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LADB Staff

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Church-state Schism Develops

by LADB Staff

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[The author is a staff writer for Inforpress Centroamericana, published in Guatemala.]

In Nicaragua, Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo and the Catholic Church are living turbulent times. On the heels of a regime in which political and economic favors were traded freely, the new administration of President Enrique Bolanos has taken steps that have alienated the church. The government has recently reduced church subsidies and begun an aggressive anti-corruption campaign that has implicated a number of bishops in irregularities. The church has countered with accusations that the government lobbied the Vatican to undercut Obando y Bravo.

The church's role in politics has grown steadily in the last years. Its representatives make suggestions, criticisms, and comments on politics and social situations on the front pages of local newspapers. It still counts a large majority of Nicaraguans as its members.

In a 1999 poll conducted by the Instituto de Estudios Nicaraguenses (IEN), 68.8% of respondents said they consider themselves Catholic, 17% evangelical Christians, 0.8% identifies with other religions, and 13.4% said they have no religion. Church records show the number of seminary students increased sixfold from 1972 to 1998. A report on religious freedom in Nicaragua published by the US State Department in 1999 concluded that the government respects religious liberty as envisioned in the Constitution and has a close relationship with the church. The report notes that, in 1998, the government asked the church to act as the distributor of goods donated for Hurricane Mitch relief efforts.

The church has significant political influence, but its prominence does not significantly affect the religious liberty of others," says the report. Bishops go public with criticism of government Since Bolanos took power in January, there has been a shift in church-state relations. In mid-May, the Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua (CEN) released a document criticizing the government's anti-corruption campaign, the centerpiece of the Bolanos administration.

Corruption allegations have most directly touched former President Arnaldo Aleman (1997-2002) and a small circle of his close advisers (see NotiCen, 2002-05-09). Aleman was considered a strong ally of the Catholic hierarchy throughout his term. In the document, the bishops wrote that the anti-corruption campaign might provoke "a thirst for vengeance, which, once started, would be unstoppable." The CEN statement, distributed in parishes throughout the country, also accuses the media of manipulating the news.

In the last few months, the media have implicated high-ranking Catholic leaders in a number of corruption scandals. The CEN document crowned a series of disagreements between the church and the new administration mostly stemming from state-subsidy issues and the corruption allegations.

In February, Minister of Education Silvio de Franco suspended subsidies to parochial schools and canceled a government scholarship program for teachers who trained at Nicaragua's Universidad Catolica. De Franco, who identifies himself as a Catholic and a member of Opus Dei, said that the parochial schools' poor educational quality and the ill-defined selection process for awarding the scholarships resulted in the decision to withdraw government support.

Also in February, Obando y Bravo denied allegations that he had received money from two brothers implicated in the collapse of a state bank (see NotiCen, 2000-09-28). He said Alex and Saul Centeno Roque had only donated food to the church for distribution after Hurricane Mitch and the Masaya earthquake.

In April, corruption accusations expanded to include Cesar Bosco Vivas, bishop of Leon. Bosco Vivas' name appeared on a list of beneficiaries of vehicle loans made with resources of the Direccion General de Ingresos (DGI) during the time Byron Jerez was its director. Jerez is currently in prison, accused of more than US\$4 million in financial irregularities. Bosco Vivas used the loan to buy a sports utility vehicle. CEN secretary Abelardo Mata said the loans the church received for the purchase of vehicles were legal. "If there has been an illegality, let them get to the bottom of it," he said.

In April, new allegations emerged concerning an anti-Bolanos radio station that Aleman has used to discredit his critics. Radio station La Poderosa had been registered as belonging to the Comision de Promocion Social Arquidiocesana (COPROSA). Auxiliary Bishop Jorge Solorzano confirmed that the church transferred use of the frequency to the Aleman administration as a loan. COPROSA is one of the institutions involved in a corruption scandal involving import-tax exemptions. Obando y Bravo, who presented his resignation to the pope last year after turning 75, accused the Bolanos administration of conspiring against him and pressuring the Vatican to remove him.

Bishop Bosco Vivas recently told the Nicaraguan daily La Prensa that, while he desired "cordial or even fraternal relations with the government" and current relations were "respectful," there had not been any serious meetings. When asked about his chilly relations with the church, Bolanos said he had the support of 80% of the population and did not need the CEN's support. Obando y Bravo achieved a victory May 23 when Bolanos fired Alberto Novoa, the special prosecutor in charge of the Jerez case and the case of financial irregularities in the state television channel. The firing came after Novoa made public declarations about the possible involvement of the church in both cases (see NotiCen, 2002-06-06).

Church opposes church-state separation

Political analyst Maria Lopez Vigil, editor of the monthly magazine Envio, said the dispute in Nicaragua is between a premodern church and a state that is in transition. "While in the region and the world there is a tendency to move toward churches that are more modern, more diverse, better suited to new realities, in Nicaragua there is a lack of development and a stagnation in the hierarchy. Conservatism has won all the battles here about the way the populace relates to the church," said Lopez. She added that the church was fighting to conserve the power it recovered after the fall of the Sandinistas. "Obando is its most important leader, and, during the administration of Violeta

Barrios [1990-1997], rescued much of the power [the church had lost] and became a highly sought-after mediator.

When Aleman took office, the cardinal and the bishops consolidated their power. "It's impossible to think that the church was so close to a government characterized by corruption and did not take part in the corruption." Obando's tenure, said Lopez, was marked by a system of caudillismo among the bishops, from which only the two foreign bishops Pablo Smith, bishop of the Atlantic coast region, and Bernardo Hombach seem to have escaped. Hombach was the only bishop to publicly support the current government's corruption investigations. Lopez Vigil said that the strained relations between the Bolanos administration and the church might stem from the fact that technocrats in the new Cabinet are trying to fashion a more modern church-state relationship. She added that all the signs are that the church has pressured Bolanos not to pursue corruption investigations against its leaders.

One prominent priest from the progressive wing of the church said, "During Aleman's regime, the church, led by Obando, achieved very close relations with the government, and came to an understanding in which the church supported the government ideologically and the government supported the church economically. Thanks to this marriage of the church and the government, the Aleman administration managed to maintain a good public image." The priest said that the transition in Nicaragua should aim to create a church with an important social role, but that power should be constructed with civil society as its base.

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