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## Nicaraguan Election Pits Competing Hemispheric Visions; Left Widens Its Embrace

by Mike Leffert

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Gran Unidad Nicaragua Triunfa. Under that banner, Daniel Ortega has vastly broadened the platform he hopes will return him to the presidency. If successful, the restructuring of the Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) could also return Nicaragua to the international stage as the beachhead where the South's growing left gains ground on Central American soil.

In early May, just days before a deadline set by electoral law, the FSLN sealed an alliance called in the press "a bewildering mix of former enemies." On May 28, at a Congreso Extraordinario of the party, a list of candidates reflecting this alliance was ratified. Heading the list was Ortega's chosen running mate, Jaime Morales Carazo. Commonly called The Godfather (el Padrino), Morales was an early dissident within the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), a banker, businessman, and, for a decade, columnist with *Prensa Libre*. He was a founder, with the Jesuits, of the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) and of its school of business. He was also chief negotiator for the US-sponsored contras. Morales wrote the statutes of the PLC in 1993 and went on to be the campaign manager for former President Arnoldo Aleman (1997-2002) in 1996 and Aleman's personal advisor during his presidency.

After turning dissident, however, Morales was expelled from the party and the administration he helped create (see *NotiCen*, 2002-07-18). But Morales Carazo also has roots, of a sort, in the FSLN. He used to own the lands upon which the FSLN headquarters and Ortega's home now stand. The Sandinistas expropriated them following the revolution. The national deputy candidate list has some unexpected names, beginning at the very top. Miram Arguello of the conservative *Convergencia Nacional* tops even the last surviving FSLN founder Tomas Borge on the list.

The fifth name from the top is Brooklyn Rivera, who in times past battled the FSLN for indigenous autonomy. Rivera is now with Yatama, the indigenous party of the Atlantic Coast. Although former adversaries, this alliance is not so strange when Rivera explains it. "Today, paradoxically, we are making this alliance, because we have both come to know and respect each other's positions, and over time have taken similar positions," said Rivera. "The FSLN is the party that best understands, and has respected, our autonomy." It was the FSLN that granted the coastal autonomy. The department list also reflects broad inclusion.

Here, too, the *Convergencia Nacional*, in the person of Agustin Jarquin Anaya, tops the roster. A bit further down can be found the name of Julia Mena, vice president in the government of former President Violeta Chamorro (1990-1996). She heads the *Parlamento Centroamericano* candidates, and Odell Incer Barquero, ex-*contra* leader, heads the departmental list of Boaco. Ortega explained to *Inforpress Centroamericana*, "We have to accept and understand each other to confront this enemy, which is poverty and unemployment, as well as lack of health and education."

## Polls support the wisdom

With five months before the Nov. 5 election, the broad net appears to have pulled in support. One recent poll found Ortega has pulled into the lead in the race. The Borge y Asociados poll showed Ortega with 28.4% of voter intentions, just ahead of Eduardo Montealegre of the PLC split-off Alianza Liberal Nicaraguense (ALN) with 26.5%. The PLC's Jose Rizo trailed with 17.1%, and FSLN dissident Herty Lewites (Movimiento de Renovacion Sandinista, MRS) brought up the rear with 14.8%. That poll was criticized for its small size and relatively wide margin of error, but a subsequent larger one by M&R confirmed Ortega and Montealegre in a virtual tie with 27.9% and 27.2% respectively.

Neither candidate at this point has enough support to win in a first round 35% with a margin of 5% over the next-highest candidate would be needed. The M&R poll found Montealegre would win in a runoff. This poll also unearthed some findings that could shed further light on the FSLN's sudden turn to breadth. The electorate considers this election of transcendent importance; 86.2% of respondents said this election was as crucial, or more so, as the 1990 upset that turned Ortega out and brought Chamorro to power. Of respondents, 72.1% expressed a strong intention to vote, and only 12% were unsure, even at this early stage. The campaign does not officially start until July. Opinion within the party varied but leaned toward acceptance of the wide-net strategy.

Jose Pasos Marcial, Contralor General de la Republica and member of the FSLN directorate, said, "Of course, it must be that some people disagree, but if one thing characterizes our supporters, it is that we have a commitment to the party." A trend away from primaries Misgivings about Ortega's nomination continue.

Many within the party wanted a primary to decide it, and, said thwarted candidate Alejandro Martinez Cuenca, "that includes people who recognize [Ortega's] leadership, qualities, and political experience within the party." Martinez was foreign trade minister during the Sandinista government.

But Pasos Marcial said all that is history now. "The [party] congress can take whatever decision and make whatever exception it deems appropriate," was the way he dismissed the decision to forgo a primary.

