

PANAMA IN WORLD WAR 2: A STORY OF THREE CONSTITUTIONS

During World War 2, in Panama, Constitutions seemed to go and go with confusing regularity. When the war broke out in Europe the country still had the original 1904 Constitution in place, but by 1941 the new administration had a new one approved and in place, this lasting until 1945. In the chaos and unrest of the last year of the war and the immediate aftermath, the 1941 Constitution was suspended, and a new one introduced in 1946. Then, when the President deposed in 1941 returned to the office in 1949, he suspended the 1946 Constitution in 1951 and reinstated his 1941 once again. When this President was removed for a second time and sent into exile (not for the last time) later in 1951, the 1946 Constitution was revived. This time it lasted until the National Guard coup in 1968, and yet another new Constitution in 1972.

The story of the three Constitutions of the wartime period is also a reflection of the political theatre and unsettled community that formed a backdrop to the efforts to defend the Panama Canal, defeat the U-boats in the Caribbean and contribute to the Allied victory. The US Government and military, while focused on the security and operation of the Canal, always paid attention to the manoeuvring, coups and counter coups, and the civil unrest in the Republic of Panama. The US had forgone the right to intervene militarily in the country (in a 1936 amendment of the original 1903 Treaty between Panama and the US)¹, but there is little doubt that, if it had been concerned for the security of the Canal, it would have done so. After all, until late in the war it maintained a striking force of airborne troops in Panama, in case such action was required elsewhere in the region.²

¹ See <http://raytodd.blog/2023/08/24/panama-in-world-war-2-the-1936-treaty-and-changes-in-the-relationship-with-the-us/>

² See <http://raytodd.blog/2022/09/15/panama-the-striking-force-martinique-and-gliders-in-the-jungle/>

THE ORIGINAL CONSTITUTION³

Panama's first Constitutional Assembly in 1903, the National Constituent Convention, elected by popular vote only a few days after independence from Colombia, had produced what became the 1904 Constitution.⁴ At its core it replicated the 1886 Colombian Constitution.⁵

This Constitution recognised both the separation of the former province from Colombia, but also the dominant position of the US and its need to create and protect the new Canal. Most notable was Article 136, which was to become a bugbear of Panamanian nationalists. This Article gave the US the right to add additional territory to the Canal Zone when this was considered necessary for defence – and for US military intervention to guarantee independence and sovereignty (and, of course, safety and security of the Canal). It also acknowledged the status of Panama itself as a *de facto* protectorate of the US.

Not until amendments to the 1903 Hay-Bunau Varilla Treaty between Panama and the US were agreed in 1936, would Article 136 and the protectorate status be addressed.⁶ Even then, it took until 1939 for the US Senate to (narrowly) approve the 1936 amendments, given the resistance of the US Army.

The Constitution recognised the protection of private property, individual rights and established a fundamentally *laissez-faire* state (a state without legal powers to regulate the economic life of the country), prohibited slavery but did not outlaw the death penalty.⁷

In 1936, negotiations between the Roosevelt administration and that of President Harmodio Arias Madrid resulted in draft amendments of the 1903 Treaty which, *inter alia*, end the

³ https://www.asamblea.gob.pa/APPS/LEGISPAN/PDF_NORMAS/1903/1904/1904_189_3000.pdf

⁴ If one thinks the several constitutions of the 20th Century are too many, while part of Colombia it had eight, plus others as an independent isthmus or a federated state, plus six provincial and state constitutions – all during the 19th Century after independence from Spain in 1821: *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics* 15:7 (2022): 1049-1068 DOI: 10.2478/bjlp-2022-007076.

⁵ <https://rinedtep.edu.pa/server/api/core/bitstreams/75a7bcd6-961e-42d1-9051-032d9648b977/content>

⁶ It did not help that the diplomatic representative who negotiated the 1903 Treaty, Philippe-Jean Bunau-Varilla was not even a Panamanian, being French. He had been involved heavily in the lobbying for the US to take over the canal project – being a major stockholder in the company then taken over by the US Government.

