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## Win for FSLN in Nicaragua Election

by LADB Staff

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Nicaragua held municipal elections on Nov. 7, the outcome of which told a story of popular disaffection, fragmentation on the right, and gains for the left. This was the first election since President Enrique Bolanos broke with the party that elected him, the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), to form the Alianza por la Republica (APRE). Early in his term, Bolanos angered and alienated PLC supporters of former President Arnaldo Aleman (1996-2002) with an anti-corruption initiative (see NotiCen, 2002-05-09) that ended in a 20-year prison sentence for Aleman.

A recent audit of the financing of the election that brought Bolanos to power resulted in government auditors recommending to the Asamblea Nacional (AN) that it impeach him (see NotiCen, 2004-10-09). The auditors found Bolanos received US\$7 million in illegal campaign contributions. Bolanos remains under that cloud, which appears to have rained on APRE's prospects in the recent election.

### *A good day for the Frente*

The Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) benefited from the disarray to its right and appears to have re-elected Managua Mayor Dionisio Marengo, who brought the capital back to the fold in 2000. Marengo trounced PLC candidate Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, the son of former President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro (1990-1996). Her victory ended the reign of FSLN President Daniel Ortega (1979-1990). Ortega has been the FSLN's perennial candidate ever since and has called this municipal election a "kind of referendum" on party preference. "We're going to see which political force gains the most votes, which comes in second, and which comes in third." To the extent that the Nov. 7 contest presages presidential elections in 2007, Ortega had some reason to be buoyed by the outcome.

Preliminary results showed his force first with about 46% of the vote in Managua, the PLC second with about 36%, and APRE with 12%. Numbers coming from Ciudad Sandino, Tipitapa, and Masaya followed the same pattern, but with even more impressive gains for the Sandinistas. Even tiny parties, none of which got more than 8% of the vote, trumped APRE in some places. As one newspaper summed it, "The FSLN was the big winner, the PLC suffered an unprecedented debacle, and APRE was the great disappointment." The election can be seen as a near sweep for the FSLN. The party held on to gains made in the 2000 elections and won races in traditionally PLC areas. But in some respects, the election represents failure for all, even the winners.

### *A bad day for the process*

If the exercise was a referendum, as Ortega would have it, it was also a referendum on the electoral process itself, on the party system, and on the degree to which these really represent inclusion

and participation for the public. On these, most people voted in the negative by not voting at all. A quick count by Organization of American States (OAS) election watchers revealed that abstention reached at least 52%, ten points higher than the 2000 municipal elections. Published analyses of the abstention laid blame for the sparse turnout on corruption scandals within the parties and a general feeling that local elections do not influence the most pressing problems of unemployment and poverty.

These results came as a surprise to election experts. On the basis of pre-election polls, abstention of 20% was expected. Another factor may have been a decision by the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE) that people whose names did not appear on the padron electoral, the electoral rolls, could not vote, even when their identity documents were in order, showing them to be residents of the areas in question. The CSE decision seems to be a violation of the Ley Electoral.

Still another factor, according to Manuel Ortega Hegg, a specialist in decentralization and citizen participation, was that, because the central government controls most of public finance, the municipal authorities make very little difference in the daily lives of ordinary citizens. So, there is little reason to vote for them. When it was apparent from the lack of voters at polling places that this was to be a numerical disaster, electoral observers put out a call for citizens to come vote but to no avail.

Mauricio Zuniga of the Instituto para el Desarrollo y la Democracia (IPADE) said that in some districts the voter turnout would not even reach 30%. Among the parties, the biggest loser was the PLC. APRE was a disappointment, but it came out a solid third-place party, assured of survival. Party president Miguel Lopez took this as something of an accomplishment. PLC leader Enrique Quinonez, meanwhile, announced on the day after the elections that there would be wholesale expulsions.

## *A disaster for the Liberals*

Said Lopez of the situation of his former party, "Here the big loser is the PLC because it is the first time it lost intended voters before the elections. Passing the buck, which leaders are thinking of doing, is an attitude anti-Liberal, retrograde, Jurassic, and troglodyte. I can tell you that in the coming days we could be seeing the rupture of the Liberal faction in the parliament and also the self-destruction of the PLC." The biggest winners, then, were the FSLN and abstention. Trying to make sense of the triumph of the latter, director of the Consorcio Etica y Transparencia Roberto Courtney called the nonvote a "clear message of silence" on the part of 1.6 million eligible voters.

But while able to tick off possible reasons for the phenomenon, as did other analysts, Courtney recommended that organizations concerned with these matters forego easy explanations and try to discover the fundamental causes of the lowest voter turnout since 1990. "Let's not look for excuses or easy explanations," he said. "Let's look for basic reasons, it is necessary to get to the bottom of the problem to try to recover the confidence and the participation [of the electorate]. The voter is sending with her silence and abstention a message to the political class." Courtney wants that message uncovered and articulated. Pollster Raul Obrigon offered the insight that the abstention

avored the FSLN and punished APRE because APRE really got nothing more than "a soft vote, migrants from other parties."

It is also the case that the Sandinistas, their own corruption aside, still have a core of disciplined militants, people who will vote no matter what. The FSLN was a popular movement before it was a party and there are plenty of Nicas who remember and bled for that movement. Moreover, Sandinismo grew out of distrust of government, with a commitment to action beyond electoral politics, so it is not unreasonable to imagine that Sandinistas are better able to conceive of voting as just one of many democratic options than are members of opportunistically organized political parties. These are hypotheses that await the research Courtney calls for.

FSLN prospects for the presidential elections, based on this election, are also brightened by the PLC's having not just lost, but by its having suffered its worst loss since 1994 according to the freshest available numbers, which tallied more than 85% of the vote. The PLC appears to have lost 39 mayoralties and in doing that managed to get 540,103 votes, 100,000 fewer than in the 2000 municipal elections. They even lost in their traditional strongholds, like Jinotega and Boaco.

By contrast, the FSLN managed to get 23,000 votes more than they got in 2000. In effect, they beat both the Liberals and the abstainers. They almost doubled the number of constituencies in their column. They won most departmental capitals, leaving only Bluefields and Rivas to the PLC, Bilwi to the indigenous party Yatima, and they are waiting for the final tally in Granada, where APRE is in contention.

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