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## Ex-President Aleman Seeks Leadership Legislature

by LADB Staff

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The inauguration of Enrique Bolanos as president of Nicaragua was overshadowed by the political ambitions of his predecessor Arnoldo Aleman. Aleman's noisy and relentless campaign to take over the job as president of the National Assembly convinced many that he plans to retain control of the governing Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), challenge Bolanos' authority, and position himself for another run at the presidency in 2006.

Bolanos took the oath of office as president on Jan. 10. The 73-year-old engineer and businessman had soundly defeated Daniel Ortega of the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) in the November 2001 election (see NotiCen, 2001-11-08). Bolanos promises "new era" In his inauguration speech, Bolanos said his "new era" would not tolerate even a single act of corruption, and he reminded the audience that he spoke during his campaign of "moral restructuring." In an obvious allusion to Aleman's tainted presidency, he said, "We have to defeat the great vices that have historically characterized our society: corruption, perversion in the use of power, and caudillismo."

One of Bolanos' first acts as president was a promise to end the inflated salaries of high government officials. He said that salaries would be lower than those in Aleman's administration and that the specific amounts would be open to popular approval. Government salaries during the Aleman years ranged from US\$7,000 to US\$10,000 per month. With other government payments, some went as high as US\$23,000 per month. Bolanos also ordered the workday for government employees increased from seven to eight hours. Aleman had lowered the hours to seven to save money, but his administration never said what the savings were or how the funds were used.

Bolanos also promised to dissolve the pact made in 1999 between Ortega and Aleman and to get rid of the political control of state institutions that came out of the pact. That would mean undoing PLC\FSLN power-sharing in such key institutions as the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), the Contraloria General de la Republica (CGR), and the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE). The constitutional reforms that resulted from the pact gave unelected Assembly seats to outgoing presidents and the runner-up in the presidential election. Bolanos promised to implement an austere fiscal policy and to reduce indebtedness, especially the internal debt caused by bank failures.

A key element in the new era is economic stimulation through foreign investment. Bolanos' promise to focus on the economy has received support from the business community and international organizations. But the emerging conflict between Bolanos and Aleman over who holds the real political power in Nicaragua threatens the president's program before it is launched.

Expressing his concern that the next five years might be marked by political gridlock and more economic stagnation, Anastasio Somarriba, president of the business organization Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada (COSEP), said, "If we Nicaraguans can't generate peace but

instead live in ideological confrontations, another decade will pass without progress and with more impoverishment." Aleman's ambitions split governing party Aleman's open campaign for the Assembly presidency split the party into "Arnoldistas" and "Bolanistas."

Soon after the November presidential election, Aleman made it clear he expected to take over as Assembly president. His ambition was widely rejected by civic groups, human rights activists, and even some from his own party. But Bolanos gave strong signals that he would not become Aleman's puppet. This was not surprising since he had campaigned almost as much against Aleman as he had against Ortega, hoping to shed the aura of corruption, nepotism, and arrogance that engulfed the Aleman administration. With 53 PLC deputies in the 92-seat legislature many with strong ties to Aleman Bolanos pressed Aleman not to run for Assembly president.

Calling his election triumph over Ortega an "avalanche," Bolanos insists he has a popular mandate to govern independently of Aleman. But the former president said that the election of Assembly presidents was an act of democracy and that, if he should get the call to serve, he would accept as "a soldier of Liberalism."

With the immunity an Assembly seat confers, Aleman cannot be prosecuted for any crimes he might have committed while in office. However, Bolanos promised to reform congressional immunity and to investigate all allegations against former officials, including Aleman. Aleman's critics say the Assembly is loaded with PLC deputies who will support Aleman to retain their own immunity.

Jose Augusto Navarro, a former Liberal Cabinet minister, said many in the party went to the Assembly to acquire immunity, "which in Nicaragua has become impunity." Opposing Aleman for the Assembly presidency was Liberal Deputy Jaime Cuadra. Aleman lashed out with accusations that his opponents were trying to organize a PLC faction in the Assembly to oppose him, using Cuadra to fracture the party. He called them "cockroaches." The cockroaches would include the 38 FSLN deputies, Cuadra, some 15 Liberals who were said to favor Cuadra, as well as COSEP, which also came out against Aleman.

Aleman's brother-in-law Eddy Gomez, also a Liberal, advised him "to leave Nicaragua in peace." Gomez said Aleman had his chance but wasted it through his manner of governing. He said it remained to be seen whether Aleman could command authority in the Assembly without the resources of the executive branch that enabled him to hand out jobs and favors.

In a direct challenge to Aleman, Bolanos threw his support to Cuadra, telling the daily *El Nuevo Diario* Jan. 7 that he would be "proud" to have Cuadra, as Assembly president, swear him in during the inauguration ceremony. Bolanos reportedly told Aleman to step aside "for the good of Nicaragua." And in a news conference, he said that he had told Aleman of his preference, and that Aleman said he would support Cuadra's candidacy with certain unnamed conditions. However, in his last radio broadcast as president, Aleman issued what *El Nuevo Diario* called "threats" to destabilize the new administration. Of the 15 or so PLC deputies that supposedly had lined up behind Cuadra, Aleman said, "Sooner or later the support of those 15 people...will disappear and leave the executive totally weakened in the face of a 53-member [PLC] delegation."

Turning the contest over the Assembly presidency into a weapon against the Sandinistas, Aleman said he thought FSLN support for Cuadra was part of the plot to split the PLC. "I don't want to undercut [Cuadra's] aspirations...but one has to sacrifice personal interests," Aleman said. "At this moment we must be united to put an end to those fears of dictatorship the people suffer every four or five years."

