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## Profound Change Possible In Nicaragua's 2006 Elections

*by LADB Staff*

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Herty Lewites, former mayor of Managua and erstwhile pillar of the Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN), has received a leg up from the Partido Alternativa Cristiana (AC) in his run for president of Nicaragua in 2006 (see NotiCen, 2005-03-10). The Catholic of Jewish extraction is now the candidate of the evangelicals.

Lewites brought down the ire of the FSLN directorate in challenging Daniel Ortega as the party's candidate and calling for the question to be settled in a primary election. Ortega chose instead to have himself chosen by a convention rather than compete in a contest that, said all the polls, Lewites would have won.

The AC chose Lewites on the basis of "human values." Though small, the party is linked to organizations throughout the country that together form a "human alliance" that militates for the poor and for a government that seeks to improve their lot. Lewites' political philosophy plays directly to that interest. Upon being nominated, he said, "It is difficult to see the population surviving on what it can obtain from the garbage, eating waste or spoiled food to be able to mitigate hunger." He told his AC supporters, "What is gained from elections if the people live more in misery every day? For me, democracy is to have food, education, health, work, and that is the democracy that we are going to make in Nicaragua."

Lewites was also named the candidate of the Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (MRS), a movement spun off from the FSLN and founded by former vice president Sergio Ramirez. Lewites, along with some analysts, believes that his nomination represents a fundamental change in Nicaraguan politics that will break the electoral duopoly held for years between the FSLN on the left and the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) on the right.

As things now stand there will be not three but four choices. Another ex-mayor of Managua, Eduardo Montealegre, expelled from the PLC much as was Lewites from his party, has risen up to challenge the status quo on his side of the spectrum. Together, the two represent an alternative to the "exhausted left" and the "corrupt right," said Lewites. Now that there four viable groups putting up candidates, he said, "in these groups there are representatives of the corrupt right [the PLC] and a sector of a center-right [Montealegre]. At the same time, there is a corrupt left [the FSLN], out of fashion, exhausted, and a modern, responsible left [himself]."

MRS founder Ramirez, supporting his candidate and the introduction of alternatives, said, "The play of different groups is the only thing that is going to make democracy possible." MRS president Dora Maria Tellez said that the movement sought more than the presidency of the nation. She said that alliances would enable the MRS to capture the elections in the autonomous regions of the Atlantic Coast and elect at least 60 deputies, approximately two-thirds of the whole, in the legislature,

ensuring a government that can govern. Lewites cautioned that the ruling parties would stop at nothing to foil these plans, both his and Montealegre's.

Both parties have already filed charges against the upstarts of improprieties while in office as mayor. But MRS vice president Enrique Saenz said they would defend their candidate "tooth and nail." He added, "They are not going to stop Herty Lewites." The enmities have already reached full boil and there is no hint anywhere of peacemaking. "Either we all go or they [the PLC and FSLN] don't go, let that be clear," said Lewites. Convergencia Nacional breached Postulating Lewites also meant that the MRS broke away from the Convergencia Nacional that tied the movement to the FSLN (see NotiCen, 2001-09-06).

MRS broke away from the party in 1995, but later, in 2001, reunited with it in an electoral pact against the PLC in the presidential election that year. Tellez, who then as now led the MRS, signed the pact with Ortega. With all ties undone, the freestanding movement is now making plans to coalesce with others, including the Partido Conservador (PC) and the Alternativa Cristiana, which has already named Lewites its candidate.

Coalitions of this kind have sprung up before to challenge the two behemoths, but Victor Tinoco, another Sandinista breakaway, said the situation is different this time. "The people got tired," he said. "The difference is that in 1995 Daniel Ortega had only lost once; now he has lost three times. At that time the pact with Arnaldo Aleman didn't exist; now it does, and it has been disastrous for the country (see NotiCen 1999-12-23 and 2002-07-25)." As Lewites and his supporters add up their pluses, which include the probability that many small organizations and cooperatives will join in support through their links with the AC, the FSLN is marshalling minuses.

Hard-line party leader Tomas Borge emphasized a legal assault. "I have heard there is the possibility that Herty Lewites might not be able to participate and that he could be indicted, or he already is being indicted, I'm not sure, in the appropriate courts," said Borge. "I would like him to participate to demonstrate the crushing force of the Frente Sandinista and the insignificance of Herty Lewites." It is improbable that Borge, who can read polls, would like Lewites to run, but his coy remarks cannot be taken lightly. The Frente controls much of the judiciary and can make an indictment happen. Just as Lewites is able to crystallize support around him, he is also capable of galvanizing opposition.

