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Nicaraguan leader Daniel Ortega orchestrated a quick succession of strong-arm maneuvers in recent weeks that not only make him a virtual shoo-in for reelection, but also put his family in a position to continue controlling the country should health or other unforeseen circumstances prevent him from completing another five-year term.

The latest and arguably most attention-grabbing move came Aug. 2, when the long-serving Ortega chose his wife, first lady Rosario Murillo, as his official running mate for the Nov. 6 national elections. As vice president, Murillo would have a healthy dose of formal power to go along with the de facto authority she already wields as the regime’s spokesperson and unofficial cabinet chief. She would also be first in the line of succession to replace the 70-year-old Ortega—whose health is a frequent subject of speculation in Nicaragua. The current vice president is Omar Halleslevens, a former commander and chief of the armed forces.

President Ortega framed the announcement as a nod toward gender equality. “It had to be a woman,” he said. “And who better than our colleague Rosario, who’s gone about her duties with so much efficiency, discipline, dedication, and commitment?” Plenty of critics, however, see the choice as a blatant case of nepotism and an attempt by the ruling couple to establish a “family dynasty.” Several of the couple’s adult children also serve in influential positions—as heads of various family-owned business (including several media outlets) and as government advisers.

“I have always thought that Ortega’s plan was to guarantee his family’s succession in case he can’t go on or isn’t around, and this is proof of that,” Eliseo Núñez, a former legislator with the opposition Partido Liberal Independiente (Independent Liberal Party, PLI), told the Associated Press.

The development also attracted criticism from abroad. Several major newspapers, including the US dailies The New York Times and The Washington Post, Spain’s El País, and La Nación in Costa Rica, ran editorials lambasting the move. “This is a replay of the nepotistic arrangement pioneered by Argentina’s former strongman, Juan Perón, and his third wife, Isabel, in 1973. The most relevant precedent, though, is local: the Somoza family dynasty that reigned over the Central American country so corruptly and violently between 1936 and 1979 that it drove an entire generation of young people into opposition,” The Washington Post argued in an Aug. 12 piece.

Decimating the opposition

One of those young Somoza opponents was Ortega himself, a former guerrilla who played a leading role in Nicaragua’s 1979 revolution and in the junta government (1979-1985) that followed. He was then elected president, serving until 1990. After several failed bids, Ortega returned to power in 2007 following a narrow victory over the divided right (NotiCen, Nov, 9, 2006).

That five-year term should have been his last, according to election rules then in place. But in 2011, Ortega sought reelection anyway—and won, this time by a wide margin (NotiCen, Nov. 17, 2011).
The 2011 elections also gave Ortega’s Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) a long-coveted “super majority” in the legislature, allowing him to enact laws essentially at will. In 2014 he used that power to push through a partial rewrite of the Constitution that, among other things, allows him to seek reelection indefinitely (NotiCen, Feb. 27, 2014). Ortega also passed legislation that year giving him more direct control over the military and police (NotiCen, July 24, 2014).

The powerful president commands loyalty from the high court (Corte Suprema de Justicia, CSJ) and the top electoral authority (Consejo Supremo Electoral, CSE) as well. The two bodies were instrumental in helping Ortega bypass Nicaragua’s previous term-limit laws and compete in the 2011 elections (NotiCen, Nov. 19, 2009, and May 26, 2011). They again came to the president’s aid in this election season, issuing a series of timely rulings that essentially outlaw the one opposition force capable of at least denting Ortega’s formidable political armor.

Even before the maneuvers against it, the opposition bloc—known as the Coalición Nacional por la Democracia (National Coalition for Democracy, CND) and led by the PLI—stood little chance of beating Ortega. Nevertheless, it made a concerted effort, starting in early June, to mount a challenge by nominating Luis Callejas, a lawmaker, doctor, and former contra fighter, and Violeta Granera, a sociologist and civil society activist, as its presidential and vice presidential candidates (NotiCen, June 16, 2016).