The differences of opinion between Martinez and Pasos reflect a burgeoning trend among left parties in the hemisphere away from primaries. The thinking is that primaries are too divisive and erosive of party discipline. Pedro Carreno, a deputy in Venezuela's official Movimiento Quinta Republica (MVR), said, for instance, "If we had chosen candidates to the Asamblea Nacional in primary elections, we'd have run the risk that, when someone won, divisions would be generated and the popular movement broken up."

Similarly, in El Salvador, the Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) recalls painfully that a primary election started conflicts resulting in a party schism that ended with the formation of the Frente Democratico Revolucionario (FDR), a costly outcome for the major left party.

In Nicaragua, however, the opposite has held true, and now the split that launched Lewites and his MRS has spirited away almost 15% of the FSLN's potential vote. The loss is tempered by the split on the right, however, that has nearly sunk the once indomitable PLC (see NotiCen, 2006-02-23, 2006-03-09 and 2006-04-06). Still, the Sandinistas like their chances and appear to have determined that whatever they give up with the inclusion strategy will be balanced by what they gain in solidarity with the hemisphere's rising left and what such gains could mean for the isthmus. Borge, the quintessential Sandinista hard-liner, told Inforpress, "In Nicaragua, we will be the first. Then the FMLN will follow; after that, Guatemala, and from there, one by one." That might be an overly rosy scenario, but the crusty old war-horse may be on to something.

Ortega's bona fides with the international left are very much intact, the latest indication of which is his deal with Venezuela to supply Nicaragua with oil, undercutting the multinational corporations that determine supply, demand, and cost (see NotiCen, 2006-04-27). Ortega has emphasized in his speeches his intention to continue cooperation with Venezuela and with Cuba in the areas of health care and education. He is at the crux of the competing visions dominating the hemisphere, that of the South represented by Venezuela's Alternativa Bolivariana para las Americas (ALBA) and that of the North, represented by the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).

#### Ortega at the crossroads

Aware of the stakes, the US has cast its lot with Ortega's opposition, while Venezuela looks on. Both sides have drawn ire and criticism in Nicaragua for interference in the electoral process, and these criticisms promise to become an ongoing part of the campaigns. Montealegre is the obvious choice of the US, which has coyly declined to announce its support, while Venezuela coaches its candidate from the sidelines. Said Carreno recently, "Ortega spoke of a revision of CAFTA, which he will have to revise because it would be impossible to be able to manage well with these two forms of integration. Our peoples rule themselves by parliamentary democracies, and with a parliamentary decision or with a popular referendum it would be sufficient to make a decision." The Venezuelan deputy's statement recalls that Ortega was a prime mover in making constitutional changes vesting more power in the legislature, creating a near-parliamentary system in Nicaragua that would permit that very thing (see NotiCen, 2005-01-20).

Ortega's leftward vision extends beyond Latin America. He said on May 29 that if he wins in November he will re-establish relations with China. These relations were firm during the Sandinista administration but were broken when Violeta Chamorro established ties with Taiwan. This would be another balance-tipping move for the region. As China continues to gain economic influence in the world, heads are turning, and Taiwan's only official friends in Latin America are centered on the isthmus and in the Caribbean. Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Panama recognize Taiwan, as do the Dominican Republic and Haiti. In South America, only Paraguay chooses Taiwan.

The FSLN has expressed confidence that its inclusion of conservatives will not materially impede these leftward initiatives. Ortega dangles his vice presidential choice as evidence that the business community has nothing to fear from a Sandinista administration, and he stands by as Morales Carazo publicly ticks off "macroeconomy, monetary stability, protection of deposits, and security

of property" as his priorities, along with "banking, the maquila industry, and international trade." He supports CAFTA. But Borge reflects the party's thinking on the clash of visions, saying, "Certain concessions have to be made, but we conserve intact our fundamental principles."

The Frente also appears to be counting on a combination of continued US interference and the PLC's wrath to erode some of Montealegre's support. Some analysts credit the favorable gestures of Ambassador Paul Trivelli toward Lewites with taking a toll on the former Sandinista's chances and see the same possibility for Montealegre. Apparently aware of this, the ambassador has pulled back of late and said, "We have never endorsed anyone and will not do so. The only ones who can decide who can be president of this country are the Nicaraguans themselves."

Meanwhile, the PLC is arguably running harder against Montealegre than against Ortega. The party has accused Montealegre of having profited from illegal bond issues, Certificados Negociables de Inversion (Ceni). The matter is currently under investigation by the comptroller-general, the public prosecutor, and the legislature. The beauty of this, from the FSLN point of view, is that the scandal has the potential to damage the PLC, whose members are embroiled in it.

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