

1-19-2017

Daniel Ortega Begins Third Straight Term as President of Nicaragua

Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

Witte-Lebhar, Benjamin. "Daniel Ortega Begins Third Straight Term as President of Nicaragua." (2017).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/10400>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Daniel Ortega Begins Third Straight Term as President of Nicaragua

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

Category/Department: Nicaragua

Published: 2017-01-19

Whatever challenges await Daniel Ortega in the coming months and years were well out of sight and mind on the evening of Jan. 10, when the already long-serving president of Nicaragua was sworn in for another five-year term, his third in a row and fourth overall.

“To the beloved Nicaraguan families, for all of you, I give you our affection, our love, our commitment to continue fighting for peace and the well-being of all Nicaraguans,” the controversial leader said during a ceremony attended by a handful of fellow heads of state, among them the presidents of Venezuela and Bolivia.

Joining him on stage was Rosario Murillo, his wife and now vice president, who stands first in the line of succession should illness of some other unforeseen circumstance prevent Ortega, 71, from completing the next leg of his presidency. Murillo, 65, a poet and former legislator, has been a fixture in Nicaraguan politics since Ortega, a one-time guerrilla commander, first led the country as head of the post-revolution junta government (1979-1985). He later served as president (1985-1990) but was defeated in his first reelection bid. After two more failed tries, Ortega squeezed back into the presidency a decade ago following a narrow win in the 2006 election.

The ruling couple begin this next chapter in their long leadership story having amassed an extraordinary amount of power against a divided and outmaneuvered opposition. Their party, the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), has a commanding majority in the Asamblea Nacional (AN), the unicameral legislature; controls nearly all of the country’s municipalities; and holds sway over the military and police. It also has demonstrated influence over the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), the nation’s top court, and the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE), the electoral authority.

The CSJ and CSE played a key role in helping Ortega bypass term-limit rules that were supposed to have prevented him from staying on as president beyond January 2012. They again acted in the president’s favor in the run-up to last year’s presidential and parliamentary elections, held Nov. 6 ([NotiCen, Nov. 17, 2016](#)).

In June, the CSJ forced the one somewhat viable opposition group, the Coalición Nacional por la Democracia (National Coalition for Democracy, CND), out of the contest by voiding its candidate choices and transferring leadership of its principal member party, the Partido Liberal Independiente (Liberal Independent Party, PLI), to an apparent Ortega ally ([NotiCen, July 7, 2016](#)). Two months later, the CSE took aim at the CND’s legislative bloc, unseating 16 elected AN members and 12 alternates ([NotiCen, Aug. 25, 2016](#)).

Against a field of largely unknown and hastily organized challengers, the Ortega-Murillo ticket, as expected, won the election easily, with nearly 72.5% of the vote, according to the CSE. The FSLN, for its part, won 71 seats in the 92-person AN, adding to the two-thirds “super majority” it obtained in the 2011 elections and has used ever since to rubber stamp any legislation Ortega introduces.

Fourteen of the 21 seats not held by the Sandinistas went to the once-powerful Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (Constitutionalist Liberal Party, PLC), whose leader, former President Arnaldo Alemán (1997-2002), is believed to have entered years ago into a mutually beneficial pacto (pact) with Ortega.

Government critics like Violeta Granera—an activist and sociologist who ran as the CND’s vice-presidential candidate before being squeezed out of the 2016 electoral process—say the PLC and other minor parties in the AN are opposition in name only. “I think those [lawmakers] who are there know that it’s because Daniel Ortega wants them there. They all know why and how they got there,” Granera recently told the independent news magazine and website *Confidencial*.

Positive press

Ortega also enjoys a cozy relationship with Nicaragua’s business leaders, who applaud the regime’s stewardship of the economy. Foreign investment has risen since the Sandinista leader’s return to power in 2007. Inflation is relatively low. And overall growth numbers are solid. In 2015 the economy grew 3.9%, well above the Latin American average of between 2% and 2.5%, according to the World Bank. Nicaragua is presumed to have fared even better last year, with a projected growth rate—the final numbers aren’t yet official—of between 4.5% and 4.7%.

“Besides inheriting a house that was in order, the [Ortega] administration has been able, during all of these years, to maintain that order,” Juan Sebastián Chamorro, head of the economic think tank *Fundación Nicaragüense para el Desarrollo Económico y Social (FUNIDES)*, told the opposition newspaper *La Prensa*.

