



Policy on Purpose

Episode 12: Former President of Costa Rica Luis Guillermo Solís and Vice President of Nicaragua Sergio Ramírez

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DR. VICTORIA DeFRANCESCO SOTO: Hello, my name is Dr. Victoria DeFrancesco Soto, and I am the director of civic engagement at the LBJ School. I have the pleasure to guest host this episode of "Policy on Purpose." The special episode will be recorded in Spanish, and an English and Spanish transcript will be made available. I'm very excited to have with me two leading figures in Central American politics: the former president of Costa Rica, Luis Guillermo Solís, and the former vice president of Nicaragua, Sergio Ramírez. Today we will discuss the current crisis of democracy in Nicaragua, challenges and opportunities within the region, relations with neighbors to the north, and the ongoing migration crisis at the U.S. Mexico border. Welcome, gentlemen.

LUIS GUILLERMO SOLÍS: Many thanks.

SERGIO RAMÍREZ: Thank you.

DeFRANCESCO SOTO: Nowadays, the Central American region has captured the political tension in the United States. On the one hand, there is talk about a border crisis because of caravans. On the other hand, we are talking about a humanitarian crisis. In your opinion, what is the nature of this migration crisis that we see, President Solís?

SOLÍS: Well, first of all I would like to thank you for the opportunity of being in this podcast, and I hope that the many people that listen to us through here will be better informed of the Mexican and American situation, which is very complex. But it will not be coated with the same gravity and chaos with which it is presented. The truth is, as many of its inhabitants know, that it is a zone of much human dynamism. Every day exchanges take place among dozens of millions of people that travel from one country to another, and the latest migrant waves that have been produced from Central America respond to the phenomena of the ones before. People that have to flee their countries — and I have insisted on this idea, that they are not migrating, they are escaping from their national realities — particularly criminal violence and lack of employment. And this is a phenomenon that has been developing from a long time ago and it is not exclusive of the United States and Mexico border and the Mexico and Central America border.

There are also important migrations along the south that in some cases are much greater than the ones

that have been happening between the United States and Mexico as a result of the journeys taken by Central Americans. I am obviously referring to the Venezuelan people, who are migrating to Colombia or of the Nicaraguans that are migrating toward Costa Rica as a result of the increasing government repression in their respective countries. So I say that there is a humanitarian situation that is deplorable, that we need to attend to quickly because it affects people of flesh and bone. It affects sick people, children, women, and men that are desperately fleeing from their home countries, but we should be weary of exacerbating the fear calling upon figures that do not reflect that reality.

DeFRANCESCO SOTO: Thank you.

RAMÍREZ: I believe that the migration phenomenon is very old. It has always affected the United States, Central America. Just how president Solís says, it is now affecting part of the Mediterranean, of Europe with all these massive migrations. There is a philosophical concept by Adela Cortina that I remembered now during our reunion with the professors and that is aporophobia — a rejection of poor people moreso than migrants themselves because foreign tourists are not rejected. People that have the means are well received. The only ones that have never been well received are poor people, no? They are blamed for being thugs, they are being blamed for being people of a third category precisely because they are poor and because they are poor they turn dangerous. I remember reading *Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. He narrates the migration of poor people in Oklahoma that are displaced because of the great cotton industry, from their small plot of land to California. And on their way to California they are treated like foreigners even though they live in the same United States. Then they are referred to as “Okies.” Oklahoman people would be called “Okies” disrespectfully because they were poor and because they were travelling in great masses with their families, with all their junk that they would carry in the trucks. And they were shunned precisely because they were poor, not because they were from another North American state.

DeFRANCESCO SOTO: Yes, well — what we see is the humanity. What we see many times in the political dialogue, in that rhetoric, is that the humanity is forgotten.