On Jan. 3, the PLC's executive committee formally declared its support for Aleman. On Jan. 5, Aleman met with 49 PLC deputies and had them sign a formal pledge to vote for him. Some of those attending reportedly called the pledge "ridiculous" and an act of desperation. Aleman lists his accomplishments In his farewell speech, Aleman defended the controversial 1999 pact with the FSLN as necessary to preserve stability and governability.

Among his other accomplishments, he mentioned various public-works projects and Nicaragua's acceptance in the World Bank's foreign-debt reduction program (Initiative for Heavily Indebted Poor Countries, HIPC). He also apologized to the media for any inadvertent "errors" he might have made, which he said resulted from his "extroverted temperament and the rhythm of excessive work."

Aleman criticized and attacked the media steadily during his five-year term. Aleman left office with the economy unimproved despite his promises to create jobs and reduce the poverty that afflicts more than 70% of the population. One economist described Aleman as "an octopus swallowing the country," with ill-conceived economic policies. The drumbeat of corruption allegations and his disdainful response to critics helped reduce the outgoing president's popular support to negative numbers.

The primary allegation against Aleman's personal conduct is the unexplained growth of his assets from some US\$990,000 when he was mayor of Nicaragua to an estimated US\$250 million since becoming president in 1997 (see NotiCen,1999-02-25). Arnoldismo hands Bolanismo its first defeat Aleman was sworn in as an Assembly deputy on Jan. 12 and promised Bolanos his complete support. However, the Arnoldista faction of the PLC lost no time in demonstrating its ability to challenge the Bolanos faction.

On the first day of business Jan. 9, Aleman and the PLC handed Bolanos his first defeat, choosing Oscar Moncada as Assembly president. Aleman could not run since he was still president, but Moncada was clearly his placeholder. Moncada defeated Cuadra by a vote of 49-42. Only two Liberals voted for Cuadra not the 15 that had been predicted.

One newspaper headline read, "Aleman 1, Bolanos 0." Another said the Assembly had started its new session "with its hands up." In a statement that sounded as though he was not a member of the PLC, Bolanos graciously accepted Moncada's election, promising to support the Liberal-led Assembly. "Democracy is not easy," he said. "Liberalism won because Liberalism has the majority of votes in the Assembly." This statement seemed to give the factional disputes official status and recognized the possibility of a government divided between Arnoldistas and Bolanistas. Bayardo Izaba, an official of the Centro Nicaraguense de Derechos Humanos (CENIDH), was pessimistic about the effects of the likely continuation of Aleman's power in the new Bolanos administration.

With the FSLN in evident decline, he predicted the party might return to deal-making with the PLC, seeking accommodations as it did in the 1999 pact. Jose Augusto Navarro, the new agriculture minister, said the election of Moncada went against the popular will that elected Bolanos to the presidency. "This demonstrates that the leader of the party is really Aleman, but President Bolanos is the president of all Nicaraguans."

Less pessimistic was former foreign minister Emilio Alvarez Montalvan, who reasoned that Aleman would have to get along with Bolanos to avoid an open rupture in the party if he expects to be re-elected president in 2006. On Jan. 14, Moncada announced he would resign as Assembly president. The resignation is expected to become official Jan. 17 during the first plenary session of the Assembly.

El Nuevo Diario cited Assembly sources as saying that once the resignation is accepted, the Assembly will elect Aleman to replace Moncada on Aleman's birthday, Jan. 18. The FSLN announced that none of its 38 deputies would vote for Aleman, but the party has not put up its own candidate. Jorge Matamoros, the lone deputy of the Partido Conservador (PC), also said he would not vote for Aleman. Aleman's only opposition is expected to be Cuadra, who said he would run again. Bolanos makes safe Cabinet choices For his Cabinet, Bolanos turned to the business community and former Cabinet officials.

The press reported that Aleman had no hand in picking the ministers, but several of his ministers and vice ministers will be in the new Cabinet. The daily La Prensa said in an editorial that none of the former Cabinet members was touched by accusations of corruption and that none was a relative of the new president. In general, said the editorial, the Cabinet is notable for its "ability, transparency, [and] honesty." Unlike Aleman, who personally picked even the lowest-level government executives, Bolanos has allowed his ministers to nominate their vice ministers.

The Cabinet as announced so far includes:

Foreign Relations: Norman Caldera, formerly minister of economic development, industry and commerce.

Defense: Jose Adan Guerra, former defense minister.

Treasury and Public Credit: Eduardo Montealegre, former foreign minister.

Agriculture: Jose Augusto Navarro.

Economic Development, Industry and Commerce: Marcos Narvaez, banker.

Interior: Arturo Harding, Bolanos' former campaign manager.

Health: Lucia Salvo, businesswoman. \*

Transportation and Infrastructure: Pedro Solorzano, former Managua mayoral candidate for the PC.

Education: Silvio de Franco, rector of the Universidad Thomas More.

Family: Natalia Barillas, former family vice minister.

Secretary of the Presidency: Azucena Castillo, former vice minister of economic development.

Chief of Cabinet: Mario de Franco, former agriculture minister and presidential assessor to Aleman.

President of the central bank: Mario Allowance Icabalceta, economist.

Technical Secretary of the Presidency: Mario Arana, former advisor to the Treasury Ministry.

Secretary of Information: Alejandro Fiallos, former Managua city official.

Secretary of Youth: Lindolfo Monjarrez, former Bolanos campaign worker.

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