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Final Vote Tally Gives Sandinistas Edge in Nicaragua's Local Elections

by LADB Staff

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After a long delay, the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE) on Nov. 28 announced the results of the Nov. 5 local elections (see NotiCen, 2000-11-09). While the governing Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) won in a majority of races, the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) victory in Managua and several other key cities has emboldened the party to say it can take back the presidency in the 2001 election.

The official tally shows that the PLC won mayoral races in 97 of Nicaragua's 151 municipalities, the FSLN won in 49, and the Partido Conservador (PC) won in five. However, the FSLN took 11 of the 17 department capitals, while the PLC took five, and the PC one.

In the most important race, CSE president Roberto Rivas confirmed that, as expected, FSLN candidate Herty Lewites won in Managua. The FSLN also won in the department capitals of Chinandega, Juigalpa, Esteli, Leon, Somoto, Matagalpa, Ocotal, Puerto Cabezas, Bluefields, and San Carlos. The PLC victories were in Boaco, Jinotepe, Masaya, Jinotega and Rivas. The PC won the mayoral race in Granada.

The delay in releasing the final tally compounded suspicions among Sandinistas about election irregularities and sinister manipulations by the CSE. Reports by the Federacion Nacional de Universidades Privadas (FENUP) and the Organization of American States (OAS) election-observer teams said there was mistreatment of both voters and election observers and mistakes by the CSE in providing the necessary conditions for poll watchers.

Observers reported being kicked out of some polling sites. Sergio Bonilla, coordinator of the FENUP observers, said the elections were honest but inefficient. The computer center had not tested its equipment and 300,00 voters were left off the rolls.

Daniel Ortega threatens to kick out president

On Nov. 27, Sandinista supporters led by FSLN secretary general Daniel Ortega demonstrated against the delay outside the CSE headquarters. Similar demonstrations took place around the country. Six police and three demonstrators were injured by a bomb in Diriamba, 42 km south of the capital.

Ortega issued a series of warnings that the FSLN would take direct action if the party's presumed victories were overturned. He said if the tally were not announced soon, he would throw President Arnoldo Aleman out of the presidential residence. He accused Aleman of holding up the vote count and of plotting to jail Lewites, whose victory was never in doubt. The plot was supposedly aimed at jailing Lewites on charges stemming from a loan from the Banco Central to Lewites in 1990 when

he was minister of tourism. Lewites said the loans were not for personal use but were made to the Tourism Ministry.

Nevertheless, the attorney general began an investigation of the loan after Lewites won the mayoral election. During his regular radio talk, Aleman called Ortega a "reactionary" and a "troglodyte" for his threats and demonstrations. He also challenged Ortega to run in the next presidential election and give the PLC a chance to defeat him again. Ortega said he was satisfied with the final election results although they showed the FSLN won fewer races than indicated in the preliminary vote count. But he repeated his belief that Aleman had pressured and obstructed the CSE.

Ortega said the PLC and Aleman were worried that Lewites and the other FSLN mayors would pave the way for the Sandinistas to return to power at the national level through the presidential elections next year.

While Ortega is off and running, having announced his candidacy after the election, the party's orthodox and reformist factions are feuding over who is to receive the nomination. FSLN Assembly Deputy Monica Baltodano said Ortega's polarizing talk was outdated, and the party needed a unifying candidate. A recent poll showed that 49% of Sandinistas and 60% of the public oppose an Ortega candidacy.

Other possible candidates have come forward as the party argues about Ortega's self-nomination. Former Assembly deputy and vice minister of foreign relations Victor Hugo Tinoco, former planning minister Alejandro Martinez, and others have announced their intention to run. [Sources: Spanish News Service EFE, 11/23/00; El Nuevo Diario (Nicaragua), 11/15/00, 11/25/00, 11/26/00, 11/28/00; Notimex, 11/23/00, 11/14/00, 11/28/00; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 11/29/00; La Prensa (Nicaragua), 11/14/00, 11/25/00, 11/28/00, 12/01/00]

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