ALMOST A WARTIME PRESIDENT – ARNULFO ARIAS MADRID 1940-41

Of the many colourful characters that Panama produced during the 20th century, perhaps the most prominent, if not the most important in a historical sense, was Arnulfo Arias Madrid. A President on more than one occasion, though never for very long, and a hero of the country's first coup (or *golpe de estado*), he was the country's leader on the eve of the US entry into World War 2 (and hence the entry of Panama too).



Dr Arnulfo Arias Madrid was a politician, doctor and writer who served on three occasions as President – from 1940 to 1941, 1949-51, and for 11 days in October 1968.[1]

EARLY YEARS

Nicknamed "*Fufo*", Arnulfo was the youngest son of a large family of peasant parents, he was born in the middle of the War of the Thousand Days on 15 August 1901,[2] in Penonomé, when Panama was still a department of the Republic of Colombia. He was the son of Antonio Arias, a cattle rancher of Costa Rican origin, and Carmen Madrid, the owner of a bakery in Penonomé, the capital of Coclé Province, roughly in the centre

[1] It has been said that Arnulfo Arias was elected to the Presidency at least three times after 1940 (or perhaps four or even five times if, as many believe, the vote counts of 1964 and 1984 were fraudulent), but he was never able or allowed to serve a full term:
https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a210486.pdf

[2] The *Guerra de los Mil Días* was a civil war in Colombia 17 October 1899 to 21 November 1902 that saw anything between 60,000 and 130,000 deaths and economic ruin for the country. In fact, much of the war took place in Panama, causing devastation, with conventional combat followed by guerilla warfare, with also involved indigenous tribes fighting back after being attacked.
http://www.bruceruiz.net/PanamaHistory/1000_day_war.htm
It is said that a stray bullet struck the young Arnulfo during the war when he was just two months old.
https://www.panamaamerica.com.pa/opinion/resena-historica-de-la-familia-arias-madrid-1110422

of the country and south-west of Panama City.[3] The family, of humble origin, was unrelated to an aristocratic family, also prominent in politics, also called Arias.[4]

He was *mestizo* - a term that originally referred to a person of combined European and indigenous descent, regardless of where the person was born. The term was used as an ethnic/racial category for mixed-race castes that evolved during the Spanish Empire.

In 1904, the new Republic of Panama allocated funds for a number of low-income young people to travel abroad to receive education, one of which was Arnulfo's brother Harmodio, who obtained a law degree from Cambridge University in 1911. After this, the family was able to send Arnulfo abroad to finish his secondary studies at Hartwick College, New York. He then entered Harvard University and Chicago, ending up a doctor and surgeon.[5]

The brothers had entered politics through a movement known as Community Action (*Acción Communal*), founded in 1923 and which Arnulfo had joined following his return home in 1924. Its following was primarily from the *mestizo* middle class, and it was anti-oligarch and anti-American.[6] Following his election in 1932, Harmodio Arias Madrid would become the first Panamanian President to institute relief efforts for the isolated and impoverished countryside, and he later established the University of Panama in 1935 - this would become the focal point for political activism and nationalistic zeal and, it has to be said, of student unrest during the years following World War 2.[7]

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[3] https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/arnulfo-arias-madrid/

[4] For example, one member ran against Arnulfo's brother in the presidential election following the 1931 coup, and his son was briefly President following the assassination of President Remón Cantera in 1955.

[5] https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/arnulfo-arias-madrid/?fbclid=IwAR1UbFenl4SCIRTjyb0a-C5LNj8XZ2A4HtbT5q5Tt8WVaDN46bd_Wq997GE

[6] *Acción Communal* (predecessor to the *Panameñista*) had a nationalist and anti-US platform, with the slogan "*Patriotismo*, *Acción, Euidad y Disciplina*" ("Patriotism, Action, Equality and Discipline"), and arguing that non-Panamanians were "*willing to enrich themselves to the detriment of national citizens and erase the characteristic elements of Panamanian national identity*": *Latin America During World War II*, edited by Thomas M Leonard, John F Bratzel (Bowman & Littlefield Inc), 2007.

[7] https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a210486.pdf



Dr Arias when working as a doctor

Arnulfo had first practised medicine in Boston, returning to Panama in 1924 to establish a clinic in Panama City, while also having senior posts at the city's Santo Tomás Hospital.

In 1927, the 26-year-old Arnulfo married 20-year-old Ana Matilde Linares.[8] They would remain together until she died in 1955, having one adopted son.[9]

THE 1931 COUP

From the 1920s, despite studying medicine in the US (including at Harvard), returning to Panama, he had espoused anti-Americanism and was to lead the nationalist, patriotic *Accion Comunal* organisation, opposed to US influence in Panama.


1930

PANAMA, R. de P. VIERNES ENERO 2 de 1931

Un Ejemplar 5 Centa

Acción Comunal a la cabeza de un movimiento de reivindicacion nacional

ARIO DE GOBIERNO RINDE INFORME
E LA INSPECCION HECHA EN GARACHINE

ión dada en el año 1922 en cuanto a que los terre-
rencia son de propiedad de la Darien Estate Incorpo-
os vecinos de Taimatí huyeron a la montaña cuan-
n del arribo del Secretario Ballén.--- Allí han ame-
uerte al Corregidor, y el caudillo de la rebeldía
es Ramón Pérez

ation abre los brazos a la inmigración de desalmados que
ía, y la situación es cada vez más grave.— El Corregidor
colombiano, dueño y señor de haciendas, que tala árboles
s sobre terrenos que no le pertenecen.— Otras considera-

Dr. DANIEL BALLEN

Personal del Hospital de Caridad de Colón

LO HA LLEVADO A ESE EXTREMO EL PATRIOTIS
DE LA INSTITUCION Y LOS MALOS GOBIERNOS Q
HAN REGENTADO EL PAIS, DICE

Desde hace mucho tiempo, "Acción Comu
debido al desastre de los distintos Gobiernos
ció una campaña cívica periodística para
que el Gobierno entrara por el carril de la
radez, pero todo fue en vano. Los distintos
sidentes, cada cual con más ímpetus le a
ha arpazos al erario público hasta el extrem
tenerlo completamente exhausto.

