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Opposition Infighting has Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega Leading Ahead of November Election

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With Nicaragua’s general election just six months away, leaders of the country’s fractured opposition continue to save their best punches not for incumbent President Daniel Ortega of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) but for each other.

The opposition’s leading contenders are ex-President Arnoldo Alemán (1997-2002) of the conservative Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) and Fabio Gadea Mantilla, a 79-year-old radio personality and station owner who has served several terms as a PLC deputy for the Guatemala-based Parlamento Centroamericano (PARLACEN). Two other opposition candidates are also competing: Deputy Enrique Quiñónez of the Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense (ALN) and Miguel Ángel García, a former education minister who represents the coalition Alianza por la República (APRE).

The two heavyweights, Gadea and Alemán, have a lot in common. Veteran members of the same political party, they share family ties as well. Gadea’s son is married to Alemán’s daughter. The two candidates also share the hope that President Ortega’s current term, his second, is his last. Ortega, a leader in the 1979 Sandinista revolution, first held the presidency from 1985-1990.

But where Gadea and Alemán do not see eye to eye is on the question of who would fare best against Ortega come Nov. 6, election day in Nicaragua. As it stands, both are planning to be on the ballot, setting the stage for a possible repeat of the 2006 election outcome, when Ortega capitalized on a split opposition vote to eke out a 38% victory (NotiCen, Nov. 9, 2006). Thanks to election rules Ortega helped broker, Nicaraguan candidates can win an election outright with just 35% of the vote, assuming they have at least a 5% advantage over the closest runner-up.

Sticks and stones

Alemán threw his hat in the ring early, going public with his presidential ambitions a full year and a half before the election (NotiCen, April 15, 2010). For many observers, the ex-president’s checkered past, which includes a corruption conviction followed by several years of house arrest, undermines any real chance he has of winning the election. Opinion polls tend to agree.

First to challenge Alemán was one of his former Cabinet ministers, Deputy Eduardo Montealegre, a PLC dissident who finished second to Ortega in the last election. Montealegre initially planned to compete this time as well, though only on condition he avoid another split-vote scenario.

For months he urged his former boss to drop out of the race. Alemán would not budge. Eventually Montealegre changed strategy, throwing his weight behind Gadea, whom he christened a "consensus candidate" (NotiCen, Sept. 16, 2010). Gadea, who has since resigned from the PLC, represents the Unidad Nicaragüense por la Esperanza (UNE) coalition.

Six months later, however, Gadea—despite his PLC credentials and close family ties to Alemán—has failed to convince his in-law to acquiesce. On reportedly "friendly" terms when they met for late...
January negotiations in the home of their married children, the two men now look liked the bitterest of rivals.

"If you won’t listen to reason, at least listen to the voice of the people. Dr. Alemán, back off. Back off to show that you’re not trying to help Daniel Ortega," Gadea urged during a March 14 campaign rally in Tipitapa, a suburb of Managua.

Alemán and Ortega, despite being from opposite ends of the political spectrum, have long been suspected of collaborating via an infamous "pacto," a secretive power-sharing deal the two caudillos reportedly struck more than a decade ago (EcoCentral, Aug. 27, 1998).

The 65-year-old ex-president responded to Gadea’s challenge with an unequivocal "no." "These are the senile things Fabio [Gadea] says," said Alemán. "I think, now that he’s 80, the person who should back off and go home is Fabio, so that he stops going around saying he’s more Sandinista than the Sandinistas."

Alemán’s "Sandinista" barb referred to Gadea’s choice for running mate, Edmundo Jarquín of the Movimiento de Renovación Sandinista (MRS), a political party established in the mid-1990s by FLSN dissidents. Jarquín finished a distant fourth in the 2006 election. Gadea’s campaign team is hoping Jarquín will attract moderate and independent voters to the UNE’s "revolution of honesty." PLC hardliners point to the vice presidential candidate as evidence Gadea has sold out to the left.

"The ugly man," as PLC Dep. Wilfredo Navarro referred to Jarquín in a recent interview with the television program Noticias 12, "doesn’t offer Fabio Gadea anything. The MRS represents 3% of the electorate. All this shows is the power the MRS has over Eduardo Montealegre and Fabio Gadea."

