7-7-2016

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Daniel Ortega, FSLN Draw Scant Opposition in Nicaraguan Elections

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Category/Department: Nicaragua
Published: 2016-07-07

Already a heavy favorite to win Nicaragua’s Nov. 6 presidential election, Daniel Ortega, the incumbent, is now a virtual shoo-in following a pair of controversial high-court rulings last month that prompted the only viable opposition force to withdraw from the contest. The developments also clear the way for another steamroller finish by the governing Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front, FSLN), which will run nearly unopposed in parliamentary elections taking place the same day. Nicaragua, analysts and Ortega critics predict, is on the verge of becoming a one-party state.

Ortega, 70, is in his second consecutive term and third overall, not counting his years as head of the FSLN’s post-revolutionary junta government (1979-1985). He had been widely expected to seek yet another five-year term, but the crafty caudillo kept the public in suspense until June 4, when nearly 2,000 delegates at an FSLN convention in Managua, the capital, officially nominated him—for the seventh straight time dating back to 1984 (NotiCen, June 16, 2016).

The next day, the Coalición Nacional por la Democracia (National Coalition for Democracy, CND) opposition bloc, led by the center-right Partido Liberal Independiente (Liberal Independent Party, PLI), held a convention of its own to kick-start the presidential campaign of Luis Callejas, 57, a lawmaker, doctor, and former contra fighter. The PLI’s allies in the CND include the Sandinista dissident group Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (Sandinista Renewal Movement, MRS) and a handful of smaller parties and civil society organizations. Callejas’ chosen running mate was sociologist and civil society activist Violeta Granera.

The candidate confirmations ended months of uncertainty about the elections, which the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE), the country’s top electoral authority, didn’t formally announce until May 6, a half-year behind schedule. No sooner had the election picture finally come into focus, however, than a stunning decision by Nicaragua’s highest court, the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), threw everything back into disarray.

On June 8, just three days after the coalition had formalized the Callejas and Granera candidacies, the high court put a sudden end to its hopes by stripping Eduardo Montealegre, the bloc’s political architect and an outspoken Ortega critic, of his role as leader and legal representative of the PLI. The court instead recognized attorney Pedro Reyes, head of a competing PLI faction and an apparent Ortega ally, as the “real” party leader. In doing so, the court not only sent Montealegre packing; it also pulled the proverbial plug on the coalition he’d built by taking away its right to run under the PLI banner and nullifying its candidate choices.

A week later, the CSJ’s Sala de lo Constitucional (Constitutional Chamber) upheld the ruling, leaving Montealegre and his allies with just two options: either start over and re-launch their presidential campaign under a new banner—a logistical nightmare this late in the election process—or drop out. Furious and exasperated, the opposition bloc chose the latter, lambasting the court
rulings as an obvious power play by Ortega (whose influence over both the high court and the CSE are common knowledge at this point) and decrying the election as “a farce.”

“Ortega is no longer interested in legitimacy,” Dora María Téllez, an MRS leader and former Sandinista guerrilla, said in response to the court rulings. “He’s tired of even pretending with elections. He wants to die in power and pass it along to his children. The mask is off now, and what happens from here on out affects all of us.”

'A one-horse race'
The CND, with Callejas and Granera as its presidential and vice-presidential candidates, was unlikely to beat Ortega even if it had competed. The powerful president continues to enjoy strong poll numbers thanks to a solid economic record, social programs favoring the poorest sectors of Nicaragua society, and a vast advantage in resources over the feeble and fractured opposition (NotiCen, Jan. 28, 2016).

“The recent events look bad in an election season, but the opposition are poorly organized, bereft of ideas, and spend too much time fighting amongst themselves,” Christine Wade, an associate professor of political science and international studies at Washington College, Maryland, told the British daily The Guardian late last month. “Regardless of the supreme court decision, there’s no one in the opposition capable of beating Ortega. He’s too popular—it was always going to be a one-horse race.”

The Montelagre-led coalition was seen, however, as the one group that could have at least put a dent in Ortega’s political armor. Montealegre, a lawmaker, economist, and former Cabinet minister, ran for president himself in 2006 (finishing a fairly close second behind Ortega) and continues to be one of the country’s top politicians. In the last election, in 2011, he was one of 26 PLI candidates to win seats in the Asamblea Nacional (AN), the country’s unicameral legislature (NotiCen, Dec. 15, 2011).