Por todo esto, Acción Comunal, instit
llena de cordura, y al extremo pacífica opt
hacer entrar en razón al Gobierno mediant
fuerza. Y así, con esta disposición, fue lab
do en silencio y preparándose a fin de arma

[8] https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/arnulfo-arias-madrid/?fbclid=IwAR1UbFenl4SCIRTjyb0a-C5LNj8XZ2A4HtbT5q5Tt8WVaDN46bd_Wq997GE

[9] He would eventually marry again, whilst in exile, in 1972, to Mireya Moscoco, who would go on to become the first female President of Panama in 1999-2004, as candidate for her dead husband's *Arnulfista* Party.
The son, Gerardo, graduated as an agricultural engineer, but also followed his father into public life, being elected as a deputy for the *Panameñista* (later *Arnulfista*) Party in 1968, and latterly Ambassador to Peru and Venezuela in the 1990s.

Until the 1930s, Panamanian politics had remained, essentially, a closed shop with competing individuals and families within a club - specifically, the Union Club of Panama City.[10] The armed coup of 1931 saw an outsider, in the form of Arnulfo's brother, Harmodio, become President.[11]

However, it was Arnulfo who led this, the first successful coup against a duly-elected government in Panama.[12] Overnight he became a hero and champion of the masses, having seemingly dealt a blow to what was seen as the oppressive Panamanian oligarchy.[13]

The actual number of rebels was small, with only some several dozen involved. Armed with only about a dozen shotguns and approximately 20 pistols, in the early hours of 2 January 1931, the insurgents started by cutting Panama City's telephone lines. One group took control by subterfuge the police cavalry substation, while another engaged in a gun battle before seizing the main police headquarters. In this way, the rebels hoped to stifle the Government's ability to put down the coup.

It was Arnulfo, and an aide named Dr Ramon Mora, who are said to have forced Arosemena to resign.[14] Arnulfo had led one group that had accessed the Presidential Palace and, after a gunfight, he had personally captured President Arosemena.[15] Swift and successful, the coup was also largely bloodless, although 10 people died.

The Supreme Court acted to prevent a possible intervention by the US military forces stationed in the Canal Zone, and allowed the new Minister of Government and Justice

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[10] This still exists, albeit in new premises. Whether or not it still serves as the home from home for the ruling elite is not for me to say, although it did let me in, so perhaps it is least elitist than in the past.

[11] Harmodio's story also deserves to be told – from his rise as a popular man of the people, and having gained prominence through a book that had attacked the Monroe Doctrine, to President, and an important newspaper editor.

[12] *The Legacy of the Three Presidencies of Arnulfo Arias Madrid* by Sandra Blackman (Loma Linda University Electronic Theses, Dissertations & Projects, 1985): https://scholarsrepository.llu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1539&context=etd

[13] Ibid.

[14] https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/arnulfo-arias-madrid

[15] Florencio Harmodio Arosemena was considered to be just a figurehead and an appendage of the former President Rodolfo Chiari, who maintained the dominance of the Cabinet with several of his loyal followers.

(who Arosemena was persuaded to appoint), Arnulfo's brother Harmodio to act as caretaker until Ricardo J Alfaro, a respected lawyer who was serving as Minister to the US at the time, returned to the country to become interim President, seeing out the remainder of Arosemena's term.[16] Arosemena and his family went into exile at the Tivoli Hotel in the Canal Zone (not the last Panamanian politician to do so over the years).[17]

The US Minister in Panama and the US Secretary of State declined to send troops into Panama City to put down the coup (as the US was authorised to do under the 1903 Treaty and Article 136 of Panama's Constitution). Rather than intervening, the US military waited for assurances from the coup leaders that they would not do anything to affect the Canal's function or security, which they received.[18] In the wake of the coup, the interim President praised the courage and skill of the US Minister in Panama, Roy T Davis, who assured the leaders of the provisional regime that US troops would not intervene unless the unrest spread to other parts of the country.[19] The US State Department issued a statement on 2 January, saying that public order had not been disturbed, so no intervention was necessary.[20]

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[16] https://www.prensa.com/politica/habra-fallo-de-la-corte-el-24-de-noviembre/
This was the same man who would negotiate the 1936 amending Treaty with the US, and would be Arias Madrid's opponent in the 1940 election – although he would withdraw and advise his supporters to also boycott the vote.

[17] *Historia y Biografía de la Justicia Panameña en sus primeros cien años* (Órgano Judicial de la República de Panamá, 2003)
https://www.organojudicial.gob.pa/uploads/wp_repo/uploads/2010/06/libro1.pdf

[18] This also reflected then President Herbert Hoover's proclivity for non-interventionist diplomacy.

[19] https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/publicando-historia/220102/cubrieron-agencias-prensa-golpe
Faced with deadlock in the Supreme Court over an interim successor to President Arosemena acceptable to the National Assembly and the coup leaders, Davis had stepped in and, around 7:30 in the morning, told the President of the Supreme Court of Justice, that the institutional crisis had to be resolved 'constitutionally' before 5:00 in the afternoon, or else the US Government would intervene to ensure individual rights and safeguard its own interests.

[20] https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/publicando-historia/220102/cubrieron-agencias-prensa-golpe

AFTER THE COUP

In the 1930s, Panama, whose economy was already in a poor condition,[21] suffered, like most countries of the Western world, from the economic depression. It was also wracked by political instability. As is often the case in such rebellions, the rebels soon began to fall out and fight among themselves, undermining their unified front. Within months of the coup, the dissidents had divided into various opposition groups whose agendas often clashed and whose members sometimes even took up arms to oppose their former allies.

Arnulfo's brother, Harmodio, served as interim President for 13 days in January 1931 in the wake of the coup, and then was elected in the 1932 elections, serving to 1936.

While Harmodio was President, and during the term of his chosen successor, Arnulfo held a number of political and diplomatic posts; he was ambassador to Italy, France, Great Britain and Germany, and minister of public works and agriculture.[22] It is said that while serving in Europe he developed pro-fascist political views. Perhaps so, for at some time in his stay he met with Adolf Hitler and was believed to have reached an understanding concerning Isthmian relationships with Berlin and Rome before returning to Panama in 1938.[23]

However, the brothers would fall out later during the 1930s, leading to Arnulfo to stand for the presidency, and to the extent that Harmodio would be among those who welcomed Arnulfo's removal in 1941.