SOLÍS: And if you would let me interrupt here, I would like to bring into the conversation what is also not being said. And that’s the benefits that these migrant populations bring. That these are people that in a great majority are coming to work in different productive activities such as agriculture and service work. They are people that generally come with more education. Migrants tend to be the more eager and enterprising of their societies. And the country that accommodated them would not function well without them. The generation of wealth the immigrants of other countries to the United States produce, from the Indians that work in Silicon Valley to the farmers that pick tomatoes in the San Fernando Valley, contribute considerable amounts of essential resources to the countries’ growth.

DeFRANCESCO SOTO: Yes. President Solís, I would like for us to focus a little bit on your country, in Costa Rica, which is recognized as one of the more prosperous and stable countries of Latin America. How can Costa Rica maintain this position as well as support its neighbors living grave moments of tumult and violence?

SOLÍS: Well, in a very colloquial manner we would say “scraping the pot.” That’s to say, sharing a lot of times that which we do not have enough of. I say that is because regardless of its stability and regardless of it being solved partially, immediately, the fiscal deficit topic, Costa Rica has a vulnerable economy — very dependent on the northern markets, particularly that of the United States, [which is] more than 50 percent. And that it has a deficit problem on the one hand and external debt on the other, which combined mean a very big weight to the economy and the national production. Then the presence of

immigrants in the quantities we are receiving from Nicaragua and other nationalities — we had Cubans in 2015 and Haitians in 2016, and they keep coming from other places, etc. Venezuelans — many in the last six months, for example — constitute challenges that we have to address. Addressing them means providing housing, food, programs for health education for those that need them. And that has been guaranteed throughout the years. I believe there has been, generally, in all the government of Costa Rica an attitude very consequential to the countries' principles. But the only way is by sharing what's there, and that it is not always enough. Again, it is not only a problem of Costa Rica. I have also had the opportunity to speak to representatives of other countries, for example from Lebanon or from Cyprus or from countries that within the United Nations have intervened in the migrations and the problem that they have are much bigger than the ones we have here. In Lebanon's case, for example, with Syrian immigration, that represents practically 25 percent of that population of the country.

Now, that means — those are big words, but solidarity and public policy designed with the purpose of taking care of them is the only solution.

DeFRANCESCO SOTO: Yes. Thank you, president. Vice President Ramírez, I recently read in the *New York Times* that you described President Ortega like an injured animal: "It still stands, but it won't take long until it falls." Please talk to us about the political climate today in Nicaragua and what will happen once the metaphorical wound you mentioned ends President Ortega.

RAMÍREZ: Because a government, no matter how authoritarian, has to always have sustenance for its society. Up until April 18, when the Nicaraguan crisis began, Ortega was counting on indifference from the United States — the indifference from the international community that was not worried about what was happening on Nicaragua. He had an ally in the private industries, in business — there was a pact from which businesses could make their money freely so long as they were not involved in politics. Therefore, they would be absent from politics and would not worry over the institutional deterioration of the country and of the rising authoritarianism. All that fell apart. All those factors — say of stability — that Ortega no longer exists and now his power is only in repressive force, in excessive repressive force. Six hundred political prisoners, thousands of exiles in Costa Rica and other countries, the imposition of silence, of opinion, the expulsion of journalists, the shutting down of media. That, rather than being consensual, is a very serious deterioration for someone to be in power, but is unable to govern; those are two separate things. Then, in the long run this battle is lost. And I — that's why I made the comparison with an animal being hunted, no? When an animal has been shot in the elbow — and can still run — yet it will at some point fall because its trajectory is already limited, no?

DeFRANCESCO SOTO: Well, now, in politics it is never a sure science, but Vice President Ramírez, if you could calculate months, years, weeks, what would you give President Ortega?

RAMÍREZ: Well, I think that the only sensible action that he has left is negotiating some early election under internationally supervised transparent rules with a new electoral court and that the people be the ones to choose who is going to be their new governor or, if all else fails, may he decide someone of his choosing to stay if he is no longer present. But there should be a popular decision and it should be a respected decision. It is the only way to bring peace to the country because if not we are running other undesirable risks. Now, I would like that, no? That at some point reason will prevail.

