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Reelection Seen as Likely for Nicaraguan Leader Daniel Ortega

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

Category/Department: Nicaragua
Published: 2016-01-28

Opposition victories in December’s parliamentary elections in Venezuela, and in the Argentine presidential runoff just two weeks earlier, have sparked talk of a “right-wing revival” in Latin America and prompted some pundits to question whether left-leaning Nicaragua, too, could be in for a change.

Nicaragua’s next elections, both presidential and legislative, are set for early November—still quite a ways off—and given that the leading parties have yet to even announce their official candidates, it’s too early to say with any certainty how things will pan out. Nevertheless, more than a few observers are willing to venture that President Daniel Ortega and his Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) will continue their hold on the country, in part because of the long-serving leader’s enduring popularity, but also because of serious shortcomings on the part of the feeble and fractured opposition.

Ortega, whose current run as president began in 2007, hasn’t officially thrown his hat in the ring. But given his track record, it would come as a huge surprise if he didn’t. Not only has the one-time revolutionary stood in every presidential election since 1984, but he also went to great lengths two years ago to ensure, from a legal standpoint, that he could continue to compete as long as he was willing or able. “It’s obvious that he’ll run again,” sociologist Cirilo Otero told Agence France-Presse (AFP) last month. “It’s an illness. He thinks he’s indispensable. He believes that, and we help him believe that with our silence, fear or praise of his government.”

Public opinion surveys suggest that if Ortega does run—as Otero and just about everyone else in Nicaragua expect—he has a high probability of winning and thus extending his run on power until 2021. Numbers released earlier this month by the polling firm M&R Consultores put support for the president at 71% and for the FSLN at 54%. In contrast, only 8% of respondents combined expressed support for the country’s beleaguered opposition parties. Nearly 38% identified as politically independent. “Looking at these numbers, it’s hard to imagine [Ortega] won’t be the candidate with the majority of valid votes on Election Day,” political analyst Arturo Cruz told the opposition daily La Prensa.

Power plays

A key player in the Sandinista revolution in 1979, Ortega served as head of the post-revolutionary junta government (1979-1985) and was elected president in 1984. He was upset in the 1990 election by Violeta Barrios de Chamorro (1990-1996), but after two more failed bids and thanks to a rule change that lowered the threshold needed to win in just a single round, he eked out a victory in 2006 with just 38% of the vote (NotiCen, Nov. 9. 2006).

The FSLN leader’s second term (2007-2011) was supposed to be his last, at least according to the Constitution, which limited presidents to two terms overall and barred immediate reelection. Ortega was determined to stay on, however, and thanks to his considerable influence in the Corte Suprema
de Justicia (CSJ) and the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE), secured “permission” to compete in the 2011 election, which he won by a landslide over radio journalist and former Parlamento Centroamericano (PARLACEN) member Fabio Gadea of the Partido Liberal Independiente (PLI) (NotiCen, Nov. 17, 2011).

Opposition leaders cried foul but have been unable to stop the powerful president, especially since the 2011 elections also gave him a two-thirds majority in the Asamblea Nacional (AN), the country’s unicameral legislature. Since its inauguration in early 2012, the FSLN-dominated AN has approved any and all legislation the Ortega administration sends its way, including a partial rewrite of the Constitution that, among other things, did away with term-limit laws. The president’s made-to-order constitutional makeover took effect in early 2014 (NotiCen, Feb. 27, 2014).

Also in 2014, the legislature approved a bill giving Ortega direct command of the Policía Nacional (PN), Nicaragua’s 12,000-strong national police force (NotiCen, July 24, 2014). The PN previously answered to the Ministerio de Gobernación. The maneuver made Ortega the first Nicaraguan leader since the fall of the Somoza family dictatorship (1936-1979) to enjoy immediate authority over both the police and armed forces.

Rights groups say the PN has become increasingly partisan as a result, acting on repeated occasions to repress civil society activists and opposition protestors who criticize government policy. In its most recent annual report, published in May 2015, the Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos (CENIDH) accused the police of “favoring demonstrations by groups allied with the governing [FSLN] party and blocking, by various means, protests by civil society groups.”

The report cites a December 2014 crackdown on people protesting Ortega’s plans for an inter-oceanic canal, and police violence in March 2015 against a group of International Women’s Day demonstrators. More recent examples include an October 2015 police raid on striking miners in the northwestern town of Mina El Limón (NotiCen, Nov. 12, 2015) and an incident in July 2015 when police roughed up people protesting in front of the CSE office in Managua and arrested a number of people, including PLI leader Eduardo Montealegre (NotiCen, Aug. 6, 2015). Montealegre, an economist and former presidential candidate, was released shortly after.

Protests but no platform
Montealegre’s run-in with the police took place during one of dozens of protests—always on Wednesdays—that the PLI and its allies have organized to demand fair and transparent elections. The demonstrators accuse the FLSN-stacked CSE, the country’s electoral authority, of blatant partisanship and insist that the 2011 national elections, and the 2008 and 2012 municipal elections, were marred by fraud.

Turnout for the miércoles de protesta (Wednesday protests) events has been low. The PLI, nevertheless, is sticking to the strategy, calling the election transparency issue a necessary first step toward challenging Ortega. Opposition lawmakers also say that because of their powerlessness in the AL, the weekly demonstrations are the only way to make their demands heard.

“I feel like it’s an embarrassment for Ortega and his administration that the deputies have to go every Wednesday and tell the nation that there’s no space here for free elections when these issues should really be discussed in the Asamblea Nacional,” Deputy Carlos Langrand said in a December interview with La Prensa. Langrand also accused Ortega of mounting a “dictatorship that
has run roughshod over the institutions of state and doesn’t even respect the sacred letter of the Constitution.”

Critics say that by focusing only on the issue of legitimacy—by “embarrassing” Ortega, as Langrand claims—the PLI is missing an opportunity to develop a legitimate platform of its own. The leading opposition party is failing, in other words, to sell itself as a serious option for would-be voters. The PLI’s lack of alternative policy proposals may also be sending the message, according to political scientist Oscar René Vargas, that its ideas aren’t all that different from Ortega’s.

“Where do they stand, for example, when it comes to the free-trade zones or the mining companies? I haven’t heard any criticism from the opposition regarding mining. Nor have I heard what they would do differently with regards to the telecom companies,” Vargas told La Prensa. “In that sense, I don’t see the difference.”

The opposition’s other perennial problem is cohesion. A civil society group called Hagamos Democracia has been insisting for months that the various opposition parties and factions participate in primaries to select a single candidate to challenge Ortega. Some smaller groups, including the Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC) and the Partido Conservador (PC), have heeded the call. The two most important opposition groups, the PLI and Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), have not.

Some question whether the once-powerful but now very much diminished PLC, whose historic leader, former President Arnoldo Alemán (1997-2002), was engaged for years in a power-sharing pacto with Ortega, can even be considered a real opposition force. Unlike the PLI, which has not yet come forth with a presidential candidate, the PLC is backing Noel Vidaurre, a successful corporate lawyer who also ran for president in 2001, then as a member of the PC.

“The opposition is talking about freedom and improving the electoral system, but that’s not tied to the needs of the poorest,” Juan Sebastián Chamorro, executive director of the Managua-based Fundación Nicaragüense para el Desarrollo Económico y Social (FUNIDES), argued during a conference last July in Washington DC. “They’re not focusing on important issues—and the conflict between opposition leaders is not helping them, either.”

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