In 1934, Arnulfo helped form the National Revolutionary Coalition, which released a progressive manifesto in October 1934 calling for a revitalising of the country, with

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[21] In 1931, the Roberts Report (*Investigación Económica de la Republica de Panamá*) had detailed the parlous state of the republic's economy, said to be further hampered by nepotism, corruption and maladministration (the report referred to a "catastrophic" lack of professionalism. Panamanians were said to have felt that the enormous hopes that had been placed in the construction of the Canal had not been realised.

[22] https://www.biografiasyvidas.com/biografia/a/arias_arnulfo.htm

[23] https://scholarsrepository.llu.edu/etd/535

nationalist and even totalitarian aspects (the latter being very much the fashion of the times in many countries in Latin America). In December 1935, the first convention of the National Revolutionary Party nominated its candidate for the 1936 election – the man who would win, Juan Demóstenes Arosemena,[24] with Arnulfo one of his prominent supporters – being rewarded with a plum diplomatic post following the election.

It is said that while serving as the country's Extraordinary Envoy and Plenipotentiary Minister (to Britain, France, Sweden and Denmark) in Europe he developed more pro-fascist political views.[25] Perhaps so, for at some time in his stay he met with Adolf Hitler and was believed to have reached an understanding concerning Isthmian relationships with Berlin and Rome before returning to Panama in 1938.[26]

Despite the continuing political and diplomatic involvement, Arnulfo continued his interest and activity in the field of medicine as well, not only in Panama, but also at conferences and congresses abroad.

THE 1940 ELECTION

When World War 2 broke out in Europe in 1939 Panama was on the eve of an election that would see Arnulfo elected President, with a radical, authoritarian agenda – furthermore, a President with suspected pro-German sympathies and a former Minister to Italy 1934-38. Panamanian nationalism and anti-Americanism were at the heart of his policies and his campaign. The campaign in May and June of 1940 (the voting was on 2 June) would be described as the "*crudest and most bitter electoral contest in the history of the Republic*".

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[24] One of Harmodio's ministers (unrelated, despite the common name, to the earlier deposed President Arosemena), who the outgoing President had chosen to back (instead of the candidate of his own party) in an effort to retain his hold on power – ironically, one of the complaints the coup leaders had levied the deposed President was that he had been a front for a previous President.

[25] He also attended as a delegate at the League of Nations in Geneva, and was present at the coronation of King George VI. Despite his personal views, a hagiography published in 1939 claimed that he condemned the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, the Japanese actions in Manchuria, and that of Germany in respect of Austria and Czechoslovakia

[26] https://scholarsrepository.llu.edu/etd/535

Arnulfo had only arrived back from France in October 1939. He was offered the candidacy supported by the National Revolutionary Party, the United Liberal Democrat, the Democratic Party and the United Liberal Party, which together made up the National Coalition. He faced the Popular Front, formed by the Doctrinaire Liberal, Socialist and Liberal Renewal parties, which had Ricardo J Alfaro as their candidate.

The preceding four years had been marked by plots and conspiracies and accusations against representatives of traditionally dominant sectors, who were losing power and position in the face of new professional, merchant and industrial groups. Addressing the National Assembly on 1 September 1938, President Arosemena complained that instead of investing state money in the welfare of the population, he had been forced to spend on arming the police in order to protect the government from the "*revolutionary activities*" of the opposition. His own election in 1936, as the candidate of the National Revolutionary Party, had been disputed, with his victory said to have surprised many observers.

The 1930s had also seen violence between rival political groups, the threat of a counter-coup (there were at least two attempts), with the police and armed supporters of rival factions clashing. The effects of the Depression, which hit Panama hard, added to the problems of trying to rescue the country's economy, and to the popular unrest, resentment. There had even, briefly, been the risk of US troops once more being called upon to intervene, in 1932, when a huge angry crowd broke into the Presidential Palace.[27]

It was against this backdrop, and rising international tensions causing the US to work to improve defences of the Canal, that more political turmoil was caused by the sudden death of President Arosemena, and that the 1940 election campaign would be held.

[27] https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/publicando-historia/220612/angustioso-inicio-presidencia-harmodio-arias

The Second Vice-President, Ezequiel Fernández Jaén, of the National Revolutionary Party (*Partido Nacional Revolucionario* or PNR), had succeeded President Arosemena after he died on 16 December 1939, serving for just three days until Augusto Samuel Boyd, who was the First Vice-President, could return from his post as Ambassador to the US and take over as President. Meanwhile, Jaén was succeeded as leader of the PNR by Arnulfo.[28]

President from 19 December 1939, Augusto Samuel Boyd served until 1 December 1940. He was the son of one of the founders of the Republic, who had been briefly President himself.[29] He is best known for the Transisthmian Highway, also known as the Boyd-Roosevelt Highway in his honour and that of President Roosevelt, which opened (to military traffic initially) in 1942, as the first trans-isthmus road.[30] He was not of the same party as Arosemena and chose his would-be successor in Alfaro, who would stand against, and lose to, Arias Madrid in 1940. Meanwhile, the PNR had offered candidacy on its part to Arnulfo.

On 1 December 1939, the National Elections Board was formed to oversee the election. All of its members (which included Arnulfo's brother and former President Harmodio) were, noted the US Ambassador William Dawson, "*ardent Arnulfistas*".

In the election, Arnulfo made his anti-American stance one of the bases of his platform. In addition to perceived commercial exploitation of the country, he and his allies could

[28] When he became President, Arias Madrid appointed Fernández Jaén as Ambassador to Costa Rica. In this role he negotiated and signed the Echandi-Fernández Jaén boundary treaty, which ended decades of friction between the two countries (which had led included the short-lived Coto War in 1921). He died on 26 March 1946.

[29] For just five days in 1910, being the second Vice-President, pending the arrival of the first Vice-President, Pablo José Merced de los Dolores Arosemena de Alba. After the elected President, José Domingo de Obaldia, died in March 1910 he was succeeded by his second Vice-President, Carlos Antonio Mendoza Soto (the first Vice-President having also died). However, being of Afro-American descent, Mendoza Soto proved unacceptable to the US and also faced opposition in Panama when he showed interest in seeking re-election, and the National Assembly voted to have Arosemena de Alba replace him.

