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President Daniel Ortega Wins Third Consecutive Term in Nicaragua

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Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega and the governing Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) cruised to victory in national elections that were as polemical as they were predictable.

Against a field of five lesser known candidates, the long-serving leader and one-time Marxist revolutionary easily won his bid for reelection, drawing more than 72% of the votes cast Nov. 6, according to the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE), the country’s top electoral authority. Ortega’s closest challenger, former contra fighter Maximino Rodriguez of the conservative Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (Liberal Constitutionalist Party, PLC), received 15% of the vote. The other four candidates drew just 12% of the vote between them.

The results give Ortega, 71, a third consecutive five-year presidential term and fourth overall, not including his tenure as head of the country’s post-revolutionary junta government (1979-1985). They also mean that his wife, Rosario Murillo, will replace former Army general Omar Halleslevens as vice president. “This is a vote for peace, for stability, for the security of Nicaraguan families,” Ortega said after casting his vote. “Some say that we don’t have proper elections here because we’re not insulting each other, throwing messages of hate, banging the drums of death.”

Ortega named Murillo, 65, as his running mate three months ago, raising fears among critics that the couple is installing a family dynasty not unlike the Somoza family regime that controlled the country between 1936 and 1979 (NotiCen, Aug. 25, 2016). As vice president, Murillo will have a healthy dose of formal power to go along with the de facto authority she already wields as the regime’s spokesperson and unofficial Cabinet chief. Murillo will also be first in the line of succession to replace Ortega should he be unable, for health or other reasons, to complete his next term.

“For the past 10 years, Murillo has assumed on many occasions the functions of head-of-state,” Veronica Rueda Estrada, a Nicaragua expert and professor at Mexico’s Quintana Roo University, told the Agence France-Presse (AFP) news agency. “Things will definitely continue like that and it’s possible they will even increase, with the variable that after Nov. 6 she will have the legitimacy of being elected.”

The ruling couple’s party, the FSLN, also fared well in the elections, boosting its two-thirds majority in the Asamblea Nacional (AN), Nicaragua’s unicameral legislature. Sandinista lawmakers first earned a so-called “super majority” in the 2011 elections, and have used it since to rubber-stamp any and all legislation President Ortega sends their way, including a partial rewrite of the Constitution that, among other things, eliminated presidential term limits (NotiCen, Feb. 27, 2014).

Pre-election shenanigans
The results surprised no one: Even Ortega’s detractors expected that he, Murillo, and the FSLN would win, and win big. Many people, nevertheless, argue that the lopsided elections lack legitimacy. The process was compromised from the beginning, say critics, by the CSE’s obvious
pro-Sandinista partisanship and by the president’s refusal to allow independent observers. In June, Ortega lambasted observers from bodies like the Organization of American States (OAS) and the European Union as sinvergüenzas (shameless people) whose only goal is to “interfere” in Nicaragua’s internal affairs (NotiCen, June 16, 2016).

Opponents also complain about Ortega’s influence over the Corte Suprema de Justicia (Supreme Court of Justice, CSJ), which intervened directly in the election process—just days after Ortega’s sinvergüenzas outburst—by removing Eduardo Montealegre, a former presidential candidate and outspoken critic of the Ortega regime, as head of the opposition Partido Liberal Independiente (Independent Liberal Party, PLI). The high court instead assigned leadership of the party to Pedro Reyes, an attorney and apparent ally of Ortega (NotiCen, July 7, 2016).

The ruling meant that lawmaker Luis Callejas, the presidential candidate Montelagre had recruited to challenge Ortega, could no longer run under the PLI banner. Callejas and his running mate, sociologist and civil society activist Violeta Granera, subsequently dropped out of the race. Afterwards, when Montealegre, Callejas, and other opposition lawmakers refused to submit to the new PLI leader, the CSE, at Reyes’ behest, booted them from the legislature. In total, 28 elected deputies and alternates lost their AN seats.

Critics like Sergio Ramírez, a novelist who served as vice president during Ortega’s first term in office (1985-1990), say that the PLI is now “opposition” in name only. The same goes for the once powerful PLC, its presidential candidate, and the other four men who appeared on the Nov. 6 ballot as official “challengers” to Ortega but never stood a chance of beating him.

“At the ballot, the face of Comandante Ortega is joined by five other men who put on a shirt and tie for the photo but aren’t known to anyone,” Ramírez wrote in a recent essay. “A regular citizen couldn’t cite their names from memory or recognize their faces. Because they’re unknowns. In Nicaragua, figures like these are called ‘straw candidates.’ They’re just there to complete the numbers, to fill up the ballot.”

José Dávila, a political analyst and former Nicaraguan diplomat, offered a similar assessment in an interview with the news agency Inter Press Service. “There is no election spirit. People are not talking about the process. There was no debate among candidates,” he said. “If I had to compare it with other electoral processes, I would say that this election looks more like the grey processes carried out in Eastern Europe during the Cold War or the polls in Cuba, where there is no real opposition to the government party.”

**Competing claims**

Callejas, Granera, and other committed opponents of the Ortega regime refuse to recognize the results of the vote and are calling on the CSE to schedule new elections. They say the process was further undermined by sky-high abstention: less than 30% of eligible voters participated on Nov. 6, they estimate. “This is the highest level of abstention seen in any election in the last 30 years. It’s a massive expression of rejection of the electoral farce,” Granera, now with a group called Frente Amplio por la Democracia (FAD), told reporters.

The CSE tells a very different story, reporting turnout at more than 68% and calling the results “irreversible.” The competing assessments cannot, obviously, both be true. And yet without any independent observers, it’s impossible to know what the real numbers were. Even if opponents
could somehow prove their claims, there is little that they could do about it. Might, in this case, makes right. Ortega controls the CSE—along with every other major government institution—so if the CSE says it was 65%, then 65% it was.

“The level of abstention is historic, but from a legal point of view, we’re not expecting [to be able to do] anything, because here the Constitution, the laws, and international treaties don’t have any value, they’re not applied,” José Pallais Benard, an opposition lawyer and former head of the AN’s legal affairs committee, told the independent news magazine and website Confidencial. “We can’t have any hope in this regard because Ortega has violated the rule of law by imposing himself without guarantees or transparency.”

Perhaps the best opponents can hope for at this point is increased pressure on Ortega from the international community. US authorities took a step in that direction in September, when the US House of Representatives voted unanimously to approve legislation known as the Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act (NICA) of 2016 (NotiCen, Oct. 20, 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 makes a concerted effort to bolster its democratic credentials.

The bill has yet to clear the Senate, however, and would also need to be signed either by President Barack Obama or his successor, Donald Trump, to take effect. Caught up in their own election hubbub, officials in Washington aren’t likely to make Nicaragua a priority right now. Ortega’s victory didn’t, however, go unnoticed. US State Department spokesperson Mark Toner said on Nov. 7, the day after the Nicaraguan election, that the Obama administration is “deeply concerned” about developments. He also said that Ortega, by refusing to allow independent outside observers, “further degraded the legitimacy of the election.”

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