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Analysis: Arnaldo Aleman, Liberal Alliance Could Govern Nicaragua

by Guest

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Managua. - Although Nicaragua's October 1996 general elections are still a year away, the elections already dominate the country's political scene. Out of a hodgepodge of 32 political parties and 20 presidential hopefuls, Nicaragua's four-party Alianza Liberal, and its candidate, Arnold Aleman, is the undisputable front runner. The Alianza Liberal has become the strongest political force in Nicaragua. It not only leads in the polls but is perhaps better organized throughout the nation than its principal adversary, the tightly-disciplined, yet waning, Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN). The Alianza Liberal brings together four of Nicaragua's five Liberal parties: the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), which is Aleman's own party; the Partido Liberal Independiente de Unidad Nacional (PLIUN); the Partido Neoliberal (PALI); and the Partido Liberal Nacionalista (PLN). This last is made up of former politicians and supporters of the Somoza dictatorship.

As was expected, Arnaldo Aleman was chosen as the Alianza's presidential candidate last June 11, which was the anniversary of the 1893 Liberal revolution in Nicaragua. Since then, he has plunged almost full time into the campaign, even though the electoral process does not officially open until April 1996. A series of public opinion polls conducted in July, August, September, and early October by the M&R, Borges and Associates, and the CID-GALLUP polling firms placed Aleman as the country's most popular political figure.

Aleman received a high of 55% support in a July CID-GALLUP poll, although he only has an average of about 41% support if results from polls by all three firms are taken together. The polls showed FSLN leader Daniel Ortega in second place, with a high of 29% and an average of 25%. Former minister of the presidency Antonio Lacayo, who heads the Proyecto Nacional (PN), has polled about 5%, as have Sergio Ramirez of the Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (MRS), Myriam Arguello of the Alianza Popular Conservadora (APC), and Virgilio Godoy of the Partido Liberal Independiente (PLI).

All other candidates and political parties have polled a percentage point or less. However, these poll results are based on that 60% of the population that has already decided how it will vote in

1996, while the remaining 40% is undecided. A candidate needs to win at least 45% of the popular vote in the first round of voting, scheduled for Oct. 21, 1996, to avoid a runoff between the two top candidates, which, if necessary, would be held the first week of December 1996. Taking into account the large number of undecided voters and the strong possibility of a runoff election, the Alianza is carefully planning its campaign strategy. Its electoral tactics will be tailored to appeal to undecided voters, taking into account the mood of the electorate regarding the Alianza's stance vis-a-vis the Sandinistas and other political forces. The Alianza is also carefully weighing the pros and cons of potential electoral alliances for a second-round vote. The 41% of the vote that Aleman currently commands is not enough to avoid a runoff. In an interview in Managua, PLC secretary general Eliseo Nunez said that the Liberals' goal is to win at least 50.1% in the first round. With 50.1% or more of the votes, the Alianza would not only be guaranteed the presidency without the need for a runoff but would also have an absolute majority in the parliament (Asamblea Nacional), and thus exercise working control over the government.

While the PLIUN and the PALI are insignificant parties on their own, the PLN the party created by the Somoza dictatorship still retains a small but significant following in Nicaragua and, more importantly, among wealthy Somocista exiles in Miami. In 1990, the PLC Aleman's party was also a tiny group with a handful of "old-guard" Liberal leaders dating back to the Somoza years and with a scant party infrastructure. In the five years since the ouster of the Sandinistas in 1990, the PLC has experienced a meteoric growth, becoming a major nationwide political organization, perhaps better organized than the FSLN. The PLC's political rise was caused by a series of factors that all came together in the immediate post-Sandinista years.

First, the Somocista-oriented PLN had been made illegal by the 1987 Constitution and was prohibited from setting up offices and openly conducting political work in the country. (Although these legal restrictions are still technically in place, they were relaxed in 1993, and party representatives are now active in the country.)

PLN leaders and exiled Somocistas had set up important business operations in Miami and established a powerful financial base. But, with the PLN officially banned, Somocista leaders in Miami decided to work through the PLC. Aleman was a leader of the "Juventud Liberal," the Somocista youth organization in the 1960s that was part of the dictatorship's repressive political apparatus. He had spent the Sandinista years in Miami and returned to Nicaragua in 1989 to run in the 1990 elections for mayor of Managua as a PLC candidate on the Union Nacional Opositora (UNO) slate, with large-scale financial backing from the Miami Somocista groups. Since winning the mayoral post, Aleman, and the PLC along with him, have been heavily financed by these Miami groups, and have used this funding to build up the party's political infrastructure.

Second, the PLC, which had broken away from Somoza's PLN in 1948 and represented a more centrist position, was eager to have Aleman join the party and run as its candidate, seeing it as a way to rejuvenate the party and attract funds from Miami. "We embraced Aleman. We launched his candidacy. We set him up," explained Eliseo Nunez, the PLC secretary general. "But his own stature grew rapidly and soon he went from being an instrument serving our party's interests to being the leader of the party." In fact, one of the sources of tension within the Alianza is the influence over the party that the Miami groups wish to exercise. "They believe they should be given a major role in

a future Liberal government, and that their program should be implemented," said Nunez. "They want to move the entire Alliance to the far right."

Third, Aleman has used the Managua mayor's office to project his own image and that of the PLC, to finance numerous populist-oriented projects aimed at building a grassroots base, and to develop an extensive patronage network and a well-oiled party machine. Managua is home to one-third of the country's population, its budget is nearly the size of the central government's budget, and the Constitution gives Managua (and other municipalities) an extraordinary amount of autonomy, including complete autonomy over tax policies and collection, the municipal budget, and services. Aleman and his office have been accused of being involved in extensive corruption and shady deals, including collaborating with drug traffickers.