[30] Linking Panama City and Colón, its construction had been one of the terms of the 1936 Hull-Alfaro Treaty.

point to Article 136 of the Panamanian Constitution, allowing the US the right of intervention in the country, as evidence of the country's second-class status.[31]

Panamanian complaints about outsiders had been exacerbated by the influx of even more foreigners, especially of Spaniards fleeing the Civil War and other Europeans escaping from the war and threat of war in Europe. Immigrants dominated the commerce of the cities of Panama and Colón, giving reason to a growing resentment. Numbers of US servicemen and workers were also increasing, as efforts continued to bolster the defences of the Canal.

Economically, though the Panamanian state remained in a poor state, following the tough years of the 1920s and 1930s, made worse by the effects of the Great Depression, there were hopes of improvement. In 1939, the US Congress had finally approved the 1936 Arias-Roosevelt Treaty, which opened the Canal Zone market to local produce, especially beef, beer, and dairy products – and a substantial increase in the annual payment made to Panama.[32] On the other hand, there was uneasiness regarding the workers' movement, which organised frequent strikes, in the midst of the spread of socialist ideas and the awareness of workers' power after the Tenants' Movement of 1925.[33]

It was a dirty campaign from the start. The *Arnulfists* accused the Popular Front of being "*followers of communist and Stalinist doctrines*". Meanwhile, Alfaro said that the "*government is preparing the biggest fraud in history*", and he called Arias Madrid a "*Creole führer*" and constantly complained about how the government favoured him as its *'official'* candidate.

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[31] Article 136 of the 1903 Constitution granted the US the right to intervene in any part of the Republic in the event the public peace was disturbed. Article 136 had often been invoked by the party in power to control the actions of the opposition and was also instrumental in establishing a precedent for a Panamanian military to later intervene in political matters:
https://scholarsrepository.llu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1539&context=etd
As mentioned above, the 1936 Treaty allowed for this to be revoked in due course.

[32] Which had been agreed in the Hull-Alfaro Treaty of 1936.

[33] Despite a 1932 repetition of that movement being forcibly repressed by President Harmodio Arias Madrid.

It was hardly a fair fight, even leaving aside any physical intimidation of Alfaro's supporters. The governing administration saw to that the Popular Front was not represented on electoral boards, and the government even took 10% of public officials' salaries to cover the expenses of Arias Madrid's candidacy.

When supporters of Alfaro organised a demonstration in the Plaza de Santa Ana in Panama City, "*a group of officials followed by the National Police on foot and on horseback appeared and began to shoot to disperse the demonstrators. The members of the police knocked down Alfaro's portrait, trampled it and smashed it with swords*".

Unsurprisingly, US Ambassador told the State Department that the only way Alfaro could win was "*with the intervention of the United States*". A Captain McIntyre, in charge of security for the Canal Zone, thought similarly, reporting to Washington that the *Policia Nacional* was taking an active part in politics, supporting Arias Madrid. According to McIntyre, among the 1,600 members of the police there were "*many criminal elements*" and their members had orders to shoot to kill.

The US Ambassador described Arias Madrid as follows - "*Arias is intelligent, brave, strong, of great will, pleasant manners, a good conversationalist and an extraordinary leader*", but he went on to say that he was also violent, impulsive, vindictive, unscrupulous, selfish, volatile, impulsive, with depressive tendencies, allied to dictatorial and fascist tendencies.[34]

At the beginning of April 1940, the news began to circulate that the Popular Front was preparing an uprising. The Government increased security measures and surveillance of opposition leaders. Then, on 28 April, several arrests were made, with weapons and bombs seized. The leaders of the movement took refuge in the Hotel Tivoli across the border in the Canal Zone.

[34] https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/primer-triunfo-arnulfo-electoral-cuestionado-BKLE124612

Arnulfo was elected President by a landslide in 1940, at the age of 39, heading a mass movement known as *Panamefiismo*. This stood for nationalism, which in Panama's situation meant opposition to US hegemony.[35] Not only this, but his pledge to rid Panama of foreign interference and those profiting from their presence in the country, meant that he aspired to rid the country of non-Hispanics[36] (which meant not only North Americans – the term then usually applied to those from the US - but also West Indians,[37] Chinese, Hindus,[38] and Jews). To the US, he also seemed susceptible to the influence of Nazi and fascist agents.[39]

By this time, the population of Panama City had risen to 100,000, swollen by immigrants, especially Europeans, fleeing the war and workers seeking employment in the expansion of US Canal defences. The economy had become heated, and many foreigners had begun to compete commercially with Panamanians, who then felt this to be unfair competition. Arias Madrid promised Panamanians that he was the solution to this problem.[40] The Panamanians who elected Arias Madrid did so expecting changes in the distribution of the national wealth.[41]

The PNR membership mainly consisted of former members of *Accion Comunal*, teachers, shop owners, government workers, and *mestizo*. They anticipated a

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[35] Among the consequences of his campaigns, banks such as the National City Bank and Chase National Bank found themselves compelled to move their offices to the Canal Zone: https://scholarsrepository.llu.edu/etd/535.

[36] He was quoted as saying that –
"*We fear a black cloud of English speakers occupying our city…our people crave measures to stop racial degeneration—minimally, creating obstacles against the entry of parasitic races*".
https://nacla.org/beyond-transportation-panama-diablo-rojos-rolling-artwork

[37] The US refused to deport the West Indians and other non-Hispanics. A distinction was made by the Arias Madrid government between West Indian blacks and what were termed Jamaicanos-Americans.

[38] The term for those from India at the time.

[39] The US harboured fears (not wholly unjustified) of German influence, and pro-German sympathies in many parts of Latin America.

[40] https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/arnulfo-arias-madrid/?fbclid=IwAR1UbFenl4SCIRTjyb0a-C5LNj8XZ2A4HtbT5q5Tt8WVaDN46bd_Wq997GE

[41] *The Legacy of the Three Presidencies of Arnulfo Arias Madrid* by Sandra Blackman (Loma Linda University Electronic Theses, Dissertations & Projects, 1985):
https://scholarsrepository.llu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi

redistribution of the ownership of retail businesses, and there was much talk about a new Constitution, and one would eventually be approved in 1941.[42]

The landslide in favour of Arias Madrid,[43] aside from his popularity, resulted from his opponent having effectively withdrawn from the contest. Dr Ricardo Alfaro[44] had headed a coalition of liberals and socialists and was defeated only after a series of disorders said to have been incited by his followers (those more likely by supporters of Aris Madrid), and which caused Alfaro to be discredited and to withdraw from the race, with his supporters subsequently boycotting the election.[45]

After the crackdown in April 1940, Alfaro had published a manifesto in which he asked the population "*not to vote*", and announced the withdrawal of the Popular Front from the elections – saying that this was due to the lack of due guarantees, and that he himself was in danger of death.


