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Politics of Panamá

Panamá is a small country with a population of 4,187,163¹. This Spanish speaking country began as a colony of Spain and in 1821 separated and became Colombia. From Colombia, Panamá gained its indolence on 3 November 1903. Since then, Panamá has seen much political change including the United State's acquisition of territory in order to build The Panamá Canal.

It is believed that Panamá actually had civilizations of humans around 12,00 B.C. who used the country as a bridge between North and South America. Archaeologists have found arrowheads from about 9,000 B.C. and there are also traces of agriculture along the Pacific coast of Panama dating back to about 5,000 B.C. Many communities were established along Panamá, now the Talamanca region of Costa Rica. Most evidence about these self-sustaining civilizations is found at Sitio Conte in Central Panamá, which is one of the most famous pre-Columbian archaeological sites in both North and South America. This site was only founded after the Río Grande shifted course and gold artifacts were washed up on the riverbanks. These gold artifacts date back to 750-950 A.D. Harvard archeologists actually excavated at this site and found "some 60 graves, 1,000 gold ornaments, ceramic pottery, and stonework. one of the

¹"Panama Population (LIVE)." *United Arab Emirates Population (2018)* - Worldometers, www.worldometers.info/world-population/panama-population/.

biggest finds was the tomb of a chief who was buried with 22 sacrificial companions and a mountain of gold.”²

Spanish explorer Rodrigo de Bastidas discovers the lands of Panamá in 1501. He and Vasco Núñez de Balboa discovered the country together first. Then in 1502, Christopher Columbus attempted to establish a colony in Río Belén but against the resistance of the locals, failed and instead gained control of Panamá. Once Columbus died in 1506, Diego de Nicuesa was appointed to lead the land. He also tried and failed to establish a colony at Río Belén. Soon after when the Spanish conquistadors found no gold they gave up hope. Balboa instead headed South, to the Inca empire of Peru and discovered the Pacific Ocean. It was also then that he claimed all of the land and ocean he saw for the Spanish King.

Beginning in 1903, Panamá is newly independent from Colombia, and for the first



Panamá Canal, 1903

time in its history is a country of its own. In this same year, the United States under the Presidential Cabinet of Theodore Roosevelt. Then in 1914, after an 11 year

²“Panama Information: Guide to Panamanian History.” *Cuba 2018 Holiday and Festival Guide*, www.anywhere.com/panama/travel-guide/history.

construction, the Panamá Canal was completed. On August 15, 1914 The Panama Canal was inaugurated by a cargo and passenger ship, the U.S. vessel *Ancon*.³ Panamá's independence from Colombia was actually encouraged by the United States since the "Hay-Herrán Treaty" was only allowing part of Panamá to be used. With the successful separation from Colombia, Panamá was able to give the entire territory the United States wanted. The United States held influence over Panamá's political affairs after the purchase of the canal zone. The influence the United States held over Panamá was a Military influence, but in 1936 this changed. The Hull-Alfaro Treaty replaced the Hay-Bunau-Varill Treaty,



President Arnulfo Arias

with this replacement the United States relinquished some rights. One of the rights included in this relinquishment was the right to use troops in the country, outside of the Panamá Canal zone and any ability to seize more land. In addition to this relinquishment, the United States had to pay more each year to Panamá for the Canal zone. With much turmoil between the Panamanians and the Americans, this change in treaty was initiated to hopefully settle some seas. Instead of creating peace, the turmoil continued and in 1964 peaked during a protest. A student protest led by the Panama's

³"Panama Declares Independence." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, www.history.com/this-day-in-history/panama-declares-independence.

led to the death of 27 and injured 500. This day is “Día de Los Mártires” and is celebrated on January 9, each year.

As the United States influenced Panamá less with its new treaty, the Panamanian Army grew much stronger, and in 1968 overtook the government. The Guardia Nacional was able to overthrow the elected president of the time, Arnulfo Arias. The Guardia Nacional made some major changes to the government, some of the changes included dissolving the National Assembly, the Press being censored and the Constitution was suspended. By instilling these changes General Omar Torrijos took the country into a large debt but also regained control of the Panamá Canal and for the United States to withdraw its Military forces from the Latin Country. Panamá gained full control of the Canal Zone on December 31, 1999 for the first time since its creation. Omar Torrijos ultimately died during his presidency in 1981, and two years later a new leader took seizure of the Guardia Nacional, which was Colonel Manuel Antonio Noriega.

