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With U.S. Opposition At His Back, Ortega Surges In Nicaragua Presidential Race

by Mike Leffert

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Daniel Ortega has gained considerable ground in the race for Nicaragua's presidency. The election is seven months away. The ex-president (1979-1990) and evergreen candidate of the Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) is now in a statistical tie with upstart challenger Herty Lewites and just three points behind Eduardo Montealegre, who broke with the official Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) to run under his own banner. Earlier on, Ortega was running substantially behind both these candidates.

A national poll by the firm M&R Consultores published in La Prensa, the major national daily, showed Montealegre of the Alianza Liberal Nicaraguense (ALN) in front with 26.6% of the intended vote, and Ortega dogging his heels with 23.5%. Lewites, at 22.3%, has lost four points since the last poll in December. The PLC just announced its candidate, ex-vice president Jose Rizo, too late to be included in the poll.

Ortega still has a hard road ahead. He would need 35% of the valid vote to win outright, and the survey indicates that, if the election went to a second round, as of now Lewites would be the only candidate capable of beating either Ortega or Montealegre. Montealegre would beat Ortega in that hypothetical election. According to another poll, Ortega remains weak in voter-dense Managua.

In an interesting bit of strategic byplay, Lewites has taken on Otton Solis to be one of his principal advisors. Solis is the Costa Rican economist who ran a surprisingly effective campaign for the presidency of his country against the formidable Oscar Arias (see NotiCen, 2006-03-02). Solis upset the pollsters, losing by a scant 1%. Lewites is an ex-FSLN mayor of Managua who has broken sharply with Ortega and with the party to form his own Movimiento de Renovacion Sandinista (MRS). With Solis on board, "now we are playing in the major leagues, we are fully into this professional league," said Lewites. Solis is in Managua. The economist, who in his own country ran partly on renegotiating CAFTA, is analyzing the polls for Lewites and reviewing campaign speeches.

It appears now that Ortega has at least two important advantages at the national level. One is the backing of a rock-solid, well-entrenched party apparatus, with a large base of reliable voters. The other is opposition from the US, a factor that has been a key to success for several of the new wave of elected Latin American presidents.

A foe of US policy since he faced the US in its proxy war against the Sandinistas in the 1980s, Ortega is positioning himself as the US's next "greatest nightmare in Latin America." This was the appellation that served President Evo Morales so well in his victory in Bolivia last December (see NotiSur, 2006-01-06). Others have courted the US. Lewites has taken pains to indicate to the US that, although a Sandinista, he seeks US support. Both he and Montealegre had high-profile meetings

with US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick last October (see NotiCen, 2005-10-13), and both received a kind of a blessing. "I'm heartened to see that there's a third-way movement in Nicaragua, and I'm going to meet some of the leaders of that movement," said Zoellick prior to the anointings.

Zoellick announced at the time the US was giving US\$4.5 million to "support the International Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, to...make sure these elections are free and fair." Jeanne Kirkpatrick still fighting Ortega Some part of that money may have been spent on March 22, when former US ambassador to the UN (during the years of the Contra war under US President Ronald Reagan) Jeanne Kirkpatrick landed in Managua to announce that democracy and liberty in Nicaragua are "in a moment of danger" through the possible triumph of Ortega on Nov. 5.

Kirkpatrick was in the country on a three-day visit as a representative of the International Republican Institute. She said it "would be very difficult" to preserve political freedom in the event "that Daniel Ortega would be controlling state power," by which she meant if he were to win the election. The M&R poll was taken before the visit, so there is no reliable measure of the effect of her remarks or of the intervention of the International Republican Institute, but Ortega has repeatedly played the US intervention card, warning US Ambassador Paul Trivelli not to interfere in the country's election.

If Ortega meant to provoke further intrusions to aid his campaign, he was successful. On March 30, Trivelli summoned the local media to tell them, "Ortega is a tiger who has not changed his stripes." He said he was "a little upset" by Ortega's needling, which included references to the US stealing the lands of Native Americans. Trivelli warmed quickly to his major thesis, however, that Ortega was an exception to the good relations enjoyed by other leftists in the region with the US. "We have had relations with governments of the center-left in South America, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil, but with Daniel Ortega, his democratic credentials are a bit doubtful," Trivelli said.

In addition to the Indian-lands comments, Ortega has remarked lately on the rights of Latin American immigrants in the US, in light of pending legislation in the US Congress (see SourceMex, 2006-01-11 and 2006-03-08). Trivelli seems to be in full campaign mode. Three days before the tiger remarks, he appeared on the TV show *Esta Semana* to lay out the basics of good relations with his country. He said US policy was to cooperate with any government anywhere, as long as it was elected democratically and governed democratically, and "if they have a sensible economic policy and are willing to cooperate with us in matters of security."

Speaking before the publication of the national poll, and therefore relying on old figures, he assured viewers that Nicaraguans were looking for new options among emerging political parties.

The FSLN continues to play up the discord. Tomas Borge, the hard-line Sandinista who was minister of the interior during the years of Ortega's presidency, told the press the relationship with the US would be "uncertain" in the event of an FSLN win in November. "I don't know what is going to happen, but we do want to maintain good relations with the US," he said. Nevertheless, he characterized US behavior as "exceptional interference, without parallel on the continent or in any other part of the world." The old warhorse, now a deputy in the legislature, said Trivelli "ought to be expelled." He said the FSLN would cooperate with Washington and come to agreement on matters

of drug trafficking and terrorism if they won. "We are enemies of terrorism, even though it is said that Senor Bush is the principal terrorist of the world," he said. As bizarre a reassurance as this may be, it comes in the context of the Contra war, when, despite fighting US proxies on their own soil, the government never broke diplomatic relations with the Reagan regime.

In his comments, Borge spoke from an analysis that differs from that of the challengers. Rather than being fed up with the FSLN-PLC pact that threatened to topple the Bolanos presidency and effectively brought government to a standstill, his reading of the polls is that the electorate is "frustrated and disillusioned" with neoliberal policies that have resulted in unemployment, illiteracy, infant mortality, and poor health. Lest the Sandinistas feel that they are being singled out among Latin American nations for their politics, in early March, John Negroponte, former ambassador to Honduras when Ortega governed Nicaragua and now US director of national intelligence, said in congressional testimony, "We are closely observing the electoral contests in Peru and Nicaragua." He alerted the US lawmakers of the existence "in certain countries of Latin America of populist and radical personalities who champion static economic policies, show little respect for democratic institutions, and use an anti-US rhetoric" to win votes (see NotiSur, 2006-01-27 and 2006-03-10).

Managua good for Lewites, bad for Ortega

Ortega can take heart from the M&R survey, but he has no reason to rest easy or to assume that his US-baiting strategy is paying off everywhere in the country. A much narrower poll by Borge y Asociados that only sampled the department of Managua showed him doing much less well and was good news for Lewites. The Borge poll finds Lewites to be the favorite of 39.7% of those who intend to vote. Montealegre gets 31.7%, and Ortega 18.4%. Rizo, the PLC's late entry, pulled just 8.1% in the sampling taken between March 22 and 25. The area surveyed includes 30% of the national electorate. This later poll did have some good news for the FSLN in that the party led in the selection of legislators with 25.1%. The MRS was second with 23.1%, the PLC drew 23%, and Montealegre's Alianza trailed with 14.8%.

An idea that has come up before, an alliance between Lewites and Montealegre, got substantial support in the local poll. Of respondents, 63.7% agreed that deputies of the two movements could unite to break the "pact between Ortega and Arnoldo Aleman," ex-president (1997-2002) and PLC leader.

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