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## On Nicaraguan Opposition's New Responsibilities

by Deborah Tyroler

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Nicaragua's domestic opposition parties are feeling a bit overwhelmed with what are seen as new responsibilities resulting from the Feb. 14 summit meeting in El Salvador. Under the accord, the Nicaraguan government is committed to free and competitive general elections on or before Feb. 25, 1990, and undertaking electoral reforms and a six-month campaign before the elections. The opposition parties have a major role in designing reforms to ensure political pluralism, and the freeness and competitiveness of the elections. The opposition has long been a contentious assortment of 14 parties and numerous factions. Roger Guevara Mena, leader of the Democratic Coordinator, told Mark Uhlig of the New York Times: "It is as if we have been suddenly discovered after so many years...But even now, we are not the subject of negotiation; we are the object of negotiation." Social Christian Party leader Agustin Jarquin said, "We understand that this is not a normal election. If we don't succeed in reaching a national accord through these elections, there is a good probability that the military activity will be revived, and that would be a disaster for the Sandinistas, for us, for everyone." The opposition has until late April to have reached agreement with the government on the terms of new legislation controlling electoral procedures. In a series of separate interviews with Uhlig, leaders of Nicaragua's two oldest parties, the Conservative and Independent Liberal parties, supported the US view that additional aid to the contra army would keep pressure on the Sandinista government to fulfill its commitments under the regional accord. Conservative Party leader Mario Rappaccioli said, "I think that the Sandinistas are bound to do a better job with the contras in existence than without them." In contrast, several other opposition leaders argued that the continued existence of the contra army, particularly after campaigning begins, could hinder their ability to mount an effective challenge to the Sandinistas in 1990, and to build a base for future elections if defeated. They said that by maintaining the contra forces outside Nicaragua and isolated from the electoral process, the new aid would prevent the full participation of voters and candidates seen as necessary for a broadly accepted democratic vote. In the event of a Sandinista victory, they added, the existence of a standing exile army could heighten the risk of new fighting and undermine efforts to revive opposition political parties as a long-term democratic alternative to the Sandinistas. Secretary general of the Popular Social Christian Party, Mauricio Diaz Davila, said: "The real freedom fighters are here inside the country, in the political opposition and in the unions. If the contras are kept viable, we run the risk of losing this chance for change." Other opposition leaders stated that because there is little leadership role for contra officials in the election campaign, the prospect of renewed armed conflict would give the contras a personal stake in the collapse of the electoral process. A senior opposition leader, who requested anonymity, said, "It is a dangerous game because everyone knows that our loss is the contras' gain." All opposition leaders interviewed said they would oppose continued military action by the contra forces during the campaign. For instance, according to Rappaccioli, "If there is to be any electoral process, there can't be any shooting." According to Eli Altamirano Perez, secretary general of the Nicaraguan Communist Party, "The opposition's objective is to avoid repeating the errors of 1984...If we don't give everyone the chance to participate, we will be responsible for the war that results." (Basic data from New York Times, 03/30/89)

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