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## **Sandinista Herty Lewites Wins Mayoral Race in Nicaraguan Capital**

*by LADB Staff*

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Herty Lewites, candidate for the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN), won the mayoral election in Managua in the Nov. 5 local elections. Though election observers reported no violence or outright fraud, the regional indigenous party Yatama was kept from participating, touching off a riot and an election boycott. Analysts predicted that the FSLN victories in several important cities would enhance its chances in the presidential election in November 2001.

Though Lewites led in pre-election preference polls, the margin of his victory over three other candidates came as a surprise. His win restores control of the capital to the Sandinistas for the first time since 1990 when President Arnoldo Aleman of the governing Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) became Managua's mayor. With 69% of the vote counted on Nov. 8, Lewites had taken 43.7%, Wilfredo Navarro of the PLC 29.4%, and William Baez of the Partido Conservador (PC) 25.2%. Carlos Guadamuz, a former Sandinista running on the Camino Cristiano ticket, received less than 2%. In polls taken just before the election by M & R and Gallop-CID, Lewites was ahead with 38%, Baez had 26%, Navarro, 20%, and Guadamuz slightly over 1%.

Abstentionism, said to have favored the FSLN, was estimated at between 40% and 50%. The Organization of American States (OAS) observer mission blamed much of the low turnout on irregularities in voting procedures. Santiago Murray, head of the mission, enumerated various flaws, including incomplete voter-registration lists, retention of voter-identity documents by election officials, and delays in opening voting centers. He said there were no reports of violence. In other races, the election reversed the conservative trend of the 1990s, turning the governing party into the opposition in several cities it won in 1996. In that election, the PLC took 90 of the country's 151 municipalities. This time, the FSLN took back eight of the 12 it lost in 1996. The incomplete count of municipal races was PLC 67, FSLN 53, and PC 7, with 24 races still undecided.

The FSLN took 12 of Nicaragua's 17 department capitals Bluefields, Chinandega, Esteli, Jalapa, Jinotega, Juigalpa, Leon, Managua, Ocotal, Puerto Cabezas, San Carlos, and Somoto. The FSLN also took six of the nine municipalities in Managua department and was ahead in El Crucero, where Aleman has his residence. Final results were slow because of delays sorting out disputes over some tallies. On Nov. 7, the CSE said a computer failure would further delay the count. Though both Baez and Aleman's handpicked candidate Navarro conceded defeat early in the count, Aleman went on television Nov. 6 to say the outcome was still uncertain. He refused to congratulate Lewites and exaggerated the number of local races the PLC had won. Later in the day, he conceded the PLC had lost Managua but blamed the defeat on the PC, saying that party had "divided the votes of the democratic forces."

## *Election a setback for administration*

The results were generally taken as voter punishment of the Aleman administration for its corruption, mishandling of the foreign debt and Nicaragua's relations with the donor nations, and especially for the widespread belief that the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE) had tried to rig the elections to favor the PLC (see NotiCen, 2000-10-19, 2000-07-27).

Former armed forces chief retired Gen. Joaquin Cuadra, leader of the newly formed party Movimiento de Unidad Nacional (MUN), laid the PLC's loss partly on the infamous political pact between the PLC and the FSLN (see NotiCen, 1999-12-23), the CSE's lack of credibility, and the FSLN's ability to hold on to its base while conservatives split between the PLC and the PC. Besides reversing the FSLN's string of electoral defeats that began in 1990, the elections give the FSLN the opportunity to claim that voters are sick of the Aleman administration.

Political analyst Carlos Fernando Chamorro said before the elections that, if the FSLN won in Managua, it would be a heavy blow to Aleman because Navarro was his handpicked candidate and because Aleman so closely controlled the PLC. But that control would be seriously weakened by a Navarro loss, said Chamorro.

The election defeats could also put a damper on Aleman's long-range plans, which include re-election, Chamorro said. Aleman was counting on a big win in the local elections to justify canceling the 2001 presidential election and holding a constituent assembly instead. The assembly would then change the Constitution to permit him to run again in a future election. A day after the elections, press reports said the entire executive committee (Comite Ejecutivo Nacional, CEN) of the PLC resigned, beginning what appears to be a purge of top leadership posts. "We are going to revamp the party's directorate and propose the election of new leaders as soon as possible," a source told the daily *El Nuevo Diario*. Four officials were singled out for blame, two for doing sloppy work and two others for corruption.

## *Indigenous party kept out of election*

Though the elections were generally peaceful, there was pre-election violence, and many observers feared outright armed rebellion by Indians in the Atlantic Coast region. On Oct. 30, police confronted angry Miskitu Indians in the Caribbean town of Puerto Cabezas. The demonstrators were protesting a court ruling invalidating the indigenous Yatama party's petition for a place on the ballot.