The party was trounced by the FSLN, which earned a long-coveted two-thirds “super majority,” but could still at least make a claim to political relevance, unlike the once powerful Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (Liberal Constitutionalist Party, PLC), which won just two deputy seats and finished a distant third in the presidential voting. The PLI’s presidential candidate, Fabio Gadea, finished second, losing to Ortega by a margin of 31% to 62% (NotiCen, Nov. 17, 2011).

Lacking legitimacy
Technically speaking, Ortega will still face “challengers” in the November election. The PLC, led by former President Arnoldo Alemán (1997-2002), plans to run Maximino Rodríguez, a former contra fighter. The PLI, following Montealegre’s ousting, will now be represented in the election by its CSJ-designated leader, Pedro Reyes, who was officially nominated late last month in a closed-door gathering held in his garage. Neither is expected to perform well. Worse still, argue Montealegre and other Ortega critics, is that the candidates—given how co-opted the PLC and now PLI are by the Sandinista regime—are opposition in name only.

With the self-described “real opposition” out of the race, in other words, Ortega and the FSLN will basically be unchallenged in a process that is quickly losing all sense of legitimacy. “We’ll have elections with Ortega as the candidate for the governing party; against Ortega as the opposition, represented by satellite parties; and with Ortega acting as the referee, counting the votes, since he
controls the electoral authority,” Gabriel Álvarez, a constitutional law expert, told the independent news magazine and website Confidencial last month.

Álvarez isn’t alone in questioning the legitimacy of the upcoming elections. The Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua (CEN), the country’s bishops conference, reacted to the high court’s ruling with a statement suggesting that “any attempt to create conditions for the implementation of a single-party regime in which ideological diversity and political parties disappeared is harmful to the country.” José Adán Aguerri, president of the Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada (COSEP), a business leaders group, sounded off on the decision as well, endorsing the bishops’ statement and saying that the decision to oust Montealegre and nullify the opposition’s candidate selections “puts the system in a totally precarious and weakened situation.”

The scenario even prompted a telling tweet from the secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS), Luis Almagro of Uruguay, who wrote: “Transparency and the participation of everyone is key,” along with the hashtag “EleccionesNi2016.” Nicaragua’s ambassador to the OAS, Denis Moncada, responded by calling Almagro’s actions “illegal, disrespectful, and arrogant” and demanding his resignation.

**Powerless protests**

Upon announcing their withdrawal from the election process, Montealegre and his allies told reporters on June 15 that they would instead launch a “lucha cívica” (civic fight) and would seek to “transform the country” under the banner Ciudadanos por la Libertad (Citizens for Freedom). “We’re going to honor this commitment to Nicaragua with the same firmness we’ve shown since 2005, when we said no to the pact, no to corruption,” Montealegre said.

The “pact” Montealegre referred to is an infamous power sharing agreement widely believed to have existed between Ortega and former President Alemán. The pact led to Montealegre’s split from the PLC. It also greased the wheels for Ortega’s return to power a decade ago, and helped Alemán, who was convicted on corruption charges and jailed for a time, regain his freedom (NotiCen, Jan. 22, 2009).

What exactly the CND crowd means by its “civic fight” promise remains to be seen. Montealegre, Téllez, Callejas, and other “true opponents” of Ortega will presumably look to organize street demonstrations. But their record in that regard is not promising. Last year, Montealegre helped launch a “miércoles de protesta” (Wednesday protest) campaign involving weekly demonstrations in front of the CSE office in Managua (NotiCen, Aug. 6, 2015). The effort gained a fair amount of attention, at least in the first few months, but failed to draw enough participants to properly pressure the government.

The PLI-CND players also warn about the potential of violence, saying that while it’s not something they will encourage, it could also prove difficult to contain in light of Ortega’s latest power play. “This denies people the possibility of even casting an opposition vote in the next elections,” Montealegre told reporters June 8, shortly after the high court’s ruling was announced. “This pushes the county toward violence and represents a setback in terms of its progress through history.”

Others, though, argue that the PLI-CND opposition isn’t as representative and influential as it would like people to believe. While its expulsion from the election process does seem to warrant the “political crisis” label that some news outlets apply to the situation, it doesn’t appear to be
provoking the kind of popular backlash that could potentially unseat Ortega and his one-party political machine. For that, some Nicaraguans blame the opposition itself.

“The opposition hasn’t been able to unify, to come together in a solid way,” Carlos Jarquín, 35, a refrigerator repairman, told the Spanish daily El País. “That’s what’s bringing us into this dictatorship.”

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