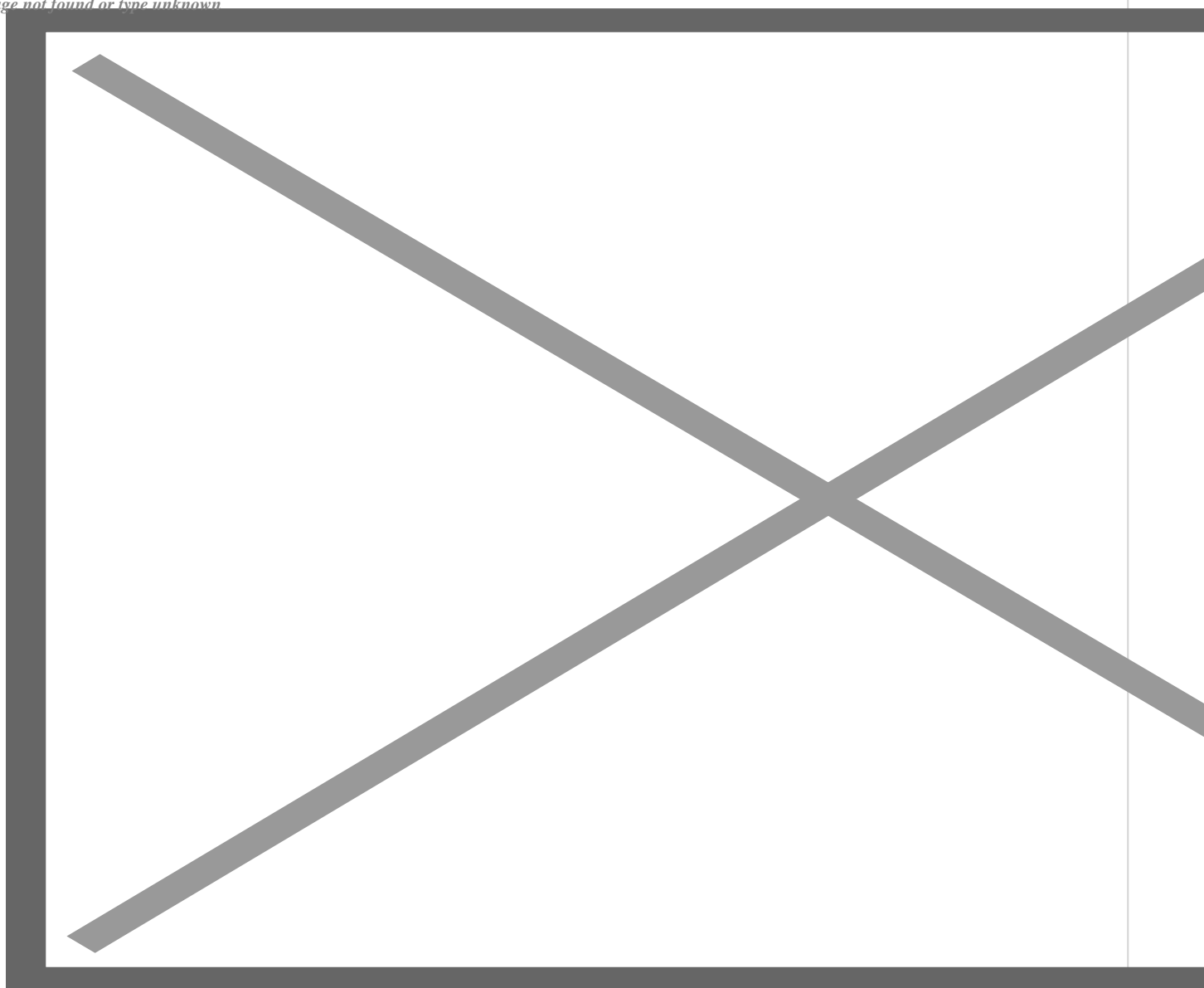


Panama: The shadow of the absent

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By Roberto Morejón

Ricardo Martinelli expressed satisfaction upon learning that the Supreme Court of Justice of Panama endorsed a decision of the Electoral Court to allow lawyer José Raúl Mulino to replace the wealthy former president as a candidate in the elections on Sunday, May 5.

After prolonged debates that kept society in suspense, the highest body of justice supported Mulino, Martinelli's dolphin, who withdrew from the political arena towards the polls, because he was sentenced to a prison sentence.

Indeed, the controversial former Head of State was sentenced for money laundering and received asylum in the Nicaraguan embassy.

Martinelli authorized his close friend to assume the candidacy of the Realizing Goals and Alliance parties, after which the substitute used the slogan "Mulino is Martinelli."

Mulino promises that they will return to Panama for what he described as "good times," and dismisses the allegations of a lawyer who maintained that his candidacy was not put to a vote in primary elections.

In the midst of so much controversy, polls indicate Mulino as the recipient of the highest voting intention, in a race with eight candidates, mostly from the right.

Whoever wins will face serious problems, such as the decline of water in the locks of the Panama Canal and the furtive passage of thousands of migrants through the dangerous Darien jungle.

Panama is still suffering the consequences of massive protests in June 2022 over the high cost of living and between October and November 2023, over a contract for copper extraction that was later declared unconstitutional.

In addition to 4 thousand workers who were left unemployed, in Panama there were 155 thousand people without a fixed job in 2023 while 47 percent of those who worked in that period did so informally.

Panama is resisting an economic slowdown, with a foreseeable modest growth of 2.5% for this year, and is one of the most unequal countries in the region and on the planet, according to the World Bank.

Although there is a widespread image of a Panama full of skyscrapers, the other image of poverty, one third in rural areas and two thirds in indigenous areas, is less noticeable.

A reality that is little talked about.

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