⁷ *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics* 15:7 (2022): 1049-1068 DOI: 10.2478/bjlp-2022-007076.

protectorate status, recognise the right of Panama to a larger share of the revenue from the Canal and a substantial increase in the annuity paid by the US, recognise the right of Panamanians to transit the Canal Zone, and for a partnership arrangement in defence of the Canal. The amendments also ended the US right of military intervention in Panama, and to acquire as of right any extra territory deemed necessary for defence of the Canal.

It was not until the threat of the obviously imminent war, and an undertaking from Panama to cooperate in changes required for defence, in 1939 that the US Senate finally ratified the agreement of 1936.⁸

THE 1941 CONSTITUTION⁹

This was a pet project of the new President, Arnulfo Arias Madrid¹⁰, at 39, the country's youngest President, he presented it to the National Assembly on 17 October 1940, after only 16 days in office. He had been elected, unopposed (after his opponent withdrew in the face of actual and threatened violence) on a nationalist and anti-American platform.

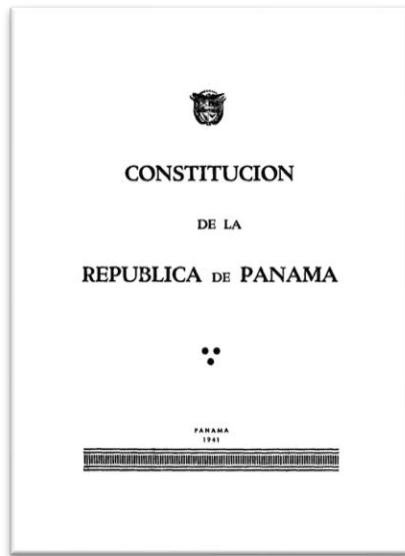
This Constitution would see power concentrated in the hands of the President whose term, along with that of members of the National Assembly, was extended from four to six years, so that Arias Madrid's term would have ended in 1947 instead of 1945 (although he would not last that long, nor would the Constitution).

Unlike its predecessor and its successor, this Constitution did not evolve through use of an elected Constitutional Assembly, but rather was drafted by a select committee of jurists.

⁸ Another agreement was for a trans-isthmus highway – which opened during the war; and two others which allowed Panama greater freedom in radio transmission, but these encountered vigorous opposition from the War Department. US Army officers in the Canal Zone opposed plans for that a highway parallel to the Canal, the thinking being that the jungle alongside the waterway presented a impenetrable barrier to any attacker.

⁹ <https://www.asamblea.gob.pa/sites/default/files/2018-09/constitucion%201941.pdf>

¹⁰ For much, much more on Arnulfo Arias Madrid, see <http://raytodd.blog/2022/10/31/panama-the-wartime-president/>



It did many things that either caused serious damage to some, and marked an advance for others. Arias Madrid thought that the original 1904 Constitution needed a radical update, and that there was scope to add to the progressive changes already introduced in Panama, as it had adopted a number of progressive laws.¹¹ For example, women's voting rights enshrined in the 1941 Constitution were implemented by means of Law 98 of 5 July 1941.¹²

The new Constitution placed the family under the protection of the state. It did this by providing for equal rights for spouses and recognised the equality of duties of parents for both legitimate and natural offspring (in a country where almost 65% of births were out of wedlock). It also provided for laws protecting motherhood and childhood and the moral, intellectual, and physical development during childhood and youth.

For workers, the right to strike was recognised in the new Constitution, together with a number of other rights and protections. After all, as well as being something of an outsider from the political elite¹³, Arias Madrid was a populist, as well as a nationalist, and owed his political success, in large part, to popular support, being seen as the champion of the common man, and a leader of the 1931 coup which had displaced (at least for several years) the ruling elite which had hitherto controlled the Presidency.

