

A PROFILE OF ARNULFO ARIAS: PANAMANIAN POLITICIAN

A Research Paper

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Master of Arts

in History

Dean of the Graduate School

by

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by
Marticia Hope Espie entitled "A Profile of Arnulfo Arias:
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts, with a major in History.


Major Professor

Accepted for the Council:

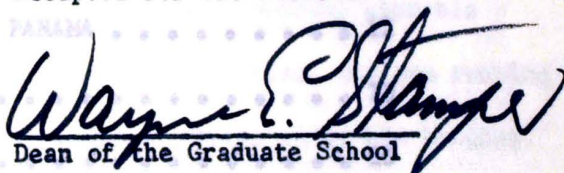

Dean of the Graduate School

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A PROFILE OF ARNULFO ARIAS: PANAMANIAN POLITICIAN

Arnulfo Arias has been in Panamanian politics for over thirty years and has been president of Panama three times. His career actively started in 1931 when he helped overthrow a Panamanian President, and was inactivated in 1968 when he was overthrown. Basically, he followed the Latin American pattern of politicians in that he had a consistent nationalistic political philosophy - "Panama for the Panamanians" - and when out of office gave his opponents strong and violent opposition. In other words, Latin American countries tend to be politically and economically unstable with leaders who are unable to improve the situation. Panama and Arias are not exceptions to this rule.

Arias's political career started as early as 1927, when he founded the Accion Communal with the purpose of promoting nationalism.¹ He was to appear again on the political scene in 1931, but in the meantime he received his medical degree and was practicing in Boston, when his brother called him home. His brother, Harmondio Arias, was now running for president of Panama and needed his help. Arias aided his brother by leading a handful of revolutionaries into the presidential palace which forced the then in office president, Florencio Arosemena, to flee.² As a reward for this service, he became head of the Sanitation Department which gave him control of the lotteries and political power.³

¹Lord Harold Varney, "From Latin America", American Opinion, May, 1968, p. 59.

²News item in the New York Times, December 22, 1939.

³John Gunther, Inside Latin America (New York: Harper Brothers, 1941), p. 147.

Also, the removal of Arosemena changed the politics of Panama because it broke the rule of land-owning whites and started the development of the National Police which was to act as the army of Panama, since it was the only armed force in the country.⁴ Later, both the Oligarchy and the National Police were to have an effect on Arias's career. Other wealth and support for Arias came from a family owned newspaper company, Nacional Revolucionario Partido. The newspaper was staffed with people who agreed in their policies and had Arnulfo Arias as director.⁵

During the years 1932-36, Arias played behind the political scene and in 1936 he was sent to Europe to act as Ambassador to Germany, Italy, Great Britain and France.⁶ He finally stationed himself in Paris because of the social life and the proximity of Monte Carlo. The economic situation was good in Panama because of the money obtained from the Canal Zone. While in Europe he was nominated for the presidency of Panama and World War II began. At this time he was for the Allies and denied Nazi or Communist leanings. He even predicted an allied victory,⁷ and helped doctor the French wounded which in 1940 won him the Legion of Honor.⁸

Although on his return to Panama in November he was still professing United States friendship,⁹ by December his speeches showed Fascist

⁴Edwin Lieuwen, Arms and Politics in Latin America (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1960), p. 90.

⁵The total assets of the newspaper were fifty-thousand dollars. New York Times, October 26, 1940.

⁶Gunther, loc. cit.

⁷New York Times, October 11, 1940.

⁸New York Times, June 1, 1940.