DeFRANCESCO SOTO: Now, I want to go over to another country of the region: Mexico. The "Remain in Mexico" program was officially instated last week, where Central American migrants seeking refuge in the United States must remain in Mexico while their case is decided. Does this seem like a good policy to you? And: What role do you both think should Mexico play when it comes to the Central American

migration to the United States?

SOLÍS: Well, I think that Mexico plays an essential role in these migration issues among other themes. Mexico — I have previously termed it our big brother. It's — it forms part of the heart, of a cultural complexity that extends for the Great Lakes in the United States to the Nicoya peninsula, the great Mesoamerica of which Quirico and Jiménez Moreno spoke about. I attribute to Mexico that possibility and that obligation because it is a shared responsibility between Mexico and Central America. And I think I have been very present in many important moments for the Central American region — in others not so much, depending on the internal politics of Mexico, and I would expect a little more activism from the new administration that has said it would not be unduly involved in problems that have to do with other countries. Going back to the Estrada doctrine, that has always been an important reference point in external Mexican politics, but I do hope that that does not include serious humanitarian issues such as migration.

Finally, the border between Mexico and Central America faces some serious problems. Not only because it is Mexico's poorest but because there are a lot of organized crime forces that make the travels of the Central Americans through the Tehuantepec Isthmus and the Oaxaca state and of the Quintana Roo always complicated. Therefore, I attribute it a very important role. In terms of the program itself, I do not have sufficient information regarding the particularities of transferring such a heavy weight on Mexico, right? Because the accumulation of people that seek to enter the United States or, in general, of immigrants in the border zones do contribute benefits to the country and they do work, but if not they also contribute to a very strong social tension and we have already seen expressions of it in Costa Rica, also in regards to Nicaragua. But not because of Nicaraguan migrants, but because of the ones that wanted to go through Nicaragua from the south, Cubans and Haitian and other places. Because of this I think that the Mexican government mutually assumes a great responsibility.

I was listening on the news that it is to be expected that these people looking for asylum in the United States could be months, if not years, waiting for their visas to be authorized, and judging from other programs that are also in place, the percentage of people that receive it is very small. It's at around 5 percent in the regular programs. I also do not see much enthusiasm from the Washington government in facilitating and making this process faster. Now we will see what the consequence of that will be. Mexico is a big country. I am sure that the vigorous Mexican economy will be able to take care of the job necessities this great mass of people and that President López Obrador, as he has said, will facilitate working conditions for those immigrants that will be in Mexico temporarily. But it is still too early to know how successful the initiative will be.

DeFRANCESCO SOTO: Vice President Ramírez, if you could also speak about the role that Mexico plays, but also of the role that all countries assume. The Central American countries: Nicaragua, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala. What role could these countries have in supporting Mexico or to try and begin a conversation with the United States?

RAMÍREZ: I think that the migratory problem headed to the United States is more concentrated around Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, no? Because in Nicaragua the people don't want to migrate. According to public surveys, 50 percent of the people want to leave, which I think is really unfortunate, no? Half of a people that want to leave its country I think is tragic. But migration in Nicaragua is mostly toward the south; it's headed toward Costa Rica. And this is where I see the reason why. Because in Costa Rica there are higher salaries, the social security conditions are much higher and in education and health that are much better than in Nicaragua. Now, if an exporter of coffee in Nicaragua receives \$100 for a season, in Costa Rica they would receive \$1,000, let's say. They would receive 10 times more because

salary is much higher in Costa Rica. And it is there where the migratory retention program of President López Obrador, and I advise with all the good intention in the world, it seems to be that in terms of humanitarianism it is commendable, where it can fail is there. Because the Central American migrant is going to the United States to survive but also to be able to send left-over money to their families that stay behind. And they must have enough income to survive and to send back home. If Mexican salaries — the Mexican salary, in agricultural work, for example, that's where it has to stand up to the United States. That is a problem that over time, just as President Solís said the one that will be able to tell us will be to sign something, no?

