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## **Daniel Ortega Reconciles His Way To Nicaragua's Presidency**

*by Mike Leffert*

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Nicaragua's Telica volcano started celebrating a day early. With a series of impressive explosions, the 1,090 meter volcano began spewing gas and ash at about 3 p.m. on Nov. 9, but the inauguration of Daniel Ortega as president was not scheduled to go off until Nov. 10. Telica belches raw power from time to time, but Ortega has not governed since 1990, when he lost a re-election bid after having led the country for 11 years. The inauguration was the Sandinista's reward for three successive tries for the office. It was a remarkable comeback (see NotiCen, 2006-11-09).

Ortega's path to victory was marked by a series of radical reconciliations. As leader of the Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN), he reconciled with archrival ex-President Arnoldo Aleman (1997-2002) of the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) a couple of elections ago to form a coalition in the legislature that held outgoing President Enrique Bolanos (2002-2007) nearly powerless for most of his presidency. Ortega reconciled with Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, leader of the Catholic Church in the country and formidable foe during the years of the contra war. He reconciled with the contras, by choosing as his running mate former contra leader Jaime Morales. He reconciled with capitalism, as Morales pointed out in a pre-inaugural statement, promising, "We will totally respect private property, entrepreneurial liberty, and the marked economy." He reconciled with the religious right by running on a pro-life platform after having supported a woman's right to choose abortion for his entire political career (see NotiCen, 2006-11-02).

### ***Bush reconciles***

But of all the reconciliations along the way, perhaps the most intriguing is the most recent. It appears that US President George W. Bush and his government have reconciled with Ortega. Pro-US governments have ruled the country since US-backed ex-President Violeta Chamorro (1990-1997) toppled Ortega in 1990, and the Bush administration waged a relentless campaign against Ortega, lest he become the latest in a string of stinging defeats for the US in Latin America. Just lately, the leader of that campaign, US Ambassador Paul Trivelli, was heard to say, "The US and Nicaragua have to have a relationship. We're their largest investor, their largest trading partner, and we have a long history together."

Even before Telica's celebratory eruption, on Jan. 8, Bush called Ortega to congratulate him, according to White House spokesman Tony Snow. The call was particularly significant in that it took Bush two months to make it. Put in perspective, Bush congratulated Ecuador's President-elect Rafael Correa within three days of his election but has never called Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, despite his eight years in office and inauguration coinciding with Ortega's. The two South Americans represent the earliest and latest electoral blows to US hegemony in the hemisphere (see NotiSur, 2006-12-08 and 2006-12-15).

Bush did not accept an invitation to attend Ortega's inauguration, but he did send a delegation to Managua. The US delegation was led by Secretary of Health and Human Services Michael Leavitt. One threat levied by Ambassador Trivelli that has disappeared from the discourse was that an Ortega win would jeopardize US\$220 million in US aid and the country's participation in the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). Now, only a faint whiff of brimstone remains. "Nicaragua is a far different place than when Ortega last ruled. It remains to be seen whether Ortega has the political acumen to steer Nicaragua through the era of globalization," said Russell Crandall of the Center for American Progress in Washington. Crandall was formerly director of Western Hemisphere initiatives at the National Security Council (NSC) in the Bush administration.

### *Taiwan back in play*

This does not exhaust the list of reconciliations. One of the potentially most profitable would have to be the late-breaking patch-up with Taiwan. Nicaragua severed relations with Taiwan in 1985, when Ortega was president. Last year, during the campaign, Ortega announced his intention to reach out to the People's Republic of China (PRC). But it was Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian who was in Managua for the ceremonies. There was some talk of Chen's making a gift of about US\$55 million to Ortega, but Taiwanese Foreign Affairs Vice Minister Yang Tzu-pao denied the speculation. Yang said, however, that the two countries are having ongoing talks on bilateral cooperation. Taiwan has been extremely generous to countries in Central America whose votes it needs in the UN to press its claims of independence from China (see NotiCen, 1997-10-02).

The warming does not necessarily mean that Ortega is turning from Beijing. The People's Republic is still reportedly interested in the restoration of diplomatic relations, and Ortega has told Chen that the FSLN will continue to maintain contact with the Communist Party of China (CPC). His government will also encourage the PRC to set up a trade office in Nicaragua. The new presidency appears, at least for now, to be setting up shop on both sides of the diplomatic street. While making up with former allies and adversaries, the new government also plans to entertain President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran, no friend of the US, as one of its first visitors.

Iran's state-run Islamic Students News Agency has reported Ahmadinejad would arrive in Nicaragua Jan. 13, as part of a swing through the region that is to include stops in Venezuela and Ecuador, where he will attend the Correa inauguration on Jan. 15. Ortega also has some eggs in Hugo Chavez's basket. He will reportedly count on Venezuelan aid, even while he continues to reconcile with the US. Chavez is expected to help finance programs on health and education that Ortega promised during the campaign.

Nicaragua is the Latin American nation with the greatest indices of poverty, save Haiti. At least 80% of the population lives on less than US\$2 a day; 41% of the country's 5.1 million people live on less than US\$1 a day.

The US approach to the problem, trade agreements with the promise of "raising all boats," has shown little sign of doing that elsewhere, and so it is Venezuela that Ortega leans on for alleviation of poverty through reduction in energy costs, health services, and education. In his speech after

swearing in, Ortega told his people that the riches that neoliberal policies had brought to the country had only benefited a few, and added, "Now we have the challenge of opening a new road that will permit Nicaraguan families to live with dignity."

The new president has promised to maintain a delicate balance between these competing influences, and many in Nicaragua believe he will do that. Jaime Valle, a PLC voter from Ciudad Sandino is one of those believers. He told reporters that Ortega has undergone a "transcendental change." "God," he said, "has given Ortega a chance to correct the damage he did to Nicaragua." [Sources: Latinnews Daily (UK), 01/09/07; Reuters, 01/09/07, 01/10/07; Associated Press, Bloomberg, Central News Agency-Taiwan, [www.telesur.tv.net](http://www.telesur.tv.net), 01/10/07]

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