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## **A Regional Turning Point; Ortega Wins Presidency In Nicaragua**

*by LADB Staff*

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Daniel Ortega had the presidential elections won with an irreversible lead after a power outage stopped the counting Nov. 6, with 61% of the votes counted. But the losers would not give up, the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE) would not declare a winner, and Ortega would not claim victory until about 91% of the votes were tallied the evening of Nov. 7. It was a hard-won battle for the Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) standard-bearer; this was his fourth attempt to reclaim a presidency he lost in 1990.

Ortega was first elected in 1984 following the successful Sandinista Revolution that toppled the dictator Anastasio Somoza (1963-1979) in 1979. This term will last five years. Internationally, the election was seen as the latest battle in the proxy war between the US and Venezuela. As such, it was a clear loss for the US both because of the clumsiness of its interventions and because of the deftness with which Ortega played the overt interference by US congresspeople, the State Department, US Ambassador to Nicaragua Paul Trivelli, Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez, and even Oliver North.

These US operatives and others mounted an unprecedented campaign of intimidation of the Nicaraguan electorate. The ambassador and a succession of Republican US congresspeople threatened aid cutoffs, reductions in US and other foreign investment, and legislation to impede the flow of remittances from Nicaraguans working in the US to their families.

The intensity of Washington's campaign drew criticisms around the world and appeals to halt the interference from the Organization of American States (OAS) and from the UN, but the politically tone-deaf administration of President George W. Bush seemed incapable of controlling its excesses.

As early as July, Michael Shifter, Nicaragua expert at the Washington-based Inter-American Dialogue, cautioned, "An Ortega win at the ballot box in November would be a humiliating setback for the Bush administration. Unlike in other Latin American elections, where Washington has shown admirable neutrality, in Nicaragua it has not concealed its intense desire to keep Ortega from returning to power."

Ortega played on his electorate's long memory of US domination of his country and probably could not have asked for more of a boost to his quest for the presidency than this Republican onslaught, capped off with the visit from Oliver North. North came to sow division between Sandinista supporters and Nicaraguans who had supported the contra war.

North is remembered as the chief negotiator of the illegal sale of weapons to Iran during the administration of President Ronald Reagan, with the profits being channeled, also illegally, to the

contras. The ex-Marine, perhaps unknowingly, had come to exhort against an Ortega who had chosen as his running mate Jaime Morales, a former contra leader. The ex-colonel did not seem to know the war was over.

Ortega's choice of a vice president and other eclectic decisions led to a perception by some analysts that the FSLN was becoming a hodge-podge, a party unreflective of traditional Sandinista values that party regulars would eschew (see NotiCen, 2006-06-08). But here again, the perception proved wrong and, more important, ignored one of Ortega's great strengths.

### *A brief history of the Marxist who wasn't*

As president after the revolution, Ortega governed as one of nine comandantes of the revolution who represented vastly different visions of Sandinismo. These visions were divided into three distinct tendencies. The Proletarian Tendency (TP) of Jaime Wheelock, Luis Carrion, and Carlos Nunez was oriented toward the urban working class, and was Marxist-Leninist. The second was the Prolonged People's War Tendency (GPP) of Tomas Borge, Henry Ruiz, and Bayardo Arce. Their emphasis was a Maoist approach to the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship, with political education and development of social consciousness. The third was the Tercerista, or Insurreccional Tendency, to which Ortega belonged, together with his brother Humberto and Victor Tirado Lopez.

For them, the key to victory was the middle class and the growing alienation of the bourgeoisie from the dictatorship. They advocated a short-term, insurreccional strategy to bring down Somoza. The Terceristas carried the day, growing rapidly by recruiting from the Catholic Church, lawyers, academics, and students. They were bourgeois to the core. When the three tendencies united in 1978 to overthrow Somoza, the Terceristas were the dominant force. In other words, from the beginning, the man whom countless newspaper articles refer to as the "balding, 60-year-old Marxist" was not a Marxist but rather a skilled leader capable of keeping ideologues of vastly different stripes working successfully together against US opposition and warfare. He is, however, balding and 60.

Once installed, the Sandinista regime agreed on establishing a popular democracy with a mixed economy, a capitalist Nicaragua. A statement from the National Directorate clearly spelled it out, saying, "The armed insurrection of the masses is a means to achieve the revolutionary overthrow of the Somoza dynasty and open up a process of popular democracy, which will allow our people to enjoy democratic liberties, a more favorable framework in which to accumulate the revolutionary energies required for the march toward full national liberation and socialism."

There were to be no liquidations or other hallmarks of Leninism or Maoism. It is also the case that the Terceristas drew their support from the international social democrats and progressives in Latin America, much as Ortega is doing now as leftists have gained significant ground in the region. Thus, the president-elect not only sees US intervention in historic terms, but he sees support from Venezuela, Bolivia, and Cuba as essential to the sovereignty of the nation he is to govern.

Ortega was quite happy to accept from Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez a deal to supply oil and gas to Sandinista constituencies as part of his campaign (see NotiCen, 2006-04-27). There are indications that the voters saw it this way, too. Miguel Mendoza, 45, was nine years old when his

parents were killed by Somoza's troops. He told the media, "Whatever Chavez sends us helps us a lot and it makes us less scared because we know we are not alone; we have his support."

Since the revolution, representatives of the other tendencies have mellowed considerably. The old hard-line leader of the GPP, Borge, said that to be of the left today means "to work for the poor, but without fighting with the rich....Now, we are a realist left, lucid, faithful to the interests of the poor." He said that, with the FSLN's return to power, there would be no return to the "errors" of the revolution. "We were wild, arrogant bureaucrats, frustrated by mistakes," he admitted about Ortega's 1984-1990 government. Borge said that the new government wants to be friends with the US, but under conditions of respect. "We will not allow them to bring us to our knees." He said he thought that friendship with the US would not happen until Bush leaves office, but he made that comment before the Republican Party suffered a crushing defeat in the US interim elections Nov. 7.

