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Bolanos Defeats Ortega

by LADB Staff

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Nicaragua's former Sandinista President Daniel Ortega (1979-1990) lost his third consecutive bid to regain the office. Businessman and former vice president Enrique Bolanos defeated him in the Nov. 4 election by a wide margin. The collapse of the national electoral computer system and charges of fraud have confused and delayed the results of races for seats in the National Assembly, but the governing Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC) is assured of a majority. Election observers agreed that the polling went well. The abstention rate was estimated at only around 8%, compared with 27% in the 1996 election.

Ortega conceded defeat in the early hours of Nov. 5 shortly after the polls closed. From the first scattered unofficial projections, there was little doubt that Bolanos, running on the PLC ticket, would win. Throughout the campaign, Ortega maintained a slight lead in most polls, but a large block of undecided voters made the outcome impossible to predict. Based on 94% of the returns, the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE) announced Nov. 7 that Bolanos had 56.04% of the vote in the three-way race.

Ortega won 42.59% and Partido Conservador (PC) candidate Alberto Saborio 1.37%. Bolanos and vice president-elect Jose Rizo take office Jan. 10, 2001. Bolanos, 73, was elected as President Arnoldo Aleman's vice president in 1996, but he resigned last year to campaign for the presidency.

The Sandinista government confiscated many of his properties in the 1980s, and he was briefly imprisoned. As a businessman, he headed several companies and was president of the influential business organization Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada, COSEP. After his concession speech, Ortega and his vice presidential running mate Agustin Jarquin visited Bolanos at PLC election headquarters to congratulate him and offer the support of the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) deputies in the legislature. Ortega said the Convergencia Nacional, the electoral alliance that sponsored his candidacy, would continue as a political force.

In his statement, Ortega promised to cooperate with the PLC on a wide variety of issues. But the list seemed to include all the things Sandinistas say the governing party ignores: democracy, independence of government institutions, the struggle against poverty, the rule of law, the fight against official corruption, and economic and social justice. Bolanos later praised Ortega and the FSLN for running a good campaign and for respecting democratic institutions. "They were tough and worthy adversaries,"

Bolanos said. He added that the outcome of the election had confirmed the FSLN as an important democratic presence. While Ortega took a conciliatory position toward Bolanos and the PLC, he roundly criticized the US government for its open campaign for Bolanos' election. For weeks before the election, US Ambassador Oliver Garza and State Department officials warned of dire

consequences should Ortega win. They repeatedly linked Ortega to leaders of states that the US says sponsor terrorism (see NotiCen, 2001-10-18).

A week before the election, Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, brother of US President George W. Bush, placed an ad in two Nicaraguan newspapers endorsing Bolanos and attacking Ortega as "an enemy of all the United States represents and also a friend of our enemies." "It's inconceivable," said the ad, "that a people would choose to return to a totalitarian past." Ortega complained that "our political adversaries took advantage of the tragedy of Sept. 11 and the message of certain US officials to run a campaign of fear."

President-elect to fight corruption

Election analysts say Bolanos' greatest challenge in the campaign was to distance himself from Aleman, who is generally believed to run a corrupt administration. Aleman has been under attack throughout his presidency for numerous alleged acts of corruption and for his mysteriously expanding personal fortune (see EcoCentral, 1998-09-10, NotiCen, 1999-10-07). Aleman never fully explained how he acquired his personal assets, so Bolanos promised that his appointees would have to make public financial disclosures. Bolanos said his first order of business would be to attack corruption. During the campaign, he promised to change Nicaragua's political culture by limiting the immunity of public officials, eliminating corruption, and doing away with the misuse of power and caudillismo.

In October, Bolanos notified Aleman that, if elected, he would instruct the attorney general to investigate Aleman and officials in his administration for a series of bank scandals (see NotiCen, 2000-09-28, 2000-12-21). He later pledged to investigate wrongdoing in earlier administrations. "In my government, no one will be above the law," not Enrique Bolanos, Daniel Ortega, nor Aleman, he said.

