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Category/Department: Nicaragua
Published: 2011-11-17

Just as the polls predicted, President Daniel Ortega easily won Nicaragua’s Nov. 6 election, rolling past a fractured opposition to earn a controversial third term in office. But while the contest may have been short on suspense, it still delivered plenty of drama. In the days after the election, skirmishes between Sandinista and opposition followers resulted in a handful of deaths. Adding to the tensions are charges that the election, which the opposition so far refuses to concede, was fraught with fraud.

Ortega did not just beat the rest of the presidential field, he crushed it, winning 62% of the vote compared with just 31% for his closest rival, 80-year-old Fabio Gadea of the Partido Liberal Independiente (PLI). The third-place finisher, former President Arnoldo Alemán (1997-2002) of the once-powerful Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), took home just 5.67% of the vote, according to the Consejo Suprema Electoral (CSE), Nicaragua’s Sandinista-controlled electoral authority. The two other candidates, Enrique Quiñonez and Róger Guevara, barely registered, finishing with less than half a percentage point each.

"Nicaraguans don’t want war, or fighting, or violence. And on Nov. 6, they voted precisely the way they did because they realize that they have had four years, 10 months, and three days with a government that has given them security, tranquility, peace, and life," Ortega, who leads the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), told supporters during a Nov. 8 acceptance speech.

The president certainly has reason to feel confident. In the 2006 election, he won just 38% of the vote, barely squeezing past a divided, though still politically relevant, opposition (NotiCen, Nov. 9, 2006). Left with a less-than-convincing mandate, his power was also somewhat limited by the unicameral Asamblea Nacional (AN), where the opposition still enjoyed a majority—at least on paper. Last week’s election changed all of that.

Not only did it give Ortega a far more commanding license to lead, it is also expected to give the FSLN firm control of the legislature. Although the results have yet to be finalized, the Sandinistas could very well reach the magic mark of 56 seats, giving the party a so-called supermajority in the 92-seat AN. Right now the Sandinistas have 38 seats.

For Ortega’s critics, an FSLN-controlled legislature is a chilling prospect considering the considerable influence the president already has with the CSE and Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ). With the AN in his back pocket, Ortega would have nearly absolute control of the Nicaraguan state.

In the lead-up to the election, Ortega used his influence in the CSE and CSJ to bypass Nicaragua’s election laws, which limit presidents to two nonconsecutive terms (NotiCen, May 26, 2011). The strategy proved effective, allowing Ortega to force his way onto a ballot from which he should have been doubly barred. But it was also a politically messy "solution" to the term-limit problem. A tidier and more lasting approach would have been to amend the Constitution and thus do away with
the limits altogether. Without a supermajority in the AN, that option was not available to Ortega. Starting next year, it will be.

"We’re on an unstoppable march toward an institutional dictatorship," Edmundo Jarquín, Gadea’s PLI running mate, told reporters shortly after the election.

"Worrisome" election-day shenanigans
During last week’s victory speech, President Ortega did his best to assuage those fears, promising continuity and insisting that, despite the FSLN’s gains in the legislature, he will govern democratically. "If we are combating extreme poverty and combating poverty, if we are delivering the zero-hunger program, dignified housing, and streets for the people, if we are giving them sheets of zinc for roofing, why are we going to change?" he said.

"If we are working well with the business class, why are we going to change? So we are not going to take over the Asamblea Nacional to make changes to the direction of the country," Ortega added. "On the contrary, if there is anything we need to work on it’s to strengthen the path we are on, which is Christian, socialist, and in solidarity."

Ortega does seem to have come up with a winning formula, funding social projects for the poor while reassuring business leaders by running a tight economic ship and making a concerted effort to attract foreign direct investment (FDI). After a recession in 2009, Nicaragua’s GDP growth rebounded last year—to the tune of 4.5%. So far this year the trend has continued, with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecasting "robust growth" of at least 4% (NotiCen, Oct. 13, 2011).

Ortega’s political opponents say, however, that the president’s approach is not only unsustainable—since it depends in large part on petrodollars generously provided by Ortega’s Venezuelan ally, President Hugo Chávez—but also dishonest. Much of that money is off the books, say critics, who accuse Ortega of using discretionary funds to "buy" votes, stuff FSLN campaign coffers, and even enrich himself and his family members.

