8-11-2011

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President Daniel Ortega Extends Lead As Nicaragua’s Election Nears

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Category/Department: Nicaragua
Published: Thursday, August 11, 2011

With just a week to go before the Aug. 20 start date of Nicaragua’s official pre-election campaign period, the country’s divided opposition is stumbling to the starting blocks, drained of momentum even before the final push toward the Nov. 6 contest begins.

Recent polls suggest the incumbent, President Daniel Ortega of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), is well on his way to scoring a big victory come November, when voters will also choose all 90 members of Nicaragua’s unicameral Asamblea Nacional (AN) and 20 members of the Parlamento Centroamericano (PARLACEN), a regional legislative body based in Guatemala.

The latest numbers from polling firm M&R indicate Ortega is likely to receive 56.5% of the vote, well above the 35% minimum he would need to win outright and avoid a runoff. M&R’s previous poll, released in May, estimated support for the president at 48% (NotiCen, May 26, 2011).

More important for Ortega, none of his rivals is even close. M&R found that the likely second-place finisher, 79-year-old Fabio Gadea Mantilla of the Partido Liberal Independiente (PLI), is supported by just 14.1% of voters, meaning he trails Ortega by more than 40 percentage points. Just 5.8% of those polled said they would vote for the other leading opposition candidate, ex-President Arnoldo Alemán (1997-2002) of the conservative Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC). Two other opposition candidates, Róger Guevara and Enrique Quiñónez, polled at 0.6% and 0.4%, respectively.

Never say never

Technically speaking, the proverbial fat lady has not yet sung for Ortega’s opponents, who are quick to recall the come-from-behind victory of President Violeta Chamorro (1990-1997) in the 1990 election. The incumbent then, as now, was Ortega, who has represented the Sandinistas in every presidential election since 1984, when he won his first term in office. Following his 1990 defeat, Ortega lost two more elections before finally regaining the presidency in 2006 (NotiCen, Nov. 9, 2006).

But if the conservative opposition parties are to mount a last-minute turn around, they would do best to rally behind a single candidate—finally. Most analysts see Gadea as the only viable option. A folksy radio personality and station owner, Gadea has served several terms as deputy for PARLACEN, where he represented the PLC. Since launching his campaign for president, he has recast himself as an independent and promised a nonpartisan "revolution of honesty."

"The real tragedy of this country is all of the corruption there is and has been, the unchecked desire by all those who reach power to become millionaires," Gadea explained in a recent interview with Spain’s. "I’m an older man, and the only thing I still want to do is plant a seed so that our children don’t suffer the way we did."

"To a certain degree I supported the revolutionary process in 1979," he went on to say. "I lived in Nicaragua until 1982, when I just couldn’t stand the persecution anymore. I went to Costa Rica.
The Ortega of that time was a character with revolutionary mystique….The Daniel of today is a supermillionaire who governs along with his family, which owns three television channels that they bought with the money [President Hugo] Chávez gave to Nicaragua."

So far, however, Gadea’s anti-corruption message has yet to spark anything resembling a mass movement against Ortega. Nor has it convinced Alemán—despite Gadea’s frequent requests—to back out of the race. Alemán, the veteran leader of the PLC, has his own well-documented legacy of corruption. After leaving the presidency, 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 the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) eventually absolved him (NotiCen, Jan. 22, 2009).

In recent weeks, some lower-ranking PLC politicians have finally started to break from their historic leader and instead back Gadea. On July 9, several PLC members in Granada publicly endorsed Gadea’s PLI and called on Alemán to step aside. "He needs to give up his candidacy for president and let his in-law Fabio [Gadea], who is another conservative, a friend and a democrat, govern this country," said Denis Ortega Arévalo, a former PLC mayor in Diriá.

Gadea and Alemán, as Ortega Arévalo noted, are related by marriage. Gadea’s son is married to Alemán’s daughter.

**A different kind of victory?**

By the look of things, the last-minute scramble toward Gadea’s camp—even if it eventually involves Alemán—may be too little too late to stop Ortega from serving a constitutionally questionable third term in office. The M&R poll numbers suggest that, even combined, the opposition can only count at this point on 22% of the vote, nowhere close to what it would need to oust Ortega.