However, there was a darker side to the new Constitution. These were later described as indicating a trend to move Panama in the direction of dictatorship and authoritarianism. The

¹¹ For example, Law 6 of 1914 had set a maximum working day of eight hours, and others in 1930 were concerned with the protection for pregnant women workers and health and hygiene conditions in the workplace. Then, under Arias Madrid, women were able to vote for the first time, and Law 23 established the Social Security Fund, with its greater protection for the working classes.

¹² The Law allowed Panamanian women aged 21 and over to exercise the right to vote. Four years later women were able to elect and be elected to positions in the Constituent Assembly, and the nomination of two women for the elections of that same year took place.

¹³ He had been a leader, and hero, of the 1931 coup that had (for a time) overthrown the ruling elite, personally arresting the President.

racist and authoritarian elements of the 1941 Constitution contrasted with the other progressive developments.¹⁴

It has been said that the worst thing about the 1941 Constitution was that it prohibited the immigration of people of "*the black race whose original language is not Spanish, the yellow race and the original races of India, Asia Minor and North Africa*" and stripped tens of thousands of people of their citizenship retroactively. Thus, all Panamanians born after May 1904 to non-ethnic Panamanian fathers and mothers, even if born in the Republic, were to be stripped of their nationality. Many of these had had full citizenship since 1925, and most prominently targeted were black Panamanians of Afro-Caribbean/Antillean origin. Around 51,000 people born in Panama would lose their citizenship.¹⁵

Another of the concerning elements in the 1941 Constitution centred on its "*nationalisation of trade*", which had resulted in retail trade being exclusively in the hands of Panama nationals. This continued the attempts made during the 1930s to preserve trade only for Panamanians.¹⁶ The Association of Merchants and Industrialists had wanted the new Constitution to preserve the policy of nationalisation of commerce and industry being introduced into law by Arias Madrid. This measure also complemented the racist elements of the Constitution, as it served to remove the Chinese (the hardest hit by the move) and others from involvement in businesses.¹⁷

¹⁴ It was more understandable that the rights of those of Japanese and other Axis states would be suspended for the period of the war.

¹⁵ <https://publicandohistoria.com/2018/04/01/un-grave-problema-etnico/>
Panamanian law had granted citizenship to any person born on Panamanian soil. Hence, in the 1930s, the first generation of West Indians born in the Republic became Panamanian citizens. However, attempts were made to contest the citizenship rights of Panamanian West Indians, and in 1928 a constitutional amendment had denied citizenship to the West Indians born in Panama until adulthood, leaving a large number of Panamanian children of West Indian origin without nationality: *Race and Ethnicity in the formation of Panamanian National Identity: Panamanian Discrimination Against Chinese and West Indians in the Thirties* by Marixa Lasso De Paulis (Revista Panameña de Política - N° 4, July-December 2007): https://www.cidempanama.org/files/2011/04/4-06-Race-Ethnicity_Marixa_Lasso.pdf

¹⁶ A 1934 Law required that 51% of the stock of corporations had to be owned by Panamanians, and no more than 25% in the hands of people of "*prohibited immigration*"; 75% of employees to be Panamanian, and 75% of the payroll: *United States Tariff Commission, Economic Controls and Commercial Policy in Panama* (Washington, 1946).

See also: <http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/bdp/The%20economy%20of%20Panama.pdf>

¹⁷ On 14 February 1941, the National Assembly had passed a Bill barring aliens from the operation of all retail businesses, and citizenship became a prerequisite for owning these. At the time, foreigners owned most of the country's retail stores, and US citizens owned the largest proportion of the bars and many other establishments for the sale of alcohol, and were also involved in other branches of the retail trade, and controlled most of the

As mentioned, Article 136 of the 1904 Constitution had given the US the right to "*intervene in any part of Panama, to re-establish public peace and constitutional order*", and effectively confirmed Panama's status as a *de facto* protectorate of the US (in line with the provisions of the 1903 Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty).¹⁸ The 1936 Hull-Alfaro Treaty (when finally approved by the US Congress in 1939) ended the automatic right of intervention in internal Panamanian affairs.¹⁹ The new Treaty had helped to ease to some extent the resent felt by Panamanians over their status and treatment, but there also remained a nationalist feeling – stoked, it has to be said, by Arias Madrid in his 1940 election campaign. The 1941 Constitution was to end Panama's constitutionally-mandated status as a protectorate of the US.²⁰

