This watermark does not appear in the registered version - http://www.clicktoconvert.com

INTERVIEW WITH:
LEGISLATOR ELISEO VARGAS
FACTION LEADER OF THE SOCIAL CHRISTIAN UNITY PARTY
(PARTIDO UNIDAD SOCIAL CRIST IANO - PUSC)
COSTA RICA, MAY 26, 2000

JOHN: To begin, how's the legislative agenda coordinated among the parties in the Assembly?

ELISEO VARGAS: There are seven political parties here in the Legislative Assembly. Out of those seven political parties, there are five of those political parties with only seven legislators. Out of the total conformation of 57 legislators, 50 belong to the majority parties; 27 to the *Partido Unidad Social Cristiano - PUSC* (Social Christian Unity Party) and 23 to the *Partido Liberación Nacional -PLN* (National Liberation Party). Here, according to the regulations, every month all of the faction leaders of all the political parties should meet together and agree on an agenda of 15 bills (*proyectos*). Five would pertain to the minority parties and ten to the majority parties. Generally, although it's in the regulations, if we don't come to an agreement that agenda wouldn't exist. What we do then is come to an agreement among the factions so that we have 38 votes. We come to an agreement with the majority opposition, in this case, with the National Liberation Party; so, their votes, together with ours, add up to 50. In other words, we always have the 38 votes in order to make the parliamentary agenda.

The agenda's discussed at the level of the legislative plenary, with the list of bills that are there and we come to an agreement about which [bills] we will possibly discuss first and also in order to be able to send some of those bills to the commissions with....., which are commissions of 19 legislators that also require 38 votes in order for them to be analyzed and discussed there.

JOHN: Inside the faction, how's it decided what the faction's position will be in a certain voting?
ELISEO VARGAS: Every Monday there are faction meetings. In other words, the legislators of the Liberation Party faction, the 27 legislators meet and it's the faction leader's responsibility to lead those meetings, and direct the agenda that will be discussed there. Then, strategies are discussed, projects of interest to the faction are discussed, the faction's relationship with the Executive Power is discussed and decisions are made that emerge from the faction meetings.

JOHN: There, it's decided if it's an open or closed voting.

ELISEO VARGAS: In the faction meetings, when we have projects that have to do with our ideology, we generally close ranks (*cerrar filas*) in favor of that project or when they're very important projects of national interest that we consider are in accord with our ideas, we also close ranks and we all vote [together]. On some other opportunities there are more open topics where the legislators' positions are quite conflicting and they don't clash ideologically with our faction's position. So, on these opportunities we do it according to each legislator's own conscience.

JOHN: In yesterday's newspaper it said that probably next week the faction's position on the presidential re-election would be open. This would be something important.

This watermark does not appear in the registered version - http://www.clicktoconvert.com

ELISEO VARGAS: It's an extremely important topic and this could be what comes out of the faction, which isn't a decision that we've made at this time.

JOHN: Is it normal for all of the members of the faction to vote together?

ELISEO VARGAS: Usually. We're quite a homogeneous faction. Generally we make a point of (*nos apuntamos*) new bills (*proyectos*) and the faction generally votes unanimously on that topic.

JOHN: When are nominal votings used? When is a registry of each legislator's votes made?

ELISEO VARGAS: It's very rare [for a registry to be made] of each legislator. The legislators can consign their vote; in other words, in a motion there can be the possibility that there be a nominal voting in the legislative plenary, but the legislators who want to consign their vote can do it; be it for the reasoning of the vote or it can be that the legislator assigns his vote.

JOHN: What would the consignment of these legislators be?

ELISEO VARGAS: Some legislators want to leave patent that - be it by groups of interest in that project, or rather that they voted that project negatively - they want to make known to those groups that they weren't a part of the majority that voted for them or the opposite; so, he leaves his position patent in the records.

JOHN: How's the electoral data taken for the voting?

ELISEO VARGAS: No, here, what's done is that they're counted. They stand up and they're counted.

JOHN: In the plenary, are the votings a matter of partisan discipline?

ELISEO VARGAS: Remember, it's required here that 38 legislators be present to have a quorum in the Legislative Assembly. If there aren't 38 legislators present, the session can not begin nor can it continue. So, it's necessary for them to be present in order to carry out the votings.