LA ESTRELLA DE PANAMA

POR MAS DE 85,000 VOTOS FUE ELEGIDO AYER PRESIDENTE EL DR. ARNULFO ARIAS

Se mantiene aún Dunkerque ante la furia nazista

"Afianzar el triunfo es mi preocupación"

Hitler espera la entrada de Italia

Turquía está lista para actuar

Following Alfaro's withdrawal, and just hours to go before the elections, Arnulfo gave a long and provocative speech that was broadcast on the radio, in which he claimed that "*The era of pain and misery of our working masses is over*". He promised fundamental transformations for the country, social justice, distribution of wealth

[42] *The Legacy of the Three Presidencies of Arnulfo Arias Madrid* by Sandra Blackman (Loma Linda University Electronic Theses, Dissertations & Projects, 1985): https://scholarsrepository.llu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1539&context=etd

[43] He won with the highest number of votes that had been achieved in any electoral election in the country. On 18 October 1940, Hitler sent him a telegram, congratulating him on assuming the Presidency.

[44] He would return as foreign minister under Arias Madrid's successor in 1941, helped to draft the 1942 bases agreement, and then resigned in 1947 in protest at plans to grant the US what he regarded as excessive control over such sites postwar.

[45] https://scholarsrepository.llu.edu/etd/535

among all Panamanians, the dissemination of culture and the defence of Panamanians from unfair foreign competition.

With Alfaro's *Frente Popular* boycotting the election Arias Madrid won unopposed, using the nationalist motto "*solo Dios sobre nosotros*" ("We answer only to God").

As we have seen, Alfaro had previously served as interim President following the coup in 1931, and had negotiated the 1936 Treaty with the Roosevelt administration which had gone some way to improve the terms of the relationship with the US – including ending Panama's status as a US protectorate, as well as ending the US peremptory right to require additional land for the security and operation of the Canal (however, due to delays in ratification in the US, the Treaty would come into effect until mid-1939). He would return as foreign minister under Arias Madrid's successor in 1941, helped to draft the 1942 agreement for additional US bases outside the Canal Zone, and then resigned in 1947 in protest at plans to grant the US what he regarded as long term and excessive control over such sites postwar.

Candidatos	Partido	Votación
Arnulfo Arias Madrid	Partido Nacional Revolucionario	107750 votos
Ricardo Joaquín Alfaro	Frente Popular	3772 votos

THE SHORT, BUT EVENTFUL, PRESIDENCY

During his term in office, Arias Madrid would introduce an immigration ban, and revoke citizenship for many, particularly English-speaking Blacks. He would confiscate shops and instigate xenophobic violence against immigrant merchants.[46] The racist tendencies of the new administration were illustrated by an additional clause for the new 1941 Constitution, a clause approved in November 1940, calling for the children of those of Chinese and Caribbean black origin whose original language was not Spanish to be denied nationality.

[46] https://nacla.org/beyond-transportation-panama-diablo-rojos-rolling-artwork

It is said that Arias Madrid discriminated against the so-called "Antillean blacks" because they did not integrate in, and regarded themselves as more British than Panamanian, refused to learn Spanish and give up English.[47] This latter point certainly appeared to irritate ordinary Panamanians, but it is claimed that another cause of friction was the fact that they appeared to be allowed greater access to the Canal Zone and did jobs – their English seeming to give them an advantage, despite US racial attitudes - which many Panamanians were unable or reluctant to perform.[48]

The fears of Arias Madrid having been influenced by the European fascists appeared justified when, during 1941, his administration introduced a law prohibiting Jewish immigration and depriving anyone of the Jewish faith without at least one Panamanian parent of their citizenship.[49] However, the inherent anti-Semitism would appear to continue under the following De La Guardia administration.

On 14 February 1941, the National Assembly passed a Law barring aliens from the operation of all retail businesses, with citizenship being a prerequisite, effectively "nationalising" them. It also banned foreigners from operating as commission merchants and fuel distributors. At the time, foreigners owned most of the country's retail stores, and the majority of bars and other establishments for the sale of alcohol were owned by Americans, who were also involved in other branches of the retail trade. Chinese, Jews, and East Indians operated many groceries, dry goods and general stores throughout the country – with the Chinese community being hardest hit.[50]

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[47] The administration promulgated a law to protect the integrity of the Spanish language, which he felt to be a symbol of Panamanian sovereignty *vis a* vis the Americans. Ironically, at the time, the country's major newspaper was published in English, with a Spanish language supplement. The President persuaded the family owning the newspaper to reverse this situation.

[48] https://nacla.org/beyond-transportation-panama-diablo-rojos-rolling-artwork

[49] In 1941, an official memorandum sent by the US Ambassador described the situation in Panama under Arias Madrid as follows –
"*what has developed in Panama is about as near an approach to Hitlerism as the characteristics of Latin Americans and the peculiar circumstances affecting Panama could be expected to permit*".

[50] https://scholarsrepository.llu.edu/etd/535

In 1943, President de la Guardia reflected on the controversial Law 24 that the Arias Madrid administration had passed, and which had nationalised and regulated retail trade. He said that it had been beneficial for the country. Indeed, he stated that "*our fellow citizens... have had the opportunity to engage in trade, for which they have shown unsuspected aptitudes*". He added: "*I trust that over time trade in the hands of Panamanians will gain greater momentum and its profits will remain primarily in the hands of our fellow citizens*".[51]

The President even replaced the national motto *Pro-Mundi Beneficio*, found on the national emblem, and replaced it with *Honor, Justicia y Libertad*. The new theme was intended to reject the concept of Panama as a simply a place of transit and commerce, this being regarded as a stigma that had plagued the nation since colonial times.[52]