Nicaragua’s steady economic growth, combined with relatively low crime numbers, has been particularly beneficial for the tourism sector. In 2015, tourism revenue topped US\$500 million for the first time, surpassing the country’s top export product, beef, in total earnings ([NotiCen, April 21, 2016](#)). The *Cámara Nicaragüense de la Micro, Pequeña y Mediana Empresa Turística (CANTUR)*, an association of small and medium-sized tourism operators, says the 2016 numbers were better still.

The outlook for 2017 is also positive, especially now that the US government has lifted a travel warning it had issued in June after authorities in Nicaragua expelled a number of US citizens. Major international media outlets, in the meantime, continue to sing the country’s praises. The *New York Times* featured Nicaragua in its “House Hunting in...” section last month. The US magazine *Travel + Leisure* recently named Nicaragua one of the “50 Best Places to Travel in 2017.” And the London-based *BBC*, in a Jan. 2 report, hailed Nicaragua as one of the five best places for “adventurous” people to retire.

“Those looking to make the most of their retirement dollars won’t find many places as attractive as Nicaragua,” the *BBC* piece suggests. “It helps that retirees are rewarded with beautiful rainforests, miles of stunning beaches, and plentiful lakes and volcanoes.”

Warning signs

As sunny a picture as the *BBC* and other publications paint, the outlook for Nicaragua and the powerful Ortega-Murillo regime isn’t exactly trouble-free. One cause for concern is a pending threat of economic sanctions by the US government ([NotiCen, Oct. 20, 2016](#)). In September, lawmakers in the US House of Representatives approved legislation calling on the US to oppose non-humanitarian loans to Nicaragua unless the Ortega regime takes “effective steps to hold

free, fair, and transparent elections.” The elections held in November, most observers agree, were anything but.

For the sanctions to apply, the legislation—known as the Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act (NICA) of 2016—would need to be approved also by the Senate and White House. Where President-elect Donald Trump, who takes office on Jan. 20, stands on Nicaragua is anybody’s guess. Certainly for the Republican party, though, Ortega has long been and remains a persona non-grata. And with the Republicans firmly in control of Congress, it’s possible they will want to revisit the issue once the turmoil of the transition period subsides.

If the NICA act were to pass, Nicaragua would be cut off from hundreds of millions of dollars in credits from lenders such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank. The possibility is even more worrisome for Nicaragua given the ongoing economic crisis in Venezuela, which has provided the Ortega regime with several billion dollars in soft loans, preferential trade deals, and investments.

“The Ortega government is not going to get out of this unscathed,” sociologist and economist Óscar René Vargas said of the economic problems in Venezuela in a recent interview with Inter Press Service. “The damage is done, and the consequences will have to be measured.”

Voter turnout

On the political front, the November election seems at first glance to have cemented control by Ortega and Murillo over what, for all intents and purposes, is now a one-party state. But the process—and all the pre-election shenanigans that went with it—also gave rise, it seems, to a new albeit silent challenge: voter apathy.

Opponents estimate that only 30% of voters took part in the process. The CSE insists otherwise, claiming that voter turnout was more than 68%. But even casual observers noted that voting stations were unusually empty on Nov. 6. José Antonio Peraza, a political analyst who spent Election Day traveling from voting station to voting station, said in an interview with the independent news magazine *Envío* that in some places there were no voters at all.

“If there were lines, they were of two or three people,” Peraza said. “At the end of the day, all of the information, all of the reports received, confirmed for me that there had been massive [abstention] like never before. The abstention is the only thing that was off-script in what was otherwise the perfect fraud. There’s no way to prove it. There’s no way to prove anything. But this was the perfect fraud. What we can establish is whether the numbers provided by the CSE are credible, whether there are contradictions. And they’re not credible; there are contradictions.”

Those contradictions may not threaten Ortega’s position in the short-term, but they do represent a chink in his political armor, a first sign that he and Vice President Murillo don’t have as tight a hold on the hearts and minds of the Nicaraguan people as they claim. Peraza is among those who think Ortega is keenly aware of the high abstention rate and what it implies.

“We’re facing a very serious problem. Because nobody knows better than Daniel Ortega what happened,” Peraza said. “He knows that his power is being seriously questioned. He knows that there’s a large sector of the population that doesn’t agree with him staying on [as president], that wants a change. They expressed it silently, passively, but they expressed it.”

-- End --