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Montealegre Leading In Nicaragua, Major Parties Hurting

by Mike Leffert

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Eduardo Montealegre has overtaken Herty Lewites in recent polls to become the man most likely to succeed President Enrique Bolanos in Nicaragua's November elections (see NotiCen, 2005-08-25). Montealegre split from Bolanos' ruling Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) to form his own coalition. The polls now show him with almost 52% of voter preference, leaving former front-runner Lewites behind with less than 45%.

Both candidates far outstrip Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) leader and ex-President Daniel Ortega (1979-1990), who has barely 14%, and convicted ex-President Arnoldo Aleman (1997-2002), with 5%.

Ever opportunist, the PLC saw a winner in Montealegre and invited him to participate in its primaries. He declined, but a hopeful PLC spokesman, Leonel Teller, said that the Feb. 9 offer would remain open until the end of the month, in case he changed his mind. Montealegre said, however, "I'm the official candidate of the Alianza Liberal Nicaraguense Partido Conservador (ALN-PC), so it is not fitting that I participate in the primary elections of another party, especially when thousands of people have put their hope in me."

In rejecting the offer, he took a swipe at Aleman, who challenged him to a PLC primary. The snub seems to have served Montealegre well. Most media have placed him on the moral high ground for his rejection of the PLC offer and for turning down leadership positions in the PLC on behalf of the ALN-PC. He said he wanted nothing to do with the collusive pact between the PLC and the FSLN that has brought government at every level to a virtual standstill. A side benefit has been that, within the legislature, seven disgusted PLC deputies have defected and joined Montealegre's party.

Fracture lines in Montealegre coalition None of this is to say that Montealegre is without organizational problems. The old guard within the PC has been balking at being anastomosed to the upstart ALN. Longtime PC leader Yamil Molina told a media conference, "We are sending a message of protest because the PC has now become a party of businessmen, where what rules is money, and this is what we are denouncing." Molina said that his group of leaders would be launching a campaign on behalf of PC members who "are discriminated against by [party president Mario] Rappaccioli." Molina, along with ex-PC president Fernando Aguero, former mayoral candidate William Baez, and former deputy Noel Vidaurre, were kicked out of the party leadership by Rappaccioli.

The Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE) has ordered their return to office, but so far to no avail. The ex-leaders now intend to go to the rank and file with their complaints. They also want primary elections within the party. After the 2001 elections, the PC emerged as the country's third political force, but lost ground in the 2004 elections after coalescing with the Alianza por la Republica

(APRE). Rappaccioli has replied to the demand for open primaries by saying that the dissidents are trying to destroy the coalition with the ALN.

The issue of primaries has long been simmering and not just for this coalition. The second-place candidate for the presidency, Lewites, had the same problem on the left after Ortega manipulated the system within the FSLN to have himself nominated. It has become a question for the legislature, where the Movimiento por Nicaragua, supportive of the Bolanos faction of the PLC, has brought up a bill to require open primaries for all parties, the Ley de Elecciones Primarias y Democratizacion de los Partidos Politicos.

Conservative Rihna Cardenal, who presented the bill, wants citizen participation beyond the presidential nomination. "The PLC is proposing primary elections for the presidency and forgetting the legislative candidates, whom they are trying to present en masse, without consulting the population," she said. "This law of primary elections buries the custom of nominating by fiat (por el dedazo)."

The FSLN, by contrast, is willing to have primaries for the deputies, but not for president. Finessing a setback in the legislature Montealegre suffered a bit of a setback in the legislature regarding the election of the new junta directiva, or leadership body, for the 2006 session. After weeks of wrangling about representation, deputies managed to avoid a PLC-FSLN monopoly of the body, but the ALN-PC was the only party left out of the mix. A spot for his coalition on the junta would have demonstrated his negotiating power, given that the ALN-PC has only seven deputies.

The top spot went to Bolanos' APRE; the new president is Eduardo Gomez. Other positions went to Alternativa Cristiana, Azul y Blanco, and Camino Cristiano Nicaraguense. Montealegre denied having lost, however, noting that his seven deputies were key to the eventual outcome. Better still, his polling numbers validate his continued distance from the PLC and from the kind of deal making that might have put one of his people on the junta.

The newspaper La Trinchera reported that Montealegre had been advised by Honduran President-elect Mel Zelaya to kiss and make up with the party and get a guaranteed half-million votes for his trouble. Questioned, Montealegre did not deny the report.

Montealegre had also been courted by the FSLN, albeit for different reasons. Edwin Castro, FSLN chief deputy, said that the Frente had negotiated with Montealegre with the aim of adding his seven votes to the Frente's 38 in order to control the junta. But together, they would have had 45 votes, two short of the 47 needed. Montealegre wanted, and would have gotten under the deal, the PLC's Maria Eugenia Sequeira, a close associate, as president of the junta. It all came to nothing when neither party could find two more votes.

The decision to stay away from the PLC cannot be said to have been entirely a matter of honor. There was no guarantee that Montealegre would have been chosen the party's candidate. Analysts have speculated that power players within the party could have maneuvered him into the vice presidential spot, taking advantage of his popularity while putting someone of their choosing at the top of the ticket.

This is not far-fetched, say the early speculators. The PLC has, besides the problematic Aleman, no fewer than 10 people who might vie for nomination for president and vice president.

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