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FSLN Seeks to Stop Another Sandinista Revolution

by LADB Staff

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A formidable adversary to the presidential aspirations of Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) perennial candidate Daniel Ortega has arisen in the person of Herty Lewites, longtime party leader and popular ex-mayor of Managua (see NotiCen, 2000-11-09). Lewites learned there is more risk than reward in challenging Ortega, the ex-president of Nicaragua (1979-1990) and maximum leader of the party.

Lewites has, so far in his quest, suffered death threats, expulsion from the party, allegations of criminal activities, and loss of the brass ring. In return, the former mayor could split the party and lose the election for the party in 2006. He could also foment a revolution within the FSLN. Ortega has tried to regain the presidency three times since his 1990 loss to Violeta Barrios de Chamorro (1990-1997), whose US-supported UNO party trounced the FMLN in an upset that shocked the left. Lewites was told to butt out of the present contest early on, but in mid-February threw down the gauntlet in defiance of Tomas Borge, ex-minister of interior of the Sandinista government.

Borge led the most hard-line left faction of the party during those years and continues to do so now as a FSLN deputy. The old warhorse threatened to crush Lewites with "overwhelming force." For starters, Borge sought to prohibit the Lewites campaign from using FSLN symbols and insignia, and even from singing the party hymn at rallies. Lewites responded with a pledge to fight on. "We remain firm and are advancing in the organization of our campaign," he told the media. "We are going to open offices throughout the country so that the voters will know our project and our campaign plans."

Lewites has the support of ex-comandantes Luis Carrion and Henry Ruiz, and FSLN national directorate member Victor Hugo Tinoco. While he does not have the support of Ortega's wife Rosario Murillo, the once and perhaps future first lady dealt Borge a blow for his threatening manner. "It seems to me, the comandante [Borge] does not help our common path when we refer to plans of 'overwhelming force' that don't exist," she said in a press statement. Lewites would win Lewites' party-splitting potential derives in part from his popularity with the electorate.

A poll conducted between Jan. 24 and Jan. 27 indicated that he would beat Ortega 74.8% to 17.9%, if the election were held at that time. The Borge & Asociados poll was published in El Nuevo Diario on Feb. 21. By the time the poll was released, the party had already found him ineligible to run on the FSLN ticket because he had at one time left the party to form his own political group. A few days after the poll's publication, the conflict between partisans of Ortega and Lewites erupted into the streets.

The rock-throwing, stick-wielding confrontation occurred when Lewites and about 1,000 supporters protested action by the Asamblea Sandinista (AS) to disqualify the ex-mayor. Lewites had called for a rebellion against Ortega and demanded a primary election to determine the nominee. The AS

responded by kicking Lewites out of the party altogether, calling him "a Judas." Lewites marked the events as the beginning of "the Sandinista rebellion against the Ortega dictatorship in the party." He said, "Ortega doesn't want to give the party freedom to choose its candidate." The enraged Lewites compared Ortega to Mike Tyson, who "gives low blows and bites ears." Not pulling any punches himself, he promised, "If I can give my life to end this dictatorship, I will give it." He then challenged Ortega to appear on the streets "without his 20 bodyguards" to show how the people love him.

Running scared

At the same time that Lewites has shown his pugnacious side, he has also said he has much to fear. He is a veteran of a party that, before the 1979 revolution, had sometimes settled intrafactional disputes through assassination. Now he charges that his adversaries are out to kill him. He said he had been called a traitor because of his stand, in a context where, he explained, "revolutionary movements like the FSLN have entry points, but no exits. They are about blood pacts, because it is about risking one's own life." Being branded a traitor, he explained, is a death sentence, either officially, or at least in the sense that it gives license to any fanatic to take matters into his or her own hands. Lewites said revolutionary parties are packed with fanatics.

History provides some support for Lewites' fears. Last year, Carlos Guadamuz, also called a traitor to the party and also a dissident, was killed. In 1973, party militant Narciso Zepeda was executed by fellow party members who later, at trial, attributed their act to a need for an "ajusticiamiento" or hit.

Political assassinations

During the last 15 years, a number of political assassinations have occurred in Nicaragua, including that of Enrique Bermudez, the contra military leader; Arges Sequiera, president of the Asociacion Nacional de Confiscados; and Maria Jose Bravo, a journalist. These were not intraparty killings, but political assassinations nonetheless. An editorial in La Prensa took Lewites' fears quite seriously and called for the government to protect him.

Since then, police have acted to avoid bloodshed. Julio Gonzalez, police commissioner of Masaya, denied a rally permit to Ortega forces when they requested permission to stage a demonstration at the time and place that an expected 15,000 Lewites supporters were scheduled to gather. Lewites has since added precautions, asking the Centro Nicaraguense de Derechos Humanos (CENIDH) to look out for him after the Judas card was played again, this time by Ortega.

Ortega said that Lewites "will end up like Judas who sold out Christ for thirty coins, hung by his own shame." Lewites asked CENIDH for protection not only for himself, but also for supporters Ruiz, Carrion, and Victor Tirado, all ex-comandantes.

FSLN trying to stop a revolution

The situation has deteriorated into the most serious internal conflict for the FSLN since Ortega's former vice president, Sergio Ramirez, split from the party and created the Movimiento de

Renovacion Sandinista (MRS) in 1995. But even that rift healed (see NotiCen, 2001-09-06). Victor Hugo Tinoco said what is happening now "is much more than Herty; it is totally a movement to save democracy within the party." The AS has also expelled Tinoco for his support of Lewites.

The FSLN showed no sign of concern for damage to the party when it upped the ante against Lewites in early March by charging that during his mayoral administration he presided over a "sacking" of public funds. The Frente didn't stop there, but lashed out against the media for covering up the alleged crime with an "attitude of compliance" and against political scientists and analysts for remaining silent about it. The accusations named no one, however, neither the individuals nor the media.

In a press release, the party said it all amounted to an anti-Sandinista conspiracy. "Regrettably, and on top of this dirty campaign, with media orchestration and chorus, the FSLN reiterates its determination to reveal, expose, and legally accuse a mayoral administration that we catalogue as one of the worst shams ever suffered by Nicaraguan society, and by the Frente Sandinista in particular," read the message.

On March 6, ignoring the call for a primary, the FSLN convened a congress of 800 party members and chose Ortega as its nominee for the presidency in 2006 by acclamation.

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