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Nicaragua: President Daniel Ortega And Former President Arnoldo Aleman "dream" Of A 2011 Showdown

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Although the next presidential election is still more than a year and a half away, campaign season has already kicked off in Nicaragua, at least for the two "caudillos" who have dominated the country's politics during the past two decades: current (and former) head of state Daniel Ortega and former President Arnoldo Aleman (1997-2002). Borrowing a page from the book of famed US civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., Aleman, the longtime head of the conservative Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), went public March 21 with his "dream" of recovering the Nicaraguan presidency. "I've had a dream," Aleman told supporters in Boaco, "to see a Nicaragua of equal opportunities, so that the sons of a peasant, or a worker, or a professional can all rise up and be whatever they want to be. That is a liberal dream." "That's why today," he went on, "I ask my dear friends in Boaco, in Matagalpa, in all of Nicaragua, to give me another opportunity to build the Nicaragua that we all want and all deserve." Aleman is not the only larger-than-life Nicaraguan politician dreaming of yet another chance to lead the country. President Daniel Ortega of the leftist Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) has also made it clear that he would like to compete in the November 2011 election, even if that means sidestepping the nation's Constitution. "If we are going to be just and fair, let the right to re-election be for all. People can use their votes to award or punish," Ortega told supporters last July.

Power for power's sake
The early maneuverings by Aleman and Ortega hardly come as a surprise. The two men, leaders of the country's two dominant parties, are longtime fixtures in Nicaragua's political structure. And, their political ambitions seem to know no bounds. Ortega, a key player in the 1979 Sandinista revolution, has competed in every presidential election since 1984, when he won his first five-year term as head of state (1985-1990). The FSLN leader lost the next three elections, but, thanks to changes in the country's election rules, won a second mandate in the 2006 contest (NotiCen, November 09, 2006). Aleman served just one term as Nicaragua's president, leaving office in January 2002, but continues to exert behind-the-scenes authority in the PLC. Still, while it is hardly a shocker that Aleman and Ortega hope to face off in next year's presidential contest, their respective candidacies – particularly from a legal standpoint – are nevertheless highly questionable, critics argue. The Nicaraguan Constitution prohibits presidents from serving consecutive terms. It also limits at two the total number of terms a president can serve. Ortega is legally disqualified from competing next year on both counts. He plans to run anyway. One option for Ortega would be to modify the Constitution. That, however, would require majority support in the unicameral legislative body, the Asamblea Nacional (AN), something he does not have. As a backup plan, the president turned last year to his many allies on the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), whose Sala Constitucional ruled on Oct. 19 that the Constitution's term limits are "inapplicable." CSJ judges loyal to the opposition claim they were kept in the dark, that their Sandinista counterparts pushed Ortega's petition through behind their backs. The ruling will eventually have to go before the full,
15-member CSJ, where Sandinista judges outnumber opposition sympathizers 8 to 7 (NotiCen, November 19, 2009).

Aleman has spent the last several years dealing with legal problems of his own. During his term in office, El Gordo (the fat man), as he is sometimes referred to, was long suspected of pilfering the government treasury for his own personal enrichment. In late 2002, those suspicions took the form of formal charges and, in December 2003, Aleman was convicted on multiple corruption counts and sentenced to a 20-year prison term. He spent the next six years under house arrest. Last year, however, the CSJ absolved the ex-president, restoring Aleman’s freedom and breathing new life into his political career (NotiCen, January 22, 2009). To explain the high court’s about-face, observers point to "el pacto" (the pact), a secretive deal reportedly struck more than a decade ago between Ortega and Aleman to essentially divide control of the country between them (EcoCentral, August 27, 1998). Under the pact, Aleman’s PLC and Ortega’s FSLN agreed to lower the cutoff for an electoral win from 45% to 35%, a change that ultimately allowed Ortega to recapture the presidency in 2006 (with just 38% of the vote).

Last year, as evidenced by the CSJ ruling, it was Aleman’s turn to benefit personally from the power-sharing scheme. "The way they negotiated the pact was using two mechanisms: one was the law. They rely on changes in the Constitution as well as changes to the electoral law of the country to eliminate most political parties and keep basically a two-party system," said Manuel Orozco, a senior associate with the Washington, D.C. think tank Inter-America Dialogue. "When Aleman went to jail and was convicted, his conviction was used as a way for Ortega to bargain with Aleman, because Aleman maintains political capital within his party," Orozco added. "But because he has this political capital, he was able to negotiate his way in and out of jail until eventually he was acquitted of most of his crimes. But in exchange, he has conceded to different demands by Ortega, most of which are not public. They are negotiated behind closed doors."

Demands for "sweeping" change
What is not clear is how much the Nicaraguan public shares the two caudillos' enthusiasm for power. A survey last month by the polling firm M&R Consultores suggests nearly two-thirds (65.7%) of Nicaraguans feel "hopeless" about the Ortega government. Nearly the same percentage (62%) feel Ortega is leading the country "in the wrong direction" and 59% qualify the Sandinista leader as "authoritarian." Aleman didn’t fare any better. The same poll found that, while 29.1% consider him the leader of the PLC (compared with 25.8% who chose dissident Deputy Eduardo Montealegre, a past and likely future presidential candidate), less than 8% of Nicaraguans think Aleman is the ideal person to represent the opposition in the 2011 elections. Citizens are making their frustrations known in the streets as well. On March 20, some 2,000 people expressed their discontent with a protest "march of the brooms" in Managua. Fed up with both leaders, the protestors gathered in front of the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE) to demand "sweeping away" government corruption. "The broom is a symbol of cleanliness. So, we called our protest the march of the brooms to do away with corruption, which doesn’t just exist in the various state institutions, but also with the political parties of the current opposition," Jorge Vidal Real, a regional coordinator with the group Movimiento por Nicaragua (MpN), told NotiCen. "We need a strong opposition, but here the opposition has sold out to whatever government's in place. During the Aleman government, a pact
was made with the Ortega faction. Now Ortega's in power, and his government is still making deals behind the backs of the populace, changing laws and our whole legal structure.

Sizing up the alternatives

The question, however, remains: if not Ortega orAleman, who? One legitimate option may be Montealegre, a 55-year-old economist who served as Aleman's foreign minister but later split off from the PLC to form the Alianza Liberal Nicaraguense (ALN). He now leads a group called Movimiento Vamos con Eduardo (MVE). Montealegre finished second in the 2006 election with 29% of the vote, ahead of the official PLC candidate Jose Rizo (26%). The distant fourth-place finisher was Edmundo Jarquin of the Movimiento de Renovacion Sandinista (MRS), an FSLN spinoff. The split vote, particularly between the PLC and the ALN, clearly benefited Ortega, who assuming he can orchestrate a way to surpass the country's term-limit laws and force his way on the ballot is no doubt hoping for a repeat scenario in 2011. To beat the FSLN, the fractured opposition will have to overcome its differences and forge a unified front, something both Aleman and Montealegre recognize, at least on paper. In announcing his candidacy last month, Aleman said he "accepts the challenge of participating in a primary" to be held July 4. It is not yet clear, however, how that primary will be structured or who else might participate. "There really isn't an alternative right now," said Orozco. "The democratic opposition is very weak. The political circle of power in Nicaragua is dominated by the friends of Aleman and the friends of Ortega. They have so much power that anything else is relatively weak. The only alternatives are either civil disobedience or to negotiate with one of the two."

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