

11-30-2017

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Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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## Recommended Citation

Witte-Lebhar, Benjamin. "Sandinistas Dominate Local Elections in Nicaragua." (2017). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/10481>

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## Sandinistas Dominate Local Elections in Nicaragua

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

Category/Department: Nicaragua

Published: 2017-11-30

Nicaraguan leader Daniel Ortega and the governing Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) added to their more than decade-long winning streak with a near-sweep in nationwide municipal elections. The contests—held Nov. 5 and tepidly approved by observers from the Organization of American States (OAS)—tightened the Ortega regime’s already meaty grip on the country ([NotiCen, Feb. 16, 2017](#), [June 29, 2017](#), and [Oct. 19, 2017](#)) but also prompted a handful of confrontations that left several people dead.

Overall, the Sandinistas won 135 of the nation’s 153 municipalities, including all 15 departmental capitals plus Bilwi (Puerto Cabezas) and Bluefields, the main cities in the Región Autónoma de la Costa Caribe Norte (North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region, RACCN) and the Región Autónoma de la Costa Caribe Sur, (South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region, RACCS) respectively, according to the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE), Nicaragua’s electoral authority. The CSE published its final results on Nov. 20 after dismissing opposition challenges in seven municipalities.

Bilwi and Bluefields had been governed by the Caribbean indigenous party Yapti Tasba Masraka Nanih Aslatakanka (YATAMA), which also lost control of Prinzapolka, in the RACCN, and is widely seen as the election’s biggest loser. YATAMA, meaning Sons of Mother Earth, refuses to recognize the results and is calling on international bodies to investigate what it claims was voter fraud on the part of the FSLN and its allies in the CSE.

In Bilwi, YATAMA supporters held a rally the day after the election to protest the results but were confronted by riot police and pro-Sandinista youth gangs. Reports vary about what exactly transpired, but sources agree that in the melee, the offices of both parties were attacked and damaged. Several vehicles were burned as well, and an iconic 30-year-old statue symbolizing indigenous resistance was torn down.

In a multi-page document released shortly afterwards, YATAMA reported that three of its followers had been killed and dozens arrested. It also accused the FSLN of trying to eliminate the party and “impose its totalitarian ideology” on Nicaragua’s indigenous peoples.

“We’re at a very dangerous juncture for the future of the indigenous peoples,” the statement read.

Post-election violence caused fatalities in other areas as well. In the department of Jinotega, in north-central Nicaragua, two members of the opposition party Ciudadanos por la Libertad (Citizens for Liberty, CxL) were killed, according to news reports. Elsewhere in the department, an official with the conservative Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (Liberal Constitutionalist Party, PLC) died from a gunshot to the head, party leader María Haidée Osuna confirmed.

### *Embracing the OAS*

Of the handful of municipalities the FSLN didn’t win, 11 went to the PLC; six to the CxL, an offshoot of the Partido Liberal Independiente (Independent Liberal Party, PLI) as it existed under the

leadership of economist and former lawmaker Eduardo Montealegre; and one to the Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense (Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance, ALN).

The PLI was the leading opposition group in Nicaragua until last year, in the run-up to the November presidential and parliamentary elections, when the Corte Suprema de Justicia (Supreme Court of Justice, CSJ), presumably at Ortega's request, removed Montealegre as head of the party. The court, which has a history of pro-FSLN partisanship, later ousted Montealegre and his allies from the legislature ([NotiCen, Aug. 25, 2016](#)). Technically speaking, the PLI still exists, but under different leadership and without its core members, who either retired from politics (as in the case of Montealegre) or joined new groups like the CxL and Frente Amplio por la Democracia (Broad Democratic Front, FAD).

The power play against Montealegre and his associates—who not only lost their seats in the legislature but were also forced to withdraw from the presidential contest—smoothed what was already a clear path toward Ortega's reelection. But it also provoked widespread criticism, including from Washington, where lawmakers presented a bill calling on the US to oppose non-humanitarian loans to Nicaragua until the Ortega government takes "effective steps to hold free, fair, and transparent elections, and for other purposes" ([NotiCen, Oct. 20, 2016](#)).

Ortega responded by reaching out to the OAS, with which his government signed a "memorandum of understanding" in February to "strengthen the country's institutions" ([NotiCen, April 27, 2017](#)). That, in turn, led to the formation of an OAS mission to observe the recent municipal elections. US lawmakers, in the meantime, submitted an updated version of their sanctions bill—the Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act (NICA) 2017—which gained full approval early last month in the US House of Representatives ([NotiCen, Oct. 19, 2017](#)). The legislation is now under consideration in the US Senate.

