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## Opposition Tries to Regroup Ahead of Nicaragua's Municipal Elections

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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Government opponents are showing signs of life after suffering a series of knockout blows that culminated late last year in another lopsided election victory for Nicaraguan leader Daniel Ortega and his Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front, FSLN) party. But with less than five months to go before the next elections—this time at the municipal level—they'll be hard pressed to shift, in any meaningful way, the balance of power in Nicaragua.

"The government is going to do whatever it wants with these elections," Eliseo Núñez, a former opposition lawmaker, told the daily *La Prensa* earlier in June. "The ones who really need to go out and campaign are the opposition [groups]. But the opposition doesn't have any money. They're fractured, involved in internal fights that are serious, very serious."

Most observers agree with Núñez that the nationwide municipal contests, set for Nov. 5, will result in another resounding but controversial victory for the Ortega-led Sandinistas, which have made a habit in recent years of trouncing the divided and outmaneuvered opposition. Each time, government critics cry foul, pointing to alleged voting irregularities and accusing the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), the nation's top court, and the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE), the electoral authority, of being openly partial to the FSLN. But they've been powerless to stop or even slow Ortega, 71, who recently began his third consecutive five-year term—this time with his wife, Rosario Murillo, installed as vice-president ([NotiCen, Jan. 19, 2017](#)). Ortega has a commanding two-thirds majority in the Asamblea Nacional (AN), Nicaragua's unicameral legislature, and controls all but a handful of the country's 153 municipalities.

The opposition's arguments are not without merit. The CSJ and CSE played instrumental roles, for example, in helping Ortega run for reelection in 2011 despite term-limit rules—contained, at the time, in the Constitution—that barred him from running ([NotiCen, Nov. 11, 2010](#), and [March 24, 2011](#)). Ortega went on to win the election in a landslide ([NotiCen, Nov. 17, 2011](#)).

The high court again acted on the president's behalf last June, forcing the one somewhat viable opposition group—the Coalición Nacional por la Democracia (National Coalition for Democracy, CND)—out of the November 2016 election 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, ousting 16 elected lawmakers and 12 alternates after they refused to recognize the PLI leadership switch ([NotiCen, Aug. 25, 2016](#)).

### *Licking their wounds*

Those last two power plays were particularly devastating for the opposition, which essentially disintegrated after the CSJ took leadership of the PLI away from Eduardo Montealegre, an outspoken Ortega critic and former presidential candidate, and gave it instead to a relative unknown named Pedro Reyes. Montealegre was the political architect of the CND, which later split into

two factions: the Frente Amplio por la Democracia (Broad Front for Democracy, FAD) and the Ciudadanos por la Libertad (Citizens for Liberty, CxL). Neither has any representation in the AN, and Montealegre, one of the lawmakers booted from the legislature last August, has since retired from politics.

A year later, the factions are making a concerted effort to regroup. The FAD doesn't have formal recognition as a political party but is making its presence felt in the public sphere as a vocal critic of the Ortega regime. Prominent members include Eliseo Núñez, who also lost his AN seat, and Violeta Granera, a sociologist and civil society activist who briefly ran as the CND's vice presidential candidate last year before the CSJ ruling forced her out of the race.

Granera's running mate, Luis Callejas—another of the ousted AN deputies—is now a member of CxL, which has also become increasingly active in recent months. Led by Carmella María Rogers Amburn de Monterrey, better known as Kitty Monterrey, CxL petitioned the CSE for official recognition as a political party. It secured that status in early May and plans to compete in the November elections. *La Prensa*, an opposition newspaper, called it a "hopeful" sign. "Organizing a coalition with a national reach in just six months won't be easy," it argued in a May 16 editorial. "But at least there's an opportunity for CxL to restore a certain balance to the electoral options."

CxL faces a tall task indeed, as it will be taking on not just the Sandinistas, but also parties such as the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (Constitutionalist Liberal Party, PLC), the "new" PLI (no longer led by Pedro Reyes, who was removed from office late last year), the Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense (Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance, ALN) and the Partido Conservador (Conservative Party, PC), all of which have at least a minimal presence in the legislature.

Critics dismiss the groups as being opposition in name only, often referring to them as *zancudos* (mosquitoes)—parasite parties that give the Ortega regime a veneer of political plurality in exchange for a narrow slice of the government pie ([NotiCen, Nov. 17, 2016](#)). There may be some truth to the claims, though it's not clear what such name-calling does to help voters already struggling to navigate the country's increasingly convoluted, alphabet-soup-like list of political parties. Little wonder that for many Nicaraguans, the only letters that ring familiar are F, S, L, and N.

## *Oversight by the OAS*

Another big question hovering over the municipal elections is whether Ortega and the CSE will allow outside observers. The president nixed the idea for last year's elections. "We're done with having observers here. Let them go observe in their own countries," he famously said ([NotiCen, June 16, 2016](#)). But Ortega appears to have changed his tune somewhat for the upcoming contests. The regime has agreed, at least on paper, to allow observers from the Organization of American States (OAS). The plan is part of a "memorandum of understanding" that the Ortega government signed with the OAS in late February to "strengthen the country's institutions" ([NotiCen, April 27, 2017](#)).

The memorandum followed several months of talks that were prompted by growing international criticism of the Ortega government, particularly from the US, where lawmakers introduced a bill late last year to condition loans to Nicaragua from international lending institutions ([NotiCen, Oct. 20, 2016](#)). The Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act (NICA), as the bill is known, essentially calls for sanctions against Nicaragua unless Ortega takes verifiable steps to improve democratic conditions in the country.

The NICA bill gained full approval in the US House of Representatives before disappearing in the shuffle of Washington's recent and tumultuous leadership transition. But in April, the US lawmakers behind the initiative introduced an updated version—NICA 2017—which has since cleared the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere and is now being examined by the full House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

The Nicaraguan government's ongoing talks with the OAS, in the meantime, appear to have hit something of a rough patch. OAS representatives traveled to Managua in late May but left several days ahead of schedule and without explanation, according to news reports. The delegation met with government officials, discussing, among other things, issues related to funding for overseeing the election. But because of its early departure, the OAS team skipped meetings that had been scheduled with opposition groups.

"It was a surprise. They sent us a note saying that our meeting ... was canceled. Not even rescheduled," Vilma Núñez, president of the Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos (CENIDH), an influential Nicaraguan human rights group, told the independent news magazine and website *Confidencial*. "These types of actions, without clear and convincing explanations, weaken the effort to seek solutions to the serious problems that exist in Nicaragua."

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