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Mike Leffert

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Ortega's First 100 Days As Nicaragua's President: Not So Bad, Not So Good

by Mike Leffert

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April 20 marked Daniel Ortega's 100th day as president of Nicaragua. Considering that he won election with barely 38% of the vote and that most of the print media in the country is connected through family ties with the government of former President Violeta Chamorro (1990-1997), Ortega did not do particularly badly in the several evaluations of his tenure that have appeared in the press. But he did not do overwhelmingly well, either.

He was criticized for using his time consolidating power but also got good marks on social issues. Ortega got good marks for reducing the number of blackouts resulting from the country's electricity-generation deficit. This was largely because of the help of Venezuela, which has sent and installed several generators (see NotiCen, 2006-12-14 and 2007-04-19). This was offset, however, by the fact that it is still unclear whether, and how much, the country will have to pay for the equipment.

Despite dire predictions to the contrary, Ortega's macroeconomic policies, and those of the Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN), do not appear to have changed from those of the administration of conservative President Enrique Bolanos (2002-2007) that he replaced. Analysts credit Ortega with improved stability, and, according to the Centro de Tramites de las Exportaciones (CETREX), exports have risen 22% in the first three months of this year.

Playing both sides with the IMF

This is happening at the same time that the president is signaling his intention to end dependency on the International Monetary Fund (IMF). He has announced, almost simultaneously, that he is negotiating a new loan with the IMF and that, "within five years, Nicaragua will be free from the fund." Talks with the IMF to extend the loan program are slated to start April 30. While vowing to work with the lenders and with business leaders, he is also telling the country, "It is a blessing to be free of the fund, and for the fund it will be a relief to rid itself of a government that defends the interests of the poor." The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) estimates that 75% of Nicaragua's 5.5 million people live in poverty. Only Haiti has a lower per capita income.

This willingness to work with the IMF has reassured some in the private sector that Ortega might not follow the trend toward nationalizations that has begun in Venezuela and Bolivia. But analyst Israel Benevides Cerros finds the uncertainty unnerving and has said the government must define its economic and foreign policy one way or the other if investors are to be placated. Economist Alejandro Martinez Cuenca, who sought to run against Ortega for the FSLN nomination, has said he has observed a decrease in foreign investment and agrees there is "a lack of truthful information that gives tranquility to the investors."

These investors are somewhat buoyed, however, by Ortega's move to lower his salary and those of his ministers. Bolanos took home US\$10,000 a month. Ortega is earning just US\$3,200. The ministers are making do with US\$3,000, a cut of US\$2,000. The savings, said the president, would go to social spending. He has already moved toward tuition-free education in the public schools and free health care at the national hospitals.

Where Ortega comes under severest criticism is on issues related to his consolidation of power. From the center-left, the Movimiento de Renovacion Sandinista (MRS), a FSLN split-off party, came a 100-days analysis that noted an authoritarian cast to Ortega, starting with his suspension until 2008 of a constitutional reform that would have obligated him to consult the legislature on hiring and firing high-level administration officials and ambassadors and to provide timely reports on his administration. The FSLN, which leads the legislature, passed the measure in January and quickly followed it with another reform at Ortega's behest that increases his control of several institutions. These, said the MRS, "evidence the will to concentrate power in the presidency, distorting institutional equilibria that had been laboriously constructed."

The MRS also criticized government secrecy. Ortega prohibited officials of government agencies from speaking to the media without authorization from the Consejo de Comunicacion de la Presidencia, which, irritatingly, is headed by his wife, Rosario Murillo. Ortega has also gotten some criticism from his southern neighbor. President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica availed himself of the 100-day mark to tell the media that "Ortega has been a little imprudent with the things he says." Arias objected to Ortega saying some days earlier that "Colombia has started to politick with the Honduran and Costa Rican leaders to make alliances with them and try to divest us of Nicaraguan territory," in reference to a territorial dispute.

The Costa Rican president was also miffed that Ortega said that Arias did not deserve the 1987 Nobel Peace Prize. He said it should have gone to former President Jose Napoleon Duarte (1984-1989) of El Salvador for ending the contra war. Arias and Ortega both were presidents of their respective countries in the 1980s and have not formally met since assuming their present mandates. The countries are embroiled in a dispute regarding navigation rights on the Rio San Juan, which is now in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague. They are also disputing maritime limits over which Costa Rica has proposed the intervention of the UN. Managua has rejected the suggestion.

The newspaper La Prensa commissioned a poll on Ortega's performance, taken between April 11 and April 14 and published on April 24. Asked how they feel about the presidency, 50.4% of the general voting population said they had no hope, but that was the case for only 21.2% of Sandinista voters. Of those responding, 36% said they do not support the government, and 28% support it somewhat, while 29% of Sandinistas support it somewhat and 9.5% do not. On the question of the citizen councils (Consejos de la Democracia Directa), 50% believe they contribute to citizen participation, while 34% say they harken back to the Civil Defense Committees of the war days.

Murillo heads these organizations. When they came into being in January, she said, "They are councils for building citizenship, so that everybody knows that we have rights according to the Constitution and the laws of the republic, and so that we exercise those rights." When respondents

were asked about Rosario Murillo, 44% said she should not have the positions she holds in the government, while 42.5% said she should. Murillo got much better ratings in earlier polls. Regarding social programs, 33% of the respondents said that Ortega's free education and health care were the achievements they most valued, 19.6% had no opinion, and 13% named other options.

The voters polled were most critical of the unemployment situation (19%), mass layoffs (18%), and failure to make good on campaign promises (16.7%). Of respondents, 81% rated the government very poor, poor, or fair on economic issues, while 17.8% found economic performance good or very good. Despite favoring the free health care, 70.1% rated the services very poor, poor, or fair, and 28.3% said they were good or very good. On education, 62% said poor to fair, 37% good or very good. On relations with the international community, 67.5% said poor to fair, 30% said good or very good.

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