One of the major positive achievements of the administration was the creation of the Social Security Fund (CSS), through Law 23 of March 21, 1941. Furthermore, the new Constitution guaranteed freedom of speech, press, assembly, and religion, while recognising the Roman Catholic religion as that of the majority of the population.[53] In addition, the laws of the family patrimony were established, Balboa paper money was (briefly) issued,[54] the female identity card was introduced, and women were granted the right to vote.[55] The administration also established a cattleman's' bank (*Banco Agropecurio*) and the Bank for Urbanisation and Rehabilitation.[56]

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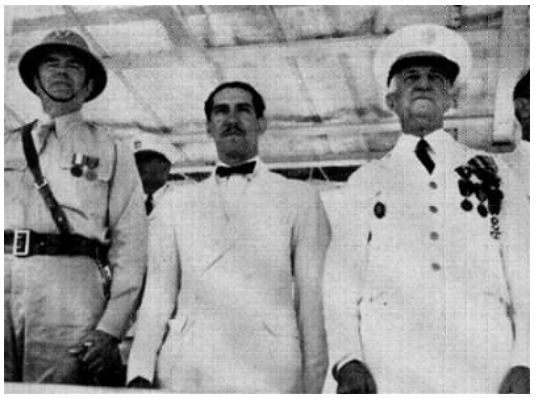
[51] *Panamá durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial (1941-1945)* Biblioteca Nacional.
[52] *The Legacy of the Three Presidencies of Arnulfo Arias Madrid* by Sandra Blackman (Loma Linda University Electronic Theses, Dissertations & Projects, 1985).
[53] https://scholarsrepository.llu.edu/etd/535
https://www.asamblea.gob.pa/sites/default/files/2018-09/constitucion%201941.pdf (in Spanish)
[54] One of Arias Madrid's initiatives, he wanted and had established a central bank, but it and the banknotes lasted only a matter of days. For more, see https://raytodd.blog/2024/06/30/panama-in-world-war-2-paper-money-comes-and-goes-and-trams-just-go-while-traffic-moves-to-the-right/
[55] https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/arnulfo-arias-madrid/?fbclid=IwAR1UbFenl4SCIRTjyb0a-C5LNj8XZ2A4HtbT5q5Tt8WVaDN46bd_Wq997GE
[56] *We Answer Only to God: Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947* by Thomas L Pearcy (University of New Mexico Press, 1968).



President Arias Madrid reviews US troops.
On the left of the photograph is General Jarman, and on the right is General Van Voorhis, Commander of the Canal Zone.[57]

During the 1930s the *Policia Nacional* had become an important player in the political scene, its use (or threat of its use) replacing the threat of US military intervention as a means of controlling opposition.[58] Successive administrations had sought to augment the force with its own supporters, and to ensure loyalty they had provided more money and facilities, modernising it and making it more professional.[59] However, Arias Madrid sought to revamp the force, and (like his predecessors) use it as a political tool, providing it with new uniforms and equipping it with sub-machine guns.[60]

The force had, because he had the support of the acting President Augusto Boyd, supported Arias Madrid during the election – including arresting and jailing supporters of his rival, and had gunfights with armed supporters.[61] When elected he continued to seek to rely on its support. In November 1940, he rehired a popular senior officer, Remón Cantera, but sent him to a military school in the US for training.[62]

The plan seemed to be to effectively create a police state, and Arias Madrid established a new secret police, the *Policia Secreta Nacional* (of PSN),[63] in June 1941. Its charter

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[57] http://www.czimages.com/CZMemories/Lifemag/lmindex.htm

[58] In 1935, Arnulfo's brother, Harmodio, had appointed his brother-in-law as National Police Chief, who became forces' Inspector General in 1939.

[59] For much more about the *Policia Nacional*, see…

[60] *The Legacy of the Three Presidencies of Arnulfo Arias Madrid* by Sandra Blackman (Loma Linda University Electronic Theses, Dissertations & Projects, 1985).

[61] In 1941, a US State Department official reflected on the recent election and stated that –

> *Boyd virtually assured the election of Arnulfo Arias in the most recent presidential election by permitting the National Police and other government agencies to overawe and intimidate the electorate in favour of Arias.*

[62] Remón Cantera had been dismissed by President Harmodio Arias Madrid in 1936 after becoming (like many other officers) involved in the turbulent politics of the decade. He would return, in his role as "kingmaker", to deny Arnulfo the Presidency in 1948, but then install him in 1949, only to depose him once more in 1951, before becoming President himself in 1952. For more on this character, see …

[63] The PSN was created under Law No 20 of 1941. In 1960, President Roberto Chiari disbanded the *Policia Secreta Nacional* and instead established the Department of Investigations (DENI), under the

made it independent of the *Policia Nacional*, answerable only to the President and the Minister of Government and Justice. This move only added to distrust and resentment in the *Policia Nacional*, with officers resentful of civilian interference in their affairs. The reason (or excuse) for its separation from the *Policia Nacional* was said to be because such responsibilities were too great for the existing force, and that the ordinary police were not trained or equipped to do the work to be undertaken by the new body.[64]

As the war in Europe progressed, Arias Madrid maintained the neutrality of Panama, and refused to break off diplomatic relations with the Axis countries. He also refused US calls to arm Panamanian ships.[65]

Irritating the US military, during 1940-41, he sought to delay the additional bases outside the Canal Zone that the US military considered essential for adequate defence of the Canal, seeking to make use of the negotiations as leverage to obtain undertakings and extensive economic assistance to Panama.[66] His policies and attitudes alarmed the US, concerned over the effect on the security of the Canal, and the US Government concluded that he would have to go. In May 1941, the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) stated that –

> "*the present conditions are considered dangerous to the security of the canal and it is believed that they should be corrected as soon as possible. A local*

Public Ministry. In 1961, a further Law (Law No 61) separated DENI from the Public Ministry, once more bringing under the Presidency, responsible for investigating threats to national security etc. After the 1968 military coup by the National Guard, DENI became an investigative body and intelligence and counterintelligence arm of the National Guard, until the US invasion of 1989 overthrew the Noriega regime. After the invasion, the new government passed a Law (Law No.16 of 9 July 1991) which created the Judicial Technical Police (PTJ), under the control of the Attorney General's Office and hence the Public Ministry and the judiciary. The PTJ was, in turn, replace by the Directorate of Judicial Investigation (DIJ) as a directorate of the (new) National Police in 2007 (Law No.69 of 2007): https://www.cnics.org.pa/resena-historica/

[64] *Report on the Police Forces of the Republic of Panama* (International Cooperation Administration, Washington DC, September 158): https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnadw902.pdf

[65] *We Answer Only to God: Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947* by Thomas L Pearcy (University of New Mexico Press, 1968).
Indicating the more accommodating administration, one of the first measures adopted following Arias Madrid's removal was a Executive Decree of 20 October which revoked the Resolution which had prohibited the arming of Panama-flag vessels.
Panamá durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial (1941-1945) Biblioteca Nacional.

