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Sandinistas Dominate Municipal Elections In Nicaragua

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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President Daniel Ortega’s Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) mauled the reeling opposition in nationwide municipal elections earlier this month, leading Nicaragua closer toward one-party-state status with wins in more than 80% of the country’s towns and cities.

Sandinista candidates drew approximately 68% of the votes cast in the Nov. 4 contest, giving the leftist party control of all but one of the country’s 17 provincial capitals, including Managua, where Mayor Daysi Torres was re-elected in a landslide. The only exception was Bilwi (Puerto Cabezas), in the Región Autónoma Atlántico Norte (RAAN), which remains in the hands of Yapti Tasba Masraka Nanih Aslatakanaka (YATAMA), an indigenous political party. YATAMA won three mayoral races, one more than the once-powerful Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), which had controlled 39 cities. Elsewhere in the country, YATAMA ran in alliance with the FSLN.

Overall, the Sandinistas won 134 of the country’s 153 mayoral races, 25 more than in the previous municipal elections in 2008, according to the Consejo Suprema Electoral (CSE). The only other party to finish the day in double digits was the center-right Partido Liberal Independiente (PLI), which won roughly 21% of the vote to take 12 mayorships. In 10 of Nicaragua’s 17 departments (provinces), the Sandinistas won every single mayoral race.

"I want to congratulate the thousands of Nicaraguans who came out to vote in these municipal elections, thus ratifying Nicaragua’s now irreversible path," said Ortega, a former guerilla fighter currently serving his third official term as president. "Never again will there be violence and confrontation. From now on we’ll always have a Nicaragua that’s peaceful, prosperous, and secure."

A day later three people died—two in Ciudad Dario and one in Nueva Segovia—in violent skirmishes between FSLN and PLI supporters. Dozens more were injured. And in La Paz Centro, PLI backers torched an old train station and a city-owned backhoe, the newspaper El Diario Nuevo reported. Similar incidents followed the 2008 municipal elections (NotiCen, Nov. 13, 2008) and 2011 general elections (NotiCen, Nov. 17, 2011).

"Phantom" parties and "zombie" candidates

Like those previous contests, this year’s elections drew widespread allegations of tampering and mismanagement. Much of the criticism was directed at the CSE, whose president, Roberto Rivas, was instrumental in helping President Ortega run for re-election in 2011 despite a constitutional term-limit law that caps at two the number of times a president can hold office (NotiCen, March 24, 2011). The law also prohibits presidents from serving consecutive terms, meaning that Ortega—who first held the presidency from 1985 to 1990 and was re-elected in 2006—should have been legally disqualified on both counts. Ortega also served as head of the FSLN’s post-revolutionary junta from 1979 to 1985.

The CSE "left absolutely no doubt about its favoritism toward the governing party," said Roberto Courtney of Ética y Transparencia (EyT), a watchdog group that unofficially observed the elections.
EyT is the Nicaraguan affiliate of Transparency International (TI), an anti-corruption organization present in more than 100 countries worldwide.

EyT and other critics of the Ortega government accuse the CSE of willingly convoluting the process by, among other things, using out-of-date voter registries, deciding not to include candidate photos on this year’s ballots, and allowing the participation of "phantom parties," barely relevant political groups like the Partido Alianza por la República (APRE), Partido Conservador, and Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense (ALN). In some cases the tiny parties included the names of deceased people on their candidate rosters, according to news reports.

"It’s clear that these elections aren’t competitive," sociologist Silvio Prado of the Red Nicaragüense por la Democracia y Desarrollo Local (RNDDL) explained in an interview with the online news site Confidencial. "It’s a case of a tethered donkey taking on a loose tiger. In addition to the usual tricks, [the CSE and FSLN] have added new ones, like the phantom parties and the candidacies of people who are either dead or out of the country. In the spirit of Nov. 2 [the Day of the Dead], we could call this the zombie election."

The US government voiced concern as well. In a statement from Washington, DC, US State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland complained about the CSE’s "partisan" management of the process. "Among the irregularities that were observed on election day were the denial of citizens who wanted to vote, cases of violating the right to a secret vote, and complaints of people who were allowed to vote more than once," she said. "These practices have characterized various elections in Nicaragua recently."

Opposition leaders made similar charges, using words like "rigged" and "fraudulent." The CSE "did what Daniel Ortega ordered," PLI Deputy Eliseo Muñoz told the Associated Press.

Their complaints echoed reactions to last year’s general election, which PLI presidential candidate Fabio Gadea, the runner-up, still refuses to concede. Gadea won 31% of the vote, well behind Ortega, who cruised to victory with 62%. PLC leader and former President Arnoldo Alemán (1997-2002) finished third with less than 6%.

**FSLN back in total control**

Yet for all of their protests and posturing, Nicaragua’s fragmented opposition has been wholly incapable of stopping—or even slowing—the FSLN’s political ascent, particularly now that the Sandinistas enjoy a two-thirds "supermajority" in the Asamblea Nacional (AN).

For many years it seemed that Ortega, despite his best efforts, might never make it back into power. Voted out of office in 1990, the former guerilla fighter failed to win over the public in the 1996 and 2001 elections, losing both times to the PLC, first to Alemán and later to Enrique Bolaños (2002-2007). When Ortega did finally squeeze his way back into the presidency, it was only by the skin of his teeth; he won the 2006 election against a divided opposition with just 38% of the vote (NotiCen, Nov. 9, 2006).

Had the 2006 contest gone to a second round, the then governing political right—unified behind a single candidate—would likely have held onto power. Ortega was able to avoid that scenario thanks to a deal he brokered with Alemán. The two agreed to reduce the minimum needed for a first-round win from 45% to 35%.
Early into his 2007-2011 term, Ortega continued to suffer from popularity problems. His enthusiasm for the job, however, never wavered. Ortega made it clear as early as 2009 that he planned to seek re-election, even though the term-limit laws forbade it. Without enough votes in the AN to amend the Constitution, Ortega instead turned to his allies in the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), which ruled that term limits were "inapplicable" in his case (NotiCen, Nov. 19, 2009).

Opposition leaders blasted the move as an illegal and undemocratic power grab but were still too divided—both in the AN and later in their choice of presidential candidates—to mount a veritable challenge (NotiCen, Aug. 11, 2011). In the meantime, Steady economic growth helped Ortega's popularity crest just in time for last year’s general election. Besides winning a new five-year mandate, the president also secured firm control of the AN, winning enough seats in the unicameral legislature to more or less govern at will. The Sandinista-dominated legislature has been rubber-stamping Ortega’s every wish and whim ever since (NotiCen, Sept. 27, 2012).

The FSLN’s smothering victory in this month’s municipal elections expands the virtually unchallenged party’s power even more. Earlier in the year, Ortega flexed his new legislative muscle to create thousands of new city council positions, tripling the size of the country’s municipal governments (NotiCen, June 28, 2012). The elections, in other words, not only gave the FSLN control of more city governments but of far-bigger ones, thus extending its influence further still.

"There will be little [municipal autonomy], especially when it comes to FSLN-controlled governments," said Silvio Prado. "In the case of opposition-led governments, FSLN-allied city council members, who are now more numerous than before, can block [legislation] and force those governments to fall in line with what’s being ordered from Managua. And as far as the FSLN-controlled city governments are concerned, those mayors’ offices are likely to be absorbed by the centralism of the Ortega administration."

-- End --