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Nicaragua's President Supports New Party

by LADB Staff

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The de facto two-party system that has kept Nicaragua stalemated for years is now under some threat from an emerging new party. True enough, parties have come and gone through the years, each with its promises, its high-profile players, and each has served for a time as a magnet for the disaffected before disappearing or settling into a niche somewhere in the political background. But this might be different.

This new party, the Alianza por la Republica (Apré), purporting to be a wedge sharp enough to be driven between the Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) and the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), is more an agglomeration of existing parties, something like the alliance that won the presidential election for Oscar Berger in Guatemala, but intended to endure as a party, not just a coalition.

In the case of Guatemala, the alliance was helped by, if not organized around, Berger, who could arguably have won on any ticket. Apré has a roughly similar situation in that President Enrique Bolanos has given the upstart a helping hand.

In a move unprecedented in Nicaraguan politics, Bolanos, a member of the PLC, last week attended the Alianza's official inauguration as a party and said the movement would help depoliticize state institutions such as the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) and the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE). "This will be the solution to many problems in Nicaragua," Bolanos said, inviting other members of the PLC and other minority political groups to join the movement. Bolanos has, as president, fought harder for survival against the Arnoldistas, the PLC faction loyal to ex-President Arnoldo Aleman (1997-2002), than against the opposition (see NotiCen, 2002-01-17).

The FSLN is not feeling heat from the new force yet, however. Quite the opposite, the left party has been salivating over the damage it hopes has been done to the PLC by Bolanos' invitation to defection. Prior to the Bolanos invitation, progressive forces within the FSLN were casting a jaundiced eye on their own prospects, dimmed by the announcement that Daniel Ortega, who as official candidate led the party to defeat in 1990, 1996, and 2001, would run again in 2005. Ortega is running behind Managua Mayor Herty Lewites in opinion polls.

Apré has not yet clearly defined itself, according to Miguel Lopez, party president, except to say that it is anti-caudillo, against re-election, favors respect for private property, human rights, and progress, and is pro-Nicaragua. It is formed by an alliance of the Gran Union Liberal (GUL), the Partido Conservador de Nicaragua (PCN), the Movimiento Democrático Nicaraguense (MDN), the Partido Social Cristiano Nicaraguense (PSCN), and the Movimiento de Unidad Nacional (MUN). With these parties, Apré represents almost 19% of the vote and is building toward capturing 40% of the vote by 2006.

"We are going to target the voters who don't identify with the Liberals and Sandinistas the young voters, women, and the indigenous," Lopez said. An end to caudillismo Nicaraguan political analyst and philosopher Alejandro Serrano, who just released *Legitimacy, Legality, and Power*, a new book on the subject, said Nicaragua must move away from its caudillo tradition.

"For the Alianza to succeed where the multitude of third-force movements have failed in the past, the party must define a clear platform," said Serrano, coordinator of the political think tank Grupo de Reflexion y Participacion Ciudadano. "The anti-caudillo element is important, but not sufficient. They need to present a clear and serious economic, political, and social proposal," Serrano said, noting that the two major parties have no clear proposals and, for the past 18 years, have been defining themselves as the opposite of the other. Serrano said, "The anti-caudillo position could be an advantage, but the country is accustomed to seeing caudillos." In his view, weaning the electorate from its predilection for caudillos will be very difficult.

Apré is looking to cut its teeth on municipal elections coming up Nov. 7 in 152 municipalities around the country. It has named few candidates thus far, but Lopez said the hope is to win several mayoral posts. There has been no mention of a presidential candidate for 2006. The longest thorn in the mayoral crown for Apré in November would be Managua. Apré has approached Pedro Joaquin Chamorro Barrios, running for mayor on the PLC ticket, but the conservative with formidable name recognition turned them down.

The son of former President Violeta de Chamorro (1990-1997) and founder of La Prensa Pedro Joaquin Chamorro Cardenal was thought to be concerned about the taint of Arnoldismo, now that the caudillo is in prison, but Chamorro was not. "In municipal elections, people vote for the party, but fundamentally for the person," said Chamorro. "Most of the polls have shown that Pedro Joaquin would win the mayoralty, meaning that the majority of people don't think the Aleman image is fundamental." On teaming up with Apré specifically, the candidate took a position consistent with his conservative outlook, saying he wouldn't mount "a horse that hasn't left the stable, and we don't know how it's going to turn out because it is a cross of several breeds, so I prefer to stay on this horse [the PLC] that has brought three presidents to the presidential chair and has won many mayoralties."

The Chamorro refusal left Apré leaders discouraging the interpretation that the new party was weak or unworthy. Apré leader William Baez is his party's candidate, but would be willing to step aside. "Pedro Joaquin is a good boy, but he is in the party he shouldn't be in. It would be a good role; I would definitely beat him, but I'd give up my place if he wanted to find unity," Baez said. The polls did not worry Baez either. His reading of the latest surveys was that, even though Chamorro is ahead, he has peaked, will not gain much more, and Apré hasn't even begun to campaign.

Not to worry. Apré has not put all its eggs in Managua.

In Leon, the Alianza is in dialogue with several parties to form internal alliances. In San Jose de Achuapa, Apré has already integrated municipal candidates with the PLC. In Quezalguaque, Apré is dealing with the PCN and the Partido Liberal Nacionalista (PLN), according to Leon Apré leader Ramon Baldizon Carvahal. The idea, said Baldizon, is to put together a front with these other

parties ahead of the June 13 primaries in all the municipios of the department. PLC departmental president Doris Juarez de Palma confirmed just such an arrangement in Achuapa, where PLC mayoral candidate Ulda Miriam Mendoza will team up with Apre vice mayoral candidate Tomas Lira. The deadline notwithstanding, Lopez said, "These elections are the warm-up phase for the final championship." Lopez is also deputy and president of the GUL, one of the parties of which Apre is made.

Presidents of all five of the parties met on June 6 for a strategy meeting for November. They are still a long way from completion of all their slates but have set a one-month period to get this done by consensus. If they do not have a full list by then, they will call for primaries. "We have taken off the party t-shirt, now we are the Alianza," said Mario Sevastian Rappaccioli, president of the PCN.

Lopez said they are also talking to representatives of the Partido Resistencia Nicaraguense (PRN), Accion Democratica Nicaraguense (ADN), and the Partido Liberal Nacionalista (PLN) about joining up, and efforts continue with the PLC. Lopez admits that PLC talks have not gone splendidly and that, for now, discussions have been about limited agreements. "They want us not to present candidates in some populations where they're afraid we will take votes from them. But it's not likely that we will come to an agreement, because the caudillismo and corruption within the PLC have not changed."

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