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Nicaragua’s Catholic Bishops Give Ortega an Earful in Long-Awaited Encounter

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After years of unrequited overtures, Nicaragua’s Catholic Church leaders finally had a chance last month to sit down with President Daniel Ortega and voice first-hand their concerns about his increasingly authoritarian style of government.

"We do not think that the actual institutional and political structure of the country offers any medium-term or long-term benefits to either the current government, members of the ruling party, or the Nicaraguan people," the Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua (CEN), the country’s bishops conference, explained in a 14-page letter read out loud to Ortega during the long-awaited meeting, which took place May 21 in the Apostolic Nunciature outside Managua.

The CEN had been requesting such an encounter since 2007, when Ortega returned to power following several failed re-election bids (NotiCen, Jan. 11, 2007). A key player in Nicaragua’s 1979 revolution, Ortega previously served as president from 1985 to 1990. Prior to that he headed the country’s post-revolutionary junta (1979-1985).

Before squeezing his way back into the presidency, the former comandante recast himself as a devout Catholic. A staunch defender of the country’s no-exceptions ban on abortion (NotiCen, Feb. 25, 2010), Ortega also champions a self-styled model of government that is "cristiano, socialista, y solidario" (Christian, socialist, and in solidarity)—in that order. And yet, for seven years he repeatedly declined requests to engage in dialogue with the CEN, which has looked on with growing concern as the increasingly powerful president and his Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) employed a series of democratically questionable devices to gain nearly complete control over the country’s various governing institutions.

In the lead-up to the 2011 election, Ortega used his political influence in the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE) and Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) to sidestep the country’s constitutionally encoded term limits, which were supposed to have kept him from seeking re-election (NotiCen, March 24, 2011). Ortega went on to win the election—by a landslide (NotiCen, Nov. 17, 2011). He also picked up a "supermajority" in the Asamblea Nacional (AN), the country’s unicameral legislature, where FSLN lawmakers have since taken to rubberstamping each and every bill the president sends their way. Earlier this year the Sandinista-dominated AN approved a controversial overhaul of the Constitution (NotiCen, Feb. 27, 2014). Among other things, the reforms allow Ortega to succeed himself in office as many times as he is willing and able.

Last November, when Ortega first aired his plans for a constitutional makeover, the CEN accused the president of seeking "absolute power" (NotiCen, Dec. 12, 2013). The bishops revisited the issue during last month’s sit-down with the Sandinista strongman. "Since the election results of 2011, the concentration of power, government corruption, confusion of state and party, subjugation of state branches to the will of the president, disrespect for the law, lack of judicial security, trafficking of influences, political intolerance, domination of almost all mayorships in the country, and recent
constitutional reforms have aggravated in a truly alarming way the current situation of the country and its future," the CEN explained.

**Airing their grievances**

Titled "En Búsqueda de Nuevos Horizontes para una Nicaragua Mejor" (in Search of New Horizons for a Better Nicaragua), the bishops’ lengthy list of grievances also touched on matters related to family life, such as abortion and gay marriage (which they vehemently oppose); the environment; and poverty and inequality. "A great part of our population lives in misery," the document reads. "Unemployment is alarming, and the cost of living and poverty grow continually while at the same time, as always in the history of our country, a few individuals and groups in power continue to get rich without controls."

The CEN turned its attention as well to various human rights issues, including the "shameful social phenomenon" of violence against women, which continues to plague the country despite the implementation two years ago of Ley 779, Nicaragua’s "femicide law" ([NotiCen, July 26, 2012, and Feb. 28, 2013](#)). Among the other problems the church leaders mentioned are prison overcrowding and the "cruel and degrading" abuse prisoners suffer at the hands of their captors, particularly in the infamous El Chipote jail in Managua. It its letter, the CEN called on the Ortega government to shutter the Dirección de Auxilio Judicial, as El Chipote is formally known, and allow rights groups to have unrestricted access to the country’s prisons.

The church leaders are concerned too about underdevelopment in Nicaragua’s eastern half, which is divided into two large and sparsely populated autonomous regions: the Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte (RAAN) and Región Autónoma del Atlántico Sur (RAAS). The central government, based in Managua, near the Pacific coast, has long treated the east as a "veritable colony," the CEN document reads. "They’ve taken its resources (gold, fish, wood, etc.) without channeling enough resources back in to benefit the Atlantic territory."

Eastern residents are beginning to face a new kind of intervention, the bishops noted, in the form of a Gran Canal (great canal), an ocean-to-ocean channel the Ortega government is planning to construct in partnership with the mysterious Chinese firm HKND Group ([NotiCen, Aug. 15, 2013](#)). Most of the digging would be on Nicaragua’s Atlantic side. "This project will radically alter our culture, way of life, and the work of our people now and for future generations," the CEN letter argues. "It is urgent that we know the canal route as soon as possible, but also where new cities will be built, the duration of the construction, how much [the canal authority] will pay the legitimate owners of the land [who are appropriated to build the canal], how many workers will be employed, and many other details."

"**Total silence**"

Given the length, detail, and breadth of their no-holds-barred list of concerns, Nicaragua’s bishops left little doubt as to where they stand vis-à-vis the Ortega administration. What is not clear is what impact—if any—their meeting with the powerful president will have. It is also unclear why Ortega, after rebuffing the CEN’s invitations for so long, finally agreed to sit down with the CEN.

Ortega has said nothing about the closed-doors encounter, which he attended together with first lady Rosario Murillo and one of their children. And there is no public record of what he spoke about while there. One participating bishop, Abelardo Mata, told the independent news site Confidencial
that Ortega’s response to their presentation contained a heavy dose of Marxist ideology. The president, according to Mata, also spoke about imperialism and that "the old values ... are being destroyed on an international level by new concepts about family, about what it means to be a man and a woman."

The bishop claims the president had nothing to say, however, when it came to the more political aspects of the CEN’s presentation. "There was total silence," according to Mata, regarding their demands that Ortega engage in a "national dialogue"—involving opposition parties and civil society organizations—and guarantee that in 2016, Nicaragua "will have an absolutely transparent and honest electoral process with new and honorable members in the CEN."

First lady Murillo, who serves as the president’s communications chief, said later that Ortega listened to the bishops’ arguments with "humility and respect." She also confirmed Ortega’s willingness to put various ministers and other government officials at the CEN’s disposal. The bishops, in other words, are free to take up their point-by-point concerns—regarding things like police abuse, infrastructure in the RAAN, inadequate healthcare services, etc.—with the corresponding government institutions.

Many observers, however, doubt the much-talked-about meeting will lead to any meaningful change. While he may be able to score a few political points by appearing to cooperate with the CEN, Ortega has little to lose if he doesn’t. Having already bent the Constitution to his will and crushed the political opposition to the point of near irrelevance, the president is hardly beholden to a group that, by its own admission, thinks politics should be left to the politicians.

"I think the bishops can act as a bridge, but only that. It’s not up to the bishops to be anything more than a moral authority and reference point for Nicaraguan society," analyst Gabriel Álvarez told Confidencial.

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