Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega Gains Momentum in Push toward Presidency

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Having finally succeeded at forcing himself into Nicaragua’s November presidential election, President Daniel Ortega is now turning his attention to would-be voters, showering them with things like free beer and worker bonuses in an effort to pad his already positive poll numbers and seal the deal on a constitutionally questionable third term in office.

Ortega, the longtime leader of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), showcased his populist push with a nationally televised speech on May 1, International Workers' Day. Combining promises to the poor with praise to God, the Nicaraguan president even had some prickly words for England’s royal newlyweds, who were married in London just three days before.

"History should bury [these monarchies]," he said. "Here, the princes and kings are the people, the workers, the campesinos. The royal family has its symbols and hands covered in blood. Because they celebrate a wedding while at the same time they’re bombing towns over in Libya, spilling blood in Libya."

Likening himself to Jesus, who was able to "multiply loaves of bread," Ortega promised to maintain electricity subsidies for low-volume consumers, continue paying transportation subsidies in Managua, and expand a program of modest land grants for the rural poor. He also offered free beer to the people who—braving the crowds and heat—ventured into downtown Managua to hear the president’s speech firsthand.

No doubt the highlight of his populist package, however, was a promise to raise the "Bono Cristiano, Socialista y Solidario," a monthly bonus paid to some 120,000 teachers, health workers, police, and other state employees. In place since last year, the nearly US$24 per month payout will now be bumped up to more than US$31.

"We already have the money set aside, and with God on our side, we’ll continue to put our faith in Christ that next year we’ll be able to find the resources [again]," said Ortega.

**Discretionary spending**

Observers are quick to point out that the money Ortega is using to fund the workers' bonus scheme and other social programs does not come from the heavens but rather from oil-rich Venezuela, through businesses linked to the Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA) trade group.

Nicaragua’s involvement with ALBA—which is led by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, a close political ally—has provided Ortega with huge sums of money that he can use at his discretion. Money for the Bono Cristiano, Socialista y Solidario program, for example, does not figure into the government’s official budget.
"Using figures from the Banco Central de Nicaragua, we can conclude conservatively that, over the past three years, the government has had an extra US$1 billion for discretionary expenses, outside of the budget," Dr. Arturo Cruz, a former Nicaraguan ambassador to the US, explained during a May 12 presentation before the Inter-American Dialogue’s Central American Working Group in San Salvador, El Salvador.

"In a society like Nicaragua’s, where citizen expectations are modest and tend to revolve around satisfying immediate needs, having that amount of money is equivalent to a Potosí," he added, referring to Bolivia’s immensely rich colonial-era silver mine.

Critics complain that Ortega’s handling of the ALBA funds is not only opaque but also unsustainable. What happens to those social programs if Venezuela for some reason shuts down the money train? Though it is not easy to imagine, Chávez could be out of office as early as next year, when Venezuela holds its first presidential election since 2006.

**No turning back**

So far, however, those criticisms—like so many others directed at Ortega in recent years—have done little to influence the former Marxist revolutionary, who is proving over and over again he has no qualms about writing his own leadership rules. Perhaps the best example of that is his insistence on participating in the upcoming election, which according to Nicaragua’s Constitution, should be off limits.

Not only does the Constitution bar presidents from serving consecutive terms, it also sets at two the number of periods a leader can serve. Ortega, who held the presidency from 1985 to 1990 and, after several election defeats, eked out enough votes to return to power in 2006, should be disqualified from running again on both counts.

But for the past two years the 65-year-old Sandinista leader has made it clear he plans to stay on regardless, using his considerable influence in the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) and Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE) to boldly bend the rules in his favor.

In October 2009, a group of Sandinista-affiliated judges from the CSJ’s Sala Constitucional ruled that Nicaragua’s term limits do not apply in Ortega’s case *(NotiCen, Nov. 19, 2009)*. The "full" CSJ—stacked at the time with "substitute" judges loyal to Ortega—upheld the ruling a year later *(NotiCen, Nov. 11, 2010)*.