A former President, Ricardo J Alfaro²¹, had criticised not only the content of the new Constitution, but the way it had been drafted, presented, discussed, and approved. The first debate in the National Assembly lasted only four days (with the most controversial and racist Articles approved in a day on 31 October 1940, with only six Deputies in the National Assembly opposed their contents²²), after which President Arias Madrid gave orders that the second debate would end in the following five days. Hence, on 22 November, barely a month after the draft Bill had been laid before it, the National Assembly declared the new Constitution of 189 Articles to be approved.

casinos, bars, and hotels - the major gambling establishments. The Bill also affected foreign restaurant and hotel owners, banned foreigners from operating as commission merchants and fuel distributors:

<https://scholarsrepository.llu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1539&context=etd>

Within a year or so of the 1941 Law, nearly 90% of retail establishments with a capital of less than \$500, and more than 75% of larger businesses, were being operated by Panamanians, and large numbers of Chinese, Japanese and others were forced to liquidate their business, and many to leave the country (where possible). Later amendments sought to tighten restrictions further, but enforcement was later relaxed (and never seemed to be applied to US citizens): *Economic Controls and Commercial Policy in Panama* (United States Tariff Commission, 1946).

¹⁸ <http://countrystudies.us/panama/51.htm>

¹⁹ See <http://raytodd.blog/2023/08/24/panama-in-world-war-2-the-1936-treaty-and-changes-in-the-relationship-with-the-us/>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ President 1931-32, serving as an acting President after a *coup d'état* (First Designate in Charge of the Executive Power - *Primer Designado, Encargado del Poder Ejecutivo*). He had negotiated the 1936 treaty amendments with the US, and he had stood against Arias Madrid in the 1940 election, but had withdrawn the face of the tension and violence engendered by his opponent's supporters.

²² <https://publicandohistoria.com/2018/04/01/un-grave-problema-etnico/>

Within a week, on 26 November 1940, President Arias Madrid signed a Decree by which he granted himself "*the supreme representation of the State*" and called for a plebiscite on the new Constitution on 15 December. This was not as required in the original 1904 Constitution, and two Supreme Court judges resigned rather than be seen to go along with the plan. Nevertheless, the plebiscite was held and overwhelmingly approved the new Constitution (although there were said to be serious "anomalies" in the voting process – there were apparently only "yes" votes).²³ On 30 December, the National Assembly formally adopted the new Constitution, to come into force on 2 January 1942.

One failure that could be traced to the new Constitution was that it provided for a new currency and monetary system to replace use of the US dollar. The 1904 Constitution had established the dollar as the country's currency, and that remains the case to this day. The new paper money was issued in 1941, but was in circulation for only a few days before Arias Madrid's removal from office.²⁴

SUSPENSION OF THE 1941 CONSTITUTION

In October 1941, the National Police mounted a coup and removed Arias Madrid from office.²⁵ However, although the 1941 Constitution remained in force, the new administration focused on cooperation with the US (especially after the Pearl Harbor attack in December), abandoned the nationalist policy carried out by Arias Madrid – ignoring but not revoking the more controversial or racist elements²⁶, and concentrated largely on the defence of Panama and the Canal.

²³ <https://www.nytimes.com/1951/05/08/archives/panamas-charter-revoked-by-arias-1941-constitution-voted-under-yes.html>

²⁴ For more on the short-lived paper money, see <http://raytodd.blog/2022/10/12/panama-in-the-war-paper-money-comes-and-goes-and-trams-just-go-while-traffic-moves-to-the-right/>

²⁵ On 7 October, Arias Madrid had left the country on a Pan American flight to Cuba (to visit his oculist, or his mistress), allowing his opponents (including Remón Cantera of the National Police) to invoke Article III of the Constitution to depose him. Remón Cantera and his fellow officers then appointed the pro-American businessman, and Minister for Government, de la Guardia as President. This appointment received rapid approval from the US.

