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A Diminished President Daniel Ortega Seeks Constitutional Change To Permit Him A Fourth Presidential Tour In Nicaragua

by LADB Staff

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An old hand at changing his country's Constitution, President Daniel Ortega has let Nicaraguans know that their Magna Carta is due for another rewrite. Ortega has had a change of perspective on constitutional content. Last time around he was a legislator, head of his Sandinista party, and looking to limit the powers (see NotiCen, 2005-01-13) of then President Enrique Bolanos (2002-2007) of the rival, rightist, Partido Liberal Constitucional (PLC). But, now that he is president for the third time, Ortega has said that he would like a fourth chance at the presidential rocker and that would entail a constitutional change. The rest could be easy. Ortega also conspired with former President Arnoldo Aleman (1997-2002) to rig the Constitution so that he could win a no runoff, first-round victory with only 35% of the vote. This minimal criterion is unique in all of Latin America. Ortega won his current presidency with 36%. Ortega chose July 19, the 30th anniversary of the Sandinista revolution, to announce his intention. It was fitting. He was the leader then, he is the leader now, so it follows that a referendum for a constitutional change that would let him be leader tomorrow would be in order. The rewrite he is advocating has worked elsewhere at least three out of four times. It worked for Presidents Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. It did not work for neighbor President Manuel Zelaya of Honduras, who is Ortega's guest in Managua, in what he hopes is temporary exile following a coup (see other article in this issue of NotiCen). The twice-amended 1995 Nicaraguan Constitution allows two nonconsecutive terms. Ortega has had all that the law allows, plus one presidency during the revolution that predates the Constitution. Besides, he reasoned to his constituents, it is not only his personal desire at stake here. "The right to re-election should be up to everyone, and it should be the people who decide who to reward or punish," he said. Creating his own opposition Ortega is not the same person he was when he led the revolt carrying the legacy of Augusto Cesar Sandino against the oppressive 43-year Somoza dictatorship (1935-1979). He has been the only president to serve under the red and black banner of the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN), but he has not been the only president, and for that reason the revolution never consolidated. Nicaragua has remained a divided country, much as it was before the downfall of the US-imposed dictator. The revolution was committed to the social betterment of all, with free education and medical care and all the trappings that socialism traditionally promises. But something went awry. The promise is far from fulfilled. Ortega's image is tarnished; many Sandinistas say he has turned his back on the ideals they fought for or lived for. Even the traditional communist red and anarchist black colors have given way to pink on the billboards festooning the capital with his visage. Through the years, groups have split off from the Ortega-dominated major party to form smaller parties from which to launch electoral challenges. One such was the Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (MRS). In the last election, MRS candidate Herty Lewites mounted a credible challenge to Ortega, but he died before the election and a lesser-known replacement was noncompetitive (see NotiCen, 2006-07-13). MRS congressional Deputy Monica Baltodano explained to Al Jazeera, "The criticism from those of us on the left is that, despite Ortega's anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist rhetoric, his administration is

absolutely free market." She has been watching Ortega for all of these 30 years and longer. When the Sandinistas overthrew Anastasio Somoza in 1979, she was a commander. The overthrow of a US-imposed dictator was not the sole aim of the revolution. Revolutionaries wanted to install a system that could eradicate the nation's poverty and more. "We wanted access to education, to land, and to material benefits from which the majority of Nicaraguans were and continue to be excluded," said Baltodano. It is that last part, "continue to be excluded," that has Baltodano and so many others riled. MRS founder and former vice president under Ortega, Sergio Ramirez, offers more rationale for the fractionation of Sandinismo and disillusionment with the president. He said, "We split because I was in favor of democratic procedures and Daniel believed we must regain power at any price, even against the Constitution. The Frente Sandinista was based on ethical principles, and now ethics and moral principles have completely disappeared." Forty-five years of rigged elections are enough for Nicaraguans who remember Somoza. Danilo Aguirre of El Nuevo Diario, a newspaper born of the revolution, said, "Nicaragua shed torrents of blood to stop re-elections. I have seen people die in the streets saying no to re-election, no to dynastic succession. That's why we fought Somoza. Here re-election has only brought us misery." The opposition PLC does not want to see any more of Ortega than his current term, ending in 2012, necessitates, either. Party secretary-general Francisco Aguirre told EFE, "We've decided to flatly oppose the successive re-election or third-time re-election of any person who has been president twice."

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