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Anastasio Somoza's Heirs Seek Political Comeback in Nicaragua

by LADB Staff

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For several years, heirs of former dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle (1967-1979) have quietly sought the return of their properties confiscated by the Sandinista government in 1979. Recently, the Somozas have tested their political welcome in Nicaragua as well. In February 1999, Javier Somoza Rivas, grandson of the Somoza clan patriarch Anastasio Somoza Garcia (1935-1956), announced the formation of a new party, the Fuerza Democratica Nicaraguense (FDN), to participate in the next municipal elections and to run a presidential candidate in 2001. FDN leaders include former members of the US-sponsored contras Enrique Quinones and Jose Manuel Urbina.

Opponents of the party's establishment cite a constitutional prohibition against groups that advocate dictatorship or anti-democratic systems of government. The FDN has since become part of the right-wing Partido Liberal Nacionalista (PLN). Former contras also criticized the FDN. In Miami, former contras belonging to the Asociacion Civica de Combatientes, said those behind the FDN were opportunists using a name with the same "sacred" initials as the Fuerzas Democraticas Nicaraguenses, one of the former contra paramilitary organizations.

"They can't use the initials of the FDN for political purposes," said an association statement. A Somoza plans to visit Nicaragua In March, PLN leader Enrique Quinones announced that Anastasio Somoza Portocarrero would make a brief visit to Managua. Somoza Portocarrero is a former National Guard colonel and head of the Escuela de Entrenamiento Basico de Infanteria (EEBI). He is considered a major actor in atrocities committed during the armed struggle with the FSLN in the 1970s.

Quinones said the Somozas are a rallying point for former members of the now defunct National Guard, former contras, and some members of the governing Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) who are fed up with the party's political deals with the FSLN. Somoza Portocarrero, who has been living in Guatemala since 1979, said he had no political agenda, even though the event he was planning to attend was a political rally for PLN candidates. FSLN secretary general Daniel Ortega said, "He can enter the country but not leave it," and said that Sandinistas were waiting for him with bullets.

Some political analysts said President Arnaldo Aleman had discretely given his assent to the visit but pulled back because of the public outcry against it. Aleman then issued a statement condemning all acts of genocide whether committed by the Somoza or Sandinista "dictatorships."

Attorney General Julio Centeno called the proposed visit "imprudent," but said the government would not block it. Vilma Nunez, president of the Centro Nicaraguense de Derechos Humanos, said Somoza Portocarrero was subject to trial for crimes committed by the National Guard. And a

former judge, Boanerges Ojeda, said Centeno would be obligated by law to arrest and try Somoza Portocarrero for human rights crimes should he enter the country. Centeno said anyone who wanted to could denounce Somoza Portocarrero in court, but the government was not going to do it. "We don't want to stir up any excitement," he said.

At the end of March, Somoza Portocarrero canceled the visit out of concern for his personal safety. Somozas want land on which the cathedral is built Alejandro and Jose Sevilla Somoza, nephews of Somoza Debayle, are seeking restitution of some 340 confiscated properties. The most prominent case is their attempt to recover land on which the new Managua cathedral is built. Former President Violeta Chamorro (1990-1997) donated the land for the cathedral as an "irrevocable and unconditional" gift.

The Somoza properties were confiscated by the Sandinista regime in a 1979 decree (Decreto Tres) and confirmed by the Comision Nacional de Confiscaciones the same year. However, legal aspects of the confiscations are muddled, in part because many of the new owners never received titles, leaving the Somoza family members as the last known titleholders.

Conservative governments since 1990 have challenged Sandinistas regarding various confiscations, including houses and businesses some Sandinista leaders took for themselves (see NotiSur, 1995-09-09, NotiCen, 1997-03-13). However, the challenge by the Sevilla Somozas has brought the administration, the Sandinistas, and the church together on the issue.

In an interview with the daily El Nuevo Diario, Alejandro Sevilla Somoza said the family had already sold some Managua property for which it claimed title and challenged the government to do something about it. He said the property had never been confiscated because new titles were never registered.

The newspaper alleged in May that, while the Aleman administration was promising to prevent any return of property to the Somozas, it was secretly allowing recovery of some property in Managua to go forward.

El Nuevo Diario said it had obtained a letter Centeno sent to the court hearing the Sevilla Somoza claim in which the attorney general said the cathedral plot had never been confiscated. Publicly, however, Centeno rejected the Somoza claims, though admitting that the new titles were not registered. He said that "politically and administratively" the new owners have title.

Centeno said the Sandinistas handled the confiscations badly, but the government opposes the family claims "because we believe the Somozas enriched themselves illicitly." Unlike the Sandinistas, who left loopholes for the Somozas to exploit, "if they sue us, we will show them that they have been defeated for life," he said. Centeno has said he is considering legal action against the Somozas for illicit enrichment. [Sources: Reuters, 03/11/00; La Prensa (Nicaragua), 02/11/99, 02/12/99, 03/28/00; Notimex, 07/24/99, 03/24/00, 03/28/00, 03/29/00, 03/30/00, 04/25/00; Agence France-Presse, 04/26/00; Spanish News Service EFE, 05/02/00; El Nuevo Diario (Nicaragua), 05/02/00, 05/03/00, 05/04/00; The Miami Herald, 05/07/00]

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