However, according to his critics, rather than merely looking for personal enrichment for his inner circle of collaborators, Aleman has used corruption, swindling, and embezzlement to build the Liberal party machine and paradoxically he has used Nicaragua's particular conditions of an impoverished population and a long-standing clientelist political culture to develop a popular base of support in poor neighborhoods, through a network of thousands of families that have come to depend on their links to Aleman and his machine. In turn, these families exercise a "multiplier" effect on the population as a whole, in the classical style of clientelist political patronage. Fourth, after establishing a solid base in Managua, the PLC began to spread out around the country, targeting not only other urban areas, but rural areas where liberalism has historically been a political tradition.

The PLC leadership studied old communist party organizing pamphlets, and decided in 1991 to implement their "cell-structure" style of organizing. In this strategy, small nuclei of Liberal leaders established "Liberal councils" in urban and rural communities, gradually recruited new members regardless of their former political sympathies, and using resources from Managua began to widen their circle in each "zone of influence." Thus, while most other political parties from the UNO coalition focused much of their energy from 1990-1994 in elite infighting in Managua, the PLC was busy weaving together a nationwide grassroots network of party leaders and supporters. This organizing campaign, conducted from 1991 to the present, proved highly successful not only because of the successful application of communist "party-cell structure" tactics and powerful funding, but also because of the skillful manner in which the Liberals developed their ideological message, which is a fifth factor in the rise of the PLC and Aleman.

The Liberals took advantage not only of anti-Sandinista sentiment, but also, after 1991, of widespread anti-government sentiment that resulted from the failure of the government's neoliberal economic structural adjustment program to resolve the social problems of unemployment, poverty, and rural production. "We know that the Sandinistas are a legitimate political force with whom we must work," said Nunez during the interview, "but we have been able to take advantage of anti-Sandinismo and also of disgust at the government's performance."

A sixth factor is the support the PLC was able to win among demobilized members of the contras (Resistencia Nicaraguense, RN). The former contras and their families, encompassing more than 120,000 people, are mostly poor campesinos. RN members are not only anti-Sandinista, but also

anti-government since President Violeta Chamorro's administration has broken numerous promises to this sector to provide land, credits, housing, and other social services after their demobilization. Similarly, most other political parties enjoy little credibility among the former contras, who see them as elites uninterested in resolving their social and economic problems. The combination of support from former contras and from the PLC's rural party networks was a major factor in the party's landslide victory in early 1994 elections in the Atlantic Coast region.

The former contras have established their own party, the Partido de la Resistencia Nicaraguense (PRN), which can be expected to deliver between 50,000 and 100,000 votes, among former contra combatants, family members, and sympathizers. PRN and PLC leaders have been involved in negotiations for several months, and it is likely that the PRN will join the Alianza Liberal rather than run an independent campaign with its own candidates, thus giving the Alianza a further electoral edge. Despite the authoritarian Somocista origins of Aleman and a portion of the Alianza, and despite the right-wing populist program it has projected and officially espouses, an Aleman presidency can be expected to continue the general contours of the economic structural-adjustment program.

"As a party, we are aware that we need to respect the country's international commitments and the structural adjustment program," explained Nunez. "We are going to look for slight modifications at the level of social policies, but our economic program will essentially give continuity to the government's current program." In this regard, the Alianza recently named Noel Ramirez Sanchez to develop its economic program and to lead what it expects will be its future governmental economic cabinet. A graduate of Harvard University, Sanchez was president of the Nicaraguan Central Bank briefly during the 1970s, and has been the rector of the Costa Rican branch of the Central American Business Administration School (INCAE), which, in turn, is largely financed by the US Ford Foundation, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and other international financial agencies. Sanchez is considered a modernizing technocrat, and his leadership of the Alianza's economic team- -and any future cabinet will solidly link the Alianza to the international financial agencies, Nicaragua's donors, and to structural adjustment and international economic integration.

And, in mid-October, a team of electoral advisors from the Liberal International, including a team of German and Spanish specialists, arrived in the country to advise the Alianza on its campaign and its program. In this regard, the strategy of such technocratic and modernizing factions within the Alianza is to develop ties between the original right-wing Liberal core and the country's business sectors and moderate and centrist political groups. The objective is to move the entire Alianza from a rightist coalition with certain centrist support to a broad centrist coalition under the leadership of the more modernizing business class, with the support of a subordinate right wing.

However, the populist rhetoric of Aleman and the Alianza is unlikely to change during the campaign, because of its need to win a maximum number of votes and retain its current base. "For instance, we agree with the privatization of TELCOR (the state-owned telecommunications monopoly) and other privatizations, but we are not going to say so publicly," candidly explained a PLC leader in another interview, noting that public opposition to TELCOR's privatization is high. In early October, Aleman named the head of the Superior Council of Private Enterprise (COSEP)

and prominent businessman Enrique Bolanos to head his electoral campaign. Bolanos might also eventually become Aleman's vice- presidential running mate.

"With the appointment of Bolanos, we want to project the image that we are not right-wingers and that we will be able to satisfy the aspirations of the business sector," said Nunez. However, while Bolanos and COSEP constitute a powerful group within the country's private sector, they do not represent the transnationalized, neoliberal wing of private enterprise most closely associated with the current government, and particularly with Antonio Lacayo and with the current economic cabinet. On the one hand, the Liberals will attempt to win over these groups, and on the other hand, transnationalized private-sector representatives can be expected to try to gain greater influence within the Alianza and assure that any future Liberal government does not upset the free-market neoliberal program.

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