"The vice president [Jaime Morales Carazo] put it beautifully when he called this 'the ugly man and old man ticket,'" Navarro went on to say. "I’d like to add to the vice president’s comment by saying this isn’t the ticket of the old man and the ugly man but rather of the super-old man and the super-ugly man."

Illegit, but won’t quit

Such name-calling is not likely to draw any complaints from President Ortega, who is preparing to participate in his sixth consecutive election despite a constitutional term limit that blocks presidents from serving consecutive terms. The same provision, Article 147, caps at two the total number of times a person can hold the top office.

Legally disqualified on both counts, the FSLN strongman will appear on November’s ballot regardless, thanks to the tight political control he wields over the Consejo Superior Electoral (CSE), which officially accepted his candidacy last week, and the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), whose Sala Constitucional ruled in October 2009 that Article 147 does not apply in Ortega’s case (NotiCen, Nov. 19, 2009). The "full" CSJ—stacked at the time with FSLN-affiliated "substitute" judges—upheld the ruling last September (NotiCen, Nov. 11, 2010).

Opposition leaders say the court rulings are a sham and that Ortega’s candidacy is blatantly illegal. At the same time, Gadea, Alemán, and the other opposition candidates feel the only way to oust the president is to beat him at the polls. By competing, however, they inadvertently legitimize the "illegitimate" candidate.
The US government, at odds with Ortega since the late 1970s, faces a similar conundrum. Gone are the days when the US tried to oust the Sandinistas by force, as it did during Ortega’s first presidency. But through US Ambassador to Nicaragua Robert Callahan, the US government does continue to challenge Ortega, especially when it comes to his maneuverings vis-à-vis the CSJ and other key state institutions.

In ruling to exempt Ortega from Nicaragua’s constitutional term limits, the CSJ acted "in a way that was improper, unusual, and rushed," Callahan said in October 2009. Three weeks ago, he again questioned the legitimacy of Ortega’s candidacy, telling reporters on March 1 that Washington’s position on the matter "hasn’t changed."

"Nicaragua can amend its Constitution. But the Constitution itself says that amendments can only come from the Asamblea Legislativa [not the CSJ]. For us that’s very important," the ambassador said.

At the same time, however, the diplomat promised continued US cooperation with the Sandinistas should they win the upcoming election. "If this process produces another Sandinista government, we’re going to be the first to congratulate them," he said. Callahan was careful not to mention Ortega by name.

**Ortega out in front**

Whether the US government likes it or not, Ortega’s name will be on the ballot in November. And, if recent poll numbers are any indication, he may just win. A CID-Gallup poll released last month has Ortega leading Alemán by 13 percentage points (36% compared with 23%). Gadea is running third (17%).

That is hardly a guarantee for Ortega. As the Gallup poll suggests, there are a lot of undecided voters out there. Six months is still plenty of time for someone like Gadea—a favorite with the press—to pick up some momentum and stage a come-from-behind surge.

But President Ortega does have a number of things going for him. In addition to having friends in high places—the CSE and CSJ—the president also has a "formidable campaign chest," as Miami Herald Latin America editor Andrés Oppenheimer wrote in a recent column. Nicaragua’s economy—growing at a relatively healthy clip of 3%-4%—is also an asset for Ortega, particularly as it helps diffuse attacks from would-be critics in the business community.

"Venezuelan-backed President Daniel Ortega has only 36 percent of the vote in the polls, and is facing growing accusations of abuse of power and corruption. But in a three-day visit here, I didn’t find anybody who doubts that he will easily win the Nov. 6 elections," wrote Oppenheimer.

Ortega’s biggest advantage, however, is perhaps the FSLN’s relative cohesion. Analysts say the president can count on a loyal base of lifelong Sandinista voters, especially among Nicaragua’s poor. Those die-hard supporters may not be a majority nationally, but, given Nicaragua’s particular electoral laws, they could be enough to push Ortega past the requisite 35% mark.

Contrast that to the bickering factions of the once powerful PLC, which are too busy right now engaging in puerile name-calling to mount any real challenge. With enemies like that, Ortega might be asking himself, who needs friends?