²⁶ Some of the racism persisted postwar, as evidenced by instructions to port operations staff in 1950, which emphasised the strict controls on Chinese individuals entering or remaining in both the Canal Zone and the Republic.

Opposition to the Government grew steadily, in part encouraged by the *Arnulfistas*, supporters of Arnulfo Arias Madrid, and, on 3 January 1945, using an Executive Decree, the Government formally suspended the 1941 Constitution, called for a Constituent Assembly (having for four years rejected repeated calls for such) and declared the country to be in a “state of alert”.²⁷ President de la Guardia²⁸ dissolved the National Assembly on 31 December.²⁹

While it was said that the de la Guardia’s goal was to cling to the Presidency that he had only achieved following the coup in which Arias Madrid was deposed in 1941, most political parties accepted the Constituent Assembly idea, but the increasingly politicised and activist students opposed it, forming the Patriotic Youth Front (*Frente Patriótico de la Juventud*), which would have a leading role in political life in the postwar years.³⁰

In October 1944, a Constitutional Studies Commission composed of three renowned jurists was appointed, and they would draft a constitution, which would then serve as the basis for the Assembly’s discussions. This Assembly would appoint a provisional government and appoint a Provisional President.³¹ The Constituent Assembly would have 51 elected delegates, 42 of them provincial and nine national.

Meanwhile, in the middle of the night, or rather the early hours, of 16 February 1945, a majority of National Assembly Deputies met in secret, leaving their temporary base in the Tivoli Hotel in Curundu in the Canal Zone (in an attempt to evade the secret police). At the meeting the Deputies, citing Article 90 of the Constitution, called for the dismissal of De La Guardia and for his replacement. A photograph of the ceremony was published on the front page of a newspaper the following day. They denounced De La Guardia as a “dictator” and called on other Latin American governments to support the “legitimate government” of the Republic.³²

²⁷ The reason, or excuse, was discovery a plot by Arias Madrid’s supporters to overthrow the government and gain control of the National Police.

²⁸ For more on President de la Guardia, see <http://raytodd.blog/2022/10/31/panama-the-wartime-president/>

²⁹ <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/160529/1946-golpe-catalizo-constituyente>

³⁰ <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/deportes/hipica/221120/primeros-pasos-federacion-estudiantes-panama>

³¹ <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/publicando-historia/210627/reglas-juego-planifico-constituyente>

³² <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/160529/1946-golpe-catalizo-constituyente>

The meeting of Deputies also appointed a replacement interim President and two Vice-Presidents. Tension in the country continued to grow during January and February 1945, with newspapers warning that the country appeared to have two governments, was being governed by decrees, and had no sitting parliament.³³

With the war with both Germany and Japan still underway, and Canal still a vital supply route to the Pacific theatre (for a short while after the German surrender it would become even more important, as US forces began to pivot the Far East), the country was still in a state of unrest and, in March 1945, the Government had had to put down a rebellion, and again in December 1945, supporters of former President Aris Madrid led an uprising in Colón in which six people were killed.

The elections to the Constituent Assembly were held on 6 May 1945, and these were said to have been one of the cleanest in the history of Panama. It saw women having the right to vote for the first time, as well as being able to stand as candidates, and two female deputies were in fact elected. There were two clear groups of winners: political parties and businessmen and merchants.³⁴

Liberal groups dominated the new Assembly, which had to decide whether to continue and further the social policy of the 1941 Constitution, or return to the themes of individualism and liberalism of the 1904 version.