Ortega officially submitted his candidacy before the CSE in March. Opposition parties countered with a formal objection, calling his intended run at the presidency "unconstitutional, null, invalid, illegal, illegitimate, nonexistent, and without legal effect."

On April 7, however, the electoral tribunal—headed by die-hard FSLN loyalist Roberto Rivas—put the matter to rest once and for all, dismissing opposition complaints and officially approving Ortega’s candidacy. Ortega, the CSE ruled, has "political, constitutional, and electoral rights as a citizen to participate in the electoral contest set to take place Nov. 6, 2011."

"This candidacy is firm," Rivas later told Canal 12. "At this point there’s no turning back."

Ortega, representing the FSLN for the sixth straight election, is running alongside retired Army Gen. Omar Hallesleven. Their top two challengers 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). Gadea now represents a party called the Partido Liberal Independiente (PLI), which heads the Unidad Nacional por la Esperanza (UNE) coalition.

Also on the ballot are Enrique Quiñónez of the Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense (ALN) and Miguel Ángel García, a former education minister who represents a coalition called Alianza por la República (APRE).

Too little, too late?

Although the various opposition candidates continue to question the legitimacy of Ortega’s candidacy, their only real chance of unseating the president at this point is to beat him come November. If recent polls are to be believed, that’s looking more and more like a tall order.

An April survey by the polling firm M&R shows Ortega well ahead of his challengers. Nearly 48% of respondents said they would vote for Ortega compared with just 12.8% for Gadea, 5.7% for Alemán, and 1.2% for Quiñónez, a former contra commander. Nearly 32% of voters were still undecided, according to the poll.

Thanks to changes in the election rules Ortega helped broker (with the cooperation of Alemán’s PLC), Nicaraguan presidential candidates need to win just 35% of the vote—assuming they have at least a 5% advantage over the closest runner-up—to avoid a runoff.

Analysts agree that both the relatively good economic conditions (the Nicaraguan economy is growing above the 4% mark) and Ortega’s easy access to ALBA petrol dollars are helping boost his chances of staying in power. But he also has the advantage of facing a deeply divided opposition.

The breakdown of the once powerful PLC into competing factions essentially handed the Sandinistas victory in the 2006 election, which Ortega won with just 38% of the vote (NotiCen, Nov. 9, 2006). Five years later, history has a good chance of repeating itself.

If they are serious about giving Ortega the boot, Alemán, Gadea, and the other challengers will have to go after him with a single opposition candidate. But with just six months to go, they still have not figured out who that should be, or even how that decision would be made.

Alemán has played a particularly divisive role in the election run-up. Consistently poor poll numbers suggest what his critics have been saying all along, that the former president has no real chance of regaining the presidency—perhaps because, after leaving office last time around, the portly politician was convicted on numerous corruption charges and sentenced to a 20-year prison term. He spent the next six years under house arrest but was eventually absolved by the CSJ.

Nevertheless, the conservative caudillo has stubbornly stuck with his dream of retaking the presidency, repeatedly rebuffing requests by Gadea—and Dep. Eduardo Montealegre before him—to step aside.

Last week, however, Alemán finally seemed to change his tune—at least somewhat—announcing on May 16 that, "for the sake of Nicaragua," he would be willing to compete against his opposition rivals in a pre-election primary. "If I lose to any of the other three candidates, they should know that they’ll have my support and the support of the political institution called the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista," he said.
The gesture may be too little, too late for the struggling opposition. Even if the various parties agree with Alemán to hold a primary, they still have to reach a consensus on how that contest would play out. Initial reactions to the ex-president’s overture suggest that such an accord will be neither easy nor speedy.

"It’s a travesty that Arnoldo Alemán is only now realizing the need for a unified front," said Gadea’s campaign coordinator Eliseo Núñez Morales. The PLI-UNE representative added that he would be "happy" to hear a proposal from Alemán about how exactly to organize the proposed primary, yet admitted he did not think the offer was "serious." Núñez added, "We’d have to see about the rules."

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