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Accusations of Terrorism in Nicaraguan Presidential Campaign

by LADB Staff

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As the presidential election campaign in Nicaragua winds down, the issues of terrorism and US interests have entered the fray. Despite US alarm about a possible victory by former Sandinista President Daniel Ortega (1979-1990) and repeated attempts by the governing party candidate Enrique Bolanos to tie Ortega and the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) to international terrorists, Ortega continues to show a slim and modestly growing lead in most opinion polls.

On Nov. 4, voters will choose a new president and vice president, and deputies to the National Assembly and Parlamento Centroamericano (PARLACEN). Ortega is supported by an electoral alliance (Convergencia Nacional) that includes the breakaway Sandinista party Movimiento de Renovacion Sandinista (MRS) and other small, unregistered parties (see NotiCen, 2001-09-06). Two PLC members, PARLACEN Deputies Eddy Gomez and Sergio Garcia Quintero, announced in a recent press conference that they were joining the FSLN's alliance. Both have been associates of President Arnoldo Aleman.

Gomez, who is Aleman's brother-in-law, had a falling out with the president. Garcia Quintero, once a close collaborator with Aleman, became a fierce critic, accusing the president on various occasions of corruption and leading the governing Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) to "shipwreck." However, the defections have not resulted in any detectable movement of Liberals to the Convergencia. Three leading Sandinistas will abstain Perhaps more damaging than the Liberal defectors for the PLC are the three prominent Sandinistas who have said they would not vote at all.

Sergio Ramirez, former Sandinista vice president under Ortega and leader of the MRS, along with novelist Gioconda Belli and poet and former minister of culture Ernesto Cardenal, announced Oct. 9 that they would abstain in the election. "Nothing remains of the party that led the revolution but appearances," said the three in a joint statement. The statement referred to Aleman and Ortega as "caudillos" who "hijacked" democracy in Nicaragua by the infamous political pact of 1999 (see EcoCentral, 1997-04-24, NotiCen, 1999-07-22, 1999-12-23). The pact resulted in several reforms in the electoral system that have reduced the electoral choices by sidelining the smaller parties and have packed the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE) and Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) with PLC and FSLN magistrates. Bolanos, who was Aleman's vice president, is compromised by the administration's abuses, said the statement. As for Ortega, in his efforts to regain power, he "has shown contempt for democratic principles."

US takes role in campaign

The US has joined in the campaign through repeated warnings that it would not like to see Ortega win. As the campaign progresses, statements from the US Embassy and the State Department have

become more frequent and more direct. Since Sept. 11, President George W. Bush's administration has grafted the terrorism issue onto its expressions of concern about another Sandinista government taking power. Twice during the first week of October, the Bush administration said the FSLN had maintained ties with Iraq and Libya, two of the seven countries on the State Department's terrorist list.

State Department spokeswoman Eliza Koch said on Oct. 6 that the FSLN also had ties to the Colombian guerrilla Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Basque separatist ETA in Spain. She alluded to the alleged extremism of Sandinista leaders still active in the party: former interior minister Tomas Borge, former director of state security Lenin Cerna, and former Gen. Alvaro Baltodano, who now heads the FSLN election campaign. Koch said they all had "long histories of grossly violating civil and human rights and suppressing democratic activities." Echoing the administration line on international terrorism, Koch said, "There is no middle ground between those who oppose terrorism and those who support it." The statement appeared to leave voters no choice but Bolanos, since the third candidate, Alberto Saborio of the Partido Conservador (PC), has no chance of winning the election.

Since the Sept. 11 attacks on the US, Bolanos and Aleman have given the terrorism issue a prominent place in their campaign rhetoric. While denying he has tried to link Ortega to terrorism, Aleman insists that Ortega is a "friend" of Saddam Hussein of Iraq and Muammar Gadhafi of Libya. In mid-September, Aleman said, "We can't compromise the future of Nicaragua with ties or friendly relations with international terrorism." A Sandinista win, he said, would mean "destruction and chaos." "God and the Virgin Mary must guide us," said Aleman. "We can't, before the Virgin, return to the past." The Bolanos camp has been aggressive in using the terrorist label, while Ortega has called for calm dialogue. But with less than three weeks to go in the campaign, each is now flinging the terror indictment at the other.

In mid-October, Bolanos said Ortega was "surrounded by terrorists," to which Ortega responded that the Aleman administration was terrorist because "to rob the wealth of the state, to kill people with hunger, and to deny health and education to the poor is terrorism." If Ortega wins the election, says the PLC, he will bring the wrath of the US down upon Nicaragua, because the US says it will attack states that sponsor terrorism.