Eden Pastora, the famed Comandante Zero who has broken away from and bitterly criticized the Frente in the past, has now called upon Ortega to form alliances to strengthen the party. "It is the responsibility of Ortega, as undisputed leader of the Frente Sandinista, to form a congress of those of us who disagree with him, to clarify ideas and thus unify the Sandinista family. Even Herty Lewites could participate in the congress." The statement does not imply that Pastora likes Lewites. Pastora said Lewites would only take votes from the Frente, not from the right. He has been especially critical of Lewites' seeking the favor of the US Embassy in the hope that it would not tar him with the same brush with which it paints the FSLN.

## *Sensitizing the US to a new political reality*

Lewites and Tinoco met with the embassy's chief of commerce, Oliver Garza, and said they told the official, "It would be a great error of North American policy to maintain a discourse of democratic forces and antidemocratic forces." Lewites said he told Garza that the US could not generalize about who are democratic and who are not, and the fact that MRS originated within the FSLN does not mean that the movement is antidemocratic. Lewites said Garza told him that the embassy was not making these charges against the parties but rather against the leadership of both the FSLN and the PLC. Lewites said he was confident the US would not take that position against the MRS or against his candidacy.

Dionisio Marengo, current mayor of Managua, a Sandinista, and another proclaimed Lewites foe, said he thinks Lewites will not take Frente votes away because "the Sandinista vote is disciplined and much more so when a candidate runs under a foreign flag." If that discipline exists, one who intends to shatter it is Rosa Estela Fonseca, sister of FSLN founder Carlos Fonseca Amador.

Carlos Fonseca is long dead, but Rosa Estela has thrown her support to Lewites and is bringing the full weight of her brother's memory to bear on the Frente and Ortega. Now living in Los Angeles, she has come to Nicaragua to caution voters that the current direction of the FSLN is not what Carlos had in mind. She said Ortega "is veering from what the Frente originated. We had to dedicate ourselves to being brothers and sisters and to bring forth a revolution that would help all the people and not end up as enemies and as piranhas." Rosa Estela Fonseca was careful to differentiate the Frente leadership from the rank and file. "You have to know how to differentiate, because the Frente Sandinista is a lot of people in Nicaragua. That certain leaders have turned from what my brother founded is another thing. Here the Frente Sandinista is spoken of as if we were lepers, and I don't like that because it is something for which my brother gave his life, dedicated his whole life, without even enjoying his family, and he fought so that our country might be different, and now, everything he did is being undone."

### *Similar dynamics on the right*

On the other side of the political spectrum, the PLC appears certain to take the same road in choosing its nominee as has the FSLN, with a similar effect for Montealegre as for Lewites. PLC national secretary Noel Ramirez told the media the party would make its selection at its convention and would not hold a primary. Party officials had also met with Garza, but Ramirez said the subject of a primary did not come up. Garza has also met with Montealegre.

Montealegre would likely face Antonio Alvarado, leader of an opposing coalition within the PLC, if there were a PLC primary, and Alvarado said he favors a primary as a "matter of principle." He said, "The country wants primaries. Democracy is not circumstantial. Divided, we are not going to solve the problems of the people." Montealegre is not waiting for any kind of duel within the party. He said he favors primaries even though he knows little about how to run one or even how to finance a primary campaign, but he has moved on from that issue. He has formed the Alianza Liberal Nicaraguense (ALN), a coalition of the Partido Liberal Independiente (PLI), the Movimiento de Salvacion Liberal (MSL), and the Partido de la Resistencia Nicaraguense (PRN). He is both president of the ALN and its candidate.

Like Lewites on the left, Montealegre is the strongest candidate on the right, according to polls. Analysts have watched the emergence of these strong candidates with interest. Raul Obregon of the polling firm M&R Consultores has said that, for both, the most important thing they can do is distance themselves as far as possible from the pact that has fused the FSLN to the PLC and effectively destroyed government.

Alejandro Serrano Caldera, a respected philosopher, analyst, and author, said that, while that may be true, a four-way election would go to a runoff, and the upstarts could live to regret the lack of party organization and financing. Both agreed on one point. Said Obregon, "These two parties have a presence, a well-accepted, well-trained national organization and a strong captive vote guaranteed." But most interesting, they both also agreed that an alliance between Lewites and Montealegre would define the future of Nicaragua. "An alliance between both would undoubtedly seal the destiny of the elections in the first round," said Caldera.

-- End --