[66] Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs Vol.12 No. 3 (July 1970).

revolution to throw out the crooked pro-Axis officialdom would be preferable to intervention by US forces".[67]

However, the US were by no means the only ones in Panama who were keen to be rid of Arnulfo. Even his brother, Harmodio, urged the US Embassy to move against him.

THE "COTITO MASSACRE"

During the war, US diplomatic reports reported that Arias Madrid, "*had built at least one concentration camp*" to isolate Jewish refugees. True or not, this added to the rumours of the death of a number of Jews of Swiss origin during the short-lived presidency. Such allegations were rejected by the Panamanian Government. However, in 1941 Arias Madrid had introduced a law prohibiting Jewish immigration, and depriving anyone of the Jewish faith without at least one Panamanian parent of their citizenship.[68]

In mid-1941, it was alleged that a special squad of police, said to comprise Guatemalans, undertook an operation during which shots were fired and, according to press reports, 12 people died. However, other reports put the death toll at 50. This tale being taken up and broadcast by CNN, but it only appeared in 1984, when Arias Madrid was once more standing for President, and the ruling Noriega dictatorship wanted to blacken his reputation.

In fact, what had happened was that a small religious community of Swiss-Germans had been attacked by a squad of *Policia Nacional* in Chiriqui. There was no evidence of Arias Madrid having ordered the attack, and he would have had little involvement in the subsequent cover-up, as he was deposed just three months later.[69]

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[67] *We Answer Only to God: Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947* by Thomas L Pearcy (University of New Mexico Press, 1968).

[68] New laws also imposed limits on various ethnic groups from obtaining citizenship, and barred those of Chinese, Jewish and Arab origin of owning businesses, shops and property.

[69] https://www.prensa.com/vivir/cotito-un-documental-historico/
See also https://raytodd.blog/2025/08/08/panama-in-world-war-2-the-cotito-massacre-in-1941/

In 1984, Arias Madrid was quoted as saying that the police captain said to be involved had been, "*acting on his own initiative, [and] had killed several members of a religious community*".[70]

THE 1941 COUP

The primary concern of the US and the Canal Zone authorities was the security and operation of the Canal. The fact was that the Arias Madrid administration appeared less cooperative than its predecessor (and that its successor would be), at a time when the US forces had realised just how badly it needed additional defence sites outside the relatively small Canal Zone – especially if anything like an adequate air defence system was to be established.

In 1941, Life Magazine carried an article in which it was said that, after his election in the previous Autumn, Arias Madrid had adopted a strong nationalist, "'*Panama for Panamanians' policy, and it said that he did not seem disposed to help the US*".[71]
In June 1941, a US State Department memo said that "*it is very probably that a large part of the police force would revolt against the present government if promised American backing*".[72]

In July, the New Zealand editor of the English section of the Panama American newspaper was deported following his attacks on *'totalitarian tendencies*' in the government.[73]

US officials made no attempt to conceal their relief when the *Policia Nacional* took advantage of Arias Madrid's temporary absence from the country to depose him. In

[70] https://www.elistmopty.com/2018/06/el-genocidio-de-judios-en-panama.html
[71] http://www.czimages.com/CZMemories/Lifemag/lmindex.htm
[72] *We Answer Only to God: Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947* by Thomas L Pearcy (University of New Mexico Press, 1968).
[73] *A History of the United States Caribbean Defense Command (1941-1947)* by Cesar A. Vasquez (Florida International University, FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations No. 2458, 2016): https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/2458

fact, it was the US Army chief of intelligence in the Canal Zone, Captain Paul McIntyre, who advised the Minister of Government and Justice, Ricardo de la Guardia, that Arias Madrid had left the country.[74]

At 5:30 in the morning on Tuesday, 7 October 1941, travelling under the name "A. Madrid", Arnulfo boarded a Pan American Airways airliner at France Field, Colón bound for Cienfuegos, Cuba. He was said to have left to visit his oculist in Havana (though his mistress, Cuban artist, Anita de la Vega was also there). However, he had failed to inform the National Assembly, as his new 1941 Constitution required. When asked his wife said he was deep sea fishing, and his secretary said he was visiting the San Blas indigenous reservation.[75]

France Field, though used at the time by airlines, was a US Army airfield, and Army intelligence immediately warned the Minister of Government and Justice, Ricardo Adolfo de la Guardia, who, together with high-ranking officers of the *Policia Nacional*, took advantage of his being out of the country to overthrow him.

With Arias Madrid out of the country, his opponents invoked Article III of the Constitution to depose him.[76] On 9 October, judges of the Supreme Court declared that Arias Madrid had "*suddenly left the country, leaving the position vacant*" and that, since it was not possible to locate the First Vice-President (Dr. José Pezet, who was imprisoned by the coup plotters as his views too closely resembled those of Arias Madrid), they called on the Second Designate, the pro-US businessman Ernesto Jaén Guardia, who took office before the Court (this appointment being swiftly approved by the US Government). However, this new man resigned after just two hours, giving way to the planned successor, Ricardo de la Guardia.[77]

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[74] It would be de la Guardia who would succeed to the presidency.
The Legacy of the Three Presidencies of Arnulfo Arias Madrid by Sandra Blackman (Loma Linda University Electronic Theses, Dissertations & Projects, 1985):
https://scholarsrepository.llu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1539&context=etd

[75] https://scholarsrepository.llu.edu/etd/535

[76] *We Answer Only to God: Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947* by Thomas L Pearcy (University of New Mexico Press, 1968).

[77] Incidentally, Ernesto Jaén Guardia was the new President's brother-in-law.

The Third Vice-President, Aníbal Ríos Delgado, stayed out of the country, being in Lima at the time, for fear of being arrested like other followers of Arias Madrid.