FSLN Deputy Bayardo Arce said the campaign to paint Ortega as a terrorist contradicts government policy, since the Aleman administration has diplomatic relations with Libya and recently received a Libyan Cabinet minister. "No one in the US is mentioning the Libyans, but they are mentioning a man by the name of Osama bin Laden, who channeled funds to the contra leadership those who now are allied with the [PLC] Liberals and are even congressional candidates," said Arce.

Secretary of State Colin Powell met with Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Francisco Aguirre in Washington, DC, on Oct. 4. A State Department press release said the two men discussed the election "and Nicaragua's role in the international effort to combat terrorism." Part of the stated US concern is that, because of Ortega's alleged ties with terrorists, as president, he would not cooperate with the US in its current international coalition. The press release expressed the hope that Nicaraguans "turn out in record numbers to vote and to continue Nicaragua's recent record

of peaceful and democratic transfers of powers." Pledging that the US would accept the election results, the statement added, "However, we continue to have grave reservations about the FSLN's history of trampling civil liberties, violating human rights, seizing people's property without compensation, destroying the economy, and ties to supporters of terrorism."

On his return to Nicaragua, Aguirre assured local media that Powell was "concerned" about a possible Ortega victory. Ortega has repeatedly assured the US that he will not repeat the errors of his 1979-1990 administration. He has talked with confidence of US assurances that it would accept the election results. US concern, he said, does not mean the US can decide Nicaraguan election outcomes. "We hope they do not meddle in the process and are consistent with their declarations," said Ortega.

US sends official to work against Ortega campaign

In June, Lino Gutierrez, acting assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, was sent to Managua to rally the PLC and smaller parties against Ortega. During a speech to business and political leaders, Gutierrez, former US ambassador to Nicaragua, alluded to Ortega's visit to Libya and his friendship with Cuban President Fidel Castro. In a warning about what might happen to US investments if Ortega were elected, Gutierrez said the next government would need massive investment. "But what kind of message would it send if it had friends like Gadhafi?" asked Gutierrez. "President Bush and the United States have faith in the Nicaraguan people...we have not forgotten them."

Sandinistas see such remarks as blatant intervention in the election and are suspicious that US contacts with PC candidate Noel Vidaurre may have resulted in his withdrawal from the campaign in June (see NotiCen, 2001-09-06). His replacement, Saborio, has not been able to hold on to Vidaurre's substantial standing in the polls. Since Vidaurre's withdrawal, Bolanos has gained strength. The attempt to paint Ortega as a terrorist has made no apparent difference in voter preferences as expressed in recent opinion polls.

Several polls taken in late September and early August indicated that Ortega maintained the same small lead he has had all along. A poll by the independent Instituto de Estudios Nicaraguenses (IEN) had Ortega at 37.6%, Bolanos at 36.5%, and Saborio at 4.6%. The most disappointing to Bolanos was probably his own party's poll that showed Ortega at 38.7%, Bolanos at 36.2%, and Saborio at 2.8%. In the capital, the same poll showed Ortega had 41.6%, Bolanos 33.8%, and Saborio 2.3%. Polls in October suggest Ortega has gained in both the capital and elsewhere. The most recent poll, by the Center for Socioeconomic Research and Consulting (CINASE), had him five percentage points ahead of Bolanos in Managua.

An IEN poll conducted after the Sept. 11 attacks and concluded on Oct. 2 put Ortega ahead with 39.9%, Bolanos 36.8%, and Saborio 2.4%. An additional 20.2% said they would cast blank ballots. Sources consulted by the daily El Nuevo Diario said Bolanos' campaign has been a failure. They cited as examples his botched challenge to Ortega to hold a debate. After twice changing the place of the debate and not clearing the time with the television station that was to broadcast it, Bolanos held a one-man "debate."

Some observers thought it was a ludicrous exercise that hurt him. "This attitude of tossing out challenges in the air is from a person who is not in his right mind," Saborio said. Some observers say the deciding factor will be how Bolanos and Ortega address economic issues.

Economist Sergio Santamaria, director of CINASE, told Inter Press Service, "In this last stretch of the campaign, the key to victory will be held by the candidate whose pledges to jump-start the economy and create jobs sound the most credible." For his part, Ortega has courted the private sector, swearing not to confiscate property if elected. In September, he announced at a business forum that his administration would select the director of the pension system and the president and board of the central bank from nominees proposed by business groups. Bolanos said at the same forum that he would go even further in the same direction and that the idea was his in the first place.

Both candidates have promised to recharge the economy with new programs for agriculture, maquiladoras, small businesses, tourism, and energy. Bolanos has heavily played a negative economic card, warning that a Sandinista victory would drive away Taiwanese and other foreign investors. If Ortega wins, "there will be no resources" because the US "is going to shut off the spigot," he said.

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