For the moment, said the sole surviving founder of the FSLN, the new government's best bet is with old friends. "Now we are friends of the Venezuela of Hugo Chavez, and we feel proud. But we also have good relations with [Argentina] President Nestor Kirchner, we are friends of Lula da Silva [Brazil], and of Evo Morales [Bolivia], and we will have very good relations with the Chile of [Michelle] Bachelet."

### *A comfortable win, support left and right*

Ortega won with about 38% of the vote, more than nine points ahead of Eduardo Montealegre, the Bush-backed candidate of the Alianza Liberal Nicaraguense (ALN), a split-off from the ruling Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC). This was more than enough to avoid a runoff, since the law requires the winner to get 40% of the vote, or more than 35% with a five-point margin. In third place was the PLC's Jose Rizo with about 23%. A distant fourth place went to Edmundo Jarquin of the Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (MRS).

The president-elect reached out immediately, calling for reconciliation, promising to "create a new political culture," to "set aside our differences and put the Nicaraguan people, the poor, first." Nicaragua is the second-poorest country, after Haiti, in the hemisphere. While stressing that "we need to make sure that each home, each Nicaraguan family can live with dignity and honor," one of Ortega's first acts on Nov. 8 was to try to calm the fears of international investors and businesspeople. In a meeting with President Enrique Bolanos, he said, "We aren't thinking of dramatic or radical changes in economic policies." This was consistent with his campaign statements, which emphasized reconciliation, free trade, and even good relations with Washington. Businesspeople appear to be more concerned with US reaction than with Ortega.

Chris Berry, owner of a resort in San Juan del Sur, said, "My fears aren't really about Ortega. He's among a group of wealthy men who want to protect their investments." Montealegre, also a wealthy man who wants to protect his investments, took the view that it was his job to save Ortega from the clutches of the Latin American left. He said he would "use every connection I have to make the relationship with the US work. We can't afford to give Ortega an excuse to let his only support be Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez. I will become an important channel so he doesn't fall into Chavez's hands."

Both Castro and Chavez were nonetheless pleased with the Ortega win. Castro said from Havana that the victory "fills our people with joy, at the same time filling the terrorist and genocidal government of the United States with opprobrium." From Caracas, Chavez said that he and Ortega would be "uniting as never before" to construct a socialist future." Ortega acknowledged Chavez and the coming election in Venezuela, saying, "I'm convinced that, as we have won today, our Venezuelan brother will have a new victory on Dec. 3 and continue the struggle for justice, peace, and solidarity among peoples."

The position of the US remains hazy. Although seriously weakened by the Nov. 7 election results, the Bush administration still has powerful cards to play against its former enemy, and the players include people like Elliot Abrams, a holdover from the contra war and key figure in the Iran-Contra scandal, now rehabilitated and serving on the National Security Council (NSC).

The US first response was tepid. "The United States is committed to the Nicaraguan people. We will work with their leaders based on their commitment to and actions in support of Nicaragua's democratic future," said national security spokesman Gordon Johndroe. As if to remind Ortega of his country's inclusion in the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), Johndroe added, "The groundwork has been laid to allow for increased prosperity and opportunity for the Nicaraguan people."

Former US President Jimmy Carter was in Nicaragua to monitor the election, which he considered free and fair. He told reporters that he had discussed the election with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. He said Rice told him that, if the election is certified as "honest and fair, and if the Ortega government reaches out in a respectful and supportive way to the United States, then the United States will reciprocate." Carter added, "I think there is no doubt that the future relations between the US and Nicaragua will be improved."

State department spokesman Sean McCormack later said, "We'll see what government this election produces. We'll see what the platform of that government is." Even Commerce Secretary Gutierrez seemed to be opening a door to improvement. Departing from the harangues of the campaign and resuming a commerce-as-usual stance, he said, "We look forward to working with the new government. We hope that we continue to build a relationship and to build trade and prosperity to both countries."

However tentative, there is a detectable difference in the US post-election rhetoric. After the results were announced, Michael Shifter seemed to sum up the shift, noting, "It was clear that if the logic of the US was to sow fear in the Nicaraguans of voting for Ortega because of the possible consequences, the tactic didn't work."

Larry Birns of the Washington-based Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) saw the US as having arrived at a choice point with Ortega's election. Observing that Washington's relations with Latin America are "at the worst moment in a century," Birns characterized Ortega "as an apple ripe for picking. This depends on Washington, which in its own interest should show maturity." If it doesn't, he said, "Nicaragua will enter the Venezuelan orbit." To the extent that Nicaragua is already in that

orbit, this election represents the first beachhead in Central America for the left rising in South America. The rest of the Central American governments are firmly in the US sphere of influence, but already the FSLN victory is encouraging left of the isthmus.

In El Salvador, the Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) hailed the victory as the beginning of the end of neoliberalism in Central America. The FMLN sent a substantial observer delegation to Nicaragua, and their spokesman, Sigfrido Reyes, greeted the results with the statement, "The neoliberal model begun in the 1990s started to suffer a reversal in Nicaragua, and this marks the start of the decline of a system that has left a wake of poor people the whose only path is to emigrate to other countries. The results in Nicaragua portend that the wave of changes that started in South America has arrived in Central America, and the triumph of Ortega represents for the FMLN satisfaction and cause for celebration."

-- End --