DeFRANCESCO SOTO: Very true. President Trump has threatened to retire aid funds from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, that region. With the logic of pressuring these governments to impose order. If you were Trump's consultant, what would be the best solution to reduce the amount of Central American migrants?

RAMÍREZ: The first thing I would say to President Trump is that this is not only under the Central American government to tell people: "Don't move." This is an issue that responds to an independent social dynamic. Now an independent economic dynamic. People migrate not because they like to go out and sight-see, get to know other countries, no. Being tourists. Barefoot tourists, no? They move because necessity drives them to. And this is something that no government can control. There has to be massive capital investments to create infrastructure, to create working centers for job creation, and that the people would stay because they have the economic and social means different from the ones they have now. But this cannot be solved through political diplomacy.

DeFRANCESCO SOTO: No. Ironically it is more funds, more support the ones that are necessary instead of less than what was there before.

RAMÍREZ: Yes, but they are long-term investments. You would have to invest a lot of money transforming agriculture, to extend crops, in creating agroindustry. That's to say, it's about Central American development, nothing less.

DeFRANCESCO SOTO: What was spoken about a "Marshall Plan."

SOLÍS: Yes, what happens there is that we have been talking about the Marshall Plan since the '80s. Henry Kissinger would propose it 20 million times. That doesn't exist. It didn't exist then, it doesn't exist now. I still remember in the '90s that Central America bought the argument of the Clinton administration during that time that very well summarize a phrase that Al Gore used in an encounter *[inaudible]* precisely because of the ALIDES, an Alliance for the Sustainable Development of Central America that was signed in '94. He would say "Trade, not aid" — commerce, not assistance. And now, "trade" is being placed on top of all things. I mean, the Trump administration has also threatened with putting — with revising, regardless of its benefit to the United States, to revise it the same as what Central America and the Dominican Republic has with the United States, revise it the same way they did with the Treaty of Free Commerce of North America. That goes against the possibility of there being more improvement on commerce rather than aid. But at the end of the day, taking away the aid will only punish those that really need it to live a little better. It is the responsibility of the states and the donors themselves, United States in this case, to see to it that these resources really are getting to those that need them. Something that is not always the case. But yes, Sergio's response is — I wholeheartedly agree. It is with development, not with limitations to the cooperation, how eventually it will be possible to reduce, I will not say eliminate, the migrations of the area.

DeFRANCESCO SOTO: Well, we only have two minutes left and I would like to end with you, Don Sergio. Are you a writer? How does the Venezuelan novel end?

RAMÍREZ: Well, it is now very popular to have novels with alternative endings. Now there is a series, a movie about — that ends the “Black Mirror” series on Netflix that whoever is watching it can make up their own ending. And I think that in Venezuela everyone wants their own ending, but we want a fast ending, not one that the movie prolongs because we see here the suffering of millions of people. Yes, what truly exists in Venezuela in a humanitarian crisis of hunger, of lack of meals, of medicine, of people that die because they don’t have the opportunity to have dialysis when the elements of dialysis don’t exist in hospitals. Cancer treatment, of chemotherapy they can’t do. It’s a very terrible crisis. Millions of people exiting through the Colombian border that want to go to Chile. Now we must end this quickly or that the people of Venezuela, right, that they have their inalienable right to truly live like human beings.

DeFRANCESCO SOTO: Well, thank you so much gentlemen for having been with us today. Thank you both for joining “Policy on Purpose,” a podcast produced by the LBJ School of Public Affairs. And thank you to Lilias Benson Latin American Studies for bringing you to Austin. You can subscribe to our podcast on iTunes, Stitcher and Google Play. I’m your guest host Victoria DeFrancesco Soto. Thanks for listening. Gracias.