carlos Navarro of the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD). Additionally, there will be a number of independent candidates, plus a newly registered leftist party that hopes to make some inroads with the electorate. Polls to date show a relatively close election with Juan Carlos Navarro leading Arias narrowly, with Varela in third place, but nearly 30% are still "undecided." It is too early to say what will happen, but two contrasting dynamics are in play: 1) the administration has tried to make the elections a referendum on the apparent success of its spending policies; scaring the electorate that the opposition will "take away" the populist programs, such as "100 at 70" that provides \$100 to those over 70 years old; and 2) the desire for change which has led to the victory of the opposition in every election since 1994.

Some observers fear the government will use its sizable resources to manipulate the elections; others fear violence if the polarization increases and the government perceives imminent defeat. Panamanians are not naturally violent and I do not envision significant physical violence marring the electoral process. The government will indeed attempt to use state resources, plus those of its wealthy supporters, to overwhelm the opposition. But the opposition will have sufficient resources to mount a credible campaign. In the end, the elections will be decided by whether the undercurrent of change so prevalent in Panamanian politics can be overcome by the government's portrayal of a country advancing toward development. The key question will be: Do the gleaming new skyscrapers and subway system outweigh the inequality, poverty and corruption that still affect too many of Panama's citizens?

\*For additional information and analysis on Panama's post-invasion political culture and institutional transformation, see: Pérez, Orlando J. (2011). Political Culture in Panama: Democracy after Invasion, New York: Palgrave-Macmillan; Pérez, Orlando J. (2011). Panamanian Strategic Culture, Findings Report #17, Florida International University, Applied Research Center, Latin American and Caribbean Center, United States Southern Command; Pérez, Orlando J. (2010). Cultura política de la democracia en Panamá, 2010: Consolidación democrática en las Américas en tiempos difíciles. Un estudio del Proyecto de Opinión Pública en América Latina (LAPOP), Vanderbilt University, USAID, CIDEM.

Posted by [Mike Allison](#) at 7:37 AM



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