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Ortega Leading in Presidential Polls

by LADB Staff

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Preference polls show former President Daniel Ortega (1979-1990) ahead of his rivals in the presidential race. The possibility that the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) could return to power has focused attention on how the US government would react and has pushed both the Sandinistas and the governing Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) toward the political center. The election campaign has been underway, unofficially, since President Arnoldo Aleman delivered a blistering attack on the FSLN and other opponents in his January annual report to the National Assembly (see NotiCen, 2001-02-08). But Sandinistas say Aleman's premature campaign volley was an act of desperation induced by endless political crises punctuated by corruption scandals.

In May, the FSLN's party assembly ratified the ticket for the Nov. 4 elections. Party secretary general Ortega will be the Sandinista presidential candidate and former comptroller general Agustin Jarquin his running mate. Ortega won the nomination in a party election in February, but the selection of the vice presidential candidate was left to Ortega, who chose Jarquin. The reasons are not hard to fathom. Jarquin's reputation for probity soared after Aleman had him jailed on flimsy charges of corruption in 1999 and forced him out of his job as comptroller general (see NotiCen, 1999-11-08, 2000-01-13). At the time of the jailing, an opinion poll showed Aleman's approval rating was 21%, while Jarquin's was 63%.

In February, the FSLN signed an electoral alliance (Convergencia Nacional) agreement with Jarquin's party, the Unidad Social Cristiana (USC), and with other smaller parties. Under the agreement setting up the Convergencia Nacional, the parties proposed to govern with austerity, fight corruption, decentralize government, and support the office of comptroller general, which is now immersed in a cleanup campaign to audit government agencies and force Aleman to disclose the provenance of his rapidly expanding assets (see NotiCen, 2001-05-17).

A former FSLN opponent who served time in jail during the Sandinista regime, Jarquin now defends the party and calls for a broad attack on the Aleman administration and the PLC. He said that the government's record of corruption is the country's biggest threat and that the private sector should be more worried about it than about Sandinista policies.

Recent preference polls show Ortega leading PLC candidate Enrique Bolanos and Partido Conservador candidate Noel Vidaurre. A poll conducted by Borge y Asociados in May showed Ortega ahead with 36%, Vidaurre in second place with 28%, and Bolanos trailing with 23%. Another poll by Centro de Investigaciones y Asesoría Económica (CINASE) in the same month gave Ortega 41.6%, Bolanos 31.6%, and Vidaurre 10%. Candidates repudiate pacts signed by their own parties. With the campaign barely underway, at least one line of debate has become clear.

Both major candidates have repudiated the dealmaking practiced by Aleman and Ortega. The pact the two leaders signed has been widely denounced for bypassing the legislative process to divide power between the PLC and the FSLN, and has caused ruptures within their own parties. Ironically, the November 1999 PLC-FSLN pact led directly to restructuring the comptroller general's office, forcing Jarquin out of his post (see NotiCen, 1999-12-13).

In May, Bolanos promised that as president he would make a pact, but with the people, not with party hierarchies. He advised local governments to hold open sessions allowing nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to have a direct say in local affairs. He promised to return power to the people, providing local government with the resources to build roads, schools, and health centers. "That is democracy; giving the people the power to make decisions about their future. That is the arrangement I want to make with you, that you decide what it is you want the government to do that is the new pact between the people and their leaders," Bolanos said. Bolanos also promised to reform the Constitution to rid it of changes made through the pact.

Not to be outdone, Ortega and Jarquin pledged that their administration would set up local citizen assemblies in all municipalities to advise local government on public matters and to send proposals on social, political, and economic issues on to the National Assembly for debate. Besides giving localities the power to initiate proposals for legislation, Ortega also said the Consejo de Planificacion Nacional, Economico, y Social (CONPES) should be converted from a purely advisory board into a decision-making body with power to develop law.

Ortega said that under the present political system, the people have no power to change a government in which they have lost confidence. He said he did not want to become president only to face the same accusations of committing errors that previous presidents have faced. He said the deliberative authority he proposed would allow for a national debate and popular approval of the budget, avoiding corruption and misuse of public funds. "Therefore, the people ought to have the power to make decisions, not just on election day, but all the time," Ortega said.

Besides its opponents from the other parties, the FSLN also faces opposition from the US government, which fought a proxy war in the 1980s to unseat then President Ortega. To reassure the US, the Sandinista candidates have announced the outlines of a centrist program they intend to implement after the election. Jarquin said the new Sandinista administration "would concentrate on strengthening and deepening the relations with the countries that have helped our country including the United States in a respectful manner and in support of cooperation." Jarquin said he had met with State Department and US Embassy officials and outlined the proposed relationship. He said Nicaragua and the US had common concerns such as regional economic integration, drug interdiction, and the development of a market economy that included social guarantees.

On the issue of illegal immigration, Jarquin said the Ortega-Jarquin administration would promote labor, economic, and political stability that would ease migratory pressures, especially on the US. As for the property issue, Jarquin said the new administration would have "an open policy" of resolving claims by US citizens against the former Sandinista government for return of or compensation for confiscated property. But the US position, stated with increasing frequency since Ortega's nomination, is that such cooperation is unlikely in the present atmosphere.

US Ambassador Oliver Garza said recently that, should the FSLN win without changing its policies, the US would not change its hard-line policy toward the Sandinistas. "Our policy of defending democracy would be maintained until we see real changes in the Sandinista party," Garza said. While stating that the US was willing to recognize whatever government emerged from "free and transparent" elections in November, Garza said, "The experience we had with Senor Ortega [in the 1980s] did not represent the interest of the United States; there was no free market nor human rights."

After a meeting in March with Ortega and other Sandinista leaders, Garza said he saw no change in Sandinista attitudes or a willingness to work with the US on the confiscated-property issue. He said the usual reply from the Sandinistas on the claims was that they would resolve them when they got back into power. If they wanted to, Garza said, they could resolve them now. In April, a group of former contra (Resistencia Nicaraguense) commanders went to Washington seeking US help in blocking the Sandinista return to power. One proposal was for US assistance in registering anti-Sandinista voters.

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