The intention had always been that the Minister of Government and Justice, Ricardo de la Guardia, would eventually permanently replace Arias Madrid, as he did.[78]

Arias Madrid was to return to Panama for a short stay before going into exile in Mexico and Central America. He remained outside the country until 13 October 1945,[79] when he returned and held a political rally in the Plaza de Santa Ana in Panama City, denounced the imperialist aspirations of the US and swore vengeance against those crucial to his earlier fall from power.[80]

HE RISES AGAIN, FAILS, BUT EVENTUALLY SUCCEEDED – FOR A TIME

He ran unsuccessfully for President in 1948 as a coalition candidate (having founded another party, the Authentic Revolutionary Party or *Partido Revolucionario Auténtico* in November 1947).



Arnulfo Arias in his second inauguration as president

However, he regained the Presidency once more in 1949, thanks to arrangements made behind the scenes by Remón Cantera, who was by now the chief

Historia y Biografía de la Justicia Panameña en sus primeros cien años (Órgano Judicial de la República de Panamá, 2003)
https://www.organojudicial.gob.pa/uploads/wp_repo/uploads/2010/06/libro1.pdf

[78] Ibid.

[79] He was not allowed to return to attend his mother's funeral after she died in October 1943.

[80] *We Answer Only to God: Politics and the Military in Panama 1903-1947* by Thomas L Pearcy (University of New Mexico Press, 1968).

of the *Policia Nacional*.[81] His opponents fled before the police could detain them, with former Presidents La Guardia and Jimenez seeking sanctuary in the Canal Zone.[82] Amid protests and general chaos in the country, Arias Madrid reinstated his 1941 Constitution, having suspended a new one brought in during 1946, contending that this would help resolve the crisis.[83]


LA ESTRELLA DE PANAMA

FUNDADO EN 1855

PANAMA, R. de P., MARTES 8 de MAYO de 1951

DEROGADA LA CONSTITUCION DE 1946; EN VIGENCIA LA DE 1941

DISUELTOS LA ASAMBLEA Y LOS CONCEJOS; LOS MAGISTRADOS Y EL PROCURADOR, EN INTERINIDAD

Se Inaugura Hoy la Convención de las Cámaras de Comercio

Dimitió ayer el Ministro Ricardo M. Arias E.

Suspéndese el Recurso de Habeas Corpus; se Convocará a Elecciones de Diputados

Se dirigió al país el Min. de Obaldía

Se Elegirán Miembros de los Ayuntamientos

"Daremos vida nueva al país", dijo el Pdte.

El Contralor H. de Obarrio cumple años hoy

Las fuerzas de la ONU llegan a Chunchon

On 7 May 1951, Arias Madrid repealed the 1946 Constitution in favour of the 1941 one, leading to protests, and he was overthrown on the 10 May

This "new" Arias Madrid was noticeably less anti-American than previously, pledged to defend the Canal and later even backed US policies over the Korean War. However, he returned once more to the grievances he had raised before the war, when he had tried to bargain additional US defence sites for US concessions.

In 1951, with the country wracked by rampant corruption, still recovering from the postwar economic downturn, and with continuing unrest, the *Policia Nacional* once more moved against Arias Madrid.[84] This removal was much more violent than the last.

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[81] And "power behind the throne" from 1947. He turned the National Police into the National Guard in 1953, after becoming President himself. For more on this important figure, see https://raytodd.blog/2026/10/16/panama-jose-antonio-remon-cantera-police-chief-and-assassinated-president/

[82] *US-Panamanian Relations Since 1941* by Lester D Langley (Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs, Vol. 12, No. 3, July 1970), Cambridge University Press: https://www.jstor.org/stable/175020?read-now=1&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

[83] https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/arnulfo-arias-madrid

[84] Remón Cantera was careful to not be personally involved.



Arnulfo is evicted from the Presidency just after the 1951 coup d'état

The National Assembly then tried the deposed President, and his political rights were suspended for life (they were restored by President Chiari in 1960).[85]

MORE ATTEMPTED COMEBACKS

Arias Madrid tried a further unsuccessful comeback in 1964 (alleging fraud and irregularities when he lost)[86] – that same year, aged 63, he married 18-year-old Mireya Moscoso

However, he did win the 1968 elections as leader of a five-party coalition, in another violent and controversial election.[87] This time, after attempting to gain control of the National Assembly and the Supreme Court, as well as trying to restructure command of the *Guardia Nacional* (the police force having been transformed into this in the mid-50s), he was ousted once more, fleeing to the Canal Zone after only 11 days, and thence travelling to the US.[88] This coup resulted in the military dictatorship that would last until the US deposed Noriega in 1989.[89]

He returned home once more in 1978, and tried again to become President in 1984, at the age of 83, representing the Democratic Opposition Alliance (*ADO Civilista*). However, when exit polls showed that he had a substantial lead, General Noriega

[85] https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/arnulfo-arias-madrid

[86] In 1964, Time Magazine described him as "*a fiery speaker with a record of totalitarian flirtations, including Nazi sympathies during World War II*", but said he "*now campaigns on a platform of friendship with the US (but "justice" on the canal) and preaches land reform for Panama's havenots*".

[87] Ibid.

[88] https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/golpe-estado-11-octubre-1968

[89] https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/publicando-historia/11-de-octubre-de-1968-el-golpe-que-abrio-21-anos-de-dictadura-en-panama-CF16462347

halted the count and declared that his candidate had won and, once more, Arias Madrid fled the country.

Following this final attempt at power, Arias Madrid supported the Civilist Crusade[90] and, having survived an attempted shooting in 1987 (blamed on the Noriega regime) and in failing health, he died in Miami on 10 August 1988 at the age of 86.[91] He was buried in Panama on his 87th birthday later in August but his body was subsequently removed for a state funeral and reburied in his hometown of Penonomé on 8 January 2012.[92]

Ray Todd
Panama City
Republic of Panama
20 November 2026

[90] Formed in 1987 as an alliance involving civic, productive, professional and commercial organisations, and the support of the Catholic Church. It was inspired by the Civilist movement in the Philippines in 1986, which had overthrown President Marcos. Large-scale demonstrations were held, such as on Via Espania and Calle 50 – often repressed by the "Doberman" anti-riot PDF units.
https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/cruzada-civilista/
[91] https://www.biografiasyvidas.com/biografia/a/arias_arnulfo.htm
[92] https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/arnulfo-arias-madrid