

Central American Politics

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Political Tolerance Declines in Panama

Orlando Perez takes a look at Political Tolerance Declines in Panama in the latest AmericasBarometer Insights.

On December 20, 1989 United States military forces invaded Panama with the stated goal of removing General Manuel Antonio Noriega from power and establishing a democratic regime. Twenty five years later, Panama's political system has made significant strides toward democracy. Five free and competitive national elections, all won by a candidate representing a party out of power, have solidified the country's electoral system.

A successful demilitarization process transformed the politicized and powerful Panamanian Defense Forces into a civilian-controlled national police force. The transfer of the Panama Canal and its successful management by Panamanians established sovereignty over the country's most important asset. Furthermore, investment in infrastructure projects such as the expansion of the Panama Canal has led to a decade of extraordinary economic growth (see Pérez, 2011).

However, problems such as corruption, weak and inefficient judicial institutions, and unequal distribution of economic growth remain as significant impediments to democratic consolidation. In addition, evidence from the *AmericasBarometer* indicates that the political culture of democracy in Panama has deteriorated since the invasion.

Political tolerance has decreased rather significantly since 2004 but really nosedived during the Martinelli years. On a zero to 100 scale, where 100 equals the highest level of tolerance, tolerance decreased from 51 to 32. The only country that score lower than Panama is Guatemala.

Overall Central America looks pretty terrible. Each country is in the bottom half of the region in terms of political tolerance with Belize scoring the best at 49.9. Low tolerance is troubling as it means that Panamanians and Central Americans have little tolerance for people and political leaders who hold different political views than them. While sometimes understandable, I won't name names, it is not healthy for democracy.

Posted by [Mike Allison](#) at 2:06 PM 

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