Noriega promoted himself to General and made himself a defacto ruler of the country, and had a history in Panamá's secret police, CIA and graduated from the School of the Americas. Noriega changed the name of Guardia Nacional to the Panamá Defense Forces, increased the size of the



Manuel Antonio Noriega

military and enforced members of every city, town and village to inform his paramilitary if someone had any ideas against Noriega or wasn't completely loyal to him. In 1987

Noriega found himself at the center of an international scandal as he was accused of being involved in drug trafficking. Some of the accusations against Noriega were involvement with Colombian drug cartels, murdering political opposers and rigging the elections to allow him to win. Many strikes and demonstrations ensued as Panamanians demanded an impeachment of Noriega. The president at the time, President Eric Arturo Delvalle attempted to rid Noriega in February of 1988, which led to the president fleeing the country and Noriega keeping his tight hold over the country. In place of Delvalle, Noriega appointed a president who was more willing to appease Noriega. However, Delvalle did not win the candidacy and instead Noriega declared himself president on December 15, 1989. His first act was to declare war on the United States as



Former President Eric Arturo Delvalle

they had imposed tight economic sanctions on Panama, ended a trade agreement and froze assets in the United States= and discontinued the payment of fees for the Canal Zone in order to weaken the government and to rid Noriega. On December 16, 1989, a day after Noriega declared war on the United States a US Marine was murdered after leaving a restaurant in Panama City. On December 20, 1989 Panama City was attacked by aircraft, tanks and troops. This operation was called "Operation Just Cause". The purpose of the invasion was to bring Noriega down and create a democracy for the

Panamian people but it ended up leaving 2000 civilians dead, multiple thousands homeless and destroyed much of Panama's history. On Christmas day, Noriega declared asylum in the Vatican embassy. The United States surrounded the embassy in order to pressure the dictator to vacate, since entering the embassy would be considered an act of war on the Vatican, the United States began to use psychological warfare tactics on Noriega. By blasting rock music for 10 days, the United States got what they wanted and Noriega vacated under the persuasion of the chief of the Vatican embassy. Noriega was taken into custody by the United States and was concealed in Miami, under charges of "conspiracy to manufacture and distribute cocaine". Noriega was sentenced to 40 years in 1992, but was released on good behavior in 2007. Noriega passed away on May 29, 2017.

Guillermo Endara, the rightful winner of the presidential election of 1989 began his presidency trying to fix Panamá. Not only was the image of Panamá broken, but the economy was also broken and much of the city was destroyed from the attacks by the United States and by looting from its own people. Endara only lasted until 1994, as his politics did not appear to be effective and created widespread unemployment in the country. Ernesto Pérez Valladares took over after Endara as new president. He



Former President Guillermo Endara

implemented programs to improve infrastructure, health care and education. Many saw him as corrupt however, due to the amount of money he was able to find for his projects. In 1999, Mireya Moscoso became Panamá's first female leader Moscoso promised many of the same promises as Valladares, but as the country continues to grow with age, the promises were not held. In 2003, Panamá found itself still in poor condition "...unemployment rose to 18% while underemployment reached 30%"⁴ the president also used the money that Panamá did have in wasteful ways, for example, instead of using \$10 million to feed her citizens, Moscoso brought the Miss Universe pageant to Panamá. Moscoso left the office in 2004, without achieving one of her promises.



Former President Mireya Moscoso

Currently the president of Panamá is Martín Torrijos, the son of former president Omar Torrijos. Torrijos has had many successes and failures in his presidency but has initiated fiscal-reforms and overhauled the nation's social security for the better. He also proposed an expansion of the Panamá Canal which was widely supported as of October 22, 2006.

⁴Planet, Lonely. "Subscribe." *Lonely Planet*, Lonely Planet, www.lonelyplanet.com/panama/history.

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