



## Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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### Costa Rica 1948

#### Executive Summary

In 1948, José Figueres Ferrer led an armed uprising against the government of President Teodoro Picado that left 2,000 dead and fundamentally shaped modern Costa Rica. The conflict stemmed primarily from factional disputes and a highly contested election. During the 1940s, Costa Rican politics was dominated by Rafael Ángel Calderón Guardia. Although Calderón received backing from business interests and the Roman Catholic Church, he also allied himself with the Communist Popular Vanguard Party and developed a welfare state in Costa Rica.<sup>1</sup> In 1944, Calderón's first term ended, and he was prohibited from running for reelection by the constitution. Picado, widely seen as a puppet for Calderón, won the 1944 election race. Throughout his term, Picado resorted to using the military to suppress unrest, and street violence instigated by pro-Calderón military elements became common. Under Picado, the Costa Rican population lost trust in governmental institutions and instigated numerous strikes, including the *huelga de brazos caídos*.<sup>2</sup>

When Picado's term neared its end in 1948, a fierce presidential race developed between Calderón and Otilio Ulate, an economic conservative against the welfare state. On February 8, 1948, Ulate won the election with 55.28 percent of the vote, and an electoral tribunal confirmed the victory.<sup>3</sup> However, Calderón insisted the election was fraudulent, and Congress granted his request to void the results. In the days following the election, police forces killed Ulate's campaign manager, Dr. Carlos Luis Valverde, and captured Ulate. The country descended into chaos as both factions accused the other of fraud.<sup>4</sup>

As disorder spread, Figueres formed the National Liberation Army in an effort to remove Picado from power. Figueres had been previously exiled to Mexico due to a radio broadcast criticizing Calderón. He returned to Costa Rica after the election of Picado, seeking to prevent Calderón from regaining power.<sup>5</sup> Figueres's National Liberation Army consisted of an uneasy alliance of anti-Communists, economic conservatives, and social democrats, with the unified goal of restoring democracy.<sup>6</sup> Despite indiscipline and confusion in its ranks, the National Liberation Army rapidly defeated the small Costa Rican military and its allied Communist militias and Nicaraguan forces.<sup>7</sup> On April 19, 1948, Picado signed the Pact of the Mexican Embassy that ended the war. Figueres toppled the military and proceeded to rule the country for 18 months as the head of a provisional junta. The provisional government oversaw the development of the 1949 Constitution by an elected assembly that abolished the military and handed the presidency to Ulate.<sup>8</sup>

## Assessing the Five Factors

### 1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

**Yes.** The Costa Rican population is largely white or mestizo, Christian, and Spanish-speaking. In the eighteenth century, a uniform national identity was formed that supported democracy, peace, and public order.<sup>9</sup>

### 2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

**No.** In 1948, the democratically elected President Ulate was forcefully removed from office. The Costa Rican population became fiercely divided between Calderón supporters and those who sought to confirm the election results. Before 1948, Costa Rica also witnessed diminishing trust in governmental institutions and the military due to large-scale violence and crackdowns on dissidents.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

**No.** The Costa Rican military was unable to achieve population security from the National Liberation Army. Rebels under Figueres moved swiftly along the Pan-American Highway, taking cities and ports with ease. Overwhelming weak and poorly equipped Costa Rican forces, the National Liberation Army rapidly captured major population centers. On April 12, Figueres took Cartago, the second-largest city in the country. Within 44 days of fighting, the National Liberation Army had effective control of Costa Rica's major cities and forced Picado to surrender.<sup>11</sup>

### 4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

**No.** While the insurgents gained support from Guatemalan President Juan José Arévalo, the National Liberation Army maintained no external sanctuary during the brief conflict.<sup>12</sup>

### 5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

**Yes.** The Costa Rican government maintained a small force of 1,000 men. However, the military was ill-equipped and ill-prepared for the internal conflict. In addition to the small standing army, Picado was assisted by 500 Nicaraguan soldiers and 3,000 Communist militia forces.<sup>13</sup>

COSTA RICA 1948	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	NO
POPULATION SECURITY	NO
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	NO
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

## Outcome

Government loss. The Costa Rican military was quickly overwhelmed by the National Liberation Army. Figueres headed a provisional government after the war which oversaw the formation of the 1949 Constitution and ushered in the presidency under Ulate. The Costa Rican internal conflict supports the theory.

## Endnotes

1. John Patrick Bell, *Crisis in Costa Rica: The 1948 Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971).
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3. Dieter Nohlen, ed., *Elections in the Americas: A Data Handbook*, vol. 1, *North America, Central America, and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
4. Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983).
5. Eric Pace, “Jose Figueres Ferrer Is Dead at 83; Led Costa Ricans to Democracy,” *New York Times* (website), June 9, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/06/09/obituaries/jose-figueres-ferrer-is-dead-at-83-led-costa-ricans-to-democracy.html>.
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7. David Díaz-Arias, “Battle of Memories in Costa Rica: Inventions, Testimonies, and Violence during the Civil War of 1948,” *Revista da Sociedade Brasileira de Sociologia* 5, no. 2 (July-December 2019): 4–23, DOI:10.20336/sid.v5i2.117.
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9. Carlos Sandoval-García, *Threatening Others: Nicaraguans and the Formation of National Identities in Costa Rica* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004).
10. Fabrice Edouard Lehoucq, “Class Conflict, Political Crisis and the Breakdown of Democratic Practices in Costa Rica: Reassessing the Origins of the 1948 Civil War,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 23, no. 1 (February 1991): 37–60, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X00013353>.
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