Three days later, on June 8, the CSJ nullified the ticket by stripping the coalition’s political architect, Eduardo Montealegre, of his role as leader and legal representative of the PLI (NotiCen, July 7, 2016). The high court instead awarded leadership of the party to attorney Pedro Reyes, head of a competing PLI faction and an apparent Ortega ally. Callejas and Granera were forced, as a result, to drop out of the race. The PLI’s new presidential candidate is Reyes, a relative unknown.

Not surprisingly, most of the PLI’s elected representatives in the legislature (including Montealegre and Callejas) were unwilling to accept the leadership change. Reyes pressured them to fall in line, but Montealegre and his allies bucked, eventually declaring themselves politically independent. Shortly afterwards—on July 29, and at Reyes’s behest—the CSE unseated the lawmakers, ousting 16 elected opposition members and 12 alternates. Included in the group were two legislators from the Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (Sandinista Renewal Movement, MRS), a Sandinista dissident party. As journalist and Nicaragua expert Tim Rogers explained in a recent article for the news site Fusion.net, “Now, Ortega doesn’t face any political opposition, symbolic or otherwise.”

**Straw candidates**

With the Montealegre-led bloc out of both the election and the legislature, Nicaragua has become a one-party state in all but name. Come election day, voters will technically be able to choose candidates not named Ortega or Murillo. Reyes is running for the PLI. Maximino Rodríguez, a former contra fighter, will represent the conservative Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (Liberal Constitutionalist Party, PLC). Critics, though, say that whatever political plurality appears to remain in Nicaragua is an illusion, and that contenders like Reyes and Rodríguez are nothing more than “straw candidates” to give the process a glimmer of legitimacy.

“There aren’t any credible opposition candidates, because the ones there had been were removed on orders from the Corte Suprema de Justicia,” Nicaraguan writer Sergio Ramírez, Ortega’s vice president in the late 1980s, wrote in an essay published Aug. 8 by the Argentine daily La Nación. “There won’t be international observers. They were declared unwelcome by the president of the
republic, who also happens to be a candidate. [And] there isn’t an electoral apparatus with even minimum credibility. [The CSE] is dominated by the governing party.”

Others argue that in addition to being blatantly undemocratic, Ortega’s power plays also hurt his own party. He has long been the controlling figure in the FSLN, running as its presidential candidate in seven straight elections over the course of more than three decades. But now, by appointing his wife as the official vice presidential candidate, he’s made it even that much more clear, say people like Dora María Téllez, a Nicaraguan historian and former guerrilla fighter, that it’s the Ortega-Murillo family, not the FSLN, that calls the shots. “It’s a family model that liquidates the Sandinista Front. Orteguismo is a parasite that liquidated the party,” she told Confidencial.

With no viable political opposition remaining, observers wonder if other actors—perhaps the business cadre, or the international community—could function as a counterbalance. For now, at least, the answer seems to be no.

Pleased no doubt with the country’s relatively robust growth numbers in recent years, the Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada (High Council of Private Business, COSEP), Nicaragua’s leading business association, has maintained a fairly amiable relationship with Ortega. The group did speak out against the president’s most recent antics. In a press release, COSEP criticized last month’s ousting of opposition lawmakers as something that “weakens representative democracy, political pluralism, and the division of powers.” But it also insists that politics be left to the politicians. The group isn’t keen, in other words, to fill the opposition void.

Some outside governments have also expressed concern about recent developments. “We call on the Nicaraguan government to respect the voices of its people and take the steps for fair and transparent elections that permit the full participation of all Nicaraguan citizens, including by allowing opposition parties to operate independently,” John Kirby, an assistant secretary and spokesperson for the US Department of State, said in an Aug. 1 statement.

But as Fusion.net’s Tim Rogers noted, the US Embassy in Nicaragua sent out its own press release two days earlier—the same day the CSE unseated Montealegre and his allies in the legislature—that made no mention of politics. The embassy instead wanted to highlight a “networking” meeting it had just hosted for entrepreneurs. “The US Embassy couldn’t appear more disconnected from Nicaragua’s political reality if it were operating in a parallel galaxy,” Rogers wrote.

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