JOHN: It's a reality to give their consent to the faction's position without voting "against" or it's a lack of interest when sometimes legislators don't attend because they don't agree with the faction's position?

ELISEO VARGAS: Sometimes that can happen, that some [legislators] prefer not to attend because the faction's position is conflicting, to his true understanding, to the position that he might possibly assume; so, it's preferable that he stays outside of that.

JOHN: Also, how do the faction's legislators know how to vote in the faction's presence (*delante de la fracción*)?

This watermark does not appear in the registered version - http://www.clicktoconvert.com

ELISEO VARGAS: It's very simple, because we all know one another; we've been colleagues the whole time; it's a limited number, so it's easily known.

JOHN: It's a strange thing in comparison with other assemblies, no, because here..... What happens if a legislator votes against the faction in a disciplined voting? What would happen?

ELISEO VARGAS: Remember, there are matters that are voted by majority and they're accepted unanimously. When the matters are like that, the faction votes unanimously. There are other matters where eventually the legislators are allowed to differ or not, and the legislator explains his reasoning about a position. However, there are matters that are really like things of the State; then, the decision's made by the majority and it's accepted unanimously.

JOHN: How does the prohibition of the legislators' re-election affect at the level of the faction? As it's known, in Mexico the re-election of legislators is also prohibited and in the United States, at the state level [re-election's prohibited] in like half the states; like in half of the States it's also prohibited. But in Mexico it's said that the prohibition increases the parties' discipline. In the United States the majority says that the prohibition lowers the unity for different reasons..... But..... in the politics of the United States, because..... in the District Assemblies. But there's been a great attempt here in Costa Rica, to prohibit the re-election.

ELISEO VARGAS: I find that the re-election of legislators has its advantages and its disadvantages, and I see more advantages than disadvantages. In the first place, I find that it can provide some parliamentary culture that's important for them to be able to have; that there are people who can devote themselves to this. It's important, for an integrated vision of the country, that people can really remain in the parliament. This election could help the new people who really could be just entering. So, from that point of view, I find the parliamentary career to be good.

The other thing is that only a short time ago the legislator worried more about the regions that he represented because he had a duty. Furthermore, the duty that his voters chose him so he can be there, even moreso if he wants to return immediately after this, so the concern's immediate. So, they'll be worrying about being able to do a good job for their voters, in order to continue with the position of the re-election, because let's say he's already found pleasure with the work.

It seems to me that these are two immediate-type advantages we could see with the re-election.

With regard to the idea that this doesn't energize the parties because new people come and who knows if this important dynamic of looking for new leaders and all that, it seems to me that those leaders will have greater difficulties in comparison with somebody who's already there. That would be the disadvantage within the political parties. Who has more advantages is me, who's already there [in the Parliament]. I can have a much greater influence. Also, if they're the government's legislators, it's an advantage against the government's influence for by the different communities. So, this perhaps is the

This watermark does not appear in the registered version - http://www.clicktoconvert.com

counterpart to the dynamics that the parties of new leaders can have. I find that that would be the only objection that's found.

JOHN: How has the work of the legislators changed, the elimination some years ago of the earmarked appropriations (*partidas específicas*)?

ELISEO VARGAS: That hasn't been eliminated. In the first place, it hasn't been eliminated because the earmarked appropriations now come from the District Councils (*Concejos Distritales*) to the Municipal Councils. So, there's always an amount for each canton. And after, that a subsequent law eliminates a previous law and then, if you put some appropriation (*partida*) in a budget for certain necessity that the communities can have or something like this, then it's an appropriation that usually's not affected. So, the government's legislators always have to do it. So, in effect, they haven't been eliminated.

JOHN: What was the abolition of the reform?

ELISEO VARGAS: The motivation is, in fact, political. It's that before it was said that the party that's in government has the possibility to give more resources to its communities and one of those resources is that each legislator was assigned an amount to take to their communities. So, they tried to do this by means of a law, through the District Councils. So, now, not only do they have that appropriataion through the district, but rather the legislators have some budget item for movements (*movimientos*) for community needs.

JOHN: Thank you.