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Women's Issues, Abortion, Explode Onto Nicaragua's Electoral-campaign Scene

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Before suffering a severe blow to its electoral prospects in Nicaragua's coming November elections with the death of its candidate Herty Lewites (see NotiCen, 2006-07-13), the Movimiento de Renovacion Sandinista (MRS) had attracted the support of a women's organization that could change the terms of engagement as the campaigns move forward.

In June, the party reached an accord with the Movimiento Autonomo de Mujeres de Nicaragua (MAM). The two organizations agreed on a series of policies of benefit to women. MAM identifies itself as an autonomous political movement that asserts equality, freedom, and solidarity. The accord reduces to five the demands based on gender equity and the establishment of women's rights. The five are:

Establishment of Democratic Institutionalality. In the face of the establishment of a pact [between the FSLN and the PLC] that has noticeably deteriorated the institutionalality of the country, MAM demands that a profound reform of the state be carried out that allows for creating the bases for constructing a true democracy, where megapensions, megasalaries, and the repartition of powers are eliminated (see NotiCen 2005-01-13), layers of management are reduced, and a law of access to public information is created that would permit citizens to have control of state information.

Secular State. MAM demands the establishment of secular public policies that respond to the interests of all the citizenry and that public authorities act in accordance with their jobs not their relationship with the church. Public education must respect the secular character of education. Similarly, state funds should not finance religious activities, and state policy should encourage in society the exchange of ideas and critical thought.

Generic Democracy. MAM demands the elaboration and approval of a state policy that guarantees democratic parity, the reduction of inequalities of power, the establishment of a program that contributes to the effective recognition of the rights of women, and the creation of a system for gender equity with ministerial status and with a budget assigned from the general budget [Presupuesto General de la Republica, PGR].

Social Justice. MAM demands the formulation of a National Development distribution Policy with true citizen participation and reallocation of the PGR, renegotiating the internal debt to liberate human and social capitalization funds, [to wit:] reformulating environmental policy that incorporates water as the primordial element for development and recovering state control of basic resources.

Population Policy. In this regard, MAM demands the design of a state population policy in concordance with a policy of development that responds to the principal economic, social, political, environmental, and cultural challenges. One of the first questions to arise when MAM made its support of the MRS known was that of autonomy. Sofia Montenegro of the MAM Coordinadora Politica told the media that there simply was no more viable alternative. "It is an endorsement to