The National Theatre in Panama City old town, *Casco Viejo*, was used for meetings of the Assembly³⁵ and, on 15 June 1945, a group of 51 Panamanians met there, with a woman, Gumersinda Páez, as vice-president of the Constituent Assembly.³⁶

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

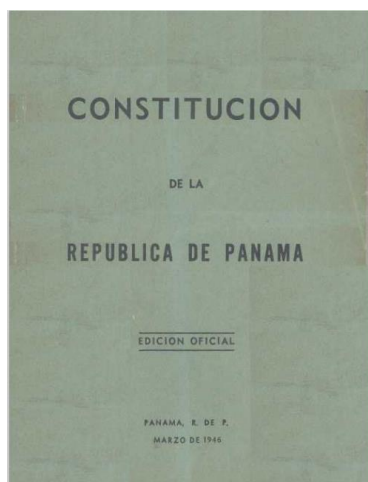
³⁵ It was also a favoured site of Presidential inaugurations.

³⁶ https://www.tvn-2.com/contenido-exclusivo/gumersinda-paez-diputada-pueblo-gumercinda-panam-panama-dia-internacional-de-la-mujer-mujer-feminismo-sufragio-mujeres-sufragismo-diputadas-constituyente-constitucion-historia-voto-voto-femenino_1_2039863.html

The former Ambassador to the US, Enrique Adolfo Jimenez Brin was elected by the new Assembly to become Provisional President of the Republic during the life of the Assembly (taking office on 1 March 1946, which was before the plenary session of the Assembly) and until a new President, elected under the terms of the new Constitution, could take office.

The former President De La Guardia Arango formally resigned in June, retired from politics, and went on to become director and general manager of the *La Nacion* newspaper.

THE NEW 1946 CONSTITUTION



In 1946, President de la Guardia promulgated a new Constitution³⁷, which was basically a return to the original 1904 Constitution but without Article 136 (involving the right of intervention on the part of the US).

This “new” Constitution was to last for 26 years, throughout the unsettled 1950s and early 1960s, until the 1968 military coup (following which 11 constitutional guarantees, including those providing for freedom of speech, press, and travel, were suspended for several months, with some were not restored fully until after the adoption of the 1972 Constitution).³⁸

The 1946 Constitution, being very similar to the original of 1904, provided for a centralised democracy, and with universal suffrage, continuing recognition of the right of women to vote found in the 1941 version, with the National Assembly a unicameral legislature. It provided for a separation of powers and protected citizens' civil liberties. The four-year Presidential term was restored and re-election was forbidden (as now, Presidents may only one term at a time, but are not barred from seeking a subsequent term). Two Vice-Presidents were

³⁷[https://www.organojudicial.gob.pa/uploads/wp_repo/blogs.dir/cendoj/CONSTITUCIONES POLITICAS/constitucion_politica_1946.pdf](https://www.organojudicial.gob.pa/uploads/wp_repo/blogs.dir/cendoj/CONSTITUCIONES_POLITICAS/constitucion_politica_1946.pdf)

³⁸ <http://countrystudies.us/panama/51.htm>

chosen by direct election (a move opposed by De La Guardia), governors continued to serve at the pleasure of the President.³⁹

Importantly, and inevitably given the unrest of the war years and after, Article 136 of the 1904 Constitution, as well as the protectorate status, were omitted from the new Constitution.

One matter not fully corrected by the 1946 Constitution was the status of Panamanian-born children of foreign parents. The 1941 Constitution had effectively denied these people citizenship, requiring that they pass a test on the history of Panama and other aspects of Panamanian culture once coming of age (at 21) before citizenship could be granted. The new Constitution only granted conditional citizenship, and it was not until 1960, and the passage of the “Bazan Amendment” under President Chiari, that the right of full citizenship from birth was restored.⁴⁰

On the other hand, social rights and the duties of the welfare state were protected, and the country would see new Labor, Health, and Tax Codes. As mentioned, the progressive changes would be abruptly derailed following the military coup in 1968, when most civil freedoms were suspended for several years.⁴¹

The new Constitution continued some of the restrictive practices of the wartime administrations, and limited the entry of foreigners into the retail trade and the wholesale trade. These measures were criticised in 1946 by the US Tariff Commission.⁴²

Overall, the 1946 Constitution, was seen as one of the most progressive in Latin America, as it emphasised equality based on citizenship, and regardless of sex, religion, race or politics.

