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LADB Staff

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Left-right Powersharing Deal Rears Its Head Again In Nicaragua

by LADB Staff

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The pact is back in Nicaragua. The alliance between the ruling Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) and the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), thought dead in some quarters, has re-emerged, as the interests of the two political polar opposites have begun to intersect. One of the mutually troublesome issues is Eduardo Montealegre, once a serious contender for the presidency. Now Montealegre is eying the mayoralty of Managua in elections upcoming this November, but a recent judicial decision has whisked his party, the Alianza Liberal Nacional (ALN), out from under him.

The FSLN-PLC intrigues played out in the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE) where the magistrates decided that the ALN, of which Montealegre is president, was illegally constituted. The Frente holds significant sway with CSE magistrates. The decision comes after two years of the ALN functioning as a legal party and fielding Montealegre as a presidential candidate. The ALN is a breakaway party, spun off the PLC (see NotiCen, 2005-08-05). After last year's presidential election, these two parties appeared to have reconciled and even signed an alliance to run together in the municipal contests. On Jan. 9, the ALN and PLC announced a coalition to run together and to support Montealegre. They demonstrated their solidarity by joining other parties the next day in refusing to attend President Daniel Ortega's annual speech to the legislature, leaving only the FSLN as audience. But it started to become clear that the basis for the old PLC-FSLN alliance was still a factor the ongoing drama of the conviction of the leader of the major Liberal faction and former President Arnoldo Aleman (1997-2002).

The conditions of Aleman's detention have steadily, over time, improved in his favor, going from imprisonment to house arrest to a limit only on leaving the country. These escalating leniencies have been paid for, allegedly, with PLC cooperation in consolidating Ortega's power. Montealegre distinguished himself during the elections by refusing to have anything to do with these manipulations and by refusing to make common cause with the Arnoldista faction of the PLC, which might have strengthened his presidential candidacy. In late February, the CSE ruled that Montealegre was no longer the leader of the ALN because of what it called "legal anomalies," and he has been ejected from the party.

The Sandinista-led CSE ruled on Feb. 20 that "a series of irregularities" had taken place when Montealegre was elected party president in April 2006. From mayoral frontrunner, he instantly became a man without a party. Additionally, Montealegre is seen as being under increased threat of prosecution for his part in the collapse of four banks in 2000 and 2001 when he was finance minister. The local press has written that Montealegre's refusal to enter into a new pact with Ortega underlies his reversals before the bar. According to Eliseo Nunez Morales, spokesman for the movement Vamos con Eduardo (VCE), Montealegre had rebuffed overtures from Ortega to forge an

alliance. The CSE ruling benefited both the Arnoldista faction of the PLC and the FSLN not only by eliminating Montealegre, but also by permanently rupturing the new PLC-ALN alliance.

The ALN chose Eliseo Nunez Hernandez (father of Nunez Morales) to replace their ousted leader, leading PLC secretary Francisco Aguirre Sacasa to reject any new alliance because Nunez Hernandez was reportedly an Arnoldista, and Aguirre Sacasa was not. This reopens the internal rift over Aleman in the party. Deputy Enrique Quinonez was to be Montealegre's running mate in the mayoral elections but, as a result of these events, has accused Aleman of sabotaging the ALN-PLC rapprochement. Quinonez said he would join Jose Rizo Castellon, the PLC's presidential candidate last time around, to organize a movement within the party against the return of the alliance with the FSLN.

Altered political landscape

The CSE decisions have significantly altered the political landscape. With the return of the ALN to the leadership of Nunez Hernandez and Deputy Carlos Garcia, the party was in the hands of the founders of the Movimiento de Salvacion Liberal (MSL). The MSL became a member of the coalition that morphed into the ALN in 2006, but its leadership strongly opposed domination by the VCE, which Montealegre formed after breaking away from the PLC. The essential point the CSE ruled on was that at the April 2006 convention that voted leadership to Montealegre, some 300 of his delegates did not have the proper credentials to have voted. The party has not lost its legal existence, however, and was, therefore, according to political analyst Jose Somarriba, a "political shell." Nevertheless, of the 23 ALN deputies in the Asamblea Nacional (AN), 17 indicated allegiance to Montealegre. He also retained the support of parties with which the ALN was in coalition.