In an editorial, the daily La Prensa reminded readers that, under current law, Aleman and Ortega would take unelected seats in the Assembly. Both will have immunity from prosecution in a body that is unlikely to change the practice. "Deputies in the next Assembly session were named by Aleman and Ortega," the editorial said. Furthermore, any law passed against the common practice of illicit enrichment could not be used retroactively against Aleman and his officials.

Another weak spot in the Aleman administration was the political pact with the Sandinistas that resulted in power sharing and the exclusion of smaller parties from roles in key institutions (see NotiCen, 2000-07-27). To inoculate himself against blame for the Aleman-Ortega pact, Bolanos promised to end political dealmaking and to depoliticize the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE), and the Contraloria General de la Republica (CGR) three major institution that Liberals and Sandinistas have divided between them.

Economic crisis awaits new administration

Nicaragua is now considered the poorest nation in the hemisphere, since its annual per capita GDP has fallen to US\$430 behind Haiti's US\$460. In addition, the country has an unpayable foreign debt

of nearly US\$7 billion, a large but undisclosed internal debt, a large trade deficit, a weak financial system nearly wrecked by bank failures and fraud, falling coffee prices, and serious unemployment. Political leaders consulted by Inter Press Service said the next president would have to develop a "national emergency plan" to cope with the economic crisis. Virgilio Godoy, former vice president in the administration of Violeta Chamorro (1990-1997), told IPS, "The next president will take over a country in a wheelchair, cast down by an immense economic, institutional, and ethical crisis."

All three presidential candidates proposed to deal with the crisis, and after conceding defeat, Ortega said the nation must unite to reduce poverty. However, nothing in the past relations between Bolanos' PLC and Ortega's FSLN ensures that they will cooperate on an effective program of economic development. The outstanding cooperative effort of the past five years has been the political power-sharing pact between Aleman and Ortega.

Vote-counting system breaks down

Despite promises of a rapid count, CSE magistrate Roberto Rivas acknowledged problems in the electronic vote-counting center (Centro Nacional de Computos), which, two days after the election, had tallied only 40% of the votes. Election observer former US President Jimmy Carter said he was disappointed with the CSE's performance, which he blamed on its notorious politization. He noted that Ortega conceded defeat based on a private count conducted by the nongovernmental organization Etica y Transparencia. While Bolanos' margin of victory puts his election beyond doubt, Carter warned that the CSE must make an accurate count of the legislative votes, which was delayed. He said the Carter Center would publish a report on the election with recommendations for reforms.

Conservatives charge fraud

FSLN counsel Juan Jose Ubeda charged that Rivas deliberately slowed the count to sow confusion. He said Rivas had ordered him kept out of the Centro Nacional de Computos on Monday and Tuesday after the Sunday election. He said PLC officials were meeting there to change the election results in favor of PLC Assembly candidates. Likewise, PC official Ernesto Leal said "something strange" was going on at the center. Leal, an Assembly candidate, said the CSE was trying to keep PC candidates from winning seats. He said the center had tried to eliminate his own vote tally even though it was already registered in the computers. "We won more seats and we are going to fight for them," Leal said.

The daily El Nuevo Diario reported Nov. 7 that the computer center had shut down all day Monday, forcing election officials to count votes manually "something like what happened in the United States election in the state of Florida." Election workers said the CSE had sent out for 100 hand-held calculators to speed the count and called on the Banco Central de Nicaragua to send additional labor. Rivas said the CSE would give all three parties copies of the tallies to check for errors. Rivas said the computers were down because they were "exhausted" from the heavy load of data and because of errors in the software. With charges of fraud flying, the CSE decided to send the ballots to the Organization of American States (OAS) for verification.

Bolanos' party to have majority in Assembly Projections from the polling firm M&R indicated that the PLC would win 49 seats in the 90-seat unicameral legislature. The Sandinistas would have 41. However, because of reforms stemming from the Aleman-Ortega pact, former presidents and candidates coming in second in presidential elections are automatically awarded seats. With Aleman and Ortega in those seats, the Assembly increases to 92 members. The official CSE count on Nov. 7 had the PLC taking 47 seats, the FSLN 43, and the PC two.

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