

10-19-2000

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### Recommended Citation

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## Nicaraguan Electoral Campaigns Underway; Electoral Tribunal Questioned

*by LADB Staff*

*Category/Department: Nicaragua*

*Published: 2000-10-19*

The campaign for 151 local offices got underway in Nicaragua in late September with the mayoralty of Managua the biggest prize. The electoral council (Consejo Supremo Electoral, CSE) is under attack because of its alleged attempts to block the registration of parties in opposition to the two main parties, the governing Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) and the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN).

At the same time, the FSLN and a former foe have formed an electoral alliance. In late September, the FSLN joined in an alliance with the Unidad Social Cristiana (USC) in preparation for the Nov. 5 local elections and the general elections in 2001.

FSLN secretary general Daniel Ortega and former Comptroller General Agustin Jarquin of the USC cemented the alliance with the signing of a Declaracion de Convergencia Electoral. The declaration calls on the USC to support FSLN candidates in towns where the USC has put up no candidate of its own and to support a platform of civic improvements.

The two parties promised to promote transparency and thrift in government and to work together on various issues such as tax policy and investment, creation of a development bank, debt relief to farmers hurt by natural disasters, and the transfer of 8% of the national budget to municipalities. Other aspects of the declaration mention the promotion of sustainable development, democracy, and social justice. It forswears resorting to war and military service. During the ascendancy of Ortega's Sandinistas (1979-1990), the USC sided with the US-backed contras.

The Sandinista government sent several USC leaders, including Jarquin, to prison. The declaration does not settle old differences nor does it spell out how the 2001 presidential ticket will be decided. There were reports that Ortega's brother, former army chief Gen. Humberto Ortega, told Daniel he should step aside and allow someone else to run in 2001. Presumably, the alliance candidate would then be Jarquin.

However, Daniel Ortega denied his brother had made the suggestion, and besides, he said, the final word on who the candidates would be lies with the Nicaraguan people. Questioned on the USC's change in political direction after years of opposing Sandinismo, Jarquin said that the principles of his party had not changed but its aims now coincided with those of the FSLN, "because the country needs a clear commitment to governability."

USC leader and former contra director Azucena Ferrey said the alliance was based on "the capacity to forgive and forget." In opposition to the accord, Digna Zamora, a USC founder, said the alliance offered nothing to Nicaragua and was the product of "personal ambitions." USC members skeptical

of the pact, asked whether Jarquin, Ferrey, Erick Ramirez, Luis Humberto Guzman, and other USC leaders who are going along with the alliance have any guarantee of power sharing should the Sandinistas return to power.

### *Electoral council toughens rules for party registration*

Throughout the electoral process, the CSE has been heavily criticized. This is largely because of the constitutional reforms worked out between the PLC and the FSLN in 1999 that essentially split membership in the CSE between them (see NotiCen, 1999-12-23). In July, donor representatives warned President Arnoldo Aleman not to allow the CSE to bar opposition parties from the election (see NotiCen, 2000-08-03). Only four parties the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), the FSLN, the Partido Conservador de Nicaragua (PCN), and Camino Cristiano qualified under CSE rules.

Carlos Tunermann, president of Etica y Transparencia, said the organization's review of preparations for the elections found that parties were complaining that CSE's rulings were arbitrary and were aimed at freezing out the opposition. Etica and Transparencia will issue two reports on how the election is being handled as the campaign progresses. Joaquin Cuadra, of the Movimiento de Unidad Nacional (MUN), complained that the CSE was late in verifying the party's petition for registration in the 2001 elections. He and Partido Liberal Democratico (PLD) vice president Rigoberto Reyes complained that the CSE was issuing ever more stringent rules to keep their parties out of contention.

Rules announced in September require painstaking scrutiny by the CSE of local party counsels and large numbers of voter officials. In early October, Cuadra had still not heard from the CSE concerning registration. He said it was obvious that the CSE and the FSLN were collaborating to keep MUN out of the presidential contest.

The daily El Nuevo Diario commented that handling the FSLN complaint was evidence of the CSE's intentions to block the entry of additional parties. Just before the deadline to file objections with the CSE against party petitions to run candidates in November, the PLC and FSLN simultaneously asked the CSE to invalidate the PLD and MUN petitions on grounds of technical flaws in the procedures they used to set up their local organizations.

Cuadra said the claims of technical errors in the petition were political moves masquerading as "ridiculous legal arguments." Furthermore, the alleged organizational errors were not errors at the time, he said, since the CSE rules were issued after the MUN had completed its local organization.

The complaint against the PLD was about its use of the color red in its emblems, the words "liberal" and "democratic" in its statutes, and its party anthem, Hermosa Soberana. PLD leader Jose Antonio Alvarado said, "The next thing will be that [President Alvaro] Aleman will say he composed it." Cuadra said the FSLN and the governing PLC "are afraid of the Unidad Nacional because they know that if the CSE reviews the signatures [on the petition] by whatever methods, the signatures are going to turn out to be good."

In the race for mayor of Managua, FSLN candidate Herty Lewites has predicted a dirty campaign. Both he and PLC candidate Wilfredo Navarro are promising improvements in the city's public

security, trash collection, public transportation, cleanup of Lakes Tiscapa and Managua, and a battle against official corruption. The other two candidates are William Baez of the PCN and Carlos Guadamuz, an FSLN dissident who is running on the Camino Cristiano ticket. As the campaign began, Baez threatened to lodge a complaint against Aleman with the CSE for a personal insult.

In public remarks, Aleman said Baez had suffered mental problems so intense that he sequestered himself in a basement. Aleman suggested that Baez's mental impairment would incapacitate him from functioning in office. Baez told reporters he would not accept an apology and was considering taking the matter to court. Vilma Nunez, president of the nongovernmental *Comite Nicaraguense de Derechos Humanos*, agreed that the remarks were an affront to Baez and advised him to sue. "The president's immunity cannot be made into a shield of impunity," she said.

Besides the complaint, Baez challenged Aleman, a former mayor of Managua, to a debate "man to man" on the problems of the country and the "questionable" situation Aleman left in Managua. Pedro Solorzano disqualified on residency rule To administration critics, the most open attempt by the CSE to freeze out the opposition was the disqualification in September of PCN candidate Pedro Solorzano for participation in the Managua race. At the time, Solorzano was the leading candidate, according to polls. Baez substituted for Solorzano after the CSE declared him ineligible because he was registered as a voter in both the newly created municipality of El Cruzero and in the capital.

The CSE ruled that he had not resided in El Cruzero the two years required under the electoral laws. A spokesperson for the CSE went so far as to say that the dual registration indicated the Solorzano family had split up and the matter should be investigated by the Ministry of the Family. Solorzano answered that the district where he lived in Managua was made a separate municipality earlier this year. He said the law on residence could not be applied since El Cruzero did not exist separate from Managua before this year. Some election analysts are saying the CSE's apparent political biases have created suspicion and indifference among voters and that the turnout in November may be very low. [Sources: *La Prensa* (Nicaragua), 07/25/00, 08/09/00; *Notimex*, 08/09/00, 09/21/00, 09/26/00; *Spanish News Service EFE*, 09/29/00, 10/01/00; *El Nuevo Diario* (Nicaragua), 07/24/00, 07/26/00, 08/23/00, 09/23/00, 09/27/00, 09/30/00, 10/06/00, 10/10/00, 10/16/00, 10/17/00]

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