⁹News item in the New York Times, November 16, 1940.

tendencies that were so compatible with his Panamanian Nationalism. One reason for this gradual change was the strong influence of his private secretary and principal advisor, Dr. Antonio Isaza, who had been influenced by Nazism while a consul in Germany.¹⁰ Isaza's political machine was the Partido Nacional Revolucionario¹¹ and was called by the local wits "Nazi-ional" leader and "Führer Criollo".¹² Before and after Arias's presidency, he was the leader of the pro-Nazi newspaper La Tribuna, of Panama's Gestapo, SIPA (Society of Anonymous Political Information), and of the semi-military youth organization, Cachorros (Cubs) de Uraca (an Indian hero). Later, Isaza, together with the La Tribuna, did much to poison the good relations with the United States and urged Arias to deprive the United States of the right of obtaining airfields.¹³

During the election Arias's speeches started showing Anti-Americanism, and he declared that unless the United States treated Panama better he could seek protection elsewhere. After the election his opponent, Ricardo Alfaro, accused Arias of using terrorism and Nazi-Style backing to get campaign funds and to break up parades and of planting guns on his supporters in order to accuse them of plotting a rebellion. Of course, Arias denied this but Alfaro had to flee to the Canal Zone for safety after the election.¹⁴

¹⁰Gunther, loc. cit.

¹¹Joachim, Joesten, "Panama's Pocket Hitler", Nation, 152:279, February 24, 1941.

¹²Gunther, loc. cit.

¹³Joesten, loc. cit.

¹⁴"Panama: Arias II", Time, 36:54, October 14, 1940.

As soon as Arias got into office, he had an election to change the Constitution in order to strengthen his position and his Fascist ideas. The constitutional change was successful because the polls were watched by Arias's police machine; and the nationalistic, Spanish-speaking young men were afraid their country was losing its cultural and economic identity, which to a great extent was true. The retail business was controlled by Chinese, Eastern Europeans, and East Indians; the banks were run by Anglo-Saxon Americans, British and Germans; the Jamaican Negroes monopolized the jobs on the canal; and the wage scale was higher for foreigners than for the natives. Also, English was spoken as freely as Spanish; street signs were in English and any kind of business was conducted in English. Arias's Constitution eradicated this by disfranchising non-Spanish speaking Negroes, by prohibiting the immigration of Asiatics and North Africans, and by establishing government monopolies. His position was strengthened by lengthening the presidential term and by empowering himself to expropriate private property and to declare a state of siege, if and when the president deemed necessary. Critics called the constitution completely dictatorial and racist in content.¹⁵

In October of 1941 Arias proved his fascist sympathies by refusing to let the United States build airstrips and deported the North American news writer, Edward Scott, because of his stand for Democracy. Arias's reason was that Scott was interfering with internal politics. Also,

¹⁵"Arias Digs In", Time, 36:20, December 30, 1940.

Arias prohibited arming of Panamanian merchant ships. This was important to the United States because several ships registered under Panama's flag were owned by United States companies and were sunk in the war zone.¹⁶

During this period of fascist actions by Arias the United States apparently did nothing, but after the decree his own national legislature voted him out on the pretext that he left the country without its permission. Arias was surprised because he thought his position was secure. He blamed the United States of plotting against him, but it was denied by the United States.¹⁷ However, the new president, Ricardo de la Guardia, was willing to cooperate with the United States. Also, beforehand, as a friend of Arias, he had stopped a national police plot to overthrow Arias but instead had taken over himself. Arias had forgotten that the economy of his country depended upon the United States.¹⁸ Arias's preoccupation with Fascism caused him to lose the support of his brother,¹⁹ of his country and of the United States.

¹⁶ Dana Gardner Munro, The Latin American Republics, A History, (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, Inc., 1960, p. 400.

¹⁷ Although it was denied by the Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, it is unrealistic to think the United States would be indifferent to all events in Panama. However, one source indicates that Arias's overthrow was probably arranged by a capital newspaper with instructions from the U. S. Department of State. On the other hand, the United States is in a "scapegoat" position in Panama. Clifford A. Houberg, Latin American Revolutions, (Minneapolis, T. S. Denison & Company, Inc., 1968) p. 157.

¹⁸ "Doctor Takes A Trip", Time, 38:32, October 20, 1941.

¹⁹ Harmondio Arias did not approve of A. Arias's reforms. Gunther, op. cit., p. 148.

