

Commemorating an Ever-Evolving Profession: The History of the Legal Profession in Panama

The practice of law was initially regulated in Panama through Law No. 30 of December 31, 1875. At the time, while Panama was still part of Colombia, it had become a sovereign state through the Constitution of Rio Negro of 1863 but, given the lack of regulation, local attorneys were practicing based on Title 13, Book II of the Judicial Code of Colombia.

Since Panama was far from Bogota, Colombia's center of power, it was evident that few lawyers had university degrees. For this reason, the Federal Supreme Court of Panama granted professional attorney degrees to those with proven legal competence. These titles, written on a paper stamped with a seal, certified the legal knowledge, practice and attitudes of the recipients, and declared them "Lawyers of the State".

Over the course of almost fifty years between 1875 and 1924, there were significant socio-political changes in Panama: Panama had become an independent country in 1903, universities awarded law degrees, women were making advances in the professional arena, and even U.S. lawyers were practicing in Panamanian courts. These circumstances led to the enactment of Law No. 55 on December 17, 1924, a historically significant legislation since it provided a formal framework for practicing law and limited the practice of law exclusively to nationals or foreigners with more than ten years of residence in the country. It allowed duly authorized U.S. citizens to practice in the Canal Zone after obtaining a certificate of competence. Foreigners with good reputation who had practiced law in the Republic for more



than ten years were also allowed to practice law. Despite these exceptions, the general rule was that people should be Panamanian citizens and possess a law degree.

In 1941, Law 54 was enacted, which allowed the issuance of law degrees, not only by the University of Panama and the National Faculty of Law, but also by other duly authorized private universities. It also made it a requirement that lawyers obtain suitability certificates to practice law through the Supreme Court of Justice and it established penalties for professional ethical violations.

Today, with nearly 30,000 professionals duly authorized to practice law in Panama, the legal career continues to evolve. The history of law in Panama reflects a process of growth, adaptation and modernization. From its inception to the present, the legal profession has played a pivotal role in shaping society, and continues to be a dynamic force for progress and justice in the nation.