³⁹ <http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/bdp/older/constitucion1946.pdf>

In the light of the disputes with the US, and rejection of the Filós-Hines Treaty on continuation of US bases in the Republic postwar, one might note Article 231 of the 1946 Constitution:

ARTICLE 231. *No foreign Government or foreign official or semi-official entity or institution may acquire ownership over any part of the national territory.*

⁴⁰ <https://archives.nypl.org/scm/20916>

⁴¹ <https://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/Panama1.html>

⁴² *United States Tariff Commission, Economic Controls and Commercial Policy in Panama* (Washington, 1946). See also: <http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/bdp/The%20economy%20of%20Panama.pdf>

The country was still far from quiet, with popular protests centred on the US Army plan to retain some, or all, of the defence sites occupied outside the Canal Zone during the war and the abortive 1947 Filos-Hines Treaty which would have permitted the retention of a number of the sites. That agreement would eventually be rejected by the National Assembly (under considerable pressure, including from crowds outside).⁴³

THE 1941 CONSTITUTION REINSTATED

Arnulfo Arias Madrid was an almost constant figure in and around Panamanian politics from the 1930s to the 1980s, and he was back in office again after President Diaz Arosemena died in 1949 (and Arias Madrid had been appointed by means of what has been described as “a *bizarre manoeuvre*”, by the National Jury of Elections, in a manoeuvre organised by Colonel Remón Cantera of the National Police).⁴⁴



On 7 May 1951, Arias Madrid suspended the 1946 Constitution and restored by decree his 1941 one.⁴⁵

The reversion to the 1941 Constitution led once more to large-scale popular protests⁴⁶, and just three days later this new term of Presidency ended in the

same way for Arias Madrid, as he was overthrown and sent once more into exile (not for the last time), as rampant corruption ravaged the country.

⁴³ For more on the 1947 agreement, see <http://raytodd.blog/2022/10/08/panama-operating-outside-the-zone-the-1942-agreement-and-the-1947-row/>

⁴⁴ For more on the background activities of the National Police, see <http://raytodd.blog/2023/12/02/panama-in-world-war-2-the-national-police-behind-the-scenes/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/1951/05/08/archives/panamas-charter-revoked-by-arias-1941-constitution-voted-under-yes.html>

⁴⁶ Exacerbated by other factors, such as rumours of a banking collapse, the secret police shooting of an Assembly Deputy, with the rising tensions having triggered the decision to revert to the 1941 Constitution. The National Assembly was dissolved, with opposition leaders being arrested by the secret police, and a general strike began. The Supreme Court rejected the Decree revoking the 1941 Constitution and move to oust Arias Madrid with a Vice-President.

As in 1941 and 1949, it was Colonel Remón Cantera, head of the National Police, who acted. On 10 May 1951, he moved to arrest Arias Madrid and a gunfight resulted in 11 dead and 100 injured. Arias Madrid was forced out.⁴⁷ It was perhaps inevitable that his eventual replacement would be the real strongman of Panamanian politics, and Remón Cantera became President in 1952.⁴⁸

THE 1946 CONSTITUTION RESTORED (IF IT HAD BEEN REVOKED)

As explained above, with the failed attempt to revoke the 1946 Constitution and replace it with the 1941 version, and the Supreme Court ruling that the Decree that purported to do so being itself unconstitutional, some degree of order was restored.

The 1946 Constitution would be suspended following a military coup mounted by the National Guard (as the National Police had transformed into) in 1968. Another new Constitution, drafted under the military government of Omar Torrijos, was to follow in 1972 (seeing substantial revision in 1983 and 1994) and remaining in force to this day – despite complaints about some of the provisions carried over from the dictatorship era of the 1970s and 1980s that now are seen as serving to assist corrupt officials and politicians.

Ray Todd
Panama City
Republic of Panama
5 December 2023

⁴⁷ <https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/golpe-estado-10-mayo-1951/>

⁴⁸ <https://www.mcnbiografias.com/app-bio/do/show?key=remon-cantera-jose-antonio>