Upon his return to Panama, Arias was jailed and remained there until a place of exile could be found for him, because he was not particularly welcomed in the surrounding countries.²⁰ Finally, he was allowed to leave the country and spent the four years (1941-45) of exile wandering from one Latin American country to another. He even had time to open up a medical clinic in Venezuela, but around 1944 he was in Argentina and Chile. In this year he started claiming the right to the Presidency of Panama, and some of his supporters in Panama, one a Chilean, tried unsuccessfully to overthrow the government.²¹

In 1945 Arias returned to Panama and was arrested because two of his aides used terroristic tactics on the police station. Finally, he was released on bail, and he now had time to criticize the United States. He said the Good-Neighbor policy was a wolf-in-sheep's clothing, and Panama's sovereignty was lost because she had granted bases to the United States which treated her as an inferior. What Arias did not want to admit was that Panama had gained at the expense of the United States. The United States had used Panamanian labor to build better roads and airfields which were later used for domestic air-service.²² However, two years later in 1947 Arias changed his tone towards the United States, probably because he was again going to run for president. His line was "There are two suns in the world collecting satellites. Panama wants a warm place in the sun with the United States."²³ To veterans Arias had not

²⁰New York Times, October 13, 1941.

²¹"Panama: plot and threat", Newsweek, 24:64, September 25, 1944.

²²New York Times, 18:2, October 15, 1945.

²³"Arnulfo Again", Time, 50:45, December 8, 1947.

changed and still was the "Jaunty thinman with the toothy smile."²⁴

The 1948 election was notable in Panama because it was the first time women voted, the campaign was the dirtiest on record, and Arias had returned to complicate the political scene. In this election Arias appealed to the workers, "the man on the street" and to parts of the middle class. Also, to the women of the country he had the appeal of a moviestar and was called "El Hombre" (the man).²⁵ Those whose support he did not have were both the National Police and his brother who supported other candidates, and the elite ruling class, who felt he had betrayed them.²⁶ In his campaign speeches Arias, in trying to white wash his past, criticized the government's handling of United States bases and said he would offer the United States bases at Río Hato in exchange for money and roads. Also, he was violently Anti-Communist. He told his opponents, José Arosemena and José Remón, the chief of police, that they would eat dirt if he won.²⁷

Fortunately for his opponents the National Election Jury declared the May election in Arosemena's favor, although Arias's newspaper, Panamenista, claimed the election had been won by Arias. The National Election Jury declared Arosemena winner on the legality that Panama's

²⁴"Arnulfo comes back", Time, 51:39, May 24, 1948.

²⁵"Vote Counting", Newsweek, 31:44, May 24, 1948.

²⁶ Arnulfo Arias had come from this class of people originally and because of his education and wealth, newspaper and land-ownership, technically he still belonged to it. However, when he overthrew their power in 1936 and continued to support the populace wishes, the Oligarchy repudiated him. Editorial in Courier Journal, (Louisville, Kentucky), June 1, 1968.

²⁷"Arnulfo comes back", loc. cit.

Constitution bars anyone from running again until two terms have elapsed from the date he last held office. Illegally, the National Police backed Arosemena. Arias's loss of the election caused fighting to develop between his supporters and the National Police, and it was so extensive that constitutional guarantees were suspended. In July of 1948 Arias voluntarily left for the Canal Zone and stated that he would return when the police would give his people and country protection.²⁸

Arias spent his second exile in Costa Rica, and while there he was accused of organizing a plot to assassinate the Panamanian president and to invade the country. The plot was revealed by a former United States Officer, W. W. Brown, and caused Arias to be arrested in June, 1949, when he was returning to Costa Rica from a trip. The Supreme Court was to try the case, but by September Arias was freed by Arosemena, the very man he was going to overthrow.²⁹ The possible reason was that José Remón, Chief of Police, felt Arias was the only one to protect his interests and to unite the country in this period of confusion. Remón needed a glamorous front man and installed Arias as president in November, 1949.³⁰ Now the problem was to seek legitimacy, since the Supreme Court upheld the Constitutional President, Daniel Chanis.³¹ First Arias called the National Election Jury in session to support

²⁸New York Times, 4:3, July 6, 1948.

²⁹New York Times, 8:7, September 1, 1949.

³⁰New York Times, 1:5, November 25, 1949.

³¹Arosemena was not president because he had resigned due to ill health and Daniel Chanis was his Vice-President. Hauberg, op. cit. p. 158.

