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Ruling Party Infighting

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On Aug. 19, four members of the Nicaraguan Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE) refused to travel to Bluefields on the Atlantic Coast to certify the results of an election there that would have ushered into the Consejo Regional del Atlantico Sur (RAAS) a new slate of regional leaders. The conflict has stalled payments from the central government and has renewed separatist sentiments. The newly elected officials would have created a new political balance between the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) and the country's ruling party, the Partido Liberal Constitucional (PLC).

The four CSE magistrates were PLC partisans. The four cited the death of the son of another magistrate, Jose Luis Villavicencio, as the reason for their refusal, but the bereaved electoral official refuted the rationale as a poor excuse. Villavicencio denounced the statement saying that his colleagues could not use the sudden death of his son as a pretext and that he had already accredited an alternative magistrate to serve in his place in order that the installation of the RAAS go forward. Villavicencio declined in his statement to give a reason for the actions of the four and their unwanted show of sympathy, but, as one newspaper put it, "unofficially it is known that the Liberals would be interested in delaying the swearing-in of the coastal directorate in the hope of gaining time to overturn their loss of control of the RAAS through negotiation between Liberals and Sandinistas."

Former CSE vice president Emmet Lang followed up a day later with criticisms of his fellow Liberals' actions. Lang told the press that there was a risk of a "conflict of great magnitude" coming from the decision. He said that the officials-in-waiting had formed a new majority faction and had threatened to take over the Bluefields airport in protest. Ten Liberal council members had separated from their block and joined with Sandinistas to form a new bloc that they named the "bancada etnica." It was that bloc that announced the airport protest.

The defection occurred along the fracture line in the PLC between supporters of ex-President Arnoldo Aleman and those loyal to President Enrique Bolanos. Lang blamed the four Arnoldista magistrates for having created an artificial problem by failing to perform their constitutional, and Supreme Court-ordered, functions.

One of the four, Silvio Calderon, responded that he was aware of the risk of political upheaval and had urgently requested that the matter be taken up that very day and that he had, in fact, been calling on their "reflection, maturity, and patriotism to preserve the interests of their coastal brothers" since July 31. Meanwhile, the Bluefields police chief beefed up security at the airport and the bancada etnica put a timeline to their demands. They would wait until the following Monday before launching their promised action.

Bancada etnica chief Alejandro Mejia Gaitan rejected the Calderon argument, claiming that the quartet had already caused incalculable economic and social damage. Despite the pressure, which

included suggestions from the Supreme Court that the CSE might face contempt charges if it failed to certify the RAAS, the dissident four did not come to Bluefields. But on Aug. 23, well before the deadline, a contingent of FSLN-affiliated magistrates did come. They swore in 26 council members, elected a new directorate of the Regional Council, and tended to related business.

Also absent from the convocation were 19 council members belonging to the PLC faction loyal to Aleman. The 26 who were sworn in included dissident PLC, FSLN, and local YATAMA party members. It was noted that the 26 represented a quorum, legalizing the proceedings. But this was not the end of the battle. Paul Gonzales, president of the PLC in the RAAS and an Aleman loyalist, attended the event just long enough to promise that the party central would be notified "so that [the decision] be impugned and measures taken to annul it, because that is the official position of the party." And this he did.

The proceedings were not duly legalized with the result that the region was left without a legitimate governing authority. A mass march was scheduled in Bluefields to protest that the autonomous region had been thrown into near chaos. Without a government, there was no authority to which operating funds could be transferred from the government in Managua. That meant that teachers, health workers, and government employees including the councilperson went unpaid in the already sorely impoverished region. Police and the military conferred about the potential for violence that the march represented. Leaders of the demonstration promised that there would be no violence.

"The population's demonstration is in support of what was done by the Sandinista magistrates who certified the Regional Council, as mandated by the Supreme Court, and also against the intentions of the Liberal magistrates and the action of their CSE colleagues," said Norman Bent, an official of Pueblos Indigenas y Comunidades Etnicas.

A question of human rights

With little apparent will to resolve the issue politically, the electoral dilemma has been swept into the human rights arena, where it becomes just one more indication that "the Atlantic Coast has not received due attention from the national civil sector and the central governments in recent times." This from Subprocurador de Derechos Humanos Julian Corrales, who visited the area to evaluate the situation. He continued, "The Caribbean Coast has been a territory exploited, whose resources have been used for the central government and for the benefit of all the sectors of the Pacific (see NotiCen, 1996-07-18). All the resources maritime, mineral, and forest are being overexploited every day, such that they are going to disappear if these irrational depredations continue." Tying this to the matter of the RAAS, he said that "the situation of human rights is being damaged by the CSE, which doesn't take seriously the unstable situation the autonomous authorities are enduring."

Where it could be headed

The day of protest produced no violence, but rather expressions of far greater political import. Placed in the broader context of violations of human rights, looting of resources, and traditional racism against the largely black coastal population, observers saw a resurgence of sentiment for attempts at secession. Said Stanford Cash, the priest of the Anglican Church of Bluefields, "Before,

I didn't think this way, but with this marginalization with which Managua treats us, I believe that it is better that we separate. Our regions deserve respect and we don't see respect anywhere."

University students joined in with strong statements in what could become a movement. Sociology student Julio Monterrey told the audience, "As students of the autonomous regions, we've produced a document that explains that coastal people historically have lived in a very exasperating situation of abandonment and eternal underestimation. We cannot go on like this."

Others, representing nongovernmental organizations, local government, and civil society in general echoed the separatist spirit. Speaking to the assembled crowd, RAAS Gov. Guy Cox summed up the day's speeches saying, "We're not asking for anything; we demand our rights. We're tired of their imposing their caprices, of their seeing us only as the opportunity to enrich themselves with our resources at our expense. The Pacific sends us geniuses who don't know our reality, who don't know our needs. We here have experts. We have brains and strong arms to work. Why must we accept what they impose on us?" The question was taken up and repeated by the crowd; "Why must we accept what they impose on us?"

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