### *'Technical support'*

In its preliminary report on the municipal elections, the 60-person OAS mission, headed by Wilfredo Penco of Uruguay, expressed "profound concern" regarding the violence and loss of life in Nicaragua. It also called for "comprehensive electoral reform," saying there is "space to strengthen the legal, technical, procedural, technological, and human aspects of [the country's] electoral processes."

At the same time, however, Penco and his team were careful to downplay Nicaragua's democratic shortcomings, calling them "weaknesses typical of all electoral processes" and insisting that they have not "substantially affected the popular will expressed through the vote." The OAS, in that sense, legitimized the results as a credible gauge of people's political preferences in Nicaragua, or at least of those who opted to participate in the process. The CSE claimed that turnout among eligible voters had been nearly 52%. Opposition groups believe no more than 30% voted.

Reactions to the preliminary report varied. In a Nov. 12 editorial titled "Avance hacia la dictadura" (moving towards a dictatorship), the leading Costa Rican daily La Nación chided the OAS for ignoring underlying structural problems in Nicaragua's electoral system such as the CSE's evident pro-government bias and the fact that the government—through its control of the public purse strings and numerous media outlets—has an unfair campaigning advantage. In that sense, the editorial argued, Penco's team provided "technical support" to a broken system rather than offer

any kind of real observation or in-depth verification. The OAS group “whitewashed” the results, the newspaper concluded.

The PLC’s campaign chief, Martha McCoy, offered a similar take. “What happened in the elections was a total disaster,” she told independent news magazine and website Confidential. Like the leaders of YATAMA, McCoy accused the FSLN and the CSE of using various dirty tricks to manipulate the outcome. Others, however, praised the OAS team’s efforts.

“We saw a Mr. Penco who was very concentrated, very technical in all this,” said Óscar Sobalvarro, a party leader with CxL. The OAS report, furthermore, “matched up well with what really took place last Sunday on Election Day,” he told Confidential reporter Wilfredo Miranda Aburto.

### *Time’s up for the TPS*

The US Department of State, for its part, lauded the OAS mission for providing “much needed transparency.” In a statement issued Nov. 8, spokesperson Heather Nauert said the municipal elections illustrated “persistent flaws in the Nicaraguan democratic process.” She also said that the US “continues to advocate for the strengthening of democratic institutions” in Nicaragua, but made no mention of economic sanctions or other mechanisms the Trump administration might use to encourage such changes.

That same day, the woman who spearheaded the NICA legislation, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Republican from Miami, issued her own statement about the Nicaraguan elections, calling them “neither free, fair, nor transparent.” The OAS mission report, she went on to say, “does not tell us anything new.” Ros-Lehtinen then took an opportunity to plug her sanctions bill, saying it is needed to promote “reforms to the electoral system in Nicaragua” and hold the Ortega government “accountable for its human rights abuses.”

Whether Washington follows through on the sanctions threat remains to be seen. The US government did, however, take one very concrete measure against Nicaragua, announcing Nov. 6—one day after the municipal elections—that Nicaraguans would no longer be eligible to stay in the US under the so-called Temporary Protection Status (TPS) program ([NotiCen, Nov. 30, 2017](#)). The move impacts an estimated 5,000 Nicaraguan who have been living legally in the US thanks to TPS visas, which the US government began issuing in 1999 after Hurricane (Mitch) devastated a large swath of Central America ([NotiCen, Nov. 12, 1998](#)).

“Acting Secretary [of Homeland Security Elaine] Duke determined that those substantial but temporary conditions caused in Nicaragua by Hurricane Mitch no longer exist, and thus, under the applicable statute, the current TPS designation must be terminated,” the US Department of Homeland Security explained in a press release.

The people in question have a little over a year—until Jan. 5, 2019—to obtain legal residency by some other mechanism or leave the country. Critics, including prominent US Democrats, slammed the move as unnecessarily harsh, especially given how long the affected Nicaraguans have been living legally in the US.

“The Trump Administration’s irresponsible decision to end TPS for Nicaraguans will tear apart families and upend the lives of these hard-working individuals,” Rep. Michelle Lujan Grisham, a Democrat from New Mexico and chair of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, said in a statement.

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