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Grumblings from Washington as Nicaraguan Elections Near

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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Lawmakers in the US have added an extra layer of drama to Nicaragua’s upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections, threatening economic sanctions if President Daniel Ortega, a virtual shoo-in for reelection, fails to improve his tarnished democratic credentials.

On Sept. 21, the US House of Representatives voted unanimously to approve legislation known as the Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act (NICA) of 2016. The bill, sponsored by Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Republican from Miami, calls on the US to oppose non-humanitarian loans to Nicaragua unless the Nicaraguan government, led by Ortega since 2007, takes “effective steps to hold free, fair, and transparent elections, and for other purposes.” The “other purposes” include strengthening the rule of law and ensuring that Nicaragua’s judiciary and electoral council—which have proven, in recent years, to be openly partial to Ortega—operate independently.

The NICA legislation threatens to cut Nicaragua off from hundreds of millions of dollars in credits from international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank. In order to move forward, however, the bill will also need to be approved by the US Senate and the White House, both of which are dealing with serious time constraints—and plenty of political uncertainty—as the US prepares to hold its own presidential and congressional elections. The Nicaragua elections take place Nov. 6. US voters head to the polls two days later.

The threatened sanctions, in other words, may end up being just that: a threat. But they’re also a clear sign that US authorities, on both sides of the political aisle, are paying closer attention to—and growing increasingly concerned about—Ortega’s long list of less-than-democratic power plays, including his decision, in early August, to name Rosario Murillo, his wife and Nicaragua’s first lady, as his vice presidential running mate (NotiCen, Aug. 25, 2016). The move is likely to give Murillo a healthy dose of formal power to go along with the unofficial clout she wields as the government’s communications chief and de facto Cabinet head.

Speaking Sept. 15 to members of the US House Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Juan S. Gonzalez, a deputy assistant secretary of state, openly accused Ortega of “working to transform the country into a de facto one-party system.” He also said that Ortega’s party, the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), “has applied the tools of government, the judiciary, political manipulation, and intimidation to eliminate the system of checks and balances necessary for a vibrant and functioning democracy.”

Six weeks earlier, John Kirby, the US State Department spokesperson, also spoke out against developments in Nicaragua. “We strongly urge the Nicaraguan government to create an environment for free and fair elections that will allow the Nicaraguan people to determine the future of their country,” he said Aug. 1. And on July 29, the State Department took the rare step of issuing a “Travel Alert” for Nicaragua, warning US citizens about “increased government scrutiny of foreigners’ activities, new requirements for volunteer groups, and the potential for demonstrations during the upcoming election season in Nicaragua.”
Toward a one-party state

US authorities aren’t alone in expressing concern about Ortega’s strong-arm leadership style and his handling, in particular, of the upcoming elections. In Nicaragua, opposition leaders have been sounding alarms for months as the president and his allies in the judiciary and Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE), the country’s top electoral authority, wrested from them what little power and representation remained.

Ortega’s political opponents, led by the center-right Partido Liberal Independiente (Liberal Independent Party, PLI), first sensed trouble when the CSE waited until May to officially announce the November elections. Elections are normally announced a year in advance, giving participating candidates and parties plenty of time to prepare (NotiCen, June 16, 2016). More worrisome still was Ortega’s announcement, in early June, that the elections would be closed to outside monitors. “We’re done with having observers here. Let them go observe in their own countries,” he said during a June 4 convention in Managua, the Nicaraguan capital, where some 2,000 FSLN delegates nominated him as the party’s presidential candidate for the seventh time in a row.

In the meantime, the PLI and its allies in the so-called Coalición Nacional por la Democracia (National Coalition for Democracy, CND) chose their own candidates for president and vice president: Luis Callejas, a lawmaker, doctor, and former contra fighter; and Violeta Granera, a sociologist and civil society activist. But on June 8, Nicaragua’s highest court, the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), nullified the ticket by stripping the CND’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.

Montealegre’s removal also had repercussions for the PLI’s elected representatives in the Asamblea Nacional (AN), Nicaragua’s unicameral legislature. Rather than fall in line behind Reyes, many PLI lawmakers, including Montealegre and Callejas, declared themselves politically independent. The CSE responded in late July by ousting them from the AN (NotiCen, Aug. 25, 2016). In total, 16 elected opposition members and 12 alternates lost their legislative seats. Even before that, the FSLN had a two-thirds “super majority” and could thus steamroll any and all legislation Ortega sent its way. The PLI had at least, however, been able to raise objections. Now even that small amount of influence has been quashed.

Solid grip on power

The US sanctions threat stands little chance of keeping Ortega from winning a third consecutive five-year term and fourth overall, not including his time as leader of Nicaragua’s post-revolutionary junta government (1979-1985). Nor, for that matter, do last-minute efforts by Ortega’s political opponents to organize protests and persuade voters to boycott the election. Demonstrations held Oct. 8 in Matiguás, Matagalpa, and Oct. 9 in Somoto, Madriz, attracted a bit of media attention but only small crowds.

Nearly 66% of respondents to a late August poll by M&R Consultores said they would vote for Ortega versus just 4.4% for his closest contender, Maximino Rodriguez of the conservative Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (Liberal Constitutionalist Party, PLC). The PLI, now being represented by José del Carmen Alvarado, could fare worse. Del Carmen Alvarado was added to the ballot just last
month, after Pedro Reyes, chosen to replace Callejas, dropped out. Reyes polled at just 2.2% in the M&R survey.

Critics dismiss Rodriguez and Del Carmen Alvarado as “straw-man candidates,” people who lend the election an air of legitimacy without posing any real challenge to Ortega’s chances. “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.

The election, in other words, is expected to be a cakewalk for Ortega and Murillo. Little wonder, then, that the government dismissed the Sept. 21 US House of Representatives vote as “a violation of international law” and “part of a pattern of historic interventionist policies.” Looking forward, however, the ruling couple may want to take better care of its relationship with the US, which isn’t likely to wage war against the FSLN, as it did in the 1980s by training and funding counterrevolutionaries, but does wield significant economic clout. In addition to having veto power over some outside loans, the US is also a major source of outside investment and Nicaragua’s biggest trading partner, realities Ortega cannot afford to ignore, given how much his popularity depends on Nicaragua’s relative economic success and on his government’s poverty assistance programs.

“We’re going to vote for the FSLN. We’re all with Daniel,” Lisbeth Paz, 20, of Villa Guadalupe, an impoverished community northeast of Managua that has benefited greatly from government largess, told the AFP news agency last month. “Before, we didn’t have anything to eat… Now, we have this house. And the whole family works.”

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