the same extent that we continue seeking the same thing, which is breaking the pact. The women alone cannot break the pact, unorganized citizens cannot break the pact, and the elections are an opportunity to get rid of it with the political rights we all have to decide the direction of the country, and particularly a situation that has done so much damage to the country." She said the autonomy lay in their ability to decide with whom to ally themselves and to join those who offer the best guarantee of advancing their rights. "An alliance is an alliance, it is not a fusion," she said. "We are not becoming members of the MRS. We are an autonomous author, with our own approach, making a political deal in favor of advancing the interests of women in general." Montenegro pointed out that even the Alianza Liberal, whose presidential candidate Eduardo Montealegre is running against the FSLN-PLC pact, has other baggage. "The Alianza Liberal has very strong links with sectors of the Catholic Church, and that has been absolutely against the rights of women." But while MAM may not have become MRS, some MAM members have become MRS candidates. MAM member Azahalea Solis is a MRS candidate for alternate deputy. She said the reason MAM signed on with MRS is that there is "coincidence with our anti-pact position, as well as with several aspects contained in their political program." Another powerful attraction might have been the presence of women of high standing on the left within the party. Dora Maria Tellez had the rank of commandante in the FSLN, was a founder of the breakaway MRS, and is now a candidate for the legislature. For Tellez, the attraction of MRS for leftist women lies not only in there being women candidates but in its platform as well. "This is the only political force that includes the subject of interfamilial and social violence as a matter of maximum importance, as well as everything relating to backing women's economic and social initiatives. But even more, we have said with clarity that we are profoundly committed to promoting gender equity in every aspect of national life." MAM support for the MRS dates to before Lewites' death. When Lewites' running mate Edmundo Jarquin inherited the top spot, he was on the spot to define himself if he was to keep the support the party already had and not lose momentum. But the disruption also created an opportunity for attack, and the church wasted little time in going after the candidate on the issue of secularism and the infinitely more sensitive question of abortion. Jarquin declares support for therapeutic abortion. In a move some supporters called unnecessary and stupid, Jarquin stepped out on the issue, saying, "I support therapeutic abortion, categorically." He told the media this was because, "when the life of the mother is at risk, it is like other situations not related to abortion that present themselves, the life must be saved." The church responded with the announcement of a march on the congress scheduled for Oct. 6 to demand that therapeutic abortion be criminalized in the penal code. At present, and for more than a century, the relevant article in the code has read, "The necessity to interrupt a pregnancy, for therapeutic reasons, will be determined scientifically, with the dictum of three practitioners at least. Therapeutic abortion shall not be punishable." Abortion other than therapeutic is punishable by imprisonment from one to three years. Legislators have agreed to take the matter up after they conclude discussions on other sections of the code, which means after the elections. Secretary of the Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua (CEN) Socrates Rene Santiago took dead aim at Jarquin, saying, "This person cannot be elected to the presidency because then you will have in the presidency an abortionist, a murderer." Jarquin held fast on his position. "I'm not a murderer," he responded in the local press. "My commitment has been and is with life. I profoundly regret that a declaration of mine in defense of life, and with strict adherence to a legal norm that is more than 100 years old, and that exists in almost all countries of the world, has provoked an intolerant and excessive reaction from an authority of the Catholic Church whose investiture I as a Catholic deeply respect." Jarquin excused the prelate's inopportune statement but said he expected an apology. Abortion is by far the hottest issue the church has, but it is deeply concerned

with another of the MAM-MRS themes, separation of church and state. When Jarquin made his pro-abortion statement, he also said, "My government is going to be absolutely compliant with the constitutional requirement, which is that this is a secular state and that therefore there must be a clear separation of issues of the state and issues of the church." He emphasized that this is to the benefit of the churches because there are several in the country, with differing agendas. It is true enough that Nicaragua has the gamut of religious options, but the Catholic Church is the major traditional power player. After a surprising rapprochement between former Archbishop of Managua Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo and Daniel Ortega, the church exercised its power with the FSLN-PLC pact. In full recognition of this important relationship, the FSLN quickly joined the church in opposing abortion. This was a reversal of traditional Sandinista policy made all the more stunning because Ortega, now in first place in the polls, has an enormous lead over fourth-place Jarquin. "We are emphatic. No to abortion, yes to life. Yes to religious beliefs. Yes to faith. Yes to the quest for God, which is what sustains us every day to resume the path," said a press release from Rosario Murillo, Ortega's campaign manager and wife. If it stunned the general public, the policy reversal absolutely blew the FSLN congressional delegation away, because it is supporting therapeutic abortion against the campaign to criminalize it. MAM's director Violeta Delgado was swift to respond. She called the move "a hypocritical electoral declaration of the FSLN like its reconciliation with Cardinal Obando." Feminist groups associated with the FSLN were not immediately heard from. What the FSLN had to gain with this announcement is difficult to assess. But it is clear that Jarquin had nothing to lose. A CID-Gallup poll released Aug. 29 and reported by Reuters showed Jarquin with 14% of the intended vote, trailing behind Ortega's 29%. In between was Eduardo Montealegre with 23%. When Lewites died, running-mate Jarquin was little known, and then only as a competent technocrat, and he has struggled to establish an identity of sufficient dynamism to lift him out of the shadow of his predecessor. Before the storm of women's issues and abortion hit, Jarquin had been building his campaign around his experience in international finance, issues of great importance but not calculated to capture the imagination of an electorate primed for what has been called Nicaragua's most important election ever because of its potential to raise the country out of the pact-induced stalemate.

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