

3-9-2006

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Nicaragua's Politicos Plumb Caribbean Coast Election For National Implications

by Mike Leffert

Category/Department: Nicaragua

Published: 2006-03-09

Regional elections for councilors (regional legislators) were held in the autonomous zones of Nicaragua's Caribbean Coast March 5. Voting was light. People in the two zones, the Region Autonoma del Atlantico Norte (RAAN) and the Region Autonoma del Atlantico Sur (RAAS), have, say reports, little trust in their officials and little hope of change.

The elections attracted interest nationally, however, because they have been advertised as a window into the November national elections. If that is true, there were plenty of surprises. Not a surprise was the low turnout. In the last elections of 2002, abstention was about 72%, and there was nothing about these elections that would reverse that, according to experts.

The Centro de Derechos Humanos Ciudadanos y Autonomicos (CDCA) estimated abstention at 80% or more in the RAAS and 70% in the RAAN. Those who vote do so with little hope of change. "Here there is no work, there is no medicine, the schools have no lights, and the roads are bad, but we are going to vote," said Claudina Tomas, a Miskita resident of Puerto Cabezas. "Look, I support myself alone with my children selling candy. We make [three or four dollars a day among us], which lets me buy beans, bread, and fish, but sometimes we only eat once a day." She has nine children. Her situation is common in the region.

The region has been autonomous since the Sandinista government passed the autonomy law in 1987 to allow Nicaragua's indigenous to govern themselves according to their customs and culture. They have been adrift ever since. Elected officials have not improved the region's lot in that time, and people usually do not really know whom they are voting for.

"There's nobody to vote for," said Adolfo Burth, who did not vote, but is one of the 226,000 eligible to elect 90 councilors in both regions. Erminio Mendoza had a different strategy, that of elimination of the worst. "I am going to vote," she said, "so that the lizards [thieves] don't win." But even with all this apathy and hopelessness, politicians in Managua insisted that these elections would shed some light on the national elections.

Polls indicated the Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) would win, and there was much expectation that maverick candidates Herty Lewites, who broke away from the FSLN, and Eduardo Montealegre, spun off the ruling Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), would show strength (see NotiCen, 2005-08-25). The Frente also denied the extent of abstentionism.

Party executive secretary Jose Figueroa said, "There's not as much abstention as has been claimed. If the electoral council removed all the dead people, the immigration to the Pacific and to the exterior,

and those in prison, the abstention reduces, and there was a satisfactory participation. The Coastal voters got behind their stake in the autonomy of the Caribbean Coast." Figueroa said also that he had asked the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE) to look into fraud by the PLC. He said he had information that the Liberals had erroneously registered 6,500 voters.

Surprise the polls were wrong

The surprise was that the polls were wrong across the board. With almost all the votes counted, preliminary results showed that the PLC got the most votes and that Montealegre's Alianza Liberal Nicaraguense (ALN-PC) and Lewites' Movimiento de Renovacion Sandinista (MRS) got left in the dust. If there was a winner, it was Yatama, a local party. Yatama means mother earth in the Miskito language. Yatama did not get the largest number of votes by a long shot, but it was allied with the FSLN, and together they had the most votes, even though the PLC was the single party with the most votes.

What makes Yatama a winner is that it could easily swing over to the PLC if the winds of opportunity blow in that direction. In the RAAN, with more than 92% of the votes counted, Yatama got 12 of the 45 seats and the FSLN got 15. The PLC got 18. This alliance will allow Yatama to be the power player in May, when the councilors elect a regional governor. But in the RAAS, Yatama concedes the power position to the ALN-PC. Montealegre's party did poorly, gaining only five seats, but the Yatama-FSLN combination is one vote short of a majority there, and the ALN-PC has it.

In this situation, much is riding on just how far the ALN-PC is alienated from the PLC. Aware of Yatama's options and apparently seeking to keep the alliance intact, Figueroa said in Managua that the FSLN would not rule out ceding the presidencies of both regional governments to the local party. "Yatama and the FSLN maintain an alliance around a political project, which is the autonomy of the Caribbean Coast, and we are going to privilege autonomy over any other interest. There is a strategic alliance to strengthen the process of autonomy," said Figueroa. He confirmed that the two parties were discussing the move.

The PLC, not wishing to be outflanked, is also interested in a deal with Yatama. They, too, would look favorably on a Yatama presidency in the RAAN, but in the RAAS, said spokesman Leonel Teller, where the PLC has enough votes to form a government "without the need for alliances." A question that remains for the analysts in Managua is whether any of these results can be extrapolated to the national situation. Alejandro Martinez Cuenca, a strong critic of FSLN party leader and candidate Daniel Ortega, but an FSLN insider, said the results on the coast strengthen the traditional parties.

PLC analysts agree the majors have upended the upstarts. From the PLC point of view, the Liberals won easily, and, if the vote could be extrapolated, the PLC would win the national election. They beat the Sandinistas 38% to 27%. They beat the ALN-PC 38% to 9%, and they cleaned house on Lewites' MRS 38% to 3%. Montealegre took a different stance, pointing out that his was the only "emerging force" in the elections, and therefore he was the real winner. His objective was to beat Lewites, with whom he has been neck and neck in national polls.

The problem now is the polls. They have been spectacularly wrong several times during the recent electoral cycle in Latin America, they were wrong in Central America in Costa Rica's election, and they were wrong on the Caribbean Coast. While it would be speculative to answer the question of extrapolation, some attention can reasonably be given to the PLC's having won on the coast after four years of damning criticism of the party from all sides and even from within it. Of about 93,000 votes cast, the PLC got 36,981, 20,923 in the RAAN and 15,968 in the RAAS. More important for the national election, there is no indication that the ALN-PC split the Liberal vote.

The same is true for the FSLN. The lame MSR 3% showing did not threaten the major party. In both cases, the popularity of Montealegre and Lewites did not carry over to threaten the traditional powers. The outcome was also bad news for President Enrique Bolanos. He split off from his own PLC and formed the Alianza por la Republica (APRE). In this election, APRE was buried, getting just 1,422 votes overall. PLC spokesman Leonel Teller interpreted this to mean that the votes Montealegre captured were just those of old APRE holdouts who understand that Bolanos is finished and APRE is dead. This interpretation is bolstered by Bolanos having campaigned against the PLC and the FSLN prior to this election. He called them "the parties of the past." He appears to have been wrong.

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