Sheldon S. Liss, The Canal Aspects of U.S. and Panamanian Relations, (New York: University of Notre Dame, 1967), p. 94-95.

his claim, which it did, and then he appointed a vice-president. This settled the question in Panama and made the coup a bloodless one.³² The only opponents to the imposition of a government by Remón's force were the students and the United States. Finally, in December of 1949 the United States gave official recognition because it possibly could not longer endure the cries of "Yankee Imperialism."³³

In order to maintain his presidency the second time Arias had three problems he had to solve: to stabilize the economy, to strengthen ties with the United States, to replace Remón's force with one of his own. To solve the first problem he reduced the budget through public works, expense accounts and personal salaries, and issued four million dollars worth of bonds to cover the national debts. These bonds were to be used to pay government debts and debts to the government. Also, Arias hoped to obtain a loan from the United States. Possibly to obtain the friendship or loan from the United States he outlawed the Communist party and asked his people to support the United Nations action in Korea. He offered bases for training Latin American troops, the use of the Panama Merchant Marine for transporting them and the aid of Panama to protect the Canal Zone.³⁴ He attempted to solve the problem of Remón by appointing his supporters to the cabinet. One, a José Clemente de Obaldi, was to develop a police force.

³² New York Times, November 25, 1949.

³³ New York Times, December, 1949.

³⁴ "Panama: Presidential Problems", Newsweek 36:47, May 15, 1950: Arias's policy was thought to be political, because Panama never has had a strong Communist Party and it has never been a serious threat to the Canal. Sheldon B. Liss, The Canal Aspects of U.S. and Panamanian Relations, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1967), p. 94-95.

In spite of all he tried to do, Arias was not successful and was becoming very unpopular. He had not obtained a loan from the United States; he had not built up a force against Remón; and Panama was still economically depressed. Other factors contributing to his loss of support were: his opponents had now organized and replaced his "yes" men in the National Assembly, his hated enemy Aldofo de la Guardia had returned, and his party did not completely support him. In order to relieve the criticism of his government Arias tried to seize control of the Panama Trust Company, but failed. In retaliation his enemies did the same on the government savings bank. Then Arias blamed the whole situation on the Communists and returned to the 1941 Charter, because, so he said, the present constitution protected Communists. In response to this dictatorial decree the Supreme Court impeached Arias and there was a general strike. These strikers demanded that Remón protect the 1946 Constitution, and Remón, seeing that the populace and the Supreme Court did not support Arias, discontinued his support also.³⁵

Arias responded to the impeachment by fighting and for four days he held the presidential palace. Finally, he was flushed out by tear gas and machine guns but emerged so confident that he thought the crowd was cheering him until a stone hit him in the head.³⁶ Arias was jailed and tried on two counts - one for trying to replace the 1946 Constitution with the Fascist shaped one of 1941 and the other for murdering a police man.

³⁵ New York Times, 5:5, February 23, 1951.

³⁶ "Ousting Arias", Newsweek, 37:46 May 21, 1951: "Panama: People & President", Time, 57:43 May 21, 1951.

During the trial Arias insisted he was a "Man of Destiny" and still the rightful president. Also, he offered no defense as he claimed it was not a fair trial and just sat calmly and read "Kon-Tiki." This seeming indifference aroused the crowd's anger, and they jeered and booed him; and some even suggested lynching. Nevertheless, Arias was just removed from office and prohibited the right to hold public office. This proved that he still had influence.³⁷

This defeat did not keep Arias inactive and he pleaded for the removal of the decree withholding him from public office. In the elections of May, 1952, he asked his followers to boycott the election to avoid the shedding of blood. His enemy, Remón, did not follow this philosophy and had gangs of hoodlums roving the streets to silence his non-supporters. The election was in Remón's favor, and he ruled until his removal by assassination in 1955. Arias was arrested for the assassination, but later was released.³⁸

With the removal of Remón, Arias's political career could continue and in 1960 his political rights were restored. In 1964 he decided to run for president. Again his support came from the "average man." The extreme left was his enemy because of his stand on Communism and his flexible policy towards the United States. His slogan was "Everyone deserves work, shelter and somebody to love."³⁹ He preached against Communism, promised social reform, improved relations with the United States and a change in

³⁷ "Mighty Fallen", Newsweek, 37:37, June 4, 1951.

