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Crisis Averted And Polemics Persist As Balance Of Power Shifts In Nicaragua

by LADB Staff

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Nicaraguan President Enrique Bolanos has dropped his objections to the recent constitutional reforms a hostile Asamblea Nacional adopted to limit his powers and expand their own (see NotiCen, 05-01-13). On Jan. 12, Bolanos held a joint news conference with Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) leader Daniel Ortega and Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo to announce the signing of an agreement that would relieve the institutional crisis (see NotiCen, 2004-10-04) burdening the country.

The agreement commits the major parties, the FSLN and the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), to drop their plans to impeach Bolanos. In return, Bolanos must "consider" ratification of the reforms, with the proviso that those reforms will not go into effect for the duration of his presidency. Controversy continues The agreement effectively puts the crisis to bed but doesn't diminish the hard-line positions that engendered it.

The Movimiento por Nicaragua, a group of political and intellectual leaders with interest in national sovereignty and governability, continues to maintain that the constitutional amendments are illegal. A director of the organization, Rosa Marina Zelaya, summed up their position. "The reforms are illegal and nonexistent for three basic reasons," she said. "First, the text of the reforms is not identical with that approved in the first legislature; second, the majority forces did not abide by the accord for national dialogue signed with the executive; and third, they changed the political system of the country from semipresidential to one that is semiparliamentary." The Movimiento now promises to militate for a national dialogue on the reforms that would involve the whole of the country, not just the government and the major parties.

The publicly announced agreement, however, very likely was not the deal that ended the stalemate. An unnamed highly placed source quoted by Notimex said that the real deal was amnesty (see NotiCen, 2005-01-13) for former President Arnaldo Aleman (1997-2002). The informant told the news agency that there is to be either an amnesty or a declaration from the Tribunal de Apelaciones de Managua nullifying Aleman's conviction for fraud and money laundering, and voiding the 20-year sentence he is currently serving, albeit in the comfort and privacy of his own home.

The arrangement calls for Aleman to be sprung before Easter. For the president, though, there was rejoicing at the crisis' end. Said Bolanos, "We have succeeded in overcoming the threats that hovered over the tranquility of the nation. We are saving ourselves from falling into the abyss toward which we were headed." Ortega appeared equally relieved, saying that the agreement had "neither winners nor losers," and that he and his party are "truly committed to reconciliation and peace."

Beyond the good feelings, the agreement mooted threats from the World Bank and others to cut Nicaragua off from critical funding and international support. World Bank representative Amparo Ballivian made comments to that effect, as did European Union (EU) representative Kess Rade. In El Salvador on Jan. 15, the presidents of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador expressed their support for Bolanos and the agreement.

A statement by the presidents reiterated their "most energetic and resolute support for the efforts of dialogue and negotiation undertaken" by Bolanos to "preserve legal constitutional order and the legitimate exercise of power in Nicaragua." They also pledged to continue to monitor the situation. They said their interest lies in the fact that Central America is "an indivisible and interdependent whole in its eagerness for democratic development." No one wanted to see a spread of the Nicaraguan conflict anywhere else in the region.

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