What is more, Ortega’s rivals insist that, on election day, the Sandinistas and their CSE allies employed a wide range of "irregularities and abuses" to ensure victory for the FSLN. "All Nicaraguans and the international community know that we have had an electoral process corrupted from the beginning," Gadea told reporters on Monday, Nov. 7.

Gadea, a radio-station owner best known as a folksy on-air storyteller, is so far refusing to concede what he considers a "fraudulent" election. "We cannot accept the results presented by the Consejo Suprema Electoral because they do not reflect the will of the people but rather the will of the CSE," he said.

Gadea is by no means alone in questioning the Nov. 6 election proceedings. The watchdog group Ética and Transparencia called the election a "failure," saying it was neither "fair, honest, nor credible." Other local groups complained that certain polling stations opened late, that voters in some cases were unable to mark their ballots privately, and that polling-station monitors often failed to validate the ballots people cast by signing and marking each with a unique code.

EU observers cited concerns as well, saying the election lacked transparency. The process, EU mission chief Luis Yáñez told reporters Nov. 8, "was directed by authorities who are not
independent and did not fulfill their duty to ensure transparency for all parties." The Spanish observer went on to say that the mission "had profound discrepancies with the CSE and [its head] Roberto Rivas."

And, although Organization of American States (OAS) head José Miguel Insulza congratulated Nicaragua for its election, calling it "a step forward for democracy and peace," OAS observers also had some complaints about the election proceedings.

Dante Caputo, who led the OAS mission to Nicaragua, said his team was denied entry into 20% of the polling stations it tried to observe. "We faced a series of difficulties," said Caputo, a former Argentine foreign minister. "We were blocked from being where we were supposed to be. This kind of situation has not happened before. It is worrisome."

**Trouble on the horizon?**

For President Ortega, this victory marks the culmination of a remarkable political resurrection. Defeated unexpectedly in the 1990 election, Ortega tried twice during the next dozen years to return to the presidency, only to lose again—in both 1996 and 2001. When he did finally return to power it was only thanks to opposition infighting and a change in the electoral rules—the percentage necessary for a first-round victory was lowered to 35%—that he had helped broker. Not only has he managed to hold on to power but he has added significantly to it.

Yet for Nicaragua as a whole, this election could eventually spell trouble. Although Ortega would likely have won without the election-day shenanigans, the voter-fraud allegations do little to improve the Sandinista government’s international standing. With the exception of Chávez and his counterparts in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Cuba—all members of the Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA)—international leaders have been slow to recognize Ortega’s victory.

Ortega seems to have a penchant for going against the current as far as the powerful nations of Europe and North America are concerned. During this year’s NATO-backed war in Libya, the Nicaraguan president repeatedly spoke out in defense of Col. Muammar Gaddafi, the recently toppled dictator who was killed last month by rebel opponents.

The Nicaraguan president is also not afraid to step on the toes of his immediate neighbors, as evidenced by Nicaragua’s recent border row with Costa Rica (NotiCen, Nov. 18, 2010).

Ortega’s poor international standing, however, could end up costing Nicaragua dearly if its leader is suddenly to lose his Venezuelan benefactor, President Chávez, whose health and political future are both uncertain at this point (NotiSur, Aug. 12, 2011).

As isolated as Nicaragua may feel as a country, Ortega’s Nicaraguan opponents no doubt feel more isolated still. With the FSLN takeover in the legislature, the various opposition parties—on both the right and left—have lost the one political outlet they had left. That leaves them with a limited set of options: either do nothing and simply fall into line with the FSLN regime or voice their opposition in the streets. Given the FSLN’s habit of dispatching violent youths to greet such protests, it is not hard to imagine how tensions could eventually escalate.

From the north of the country, signs of the troubled times that may await Nicaragua have already appeared. News outlets reported last week that up to six people were killed in and around Madriz,
near the border with Honduras, in post-election skirmishes between opposition and Sandinista supporters.

"The first two nights of fighting were all emotion, there was no organization," opposition activist Rodrigo José Gizaguirre told the Nicaragua Dispatch. "Now people are meeting and organizing. This is will not stand. This is not over."

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