³⁸ "Murder at the track in Panama", Life, 38:40 January 17, 1955.

³⁹ "Someone to Love", Time, 83:39 May 1, 1964.

the Constitution. His oratory was full of emotion and histrionics and held sway over the masses of impoverished and unemployed. However, his supporters did not have a majority on the National Electoral Jury and his opponent won. In Panama the National Election Jury is composed of representatives of the various political parties and if one has the majority on his side, then some of his opponents' votes can be declared as obtained by fraud. This happened to Arias in 1948 and now again in 1964.⁴⁰

In 1967, Arias made his latest bid for the Presidency and tried to get United States backing by declaring he had the power to negotiate a canal treaty and to settle civil disorders.⁴¹ Marco Robles, the president, had not stopped these disorders, nor had he encouraged the ratification of a renewed canal treaty.⁴² The next move Arias made was to arouse his supporters to remove Robles. This was done by impeaching Robles on the basis that he had used government machinery to help his candidate, David Samudio. This was almost successful; but, to the surprise of Arias, the Chief of Police, Bolivar Vallarino, swung his support to Robles. In response Arias's supporters took over the

⁴⁰ New York Times, 16:3, May 14, 1964; Another source, Hauberg, confirms the 1948 fraud and indicates that there was no fraud in 1964, and Arias lost because of his past record and his flexible policy towards the U.S. and the election, as a whole, was a repudiation of Arias. Hauberg, Op. Cit. p. 164.

⁴¹ These disorders concerned wage scales and where the two countries' flags should be and should not be flown. In 1964 some American students raised the American Flag where it should not have been which led to Panamanian riots and continued ill feelings. This incident added to the misunderstandings that exist between Panama and the Canal Zone. Hauberg, Op. Cit. p. 162-64.

⁴² New York Times, 12:1, September 14, 1967.

television and radio stations and called for civil disobedience. However, there was little response and now Robles was upheld by the Supreme Court.⁴³

The 1968 election was held in May, and Arias eighteen days later won the election in spite of all opposition. It took a long time to decide the election because in two hundred counties the ballots had been tampered with or had vanished. These votes were nullified by the National Election Board, but still Arias won by the majority of forty-two thousand votes.

After the election, in order to again maintain his position, Arias had to try to cement relations with the National Guard that had twice been responsible for his downfall. He needed also to silence his political opponents who had called the election a fraud. His programs of tighter tax collection, urban renewal and continuing negotiations on a new Panama Canal treaty depended upon the support of these two parties.⁴⁴ Again Arias's strategy failed, because a retired Chief of Police, José Pinilla, decided to take over the government which forced Arnulfo Arias to flee once again to the Canal Zone.⁴⁵

Arias's overthrow in 1968 may have ended his career for the present, but due to his political experience I believe he will appear again on the political scene, if age doesn't slow him down (he is now seventy-seven years old). Also, as a politician and Latin American, he thrives on the

⁴³ New York Times, 11:1, March 26, 1968.

⁴⁴ "Panama: Finally, the Winner", Time, June 7, 1968, p. 35-36.

⁴⁵ "Panama", Senior Scholastic, 93:17, October, 1968. Some sources blame the United States because it did not try to reinstate Arias and remained silent on the question. "Exit Panama lesser evil", Ramparts, November 30, 1968, pp. 16-17.

attention that the populace gives him, and the Latin American voter likes a politician that puts on a show. Arias is adept as a showman. One of Arias's problems was never the lack of popular support, except in 1951, but the lack of support from the National Guard, the Oligarchy and the United States. If the National Guard would support him, probably the United States would follow suit because all the United States wants in that area is stability in order to protect its interests. Arias is a product of Latin American politics and never tried to improve upon them because they worked to his advantage. Only when the United States can find the key to solve Latin American problems of instability and disunity will men like Arias pass into the background.

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