If the numbers hold up, President Ortega might not just win, he might win big, scoring a very different kind of victory than the narrow 38% triumph by default he eked out in 2006. In that election, the two leading opposition candidates, Eduardo Montealegre and José Rizo, split what would have been a 55% vote haul.

Ortega took advantage of the rift to win the presidency. The opposition’s relatively strong showing, however, denied the president a convincing mandate. It also denied him a majority in the AN, where the various opposition parties have had at least some success in the past four years in keeping Ortega’s FMLN in check. If the M&R poll numbers are any indication, that could soon change.

"Ortega might not only win in the first round. His party might also gain absolute control of the Asamblea Nacional, winning the 56 seats it needs to govern practically without limits," Emilio J. Cárdenas, a former Argentine ambassador to the UN, wrote in a recent opinion piece in Argentina’s.

Government critics point out that, even without control of the AN, Ortega has already exerted his authority well beyond legal and institutional limits. A perfect example is that he is participating in this year’s election, which according to Nicaragua’s Constitution, should be off limits to the two-time leader.

The Constitution prohibits presidents from serving consecutive periods and caps at two the total number of terms a leader can serve. Ortega should be disqualified on both counts but used his considerable influence in the CSJ and Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE) to sidestep the election
In October 2009, the CSJ ruled the term limit "inapplicable" in Ortega’s case (NotiCen, Nov. 19, 2009). His allies in the CSE later approved his candidacy.

Opposition leaders continue to argue that Ortega’s candidacy is unconstitutional and therefore illegal. They appear to have a legitimate gripe. But they also have little choice at this point but to compete against him. In doing so, they in effect legitimize Ortega’s questionable power plays via the CSJ and CSE. That, in turn, means they will have to accept an Ortega victory should—as the polls predict—he come out on top in November.

**Good neighbors**

The international community will also have to learn to live with another several years—at least—of Ortega rule. The Sandinista leader does have some allies in the region, namely President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, the Castro brothers in Cuba, and the presidents of Bolivia and Ecuador. But he also has a long list of critics. Relations with neighboring Costa Rica are dismal at the moment (NotiCen, March 17, 2011). And for authorities in the US government, Ortega is a perennial persona non grata.

President Ortega didn’t do anything to ameliorate historic tensions with the US when he raised the possibility last month of demanding US$17 billion in reparations for damages caused to Nicaragua during the US-backed contra war.

In 1986 the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague found the US government guilty of violating international law for mining Nicaragua’s harbors and for providing military and financial support to the counterrevolutionary contra army. US authorities refused to recognize the ICJ ruling and resisted international pressure to pay up. Later, during the Chamorro government, Nicaragua dropped its claim.

During a July 19 anniversary celebration of the FSLN’s 1979 revolutionary victory over the US-backed Somoza dynasty, Ortega promised a referendum on whether Nicaragua should re-examine the ICJ case and once again demand the US pay for its Cold War-era crimes.

"Let the US honor this debt and not say they won’t pay, as they’ve said in the past. At least the Yankee representative here has said they won’t pay. The president has not said it, but the Yankee representative [Ambassador Robert Callahan] here has," said Ortega.

Yet for all the bad blood, come November US authorities may have to take their cues from Nicaragua’s struggling opposition and reluctantly accept another Ortega government—particularly if the Sandinista leader invites international electoral observers to oversee his likely victory.

Contrary to appearances, Ortega—for all his authoritarian leanings and anti-American rhetoric—may not actually be all that bitter a pill for the US government to swallow. His handling of the economy has him on good footing with the Washington-based International Monetary Fund (IMF). And, when it comes to crime and drug trafficking in Central America, Nicaragua is proving to be an exception to the rule and thus an island of relative stability. As US President Barack Obama made clear during his visit to the isthmus this past March, drug trafficking and international crime are now a central focus of US policy vis-à-vis the region (NotiCen, March 31, 2011).

"For the US government’s foreign-policy apparatus, stability is highly prized," political analyst Arturo Cruz wrote in a recent essay in the Nicaraguan weekly Confidencial. "If a majority of
Nicaraguans, with their Balkanized opposition, choose effective governments that take an immediate approach to their multiple needs, why would the US government insist [Ortega] follow a set of rules that may or may not fit the needs of Nicaragua."

-- End --