One of those is the Partido Liberal Independente (PLI). Montealegre recently said he would continue his bid for mayor on the PLI ticket if necessary, but on March 2, the final date for filing candidacies, liberals of all stripes suddenly agreed to run together, shutting out both the ALN and the FSLN. This was a big strategic failure for the Frente in its quest to keep the liberals divided and dependent. Montealegre is at the top of the ticket, and Quinones is back at his side. The arrangement between the VCE and the PLC would give 60% of the coalition's mayoralities nationwide to the PLC and 40% to VCE. For electoral purposes, the coalesced parties are registered as the Alianza Partido Constitucionalista (APC) on the right and the Convergencia Nacional (CN) on the left. The APC incorporates the PLC, the now practically insignificant ALN, and the PLI. The CN embraces the FSLN, the Union Democratica Cristiana (UDC), and the Movimiento de Unidad Cristiana (MUC). The FSLN now has 87 of the national total of 153 municipalities and despite this present setback remains strong.

The failed attempt to marginalize Montealegre drew criticism against the CSE from the breakaway left, as well. Deputy Monica Baltodano of the Movimiento de Renovacion Sandinista (MRS), an FSLN splinter that was on track to elect Herty Lewites president had he not died prior to the last election (see NotiCen, 2006-07-13), said the affair "was a clear political assault on pluralism in the country." She also said, "After letting him participate as a candidate in 2006 to divide the liberals, now they want to destroy him because they are interested in a liberalism without strong leaders."

Baltodano also called attention to the moving up of the electoral calendar. In 2004, the alliances had not been fixed until May and the candidates not selected until July.

The purpose of moving everything up was an FSLN attempt to prevent Montealegre from reorganizing after the destruction of his party and to cripple the MRS as well. "They know we still have to integrate 80% of the slates and elect 130 candidates," she said. "We are going to be the next ones on the offensive. They are going to place all possible objections to our lists." Former ALN deputy, now VCE Deputy Pedro Joaquin Chamorro took shots at the FSLN, too. "The Frente has tried to avoid at all costs a ALN-PLC accord. Together, the two forces could have won about 100 municipalities. Chamorro downplayed the Arnoldistas in this. "There is no hand of the PLC, they gained from the unity. One only has to ask a single question, 'who gains from disunity among liberals?'" Chamorro's generosity in overlooking the culpability of the Arnoldistas despite the presence of their sympathizers on the CSJ was striking.

Carlos Fernando Chamorro, editor of the weekly *Confidencial* and not incidentally the deputy's brother, told *Inforpress Centroamericana* that the virtual destruction of the ALN worked out nicely for the PLC, by placing Montealegre "between the sword and the wall" and forcing him to be the unity Liberal candidate for mayor. There had been rumors that Montealegre would drop out at some point to run in the 2011 presidential elections. Furthermore, pulling his party from under the candidate served the interests of the country's big money sectors who want to see the PLC returned to power. "They want alliance at any price. They don't mind destroying the credibility of Montealegre, forcing him to ally with those he has criticized so often, nor [do they mind] rehabilitating the image of Aleman," said Chamorro. He said Eliseo Nunez Morales had told him these financiers had told Nunez they would support "the PLC and nobody else."

Both Baltodano and *Envio* editor Maria Lopez Vigil agreed with this analysis. They said Montealegre would now be subjected to great pressures from this sector and that explained why he sought to ally with the PLI. It also explained, said Lopez Vigil, why Nunez Hernandez was willing to take the ALN, the shell with nothing but the MSL left in it, back into the Liberal coalition. She said that the MSL had always functioned as Aleman's agent within the ALN. Lopez Vigil views the powerful private sector as being comfortable with the FSLN in power and even with their controlling a majority of municipalities. They just want a powerful PLC as a hedge against any future change of course.

A return to the old pact between the putatively opposing forces serves them as much as it does Ortega and Aleman. "It is in the FSLN's interest that everyone is divided and everyone struggles against everyone. It is in Aleman's interest to debilitate Montealegre, bring him into the PLC, and strip him of his anti-Aleman banner," she said. *Confidencial's* Chamorro said that recapturing Montealegre after his principled and high-minded refusal to have anything to do with Aleman's PLC during the presidential campaign showed the world that those who engineered the coup "are the institutionality of the country, they decide who participates in the elections and who can or cannot have a party."

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