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Mike Leffert

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## Nicaragua's Far Right Presidential Candidate Running Against The Regional Tide

by Mike Leffert

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Jose Rizo, candidate of the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) for the presidency of Nicaragua, revealed elements of his campaign with which he hopes to overcome his fourth-place standing in the polls. His party is widely criticized for cleaving to party leader Arnoldo Aleman, the ex-president who rules the party from behind the walls of his home, where he is serving a sentence after being convicted of fraud.

Rizo is running against populism. Rizo is running from the far right, and chose as a venue for his strategy announcement the XXV Congreso de la Fundacion Nacional Cubano Americana (FNCA) in Miami. He told his avidly anti-Castro audience that a "populist tsunami" is deluging all of Latin America, and its totalitarian bent threatens to erode the region's democracy. There was a tinge of contradiction in his contention that, "a wave of electoral victories of leftist, populist, and demagogic forces" was creating "an anemia of democracy that is damaging and destroying it. The Castros, the Chavezs', the Morales', and others of lesser stature are setting the pattern of leadership that should be assumed by men of good and of principles of our continent, like ourselves."

Rizo is running behind perennial Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) candidate Daniel Ortega, and two candidates from upstart parties, Edmundo Jarquin on the left (see NotiCen, 2006-07-13), and Eduardo Montealegre on the right (see NotiCen, 2006-02-23), but with the campaign at an early stage - the election is Nov. 5 - he is only about nine percentage points behind front-running Ortega. Montealegre is much more moderate than he, leaving the far-right position free and clear for Rizo. Jarquin is a hastily selected, relatively unknown stand-in for the recently dead and very popular Herty Lewites.

These circumstances seem to suggest to Rizo that this is the time to make a move to pass the field. Rizo recasts recent leftist victories in the region in hegemonic, class terms rather than in democratic terms. He said these victories owed to "these forces" convincing "the most simple and humble people that they have the solution to the problems of hunger, underdevelopment, and the ignorance of the populations." Rizo's strongest adversary, Ortega, has presented a problem for his analysis, invoking Pope Juan Paul II's condemnation of "the danger of savage capitalism" Ortega, speaking on the July 19 occasion of the 27th anniversary of the Sandinista revolution, had made reference to John Paul's statement in a promise to eliminate the effects of savage capitalism in Nicaragua.

Rizo has no wish to alienate the Catholic Church in his bid for the presidency, but does have a need to square the former pope's, and Ortega's, rhetoric with his political philosophy. He also has to take into account that Ortega has made very high-profile common cause in recent times with Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo. He told his audience that the left had "appropriated" the savage capitalism phrase to put forth the perception that what they seek is "more social justice and a new

international economic order." But in fact, said Rizo, the leftists are taking advantage of political liberty to threaten international security, "even including supporting and justifying, in an impudent fashion, terrorist actions."

Rizo, speaking as he was to an international audience, and one that could be useful to his campaign, shared a vision of governance based on the creation of a "front of governments, businessmen, and 'free men'" fighting to preserve democratic values in Latin America "now that democracy is passing through difficult moments." He said that Nicaragua had "lived through the tragic Sandinista socialist experiment," and will never be free as long as "we associate ourselves with the Cuba of Castro; that we will never progress if we associate ourselves with the Venezuela of Chavez, or with the Bolivia of Morales."

### *An anti-Castro presidency*

He proposes, if elected, rather to conduct an actively anti-Castro presidency. He outlined a project calculated to appeal to his Miami audience, a Nicaragua-based radio station to broadcast messages against the "neopopulist wave." The facility would be built in Puerto Cabezas for its proximity to Cuba, and from where, he said, "many freedom fighters departed for Cuba" in the 1970s. The idea drew enthusiastic applause. He followed up with other enticements for the Cuban exiles, promising them they would be heard in international forums, and that Nicaragua would back their struggle for a free Cuba. He ended with an appeal for their support.

Running against Castro, Chavez, and Morales may have the additional beneficial effect of softening the US's sometimes vocal opposition to his candidacy. Prior to his election as PLC candidate, US ambassador Paul Trivelli had predicted that he would be handpicked by Arnaldo Aleman. After the election, many within the party complained that was what happened, despite his winning with about 63% of the vote. Delegates to the party convention who reside in the US alleged that there had been widespread coercion of party members to vote for Rizo, who had resigned as Vice President in the beleaguered Enrique Bolanos government to seek the nomination.

The party has been split between Bolanos and Aleman factions, a major reason for its weakness in this campaign. US interference in the campaign has so far seemed to benefit Ortega, who has made it a campaign issue. A delegation of academics and activists from the US, sponsored by the Nicaragua Network, has traveled to Nicaragua and spoken to Trivelli about the problem. Rizo has, meanwhile, sought to distance himself from Aleman.

At a three-day conference on the election organized by Nicaraguans living in Miami in June, he denied that Aleman had any further role within the PLC, but in doing so, admitted that Aleman had imposed a large number of candidates for seats in the Asamblea Nacional (AN). The US, however, was continuing to make things tough for the PLC. The US is where the money is, and, in June, the US revoked the visas of several PLC representatives, including that of Rene Herrera, PLC magistrate on the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE). Observers say this was an attempt to move the party to support Montealegre and coalesce with his party. Nevertheless, Rizo's visa is still valid, and he makes good use of it.

On July 24 he was in Los Angeles, where he told the Nicaraguan community that he would maintain excellent relations with the US, and would even create a section within the foreign relations ministry to look after the affairs of the 2,000,000 Nicaraguans living outside their country, and to facilitate their right to vote. It is not inconceivable that Rizo could gain support from the US government.

In taking the stance against the South American left-triumvirate, he aligns himself with US policy first enunciated by ex-commander of the US Southern Command, General James Hill, who in testimony before the Armed Services Committee of the US House of Representatives in March 2004 elaborated the concept of "radical populism." Hill differentiated in his testimony two types of threat, the traditional, and the emergent. The traditional were narco-terrorism and those that represent a threat to "law and order, by urban gangs and other illegal armed groups." But the greater threat is "radical populism, where the democratic process is undermined to diminish, instead of protect, individual rights."

Hill's successor, General Bantz Craddock, then took the concept further, linking it with the US war on terrorism, and accusing Chavez of trying to influence Nicaragua's elections.

Ortega's relationship with Chavez brings the links full circle, so that from the vantage point of US policy, an Ortega victory brings radical populism, the new communism, to Central American shores. What stands in the way of this threat to democracy and stability, says the Rizo campaign, is Rizo. Also on the bright side for Rizo is that, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's May updaters, "Some of Nicaragua's leading business figures, who are fearful of Mr. Ortega's return, are still expected to back Mr. Rizo of the PLC."

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