Thirteen people were injured in the encounter and 30 more arrested. The constitutional division of the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) refused to overturn a CSE ruling that Yatama, like several other parties, had failed to meet the criteria for inclusion on the ballot. Yatama ran candidates in the 1998 election, and party leaders said the ruling was racist and an arbitrary decision designed to exclude indigenous peoples from voting. CSE rulings excluded all but four parties from the ballot, prompting accusations that it was doing the bidding of the PLC and FSLN to pare down the opposition. Miskitu leader Brooklyn Rivera warned that there would be no elections in the Atlantic Coast region unless Yatama candidates were on the ballot. Rivera said the party had documents showing Yatama had met all CSE requirements for registration. He said two CSE magistrates,

Emmet Lang and Jose Luis Villavicencio, hinted months earlier that the CSE would exclude Yatama, telling him that the PLC members on the council were going to "settle accounts with Yatama."

Vilma Nunez, director of the human rights organization *Comite Nicaraguense de Derechos Humanos (CENIDH)*, said the CSE ruling was political and a result of the PLC-FSLN pact. FSLN secretary general Daniel Ortega said Nov. 3 that his party would propose a bill postponing the election in the Atlantic Coast region to allow time for Yatama to qualify for the ballot. Rivera said it was a good idea but chided Ortega for his belated response. Rivera said the FSLN was "very close" to Aleman and could have done something to resolve the problem weeks before.

Fearing election-day violence, OAS official Murray recommended that election officials either postpone the Nov. 5 balloting or resolve the conflict with Yatama. But CSE magistrate Silvio Calderon said that the elections could only be postponed by legislative action and that it could not be done in the two days remaining before the elections. Carlos Garcia Bonilla, National Assembly deputy for the coastal region, thought something more than sporadic election violence might occur. The indigenous region could erupt into organized conflict, he said. "They have military capability." Garcia said the reason the government wanted to freeze Yatama out of the election was the likelihood that the party would win in Bonanza, Prinzapolka, Puerto Cabezas, Waspam, and other towns. The boycott in the Atlantic Coast region drastically reduced voting. The abstention rate there was around 80%.

The daily *La Prensa* reported that some official voting councils (*Juntas Receptoras de Votas, JRVs*) in Puerto Cabezas left at the end of the day with empty ballot boxes. Of the 16,000 eligible voters in Puerto Cabezas, only 700 voted. JRVs in some towns, such as Sixsayary and Andresara, reported nearly 100% abstention. In Ninayary, the only voters to cast ballots were members of the local JRV. In Waspam, four members of the JRV did not go to the voting sites because the army refused to escort them. Army officials said security conditions for the juntas were not adequate to guarantee their safety. While the election results seemed a clear repudiation of Aleman, it is not so clear that they portend a FSLN return to power on a national level.

Many analysts said the vote was a repudiation of Aleman and not an endorsement of the Sandinistas. Furthermore, Lewites did not present himself as an orthodox Sandinista bent on a return to Sandinista economic policies. During his campaign, Lewites was able to satisfy some business leaders that he would not run the city as a Sandinista prize, rewarding party faithful with jobs and contracts. Roberto Teran, president of the business organization *Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada (COSEP)*, said he did not think the business atmosphere would change under a Sandinista mayor. "We're in the year 2000 here. I don't think we're going back to the past," he said. "This was a vote against the way the government has conducted itself," Teran said. "I have told the president he has to change the way he does business, but so far he isn't listening."

### *Ortega willing to run for president*

In post-election remarks with overtones of a campaign speech, Ortega promised that FSLN mayors would forge ties with all sectors of society. He called for local governments to practice austerity, honesty, and efficiency, reduce spending on salaries and travel, combat corruption, and give their governments credibility.

Ortega said the local victories were "a prelude" to the FSLN's imminent return to power and a portent of his personal return to power. The former president (1979-1990) said he would consider running for a third time in 2001. "I am willing to become president again," Ortega said. But former Sandinista commander Dora Maria Tellez said that, if Ortega runs in 2001, "the Frente will once again lose the elections." [[Sources: Agence France-Presse, 11/02/00; Spanish News Service EFE, 10/26/00, 11/03/00; Notimex, 11/01/00, 11/03/00; Spanish News Service EFE, 11/06/00; Inter Press Service, 11/06/00, 11/07/00; The Miami Herald, 11/07/00; La Prensa (Nicaragua), 11/05/00, 11/06/00, 11/07/00, 11/08/00; El Nuevo Diario (Nicaragua), 10/11/00, 10/17/00, 10/24/00, 11/02/00, 11/03/00, 11/06/00, 11/07/00, 11/08/00; CNN, Associated Press, 11/08/00]

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